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FROM VIOLENCE TO RESISTANCE: JUDITH BUTLER'S CRITIQUE OF NORMS

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ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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To Miska. In loving memory.

ABSTRACT

In this doctoral dissertation, I provide a systematic analysis of the role of social norms in the thought of philosopher and feminist theorist, Judith Butler. More specifically, I investigate the way in which Butler theorizes the relationship between norms and violence in light of her notions of critique and resistance. The key argument of the study is that in order to understand the wide range of topics that Butler addresses in her work—such as gender normalization, the critique of violence, ethical responsiveness, and the biopolitical regulation of life—we need to pay close attention to her account of norms. Although Butler’s theorization of norms has begun to attract increasing scholarly interest, a thorough analysis of the topic has not yet been written. In order to fill this gap in previous research, my dissertation offers the first monograph-length study that explicates the problematic of norms in Butler’s thought.

My study seeks to answer the following questions: What is the role of norms in Butler’s work? How does Butler conceptualize the relationship between norms, violence, and nonviolence? How should we understand critique, transformation, and resistance in the midst of norms? What are the ethical and political implications of Butler’s notion of norms? I respond to these questions by examining Butler’s theorization of norms through what I call her *twofold* understanding of norms. I argue that on the one hand Butler theorizes norms as mechanisms of social power that violently regulate the field of recognizable subjects, bodies, and lives, but on the other hand she conceptualizes norms in terms of the possibility of critical change and resistance.

I illustrate Butler’s twofold notion of norms through four key topics, which I have organized into four main chapters. First, by examining Butler’s often-neglected feminist theoretical background in the thought of Monique Wittig, I argue that her conception of the relationship between norms and violence critically builds on Wittig’s argument that normative heterosexuality can be understood as a form of discursive violence. Second, through explicating Butler’s conception of gender normalization vis-à-vis her generally overlooked discussions of transgender embodiment and livability, I challenge recent arguments that feminists should get rid of the concept of gender. By introducing the concept of “trans livability” I highlight Butler’s work as a contribution to trans-affirmative feminist theory.

Third, by challenging the general tendency to interpret Butler as a critical humanist, I demonstrate that she puts forward a critique of anthropocentrism that offers insights into problematizing the speciesist norms that uphold not only the human-animal binary but also differentiates between liva-

ble and killable nonhuman animals. Finally, by foregrounding Butler's psychoanalytic account of grief in terms of her critique of norms, I argue that her discussion of the normative separation between grievable and ungrievable lives does not represent a turn away from politics as many critics have argued. I contend that her account of grievability must instead be understood as a theorization of resistance.

Taken together, all the four chapters of my dissertation highlight Butler's theorization of norms as a practice of feminist critique. By elucidating the relationship between norms, violence, and social change, my study emphasizes the close relationship between feminist and queer practices of political resistance and the critique of norms.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the terminology of norms has become a commonplace in feminist, queer, trans, intersectional, and anti-racist theoretical frameworks. While rich and diverse in their areas of focus, these frameworks all share the aim of disclosing and contesting social norms, such as binary gender norms, normative heterosexuality, and racializing norms. Broadly construed, norms refer in these analyses to current ideals that regulate what can be regarded as a normal body or a valuable life (see, for example, Sedgwick 1990; Halperin 1995, Warner 1999; Duggan 2002; Eng, Halberstam & Muños 2005; Puar 2007; Ahmed 2013; Spade ([2011]2015)). However, given the multifaceted and divergent interpretations of how social norms operate in our societies, the arguments regarding the conditions of feminist critique, change, and resistance vary. In fact, an introduction to a recent special issue of *differences* called “Antinormativity’s Queer Conventions” (Wiegman & Wilson 2015) sparked a polemic with scholars holding different and even opposing positions about how we should conceptualize norms, and more specifically, how we should theorize the relationship between norms and critical agency. As debates like these indicate, there is a need to further explicate what we mean when we talk about—and, indeed contest—norms.

In this doctoral dissertation I provide a systematic analysis and a sustained discussion on how a leading theorist within feminist and queer studies, Judith Butler, approaches the problem of norms. I argue that the question of norms runs through Butler’s oeuvre, lending thematic continuity to her diverse body of work that encompasses a wide range of topics. These include, for example: gender performativity, transgender autonomy, the normative constitution of “the human,” questions regarding the social and political conditions of life, the problem of grievability, criticism of war and violence, as well as the ethical problems of responsiveness and the good life. However, despite the distinctive role that the question of norms plays in Butler’s work, its overall significance remains, in my view, underestimated in the now already rich and extensive scholarship published on her thought.

Ever since the publication of her groundbreaking book *Gender Trouble* ([1990]1999), Butler’s work has attracted considerable scholarly interest not only in gender studies and queer and feminist theory (see Jagger 2008) but also in political philosophy (see Lloyd 2007; Chambers & Carver 2008a, 2008b; Schippers 2014), moral philosophy and ethics (see Thiem 2008; Lloyd 2015), sociology (Kirby 2006), legal studies (see Loizidou 2007), literary studies (see Salih 2002), media studies (see Brady & Schirato 2010), and religious studies (see Armour and St. Ville 2006). Although several scholars have commented on the question of norms in Butler’s work, a systematic analysis of the topic still remains to be done. In order to fill this gap in the

previous literature, my dissertation provides the first book-length study that focuses particularly on investigating Butler's theorization of norms. By providing a detailed discussion of the role of norms in Butler's work, my study further develops and contributes to the growing body of literature in the emerging field of Butler studies.

Acknowledging that the question of norms is a contested theoretical terrain, I insist that Butler's work offers us important insights into understanding the relationships between norms, violence, critique, and change. To this aim, my study seeks to answer the following set of questions: What is the role of norms in Butler's work? How does Butler conceptualize the relationship between norms, violence, and nonviolence? How should we understand critique, transformation, and resistance in the midst of norms? What are the ethical and political implications of Butler's notion of norms? I will respond to these questions by explicating Butler's theorization of norms as a *critique* of norms. By investigating her work as a critique of norms I want to highlight two interrelated aspects of her notion of norms. These are the questions of violence and resistance.

The key argument of this study is that Butler's theorization of norms must be understood in terms of what I call her *twofold notion of norms*. By this I mean that on the one hand, Butler conceives of norms as something that makes the social field intelligible and constitutes us as recognizable beings. In this sense, norms operate through normalization. As mechanisms of social power, norms not only produce us as subjects but they also act forcefully on our bodies. They assign us to social categories (such as gender and race) and produce standards and ideals that regulate—often through violence and exclusion—what kinds of subjects and lives are currently regarded as possible. In this sense, norms operate in a regulatory manner that sometimes takes violent forms. This violence related to norms ranges from the systemic forms of oppression and physical violence faced by sexual and gender minorities to the politically induced condition of heightened mortality of certain populations, such as immigrants and other racialized people.

And yet, norms have a second dimension as well. Given that the social operation of norms requires that we continuously repeat them in our daily life, their persistence through time is dependent on a constant enactment through a set of various social, cultural, and political practices. It is my contention that it is precisely the function of enactment and repetition that opens the norms for *reworking* and transformation. In other words, for Butler, norms also provide the conditions for critique and change. In order to understand Butler's account of norms, we have to look carefully at this twofold dimension of norms, that is, at both her conceptualization of the relationship between norms and violence *and* her theorization of norms as modes of transformation and resistance. Analyzing Butler's work in terms of

the twofold approach to norms is an original contribution of my dissertation to the field of feminist theorizing.

In contrast to my approach, a common approach in the secondary literature is to read Butler's notion of norms in terms of what scholars have called "normative violence" (see Lloyd 2007; Chambers 2007; Chambers & Carver 2008a; Mills 2007; Brady & Schirato 2010; Murphy 2011a; Feola 2013). Moya Lloyd, for instance, has used it in order to stress "the violence of particular norms (or normative frames) in determining what (or who) will or will not count as culturally intelligible" (Lloyd 2007, 136; see also Lloyd 2013). In other words, we are formed through a constitutive violence that produces only certain kinds of beings (identities, experiences, and lives) as socially recognizable. Yet, although the concept of norms figures in the title of Lloyd's book *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics*, her focus is not specifically on Butler's notion of norms but more generally on the feminist theoretical and philosophical trajectories of her thought with a particular focus on the questions of the body, language, and politics.

On the other hand, those scholars who have provided more detailed analyses of Butler's notion of norms (Chambers 2007; Chambers & Carver 2008a; Mills 2007; Thiem 2008; Murphy 2011a; Kirby 2006) have systematically downplayed the feminist theoretical background of Butler's conception of norms. Generally, these scholars have highlighted Butler's philosophical commitments to Michel Foucault's notion of normalizing power and Jacques Derrida's theorization of deconstruction. By focusing only on the impact of these philosophers on Butler's notion of norms, they have ignored the feminist theoretical background of her theorization of the relationship between norms and violence (see also Hemmings 2011). More precisely, I argue that scholars have overlooked Butler's critical deployment of Monique Wittig's notion of compulsory heterosexuality as a form of discursive violence (see Karhu 2016). It is my contention that Butler starts to develop her twofold notion of norms exactly in the context of her early reading of Wittig in *Gender Trouble* ([1990]1999).

In my view, the selective readings that have neglected Butler's debt to Wittig have contributed to a general misunderstanding that Butler theorizes norms as structurally and ontologically violent. This line of interpretation presumes that Butler's conception of norms rests on a notion of the "inherent violence of norms" (Murphy 2011a; see also Chambers 2007; Chambers & Carver 2008a), "fundamental violence of discourse" (Chambers 2007; Chambers & Carver 2008a), "foundational violence" (Brady & Schirato 2010), "transcendental violence" (Murphy 2011a) or "ontological or constitutive violence" (Mills 2007). Some of these scholars have also identified a tension in Butler's work between her previous work on normative violence in the context of her elaboration of gender and her more recent considerations on the ethics of

nonviolence. They have argued that because Butler conceptualizes norms as ontologically violent, her turn to a critique of violence and a notion of non-violence in her more recent work is at odds with her prior work on norms (Mills 2007; Murphy 2011a).

However, by offering a more nuanced reading of Butler's early discussion of norms in the context of her interpretation of Wittig, I challenge this interpretation. I argue that by conjoining Wittig's notion of discursive violence to her own notion of the performative operation of norms Butler actually rejects the argument that norms are inherently violent and instead theorizes them in the twofold manner I describe above. To emphasize Butler's critical reading of Wittig in the context of her notion of norms is the first central topic of my dissertation.

While my work draws and further elaborates on the interpretations that have read Butler's work through the lens of "normative violence," and while I think the concept does capture something important about Butler's discussion of the ways in which norms constitute us as recognizable beings, I will not use it as a point of departure for developing my conceptual framework. In fact, Butler mentions the phrase "normative violence" only once in her whole work (see GT, xx). Therefore, and for the purposes of my study, I deploy an analytical strategy that refrains from merging the concepts of "norms" and "violence" together. This is not to argue that Butler theorizes norms and violence as mutually exclusive operations of power. Quite the contrary, I argue also that Butler does conceptualize norms often in terms of violence.

The aim of my interpretational strategy is to take a critical step back from the accounts of ontological violence (i.e. the understandings that view norms as "inherently" violent) that in my view risk conceptualizing violence as an essential dimension of norms. By doing this I want to problematize the idea that violence is a self-evident fact of social relations and thus put more emphasis on violence as a historically and socially contingent phenomenon, that is, as something that can be called into question. By this I mean that even though norms potentially operate through violence, it is not an essential or structural feature of their function. Instead I argue that a crucial aim of Butler's account of norms is precisely to expose the conditions under which norms do operate through violence or with violent effects and then to demonstrate that it is possible to interrupt them.

To emphasize this aspect of Butler's work, I want to elucidate her theorization of norms as a critique of norms. It is my contention that Butler actually rejects the idea of norms as something that by definition work through violence. By highlighting her twofold notion of norms I thus seek to stress her general aim of opening up the norms for critique and change, of articulating a different future of norms. This, however, does not mean that we can get rid

of norms. Considering that Butler's conception of norms is informed by Foucault's notion of social power understood not as a repressive but as a productive force that permeates all social relations, arguing for the eradication of norms would for her be an impossible theoretical position. Instead, Butler's goal is to make norms visible so that it is possible to critically scrutinize their truth and self-evidence. In this sense, the task of critique opens up the possibility of politicization and change. Therefore, my reading strategy, which analytically disentangles the concepts of "norm" and "violence," allows me to pay careful attention to Butler's understanding of norms as both potential mechanisms of violence *and* modes of social transformation.

I argue that Butler's twofold approach to norms is most clearly discernible in her discussion of gender minorities, especially trans people. In order to shed more light on her understanding of the transformative aspect of norms (in this context: gender norms), I will put forward a close reading of her theorization of transgender embodiment, livability, and gender self-determination. Although Butler has stressed the significance of trans issues for her—both personally and academically (see Butler in More 1999)—and although she dedicates much space to discussing the topic, it is conspicuous by its absence in the secondary literature. Usually trans lives are brought up (together with the intersex population) in the literature only as illustrations of non-normative genders. Since much of Butler's work focuses on problematizing the violent exclusions of gender and sexual minorities, to ignore those parts of her work that specifically deal with these issues is to render already marginalized people invisible. In this sense, the omission runs counter to the ethical undertone of Butler's critique of gender norms. This is, in her words, "to let the lives of gender and sexual minorities become more possible and more livable [...]" (NPTA, 32).

However, and in addition to the ethical implications described above, the failure to elaborate on Butler's discussion of trans issues is also theoretically problematic: it has consequences for the way scholars have interpreted her notions of norms and normalization. As I have already noted, the general tendency is to interpret Butler's account of norms in terms of ontological violence. I argue that it is specifically in the context of her writings about trans lives that she most clearly articulates the possibility of change inherent in the operation of norms. It is my contention that Butler's discussion of trans lives throws into stark relief her notion of norms as modes of critical transformation.

In my discussion on Butler's theorization of norms, violence, and trans lives, I position myself in a critical dialogue with Foucauldian feminist scholars (Hausman 1995; Germon 2009; Repo 2016) who have posed the question whether feminists should reject the concept of gender altogether. The motivation for this question in these Foucauldian feminist studies is informed by

the historical fact that the concept of “gender” was invented as part of the normalizing discourses of US psychiatric-sexology in the 1950s that targeted trans and intersex bodies in particular. However, by drawing on Butler’s elaboration of gender as a transformable norm in the context of her discussion of trans lives, I will defend the concept of gender as a valuable and critical tool for feminist theory and politics. My interrogation will thus distinguish Butler’s Foucauldian-inspired notion of norms and normalization from those Foucauldian feminist scholars that have proposed the rejection of the concept of “gender.” I will develop my argument through my concept of “trans livability” that draws on Butler’s critical reflection on the differential ways in which life is normatively produced as “livable” only for those populations that fit the current norms regulating gender and sexuality.

I will elaborate further my key argument concerning Butler’s twofold notion of norms by offering a critical development of Butler’s notion of “livability.” As many scholars have pointed out, the problem of “livability” characterizes especially Butler’s more recent work. In these writings, Butler attends to the ethical and political question regarding the unequal distribution of bodily vulnerability and exposure across different populations and how these processes make certain groups more vulnerable to violence and suffering than others. Many scholars have also noted that this problem informs especially Butler’s so-called “post-9/11” texts, which offer a sustained critique of the US’s military politics and engages in the critical analysis of the conflict in Israel-Palestine (see, for example, Schippers 2014, 2–3). A common strategy is to read this change in Butler’s thematic framing in light of the question of “the human.” Accordingly, scholars have analyzed this shift with such concepts as “new corporeal humanism” (Murphy 2011b), “mortalist humanism” (Honig 2010; 2013), “the political philosophy of the human” (Schippers 2014), and “the political problem of the human” (Lloyd 2015). Given that Butler too has proposed an analysis of the normative category of “the human” (PL, 20), the deployment of the framework of “the human” in the commentaries does not come as a surprise.

My study challenges this commonly-held interpretative scheme by showing that what has remained largely unacknowledged in the secondary literature is that Butler moves from the question of the human to the critique of the normative regulation of *lives* more generally. I contend that by this conceptual move, Butler actually includes nonhuman animals in her analysis of “livable lives.” On many occasions, Butler explicitly questions anthropocentric norms and emphasizes that her notions of “life” and “livability” also incorporate other beings and not just human beings.

Despite Butler’s critique of anthropocentrism, she unfortunately leaves the question of the animal to the margins of her work. This is something that might well be considered Butler’s own normative exclusion. Yet I argue that

Butler's critique of norms—especially the norm of anthropocentrism—provides promising tools for theorizing what I call the normative production of “killable animals,” and therefore, for animal ethics as well. Furthermore, because Butler rejects the framework of anthropocentrism in her conceptualization of norms, and because her aim is to expose and problematize normalized forms of violence, I argue that this extension is not only possible but also necessary for the overall coherence of Butler's critique of norms.

I will thus engage in a critical reading of Butler's concept of “life” and seek to tease out those elements of her work that provide in my view fruitful ideas for theorizing animal ethics in the context of a critique of norms. In short, these are her problematization of the norms that regulate “life” and her notion of ethical responsiveness. By cross-breeding Butler's account of norms with critical animal studies, my reading brings a novel analytical layer to previous scholarly analyses that have prioritized the anthropocentric framework of “the human” in their discussions of livability.

I have thus far outlined the main arguments in this study in terms of what I have called the twofold function of norms: the ways in which they operate by differentiating between livable and unlivable lives; and the possibility of exposing the norms for critical change. However, this latter aspect of norms raises the further question of how exactly Butler comes to view critique and change in relation to norms.

For decades critics of Butler have expressed trenchant criticism of and skepticism toward Butler's notions of agency and political action. They have, for example, argued that Butler's feminist theorizing, such as her notion of gender performativity, is overly abstract and cannot bring about real political change (see, for example, Fraser 1995; Benhabib 1995; Weir 1996; Nussbaum 1999; McNay 2000). Since many commentators have already provided discussions of these debates, I will not rehearse these debates in my study.¹ Most recently, however, the criticism of Butler's notion of political action has re-emerged in the readings that have focused on her theorization of grief and mourning. The fourth main topic of my study addresses this more recent critique that revolves around Butler's Freudian notion of melancholia and her ethical reflections on grievability, that is, the question of what kinds of lives are seen to be worth grieving after death.

One of the most influential criticisms has been Bonnie Honig's recent claim that Butler's turn to the questions of grief and mourning in her later work is premised upon an overly thin notion of political action. She argues that during this period of her thought Butler's notion of political action shrinks into

¹ For an examination of these discussions, see, for example, Lloyd (2005, 147–148; 2007, 57–61) and Kirby (2006, 129–143).

“a sentimental politics of shared feeling” (Honig 2013, 64). Engaging in a critical conversation with Honig, I analyze Butler’s notion of grievability in the context of her twofold approach to norms and argue that only this type of analysis will provide a thorough understanding of Butler’s notion of political action. This reading tactic allows me to emphasize the dimensions of critique and resistance that Butler strongly attaches to the questions of mourning and grief.

By offering a close reading of Butler’s account of grievability, I will demonstrate that upon closer examination the topic not only permeates Butler’s work on norms—from her early reading of Freud’s notion of melancholia to her later critique of the hierarchies of grief related to war on terror—but that she repeatedly connects it to questions of critique and resistance. To develop my argument regarding the necessary link between Butler’s theorization of grievability and her critique of norms, I explicate Butler’s Foucauldian notion of critique (that I argue has to be conceived as a critique of norms) by foregrounding it through her critical deployment of Theodor Adorno’s conception of resistance and Hannah Arendt’s notion of concerted action. This analytical strategy establishes the setting for my argument that Butler’s theorization of grievability must be read, *contra* Honig, as a theorization of resistance. Before providing a chapter outline of my study, I will briefly explicate Butler’s conception of norms.

Butler’s conception of norms

Although the problematic of norms guides Butler’s work, she does not give any systematic or single theory of norms. As she stresses, the aim of her theorization of norms is *not* “to try and establish an internally consistent philosophical position” (Butler 2007b, 180). By this she refers to her style of doing philosophy that she describes as follows:

I am always in the process of restaging and finding new experimental possibilities for prior positions. I suppose that this does make me into a ‘process philosopher’ of a certain stripe. I’m aware of resonances among my various writings, but I do not intend them to follow upon one another systematically or to amount to a single comprehensive ‘position.’ (Butler 2006a, 281)

Bearing this in mind, my aim in this dissertation is not to reconstruct Butler’s theorization of norms as a systematic theory. Although I do insist, as I already have argued, that the question of norms lends thematic continuity to her oeuvre, I do not take her work to be an emerging totality. Instead, I examine Butler’s account of norms as a mode of critical inquiry by which she seeks to respond to a particular set of questions inspired by concrete and

contemporary political and ethical problems. Hence, Butler's mode of inquiry can be understood as an *interventionist* approach (Pulkkinen 2015; Thiem 2008). Butler does not, for example, establish a single "theory" of gender but rather seeks to make critical interventions into the prevailing notions of gender that try to disclose the "truth" about human gender or sexuality (Pulkkinen 2015, 200). Similarly, her work never attempts to disclose the ontological preconditions of "humanity" or "life" as such but seeks to *intervene* into the ontological presuppositions by asking who is excluded from the category of "the human" and what kinds of lives are normatively produced as "lives."

In the context of my analysis of norms, this means that Butler's aim is not to provide a single theory of norms as an answer to the question of "what is a norm?" Instead, I take her to be setting out to critically investigate how norms currently operate in our societies and with what effects. In other words, the objective of Butler's critical inquiry—and my own as well—is to problematize norms in order to contest the ways in which they currently differentiate between livable and unlivable lives. The term "critique" can thus be understood as an ethical and political practice of thinking against and beyond the normative limits of "possible" lives.

Characteristic of her poststructuralist approach, Butler does not give a clear-cut definition of what she means by a "norm,"² neither is her aim to provide a set of alternative norms to replace the current ones. As she notes, "The point is not to apply social norms to lived social instances, to order and define them (as Foucault has criticized), nor is it to find justificatory mechanisms for the grounding of social norms that are extra-social [...]" (UG, 36). Yet, she does define norms in negative terms, specifying what they are not: a norm is not the same as a rule or a law, but it functions "within social practices as the implicit standard of *normalization*" (UG, 41, emphasis in original). In line with Foucault, Butler conceives norms as mechanisms of social power that govern the cultural intelligibility and recognizability of different kinds of subjects, lives, practices, and action. In this sense, norms produce and organize social life regulating "what will and will not appear within the domain of the social" (UG, 42). Although norms usually remain hidden and unquestioned as they operate implicitly in daily life, they are "discernible most clearly and dramatically in the effects that they produce" (UG, 41). To put it differently: norms act precisely by producing certain effects.

Despite the fact that a norm can be analytically separated from the practices it governs, Butler emphasizes that this is only "an intellectual heuristic" (UG, 48). As she reminds us, "The norm is not exterior to its field of application"

² According to the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, the term "norm" comes etymologically from the Latin word *norma*, that is, "precept, rule, carpenter's square."

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/norm> (accessed May 23, 2017).

(UG, 52). This is because a norm does not have a distinct ontological status isolated from the social practices that sustain its continuing operation. This is to say that, for instance, gender norms regulate what will be a possible subject or a body and what will be not. In this way, norms make certain kinds of subjects, bodies, and practices appear as if they were natural and self-evident. However, the naturalized status (e.g. “woman,” “heterosexuality,” “race,” “ability”) that norms sometimes enjoy is only an *effect* of repeated social practices and power relations, such as the institutionalized practice of gender assignment at birth.

Yet Butler also argues that norms cannot be completely reduced to their concrete instances either: the enactment of norms constitutes social reality by generating different kinds of sedimented practices that endure through time. With regard to gender, this means that those who do not fit the current norms of gender (e.g. the naturalized and binary division of bodies into male or female) risk being regarded as unintelligible and “unreal” with severe consequences, such as social exclusion, oppression, harassment, criminalization, pathologization, and different forms of violence. In this sense, gender norms function by producing and regulating the field of recognizable subjects, bodies, experiences, and identities.

While Butler is clearly influenced by Foucauldian scholarship in theorizing the concept of norm in relation to what she calls, following Foucault, the “normalizing operation of bureaucratic and disciplinary powers” (UG, 49), she takes issue with what she sees as the tendency in some Foucauldian scholarship (she mentions the work of François Ewald, for example, see UG, 51) to understand norms more or less in terms of abstract structures. Against this structuralist tendency, she argues that “norms are not independent and self-subsisting entities or abstractions but must be understood as *forms of action*” (UG, 51, my emphasis). Making the argument that norms exist only in and through action—indeed, through social practice—allows Butler to conceptualize norms “as the site of *social intervention*” (UG, 52, my emphasis). This is to say that for Butler, norms are not “static entities” (CHU, 152) that are imposed on us, as if we were only passive objects of their operation, but they are actively lived, embodied, and interpreted dimensions of social life. In other words, even though norms regulate the recognizability of lives and condition our action, they can be called into question and re-enacted in new ways.

Before providing a chapter outline I want to make a final note on the main textual material and sources of my study. The extensive breadth and scope of Butler’s work—combined with the fact that she is, as she puts it herself, “a living author” (Butler 2006, 281) who constantly publishes new texts—ostensibly sets certain limits to any effort to study her work. Although Butler discusses norms throughout her oeuvre, I have restricted my focus on those

of her texts that directly address norms in regard to the four key questions of my analysis (the relationship between norms and violence, the question of trans lives, the problem of animals, and the topic of grievability). For this reason, I do not engage in any detailed analysis of her other major works, including *Parting Ways* (2012) and *Senses of the Subject* (2015) for example—though I do also reference these works when relevant for the arguments I wish to pursue.³

Structure of the study

In developing my main arguments throughout the dissertation, I have organized the study thematically into four chapters.

Chapter 1 traces Butler’s conceptualization of norms to her early discussion of discursive violence. Although Butler’s account of the relationship between norms and violence has begun to receive growing scholarly attention, the feminist theoretical background of this aspect of her work remains unexplored. In order to fill this lacuna and to highlight Butler’s twofold understanding of norms, the chapter explicates the feminist genealogy of Butler’s notion of violence. I argue that Butler’s theorization of norms as a certain form of violence can be traced back to *Gender Trouble*, and more precisely, to her discussion of Monique Wittig’s argument that the binary categorization of sex can be conceived in terms of discursive violence. I contend, first, that Butler starts to develop her notion of “gender violence” on the basis of her reading of Wittig. On the other hand, I also show that Butler departs from Wittig’s notion of violence by proposing an understanding of gender norms as both violent mechanisms of social power *and* a means of critical transformation. Second, I argue that Butler’s more recent writings on military violence and the ethics of nonviolence build on her critical interpretation of Wittig. On the basis of my reading, I suggest, in contrast to recent criticism (e.g. Mills 2007; Murphy 2011a) that Butler’s later critique of norms is not at odds with her prior work, but rather expands upon it.

Chapter 2 explicates and further develops Butler’s twofold approach to norms by analyzing her critique of the psychiatric pathologization and normalization of transsexual and transgender populations. I argue that in the growing body of scholarly literature, Butler’s explicit turn to questions concerning trans persons in *Undoing Gender* has been largely overlooked. Typically, commentators use trans and genderqueer experiences and identities only as illustrations of non-normative genders and do not analyze Butler’s theorization of trans lives with equal scholarly attention as other aspects of

³ For an elaboration of Butler’s key arguments in *Parting Ways*, see, for example, the last two chapters (ch. 4 & ch. 5) in Schippers (2014).

her work. In contrast to this scholarly trend, I provide a detailed examination of Butler's discussion of trans lives, focusing particularly on the relationship between gender norms and trans embodiment, her critique of the psychiatric pathologization of gender, as well as her account of gender self-determination and trans autonomy. I will do this by contrasting Butler's approach to Foucauldian feminist scholars and to critics of her work (Hausman 1995; Repo 2016) who have also questioned the pathologization of trans bodies but, unlike Butler, propose that feminists should reject the concept of gender altogether because of its history as a normalizing, sexological category. Through my deployment of Butler's twofold approach to norms, and my examination of *Undoing Gender*, I contend that the price of the urge to reject the concept of gender is the exclusion of trans lives from feminist theory and politics. Although Butler also draws on a Foucauldian notion of normalization, I demonstrate that she theorizes it not only as a mechanism of regulation but also, and more importantly, in terms of critical transformation.

The chapter thus seeks to answer the question how the normalizing functions of gender can be revised and reworked in new ways. By way of a critical comparison, I thus seek to highlight Butler's notion of gender norms as both constraining *and* enabling mechanisms of power. I further illustrate her distinctive approach to norms through my concept of "trans livability," which builds on her analysis of the ways in which gender norms differentiate between those gendered lives that are conceived as valuable and livable and those that are not. In sum, my overall argument in this chapter is that Butler's critique of gender norms and normalization can be taken as a trans-affirmative contribution to feminist theory.

Chapter 3 continues to examine Butler's concept of "livability" by turning to her more recent ideas of bodily vulnerability, precariousness, and interdependency through which she offers a critical analysis of the normative production of "the human." Although in feminist and queer theory as well as political philosophy it is now a commonplace to characterize Butler's more recent work with such concepts as "new corporeal humanism," "the political philosophy of the human," and "the political problem of the human," I show that during this period of her thought Butler extends her critique of norms from the "human" to "livable lives" more generally. It is my contention that with this conceptual shift Butler challenges anthropocentrism as well as gestures toward the possibility of incorporating nonhuman animals into her concept of livability. Furthermore, through my detailed explication of Butler's conception of livability and precariousness, I contend that this extension is not only possible, but also a necessary step forward in her critique of norms.

Despite the fact that already in *Undoing Gender* Butler points toward the question of "the animal," the problem of the animal is systematically neglect-

ed within Butler scholarship. In critical animal studies, on the other hand, several scholars (such as Chloë Taylor, Cary Wolfe, and Richard Iveson) have maintained that Butler's account of precarity and her writings on nonviolent ethics are based on the exclusion of animals. Although I agree that Butler leaves the question of "the animal" to the margins of her work, my key aim in the chapter is to demonstrate that her work offers promising tools for problematizing normalized forms of violence not only against humans but also against animals. By drawing on Butler's critique of the differential ways in which the conditions of life are made livable only for certain populations, I will provide an examination of the normative production of what I call "killable animals." I argue that a critical analysis of the norms that differentiate not only between human and animal lives but also between "lovable" and "killable" animals has important implications for theorizing a more inclusive notion of nonviolence.

Chapter 4 offers a detailed examination of Butler's theorization of grief and grievability by emphasizing its integral role for her work on norms. I address a recent criticism by Honig (2010; 2013), who claims that by turning to the topics of precariousness and mourning in Butler's so called "post-9/11" texts her conception of politics becomes reduced to a universalist ethics of mortalism and sentimentalism, representing what Honig sees as a turn away from questions of political action and resistance. Challenging Honig's reading, I seek to show that while it is true that Butler is preoccupied with questions of grief, mourning, and melancholia in her recent work, Honig's critique is based on a misconception of the role of grievability in this work. Against Honig, I suggest that when Butler's discussion of grievability is brought to the broader framework of her critique of norms—contextualized through her readings of Foucault, Adorno, and Arendt—the crucial relationship between grief and political contestation becomes visible. In order to bring the political implications of Butler's account of grievability into sharper relief, I also address the current plight of refugees and migrants in the Mediterranean Sea.

1 NORMS, VIOLENCE, NONVIOLENCE: BUTLER'S CRITICAL RELIANCE ON MONIQUE WITTIG⁴

In *Undoing Gender* (2004) Butler considers her “theory of gender explicitly in terms of the questions of violence [...]” (UG, 207). By “violence” Butler refers here to the violence performed by gender norms, that is, the forceful and binary division of bodies as either male or female within the discourse of normative heterosexuality. Yet Butler’s discussion of violence is not limited to her work on gender alone but extends to the question of whose lives count as “livable” in relation to the normative notions of the “human” and “lives.” Butler addresses this latter topic particularly in *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009), where she develops an ethics of nonviolence as a critical response to the US’s war on terror. In this sense, violence is a topic that runs through Butler’s work. It does not come as a surprise then that these reflections have started to gain emerging attention in recent commentary literature (see Chambers 2007; Chambers & Carver 2008a; Mills 2007; Lloyd 2007; Murphy 2011a; Schippers 2014). However, what has remained largely overlooked is the feminist theoretical background of Butler’s conception of violence.⁵ To fill this gap in the literature, my aim in this chapter is to show that Butler’s theorization of violence grows out of her discussion of Monique Wittig’s “materialist feminism.”⁶

Although certain feminist scholars have taken up the fact that Butler’s understanding of gender binary as a violent norm is related to Wittig’s feminist thought, they usually mention this connection only in passing (Jagger 2008, 29; Lloyd 2013, 825).⁷ It is my contention that in order to fully understand

⁴ This chapter is based on my previous article, see (Karhu 2016).

⁵ As Birgit Schippers (2014, 3) states, “it would be impossible to surgically remove Butler’s feminism from her wider political philosophy; such an attempt would also ignore how her recent work articulates the significance of feminism in new contexts.” Given this statement, it is surprising that her book’s otherwise elaborate chapter on violence (“The Paradox of Violence”) overlooks the feminist theoretical background of Butler’s account of violence.

⁶ Admittedly, Monique Wittig is not the only feminist thinker to which Butler’s early theorization of gender critically builds upon. In addition to Wittig, Butler draws on Simone de Beauvoir’s, Luce Irigaray’s, and Gayle Rubin’s work, for example. However, and as I demonstrate in this chapter, she starts to develop her conception of the violence of gender norms particularly through Wittig’s notion of discursive violence. For this reason, my focus in this chapter is on Butler’s reliance on Wittig.

⁷ In her 2007 book on Butler, Lloyd provides an analysis of the ways in which Butler’s notions of normative heterosexuality and gender performativity are “deeply influenced by Wittig” (Lloyd 2007, 47). Although Lloyd brings up the question of “normative violence” in this context (see Lloyd 2007, 33), she does not pay closer attention to the ways in which Butler critically merges Wittig’s notion of discursive violence with her own conception of norms.

Butler's conception of violence, we have to examine her discussion of Wittig in *Gender Trouble* ([1990]1999) more closely. Through explicating Butler's commitments to Wittig my attempt is to show that Wittig's notion of discursive violence plays a crucial role in Butler's theorization of normative heterosexuality and gender norms. Furthermore, I contend that Wittig's influence on Butler is more wide-ranging than this, since traces of Wittig's notion of violence can also be found in Butler's recent criticism of war and her account of nonviolence. However, in order to highlight Butler's twofold notion of norms I also want to point out a crucial difference between these thinkers. That is, while Wittig considers the system of heterosexuality as inherently violent, Butler seeks to articulate a possibility of social change inhering in the very operation of heterosexualizing norms.

The reason I wish to highlight Butler's critical reliance on Wittig has to do with two interrelated aims. First, by illustrating the theoretical connection between these two thinkers my aim is to pay attention to the generally disregarded Wittigian background of Butler's theorization of the relationship between norms and violence. The second aim has to do with Butler's formulation of nonviolence as a critique of violent norms. Through elucidating Butler's ethics of nonviolence in light of her Wittig-inspired theorization of norms, I demonstrate that Butler's later work on nonviolence does not stand in contrast to her prior work, as for example Catherine Mills (2007; see also Murphy 2011a) has argued, but rather expands upon it.

I develop my argument in three phases. Firstly, I examine Wittig's critique of the discourse of heterosexuality by discussing her notion of "material violence." The second section shows that Butler begins to formulate her account of gender violence on the basis of her critical reading of Wittig. In the third part I analyze Wittig's influence on Butler's more recent work by focusing on the questions of military violence and the ethics of nonviolence. In the concluding part I summarize the reasons why I find it important to acknowledge the Wittigian background of Butler's work.

1.1 Wittig's Criticism of Discursive Violence

Monique Wittig developed the notion of "materialist feminism" with Christine Delphy, Nicole-Claude Mathieu and Colette Guillaumin in France during the 1980's.⁸ Drawing on the socialist tradition, these scholars problematized

⁸ According to Wittig, it was Delphy who coined the phrase "materialist feminism" in order to highlight the importance of understanding women as a social class who are forced to "the kind of work that has no exchange value" (Wittig 1992, xiv). Following this insight, Wittig claims in her early manifesto "For a Women's Liberation Movement" ([1970]2005) that women's unpaid housework is equivalent to "ser-

the assumption that the division of labor between women and men is a natural state of affairs. Instead, they conceived the difference between the sexes as socially constituted, as a product of economic, political, and ideological—in their Marxist vocabulary, “material”—oppression of women. In her early manifesto, Wittig posits that women’s unpaid housework is equivalent to “servile labor” (Wittig [1970]2005, 28), which rests on “sexism” that is “so well implanted in ruling-class ideology that only a radical seizing of power can destroy it” (ibid., 22). It is exactly the “radical seizing of power” that is Wittig’s objective in her version of materialist feminism, illustrated both in her fiction and theory. As Lisa Disch emphasizes, “French materialist feminists should be heralded for analyzing women’s oppression not in terms of sexual difference but *against* it” (Disch 2008, 50, emphasis in original).

Because for Wittig, as Diane Griffin Crowder notes, the “symbolic order is as much a fundamental political category as economics or other concrete social relations” (Crowder 2005, 64), the mere transformation of economic relations cannot suffice to eradicate oppression. Rather, the goal must be an “epistemological revolution” (Wittig 1992, xvii): “the whole conceptual reevaluation of the social world, its whole reorganization with new concepts, from the point of view of oppression” (ibid., 18). Accordingly, Wittig’s key argument in her theoretical essays gathered together and published in *The Straight Mind* (1992) is that the exploitation of women is based on the discursive system of heterosexuality, which operates through the category of “sex.” Furthermore, one of Wittig’s main theses is that the discourse of heterosexuality can be understood as “material violence” against women and non-heterosexuals.

The first essay, in which Wittig addresses “material violence,” is “The Straight Mind,” where she conceptualizes language in terms of power discourses “that constantly act upon social reality” (Wittig 1992, 21). She states that “The discourses that particularly oppress all of us, lesbians, women, and homosexual men, are those which take for granted that what founds society, any society, is heterosexuality” (ibid., 24). Wittig’s critical eye is directed particularly toward Claude Lévi-Strauss’s and Jacques Lacan’s structuralist notions of sex difference. The most troubling feature of these “discourses” is, for Wittig, that they not only build whole systems of thought on the heterosexualized notion of the human, but in doing so they naturalize and thus legitimize oppression. In order to stress the material consequences of these discourses of “the straight mind” (ibid., 27), Wittig introduces the concept of

vile labor” (ibid., 28), which rests on “sexism” that is “so well implanted in ruling-class ideology that only a radical seizing of power can destroy it” (ibid., 22). In comparing women’s unpaid housework to servile labor Wittig refers to Engels’s claim that the historical institution of monogamous marriage in the industrialized world is “founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife” (Engels [1884]2010, 105).

“material violence.” She does this by explaining why she prefers the term “material oppression” to “ideology” in her criticism of the discourse of heterosexuality:

When we use the overgeneralizing term “ideology” to designate all the discourses of the dominating group, we relegate these discourses to the domain of Irreal Ideas; we forget *the material (physical) violence that they directly do to the oppressed people*, a violence produced by the abstract and “scientific” discourses. [...] I would like to insist on the *material oppression of individuals by discourses* [...]. (Wittig 1992, 25, my emphasis)

By “material violence” Wittig does not refer to physical violence in any conventional sense, but to the direct effects of oppression. For Wittig, the discourse of heterosexuality is materially violent because it tries to freeze heterosexist and male-dominated power relations by forcing everybody, especially marginalized groups, to conform to them.

Wittig’s criticism of heterosexual discourse boils down to the problematization of all kinds of essentialist explanations concerning oppression. In her essays “One Is not Born a Woman” and “The Category of Sex” Wittig therefore argues against the “method of finding in women and men a biological explanation of their division” (Wittig 1992, 10). Wittig underlines that the categories of male/female and masculinity/femininity “serve to conceal the fact that social differences always belong to an economic, political, ideological order” (ibid., 2). Thus, the category of sex can be understood as violent, for it creates a severe illusion that the reason for women’s subjugation can be found from their bodies. To underscore this, Wittig questions the reduction of “sex” to the physical characteristics of bodies:

what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an “imaginary formation,” which reinterprets physical features (in themselves as neutral as any others but marked by the social system) through the network of relationships in which they are perceived. (ibid., 11–12)

This statement crystallizes the crucial move Wittig makes. By contending that bodily differences are socially constituted she thoroughly politicizes the categories of “men” and “women” and reconceptualizes them as the products of the heterosexual discourse.

According to Wittig, the category of sex works through the sexualization of women: they are viewed as “*the sex*” (ibid., 8, emphasis in original) in order to differentiate them from—and mark them available to—the dominating class, men. Hence, the category of “women” is “the *mark* imposed by the op-

pressor: the ‘myth of women,’ plus its material effects and manifestations in the appropriated consciousness and bodies of women” (ibid., 11, emphasis in original).⁹ While Wittig focuses mainly on the relational and class-related constitution of bodies (indeed, she interprets the socially produced sex difference in terms of class), she also defends the idea of individual subjectivity. In Wittig’s view, the question of subjectivity is neglected in Marxism, which puts a strong emphasis on economics and therefore, in her view, neglects the question of sexuality as a specific form of oppression that targets women’s individual subjectivities (ibid., 17). Taking issue in this sense with Marxism, Wittig’s “historical task” is to break the “myth of women” by opening up space for “a new personal and subjective definition for all humankind [...] beyond the categories of sex” (ibid., 19).

Yet, for Wittig’s materialist feminism, the subjective perspective makes sense only in the broader political and social framework. This holds true especially for sexuality:

For women to answer the question of the individual subject in materialist terms is first to show, as the lesbians and feminists did, that supposedly “subjective,” “individual,” “private” problems are in fact social problems, class problems; sexuality is not for women an individual and subjective expression, but *a social institution of violence*. (ibid., 19, my emphasis)

With this statement Wittig reminds us that in order to fight oppression, we must first disrupt the operation of discursive violence that constructs “women” as (hetero)sexualized objects.

How, then, can we resist this kind of discursive violence? One attempt to theorize resistance can be found in Wittig’s essay “On the Social Contract,” where she merges Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s concept of “the social contract” with Adrienne Rich’s notion of “compulsory heterosexuality” in order to develop an understanding of heterosexuality as a common but forceful contract. There are two reasons for this tactic. First, it allows Wittig to highlight heterosexuality as a tacit agreement that regulates people’s “whole life, the way they act, the way they move, the way they think” (Wittig 1992, 41). Thus, the contract “makes life possible” (ibid., 40) for those who conform to its conventions—but excludes and pathologizes others. As she writes: “*Outlaw* and *mad* are the names for those who refuse to go by the rules and conventions” dictated by the contract (ibid., 40, emphasis in original).

The second reason is that to theorize heterosexuality as a social contract indicates the possibility of breaking it off. After all, the contract is made with-

⁹ Wittig borrows the term “myth of women” from Simone de Beauvoir ([1949]2011).

out everybody's consent, or as Wittig paraphrases Rousseau, "we are not enjoying a reciprocal commitment that would be the necessary condition for our freedom" (ibid., 35). By "we" Wittig refers here not only to women but also, importantly, to lesbians, the political "runaways" of the class of women. Indeed, what lurks behind the veil of heterosexual contract is the figure of the lesbian, which represents for Wittig the possibility of political resistance and freedom. This is because "Lesbians are not women," since the meaning of "women" is anchored exclusively in the economy of heterosexual meaning production, where "women" becomes intelligible only in relation to "men" (ibid., 32).

In "The Point of View" Wittig thus strongly differentiates her "lesbian point of view" from attempts to theorize change through "feminine writing," by which Wittig refers to *écriture féminine*, a theoretical approach associated with the work of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. From Wittig's perspective, "feminine writing" does not emancipate women but works as "the naturalizing metaphor of the brutal political fact of the domination of women" (Wittig 1992, 59). To theorize writing as "feminine" is thus nothing but accomplishing "the enforcement of sex in language" (ibid., 79).

Similarly, in her essay "The Mark of Gender," Wittig expresses her skepticism toward the concept of "gender," which American feminists had started to use as a tool for analyzing oppression during the 1970s (see Chapter 2 for an analysis of the genealogy of gender). For Wittig, "gender," too, operates violently by making it impossible for women to gain full access to linguistic subjectivity. She asserts that the concept of "gender" particularizes women by preventing them from achieving the status of "universal" and "absolute" speaking subjects—a linguistic position reserved only for men. In this sense, gender operates as "a direct interpellation" through which "the locutor is called upon in person" (Wittig 1992, 79).¹⁰ For women, this means that their personal subjectivity is reduced to "femininity." Moreover, Wittig claims that gender, the semantic marker of women's "difference," violates the ontological wholeness of being as it "tries to accomplish the division of Being," although "Being as being is not divided" (ibid., 81). Therefore, feminists must reject the linguistic category of gender. As she explains: "Language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it. [...] For there is a plasticity of the real to language: language has a plastic action upon the real" (ibid., 78).

¹⁰ Although Wittig does not cite Louis Althusser, the concept of "interpellation" comes, I assume, from his theorization of subject constitution through "ideological state apparatuses." See, Althusser ([1995]2014). Interestingly, Butler also examines gender in terms of linguistic and discursive interpellation by referring to Althusser's work. See, for example, Butler (PLP, 106–131).

Yet, while language can work violently against those it classifies as women and non-heterosexuals, it also provides, due to its very “plasticity,” the means of resistance. Here the figure of the “lesbian” becomes important. As Linda Zerilli notes, Wittig’s aim with the figure of the “lesbian” is “to dramatize the space and practice of freedom” (Zerilli 2005, 71). Not only does the “lesbian” articulate a promise of an alternative social order, but it also functions as a literary practice, a sort of textual violence against heterosexualized concepts. Wittig’s fiction provides myriad examples of the lesbian overriding of heterosexual discourse—a strategy she calls “a war machine” (Wittig 1992, 69). Wittig notes that her aim in *L’Opoponax* (1964) was “to universalize the point of view of a group condemned to being particular, relegated in language to a subhuman category” (Wittig 1992, 82). Likewise, in *Les querillères* (1969) Wittig experiments with personal pronouns and depicts a war led by “elles” against “ils,” so as “not to feminize the world but to make the categories of sex obsolete in language” (Wittig 1992, 85). Also *Le corps lesbien* (1973) attempts to unravel the binary notion of sex; the text dismembers and re-members certain female body parts in order to think bodily boundaries beyond the heterosexualized notion of erotic pleasure.

In sum, the main purpose of Wittig’s lesbian feminism is to disrupt the violent discourses of sex and gender by providing critical tools for mobilizing “the destruction of heterosexuality as a social system” (Wittig 1992, 20). For Wittig, then, the possibility of feminist transformation lies in the political and textual practice of lesbian resistance. This is also her solution to “material violence.” Calling into question the heterosexualized notion of the human, Wittig’s lesbian feminist critique seeks to open up a new horizon to theorize bodies and radical change.

1.2 Butler on Gender Violence

Butler provides her most extensive interpretation of Wittig’s notion of violence in *Gender Trouble* under the title of “Monique Wittig: Bodily Disintegration and Fictive Sex.” She starts the chapter with an epigraph, a citation from Wittig: “Language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body.” Later on in the text, she repeats the statement, adding also the remaining part: “[...] stamping it and violently shaping it” (GT, 147). Already this textual play gives a hint of the relevance Butler gives to Wittig’s discussion of violence, and judging by the tone of her analysis that varies between criticism and approval, the topic both puzzles and fascinates her.

In the beginning of her analysis, Butler gives credit to Wittig’s argument that “there is no sex/gender distinction along conventional lines; gender is built into sex, and sex proves to have been gender from the start” (GT, 144). In addition to this insight that works as one of the building blocks in Butler’s no-

tion of gender performativity, she states, following Wittig, that the binary categorization of sex is a “reality-effect of a violent process” because “such an object has been violently shaped into such a datum and that the history and mechanism of that violent shaping no longer appears with that object” (GT, 145). Furthermore, Butler adds in a footnote that both physical violence and the violence of categorization can be understood as aspects of the gendering violence through which the discourse of heterosexuality operates:

[Wittig’s] theory might account for the violence enacted against sexed subjects—women, lesbians, gay men, to name a few—as *the violent enforcement of a category violently constructed*. [...] Because discourse is not restricted to writing or speaking, but is also social action, even violent social action, we ought also to understand rape, sexual violence, “queer-bashing” as the category of sex in action. (GT, 212 n26, my emphasis)

Although Butler acknowledges the radical possibilities bubbling under the concept of “material violence,” she questions certain ontological underpinnings she finds behind Wittig’s understanding of language, reality, and change. According to her, Wittig postulates two different levels of ontology: the pre-discursive realm of freedom conceived as “a prior and primary unity of all persons in a prelinguistic being” and the discursive level of heterosexual oppression understood as “a violence against the field of ontological plenitude [...]” (GT, 150). Butler’s criticism targets specifically Wittig’s conception of heterosexuality as “a total system that requires a thoroughgoing displacement,” as a result of which the options are either “radical conformity” or “radical revolution” (GT, 154). From Butler’s perspective, this kind of separatist notion of lesbianism as the only emergency exit from oppression is a political short-circuit; it strips lesbianism of “the capacity to resignify the very heterosexual constructs by which it is partially and inevitably constituted” (GT, 163).

Nevertheless, and against the general criticism that misrepresents Butler solely as an unfair critic of Wittig (see, for example, Crowder 2005, 70; de Lauretis 2005, 57; Zerilli 2005, 72), she does *not* completely debunk Wittig’s strategy of lesbianism. On the contrary, Butler notes that the textual practice of lesbianism found particularly in Wittig’s fiction “makes use of redeployment and transvaluation time and again both to make use of originally oppressive terms and to deprive them of their legitimating functions” (GT, 159; see also Kirby 2006, 43).¹¹ For Butler, Wittig’s tactic of “redemption” seeks to contest heterosexual discourse from within, through “the deconstruction of constructs that are always already a kind of violence against the body’s

¹¹ Butler repeats this argument in her later article that discusses Wittig’s textual practices (see Butler 2007a).

possibilities” (GT, 161). Remarkably, this brings to mind Butler’s own deconstructive tactic of performativity that focuses on “the subversive and parodic redeployment of power rather than on the impossible fantasy of its full-scale transcendence” (GT, 158).

In my view, it is partly for this reason that Butler starts, suddenly, to use the terminology of norms in the middle of her Wittig chapter, although the terminology of “norms” does not belong to Wittig’s typical conceptual arsenal.¹² Butler, for example, writes that “The ideal of a coherent heterosexuality that Wittig describes as *the norm* and standard of the heterosexual contract is an impossible ideal, a ‘fetish,’ [...]” (GT, 155, my emphasis). Curiously, and without explaining this conceptual choice, Butler keeps deploying the vocabulary of norms in the rest of the text as well.¹³

I argue that Butler’s tactic serves a crucial theoretical aim: conceptualizing the categories of sex and gender as well as the discourse of heterosexuality as norms allows her to highlight the possibility of transformation as an intrinsic dimension of norms and social power relations. By doing this, Butler reworks Wittig’s tactic of “redeployment” by reading it through Foucault’s account of productive power understood as diffuse relations that produce, normalize, and regulate subjectivities along the historical axes of normal and abnormal.¹⁴ As Butler writes, “Clearly, the norm of compulsory heterosexuality

¹² Wittig mentions the concept of “norm” only once in her work, see Wittig (1979, 119).

¹³ Butler examines gender as a norm in relation to Wittig in her early article “Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, and Foucault” (1986), but not in terms of violence.

¹⁴ In *Undoing Gender* and elsewhere Butler explicitly associates her notion of norms to Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power and biopower. Therefore, it is helpful to briefly explicate what is the role of norms in Foucault’s thought. According to Dianne Taylor, “Foucault posits the norm as playing a fundamental role in the emergence, proliferation, and circulation of modern power” (Taylor 2009, 52). In his early Collège de France lectures (*Psychiatric Power* 1974; *Abnormal* 1975), Foucault identifies the norm as a legitimating function of disciplinary power that “[...] targets individual bodies in order to train subjects that are simultaneously efficient and obedient” (Taylor 2009, 49). When the norm operates as a form of disciplinary power it “determines what is normal” as well as constitutes subjects “through techniques of power that presuppose the norm, construed as an ideal or ‘optimal model’” (ibid., 50). These techniques of power emerged within the expansion of certain institutional structures, such as the factory, the prison, the army, the school, and the hospital, producing certain kinds of subjects as “docile bodies.” In his later lectures (*Society Must Be Defended* 1976; *Security, Territory, Population* 1978), Foucault comes to see the norm as a mechanism of biopower that, as Taylor explains, “[...] proliferates through the actions of the State in such a way as to regulate populations at the biological level in the name of promoting the health and protecting the life of society as a whole” (Taylor 2009, 50). In other words, whereas disciplinary power aims to produce “normal” individuals, biopower establishes several curves of normality—including “the most normal” and “the optimal”—by making use of statistical and demographic sciences. The aim of this kind of normalizing power is to produce a manageable “mass” in order to control and regulate its behavior. In other words, norms

does operate with the force and violence that Wittig describes, but my own position is that *this is not the only way that it operates*” (GT, 155, my emphasis). In order to find a way out of Wittig’s theoretical framework that rests on a rather static and monolithic notion of social power, Butler crossfeeds Wittig’s tactic of “redeployment” with her own theorization of norms. This permits her to analyze discursive violence done by normative heterosexuality and binary gender without compromising her account of change as a historical and temporal possibility of norms.

In the next and final chapter of *Gender Trouble* (“Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions”) Butler continues her Wittigian task of criticizing the “false stabilization of gender” (GT, 172) by introducing her account of gender as a performative, bodily enactment of norms. For Butler, the categories women and men are outcomes of “a sedimentation of gender norms” (GT, 178) in that they are “tenuously constituted in time, [...] through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (GT, 179, emphasis in original). Although Butler notes, significantly, that “Wittig understands gender [...] as a sustained and *repeated* corporeal project” (GT, 177, my emphasis), the shift to norms allows her to underscore, even more, the intrinsic instability of gender, a strategy that “moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted *social temporality*” (GT, 179, emphasis in original).

In *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler brings the ideas of repetition and violence together by arguing that the binary categorizations of sex and gender through which bodies are “materialized” is a “repeated and violent circumscription of cultural intelligibility” (BTM, xii). For Butler, “cultural intelligibility” refers to the way normative discourses constitute us as culturally recognizable subjects.¹⁵ As Butler writes in *Undoing Gender* (2004), the risks of “unintelligibility” can be severe: “When gender norms operate as violations, they function as an interpellation that one refuses only by agreeing to pay the consequences: losing one’s job, home, the prospects for desire, or for life”

function by reproducing power relations “[...] to the point that they come to be seen not as produced at all but simply as natural and necessary” (ibid., 52). Simultaneously with the production of “normal” and “abnormal” individuals and populations, “the norm” also legitimizes “intervention into both in order to ensure conformity or bring into conformity, to keep or make normal, and also effectively eliminate the threat posed by resisting individuals and populations” (ibid., 53).

¹⁵ Briefly put, Butler’s account of subject constitution is based on the idea that to become a socially recognizable subject is to become subjected to normalizing power discourses, which produce and regulate the field of intelligible subjects (or, “lives” as she terms it especially in her later work on vulnerability and interdependency), but which, simultaneously, provide the subject with the capacity of “critical agency.” Butler develops this idea particularly in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) in the context of her reading of Althusser, Hegel, Foucault, Nietzsche, and Freud. I examine Butler’s notion of critical agency and her conception of critique in more detail in Chapter 4.

(UG, 214). Also Wittig describes this risk with her famous phrase: “you-will-be-straight-or-you-will-not-be” (Wittig 1992, 28). Similarly, for Butler, deviating from norms can put one’s very survival at risk; bring forth a “social death” (Butler UG, 8; see also FW, 42).¹⁶ Yet, importantly, although gender norms can threaten the survival of those who do not conform to them, the temporal operation of norms makes them vulnerable and open to contestation.

In *Excitable Speech* (1997) Butler develops further her understanding of gender as a violent *but* temporal (i.e. historically and socially contingent) norm by drawing on Jacques Derrida’s reformulation of J.L. Austin’s account of performative speech acts, a reading that highlights repetition, that is “iterability,” as the conditioning possibility of linguistic meaning production (ES, 147–151).¹⁷ In Derrida’s (1991) critical reading of Austin, it is due to the iterable character of language that every linguistic mark can be recognized and thus “cited” again and again. And this, on the other hand, is possible only because linguistic marks can be “detached” from their prior use and redeployed in new contexts, where they can acquire new meanings. In this sense, iteration is always a process of variation and alteration. For Derrida, then, the possibility of resignification is a general character of language. Taken together, both Wittig’s idea that gendered bodies are violently constituted through repetition and Derrida’s insight that “citationality” is a general condition of language, are of importance for Butler; they offer a way to theorize gender norms as signifying, discursive practices that can be repeated, “cited,” in new ways. As Butler formulates:

Construction not only takes place in time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration. [...] This instability is the *deconstituting* possibility in the very process of repetition [...]. (BTM, 10, emphasis in original)

¹⁶ Here Butler uses Orlando Patterson’s (1982) concept of “social death.” For an analysis of the idea of heightened mortality, see my elaboration on Butler’s discussion of the biopolitical production of early mortality in Chapter 4 (section 4.4) of this dissertation.

¹⁷ For an analysis of Butler’s adaptation of Austin and Derrida to her notion of gender performativity, see, for example Rossi (2011). Butler also discusses the performative function of gender norms through Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of bodily “habitus.” However, in *Excitable Speech*, for example, she argues that while Bourdieu theorizes the body as constituted through “the repetition and acculturation of norms,” he overshadows the possibility of change inhering in the repetitive operation of norms (ES, 154–156). Here, again, Derrida’s notion of “iterability” becomes crucial for Butler’s theorization of norms as iterable mechanisms of power that are open—in their repetition—for rearticulation and change. For a fuller analysis of Butler’s discussion of Bourdieu, see, for example, Lloyd (2007, 124–125).

Given the temporal character of gender norms, they are open to resignification as the “various new forms of gendering” elucidate (GT, xi). Here, Butler refers to transsexual and transgender identities and experiences and to “lesbian and gay parenting” as well as “new butch and femme identities” (GT, xi).

Butler’s merging of Wittig’s notion of material violence to her own poststructuralist theorization of gender norms is also evident in a couple of new concepts she introduces: “normative violence” and “gender violence.” In the 10-year anniversary preface to *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes that “The dogged effort to ‘denaturalize’ gender in this text emerges [...] from a strong desire both to counter the normative violence implied by ideal morphologies of sex and to uproot the pervasive assumptions about natural or presumptive heterosexuality [...]” (GT, xx). By “normative violence”¹⁸—that can be understood as a redeployment of Wittig’s “material violence”—Butler refers to “the mundane violence performed by certain kinds of gender ideals” and to “the norms that govern gender” (GT, xx). By gender norms Butler refers here to “ideal dimorphism, heterosexual complementary of bodies, ideals and rule of proper and improper masculinity and femininity, many of which are underwritten by racial codes of purity and taboos against miscegenation” (GT, xxiii).

Similarly, in *Undoing Gender*, Butler uses the concept of “gender violence” (UG, 6; see also NPTA, 38) to problematize the psychiatric pathologization of non-conforming gender identities, as well as to criticize the coercive genital surgery of intersex children, an operation, which, in Butler’s terms, submits them “to the knife of the norm,” through which “the ideality of gendered morphology is quite literally incised in the flesh” (UG, 53). Furthermore, as I will demonstrate next, Butler’s theoretical tactic, the critical conjoining of Wittig’s “discursive violence” to her own theorization of norms, lays the groundwork for her later work as well.

1.3 Butler’s Critique of Military Violence and the Ethics of Nonviolence

Butler’s recent work, including her books *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009), are often characterized as her “post-9/11 writings” (see e.g. Schippers 2014, 6) as they bring forth a powerful critique of the US War on Terror. What usually goes unnoticed, however, is that Butler started to formulate her critique of US militarist foreign policy already in “Contingent Foundations” (1992). Indeed, I argue that this early article published two years after *Gender Trouble* works as a hinge between Butler’s early, Wittig-

¹⁸ It should be noted that Butler mentions the phrase “normative violence” only once in her work, see Butler (GT, xx).

inspired theorization of gender violence and her more recent discussions of military violence and nonviolence. What I find particularly interesting is that in “Contingent Foundations” Butler analyzes the rhetorical justification of the Gulf War as an example of discursive violence.

Contesting the rhetorical rationale that US military intervention in Iraq would generate the conditions for democracy, Butler notes that the rationale itself was grounded on a violent strategy:

We have, I think, witnessed *the conceptual and material violence* of this practice in the United States’s war against Iraq, in which the Arab ‘other’ is understood to be radically ‘outside’ the universal structures of reason and democracy and, hence, calls to be brought forcibly within. (“CF,” my emphasis)

Given that Butler refers to Wittig later in the article, in the context of her defense of what she calls a “poststructuralist analysis” of violence (“CF,” 17–18), it seems clear that her critique in the aforementioned quotation draws on her prior discussion of “material violence” in *Gender Trouble*. Furthermore, it is my contention that although Butler only cites Wittig infrequently after “Contingent Foundations” (see BTM, 259n17; UG, 207), traces of her conceptual work with Wittig’s “material violence” can also be found in her more recent critique of the US War on Terror.

Providing her critical response to the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as Israeli state violence in *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*, Butler seeks to theorize the possibility of nonviolence against the backdrop of recurrent military violence. To carefully consider our ethical and political responses in the midst of violence, Butler urges us to reflect on how certain normative understandings of “the human” work by dehumanizing particular populations so that waging war against them appears more legitimate. To illustrate this, Butler attends to the discursive regulation of public mourning, a theme that runs through her later work (see Chapter 4 in this dissertation), by analyzing how “certain forms of grief become nationally recognized and amplified, whereas other losses become unthinkable and ungrievable” (PL, xiv). The normative regulation of grief is connected to what Butler calls “the violence of derealization,” a concept that echoes Wittig’s analysis regarding the exclusive mechanisms of discursive violence.

Indeed, Butler uses the concept of “the violence of derealization” to examine how “discourse itself effects violence” by rationalizing the eradication of those populations who do not figure as “real” lives within the normative frames we currently have for “the human,” those who are, even while living, already “in the state of deadness” (PL, 33–34; see also Butler FW, 31). As in

“Contingent Foundations,”¹⁹ Butler stresses that this kind of discursive violence is often based on racist norms that target Arabs in particular or “anyone who looks vaguely Arab in the dominant racial imaginary” (“CF,” 39).²⁰ For Butler, the criticism of racist norms is a prerequisite to theorize nonviolence in times of war: only by questioning the discursive operation of racism, can we expose the myriad dimensions of contemporary military violence. This kind of “social critique” of norms (FW, 35; see also GAO, 82), which interestingly resonates with Wittig’s critique of discursive violence, is therefore a key aspect behind Butler’s conception of nonviolence.²¹

Another aspect is her conceptualization of nonviolence as an ethical task of taking responsibility for one’s own revengeful feelings. One of Butler’s main claims in both *Prekarious Life* and *Frames of War* is that “our responsibility is heightened once we have been subjected to the violence of others” (PL, 16; see also Butler FW, 172). By this she means that the situation in which one—a subject or a state²²—has undergone violence raises a crucial ethical question, “how we will respond to violent injury”? (PL, 16). Problematizing the US’s military response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks Butler reformulates this as a series of feminist questions:

Feminism surely could provide all kinds of responses to the following questions: How does a collective deal, finally, with its vulnerability to violence? At what price, and at whose expense, does it gain a purchase on ‘security,’ and in what ways has a chain of violence formed in which the aggression the United States has wrought returns to it in different forms? [...] What has happened to the value of critique as a democratic value? (PL, 42)

Butler’s goal here is to find “a way out of the circle of violence” (PL, 42). Yet, underlying this task is her claim that “aggression is coextensive with being

¹⁹ In addition to Butler’s account of violence, there are several other points of contact between “Contingent Foundations” and her recent criticism of war. For example, the idea of common human interdependency (see, for example, PL, xii-xiii; FW, 54) is already budding in this early article (see, “CF,” 12).

²⁰ Wittig (1992, 11) also criticizes racism by noting that just like the category of sex, which is a social product of oppression, “the concept of race did not exist” prior to “the socioeconomic reality of black slavery.” Butler criticizes racism in a similar manner. Although Butler problematizes the analogy between sex and race because of their different historical genealogies, she states that “Rather than accept a model which understands racism as discrimination on the basis of a pre-given race, I follow those recent theories which have made the argument that the ‘race’ is partially produced as an effect of the history of racism [...]” (BTM, 18).

²¹ Butler’s notion of “social critique” draws especially on Adorno and Foucault’s theorizations of critique. I will provide a detailed analysis of Butler’s notion of critique in Chapter 4.

²² Butler comments on the relationship between subjects and states as follows: “Nations are not the same as individual psyches, but both can be described as ‘subjects,’ albeit of different orders” (PL, 41).

human” (FW, 176) and thus “part of politics as well” (FW, 48). Therefore, the practice of nonviolence must become, in addition to the critique of norms, a struggle against “aggression’s tendency to emerge as violence” (PL, 170). Although one might understand aggression, or “rage” as she also terms it, as an intrinsic aspect of our psychic lives, Butler holds that it is, at least to a certain extent, an outcome of the social and bodily condition of our lives, a condition that makes us vulnerable to different modalities of violence:²³

The social conditions of my existence are never fully willed by me, and there is no agency apart from such conditions and their unwilled effects. [...] And though not all unwilled effects are “violent,” some of them are impingements that are injurious, acting forcibly on the body in ways that provoke rage. This is what constitutes the dynamic bind or a “struggle” that is non-violence. [...] It is precisely because one is mired in violence that the possibility of non-violence emerges. (FW, 171)

In this context, the idea of nonviolence as a “struggle” comes from Butler’s psychoanalytic reading of Levinas’s argument that the call for nonviolence emerges out of an ethical encounter with a defenseless “other,” whose “face” evokes murderous desires in us, but which, simultaneously, makes an ethical demand not to kill (FW, 172–173).²⁴ By building on Levinas, Butler’s purpose is to show that nonviolence—articulated here as an imperative of “not to kill”—is always communicated to us from outside, for it is someone “other,” who is making the demand.

Interestingly, in *Precarious Life* Butler notes that for Levinas the figure of “the face” is “a situation of discourse” (PL, 138). This is to say that the ethical call for nonviolence is always communicated to us through language, which Butler understands, as I have already pointed out, in terms of discursive power in the sense that “there is a certain violence already in being addressed, given a name, subject to a set of impositions” (PL, 130). Our ability to respond ethically to the call for nonviolence is thus dependent on the norms that produce only certain “faces” as valuable and grievable. To quote Butler, “These norms work to give *face* and to *efface*” (FW, 77, emphasis in original). In this regard, Butler’s description of nonviolence as a struggle against aggression expands upon her Wittigian critique of the violent workings of norms.

²³ Butler (FW, 176–177) specifies the relationship between aggression and violence as follows: “Even if aggression is coextensive with being human [...] the way that destructiveness is lived and directed varies enormously. Indeed, it can become the basis of a ‘non-moralized’ sense of responsibility, one that seeks to protect the other against destruction.”

²⁴ In this context, Butler reads Levinas particularly through Jean Laplanche and Melanie Klein’s psychoanalytic accounts of the relational constitution of “the self” (see, for example, GAO, 96–103).

Samuel A. Chambers also argues that Butler's criticism of the War on Terror in *Precarious Life* "relies upon and further elaborates her prior theoretical position" in *Gender Trouble* (Chambers 2007, 56).²⁵ He posits that it is precisely the concept of "normative violence" that connects these two books; in both texts Butler's criticism of normative violence is "centered on the problem of unreal and unrealizable lives" (ibid., 47; see also Lloyd 2007, 135–137). Just like *Gender Trouble*, which aimed, according to Chambers, to "counter violence at the level of discourse [...] by opening up a space within norms for more and other subjects to appear" (Chambers 2007, 54), so does *Precarious Life* strive to contest normative violence by analyzing the discursive production of certain subject categories, such as "enemy combatant" or "terrorist," that are used to legitimize military violence and the suspension of human rights, as the cases of torture at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo detention centers demonstrate (ibid., 59, see also PL, 4, 51).

Chambers defines normative violence as a "fundamental violence" of norms, for it inheres, in his view, in "the formation of subjectivity" within "the construction of discourse and the circulation of discursive practices" (Chambers 2007, 48–49). To emphasize this, he compares it to Derrida's notion of "the violence of the letter," through which Derrida theorizes the relation between linguistic violence and "juridical, force-related" violence (ibid., 47).²⁶ Similar to Derrida's notion, Butler's concept of normative violence allows us, Chambers argue, to analyze the violent operations of discourses and linguistic classifications, an analysis without which we could not understand the scope and meaning of physical violence, ranging from violent military practices to hate violence against sexual and gender minorities. Therefore, Chambers suggests that Butler's concept of "normative violence" offers a helpful tool for political theory to discuss those forms of violence that usually remain unexplored, that is, the normative practices that render some bodies and populations as "livable" and others "unlivable."

While I agree with Chambers that the theorization of norms connects Butler's work on gender to her criticism of military violence, what his analysis overlooks, however, is the Wittigian background of Butler's criticism of norms. Although Derrida's deconstructive thinking undoubtedly inspires Butler's thought, my contention is that in order to fully understand Butler's theorization of norms we must take seriously her critical commitments to Wittig. Although also Chambers seeks to point out possible locations of resistance against normative violence, his over-emphasis of the Derridean notion of

²⁵ Chambers's article is also published as a chapter (Ch. 4 "Normative Violence") in *Judith Butler and Political Theory* (2008a), which Chambers published jointly with Terrell Carver. My references in this chapter are to Chambers's article.

²⁶ For Derrida, the violence of the letter refers to "arche-writing," a sort of "originary violence" that conditions the difference between speech and writing. See Derrida (1976, 110–112).

fundamental violence obscures Butler's twofold notion of norms. In other words, for Butler, norms are precisely not "fundamentally" violent (isn't the idea of "fundamental" or "inherent" violence a residue of structuralist thinking?) but open to resignification. Indeed, far from being fundamental structures of social world, norms in Butler's thought must be understood in terms of social action (UG, 51–52; see also Introduction of this dissertation). Therefore, to highlight Butler's critical reading of Wittig's conception of discursive violence is important not only because it makes visible the radical lesbian feminist background of Butler's theorization of violence, but also because it sheds more light on her theorization of the relationship between norms, violence, and social change.²⁷ It is this aspect that generally goes unacknowledged by several Butler commentators, including Chambers. Only by ignoring Butler's critical discussion of Wittig's notion of discursive violence can one argue that Butler conceives norms as fundamentally or inherently violent.

While Chambers's interpretation of Butler is sympathetic, the understanding according to which Butler conceptualizes norms in terms of fundamental or inherent violence has also given rise to more critical readings. Particularly Butler's theorization of the ethics of nonviolence has raised questions about whether her earlier account of violently operating norms is compatible with her more recent theorization of nonviolence (Mills 2007, 2015; Murphy 2011a). According to Catherine Mills, for example, Butler's "understanding of normative violence is at odds with her attempt to move toward a nonviolent ethics" and a theorization of ethical responsibility (see Chapter 3 in this dissertation) due to the following paradox:

[W]ithin Butler's account of the normative constitution of the subject—or what she later calls "the human"—norms themselves are inherently violent, and it is that violence itself that generates the need for what she calls a "nonviolent ethics" or "ethics of nonviolence." But if the appearance of the ethical subject is itself productively constrained by social norms and is thus dependent on violence, then it is unclear in what sense an ethics of responsibility could be nonviolent. (Mills 2007, 134–135)

²⁷ Clare Hemmings (2011, 179–180) provides an excellent analysis of the ways in which feminist scholars tend to mention only Foucault and Derrida as Butler's key predecessors, a citational practice that has resulted in the systematic erasure of Wittig from Butler's thought. My analysis of Butler's critical debt to Wittig builds on and further develops this important insight. But although Hemmings analyzes in a detailed manner the theoretical relationship between these two feminist thinkers, she overlooks the way Butler's theorization of the historically contingent intertwinement of norms and violence expands upon Wittig's notion of discursive violence.

Because “normative violence,” according to Mills, conditions our appearance within the social and political sphere, every ethical encounter between singular beings “will also be founded in normative violence” (Mills 2007, 148–149). Therefore, if violence plays a formative role in constituting us as culturally intelligible beings, then it becomes difficult, according to Mills, to maintain a conception of the ethical subject that “responds to and opposes violence but does not partake of it” (ibid., 147). However, this raises the question of the crucial distinction between aggression and violence that Butler makes. Indeed, does it follow from the argument according to which we are “mired” in violence—that is, that we are socially constituted through power relations, violent practices, and violently operating norms and normative categories—that we are *incapable* of resisting our violent impulses and aggression toward others?

Despite the fact that Mills sidesteps Butler’s crucial distinction between aggression and violence, a conceptual distinction that in my view points to the possibility of developing nonviolent practices vis-à-vis the different types of violence, she nevertheless holds that one possibility to theorize nonviolence in Butler’s framework could be to claim that “the ethical encounter might break from the conditions of its production” (ibid., 151).²⁸ However, she doubts whether such “a radical break” is possible, since Butler’s notion of norms is based, as she puts it, on “the logic of iteration,” which “entail[s] that this break is never complete” (ibid., 151). While I agree that Butler’s account of nonviolence is significantly informed by her theorization of the relationship between norms and violence, isn’t it exactly the notion of “iteration” that allows Butler to formulate a critique of violence? Or, a critique as an ethical practice of nonviolence?

In her response to Mills, Butler maintains that “a certain crucial breakage can take place between the violence by which we are formed and the violence with which, once formed, we conduct ourselves” (FW, 167; see also Jenkins 2007).²⁹ This is possible because “The normative production of the subject is

²⁸ Mills suggests that another way to solve the paradox would be to distinguish between different mechanisms of violence (Mills 2007, 151). For Butler, there are several modalities of violence that overlap each other, including the violence of norms (i.e. what scholars have called “normative violence”), physical violence, hate violence, state violence, and military violence. Birgit Schippers, for her part, has mapped out four different types of nonviolence: the resignification of norms; the refusal of returning violence; as well as the practices of critique and grievability (Schippers 2014, 76–77). See also Butler’s recent elaboration on her notion of nonviolence in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (NTPA, 187–189).

²⁹ In her response, Butler notes that “[...] I would caution against a generalization of the thesis that all normativity is founded in violence” (FW, 169). Butler’s response has also been published as an article (see Butler 2007). For an analysis of the relationship between violence and nonviolence in the context

an iterable process—the norm is repeated, and in this sense is constantly ‘breaking’ with the contexts delimited as the ‘conditions of production’” (FW, 168). Moreover, as I have demonstrated in this chapter, Butler’s argument about what might be called the “socio-temporal” nature of norms originates in her discussion of Wittig’s conception of discursive violence. It is this early interpretation of Wittig that works, I argue, as a stepping-stone for Butler to theorize norms as both constitutive *and* deconstitutive forms of social power. As I noted in the introduction to this study, I argue that this can be regarded as Butler’s twofold conception of norms.³⁰ Hence, making visible the feminist genealogy of Butler’s conception of violence enables us to see why she found it important to theorize social temporality as a crucial aspect of the operation of norms. That is, it allowed her to show that transforming and even breaking violent norms is possible—if not inevitable bearing in mind that the reproduction of norms requires that they are repeated time and again. It is this compulsory repetition of norms that makes them vulnerable to critical transformation.

As Mills rightly notes, though, the break from norms is “never complete.” However, this is precisely because “the break” is not a “radical” break as Mills implies, but a temporal—constant and re-emerging—possibility of our daily action that is bound up with the performative, and potentially violent, action of norms. Yet this does not mean that nonviolence is impossible. As Butler states, it is possible to “undergo a shift in the iteration of violence” if we assume “responsibility for living a life that [...] makes good use of the iterability of the productive norms and, hence, their fragility and transformability” (FW, 170–171). This is exactly the goal of “social critique,” a topic I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4. But now it suffices to say that the idea of critique is an indispensable aspect of Butler’s theorization of the relationship between norms and violence. Highlighting critique as an ethical practice that enables us to take distance from norms and to problematize the normative production of unlivable lives, Butler envisions the possibility of “an international coalition of feminist activists and thinkers” that would mobilize feminist, queer, and anti-racist struggles against violence and militarism (PL, 32–33, 48). In this respect, then, Butler’s notion of nonviolence must be understood as a collective critique of norms that strives to arrest cycles of violence by turning aggression into radical democratic³¹ political contestation.

of the critique of colonialism, see also Butler’s reading of Frantz Fanon in her 2006 article “Violence, Non-Violence: Sartre on Fanon” (2006b).

³⁰ In *Undoing Gender* Butler describes the constitutive and deconstitutive operations of norms as the “doubleness of the norm” (UG, 206).

³¹ Throughout her work, Butler associates her project with Ernesto Laclau’s and Chantal Mouffe’s accounts of radical democracy (see, for example, FW, 142; BTM, 21, 193; NPTA, 4).

1.4 Conclusion: Butler's Feminist Critique of Violence

In this chapter I have demonstrated that Butler's theorization of norms stems from her critical discussion of Wittig's conception of discursive violence. This is most evident in *Gender Trouble*, where Butler begins to develop her notion of the gender binary as a violently operating norm. Yet, as I also have argued, Butler's criticism of US military violence and her more recent mediations on nonviolence build, albeit more implicitly, on her prior discussion of norms in the context of her interpretation of Wittig. While it is clear that Butler's theorization of norms draws to a great extent on Derrida's and Foucault's works among others, it is my contention that to ignore Wittig's influence on Butler is to overshadow a number of crucial aspects with regard to Butler's work on norms.

First, as I have shown, it was Wittig who introduced the idea that the categories of sex and gender can be conceived in terms of discursive violence. Therefore, Butler's notions of normative violence and gender violence are undoubtedly indebted to Wittig's work. Second, Butler's critical response to the US's War on Terror in her more recent work develops further her previous discussion of the relationship between norms and violence. As I have presented, Butler began to formulate her critique of military violence in "Contingent Foundations" by redeploying Wittig's concept of "material violence"—a critique that resembles Butler's later analysis concerning "the violence of derealization." In this sense, Butler's critique of the different forms of violence continues Wittig's feminist legacy.

In my elaboration of Butler's deployment of Wittig, I have also paid attention to the crucial differences between them. Whereas Wittig holds that feminists must completely overthrow the violent system of heterosexuality, Butler sees the possibility of change as an internal dimension of normative power relations. Although Butler builds on Wittig's notion of discursive violence, she reformulates it in terms of her notion of norms as iterable aspects of power. By doing this, she conceptualizes critical transformation as the intrinsic dimension of the workings of norms. My central argument in this chapter has been that it is this twofold notion of norms that Butler begins to formulate in the context of her reading of Wittig.

Like Wittig, who stresses the analysis of "material violence" as a necessary element of feminist struggles against oppression, Butler insists on the importance of understanding the social critique of norms as indispensable to our critique of violence and our struggle toward nonviolence. In Butler's words, "If the injunction to nonviolence is to avoid becoming meaningless, it must be allied with *a critical intervention apropos the norms* that differentiate between those lives that count as livable and grievable and those that do not" (FW, 180, my emphasis). I argue that by acknowledging the Wittigian

background of Butler's thought, her theorization of the relationship between norms and violence becomes visible, above all, as a practice of *feminist critique*.

I began this chapter by citing Butler's statement that she "would like to consider [her] theory of gender explicitly in terms of the questions of violence [...]" (UG, 207). To conclude, then, I want to quote the remaining part as well: "[...], and the possible transformation of the scene of gender violence into a future of social survival" (UG, 207). My discussion in the next chapter develops further Butler's notion of critical transformation by addressing the question of transgender livability.

2 CONTESTING GENDER NORMALIZATION: A DISCUSSION OF TRANSGENDER LIVABILITY

In an interview with Kate More (1999), Butler states that: “I think transgender has always been there for me as an issue and that I feel great affiliation with transgender communities and feel that my work, although it hasn’t always been explicitly linked to those issues, strikes me as [...] very sympathetic” (1999, 286). Although Butler’s early work, such as *Gender Trouble* ([1999]1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), only touches upon trans issues as part of her broader theorizations of gender, I argue that in *Undoing Gender* (2004) she brings the question of trans issues to the fore of her analysis of gender norms.³²

Butler’s shift of focus has remained largely unacknowledged in the growing body of commentary literature. In commentaries, transsexual and transgender identities are mentioned usually only as examples of Butler’s discussion of nonconforming gender identities and bodily experiences (see e.g. Loizidou 2007, 154; Lloyd 2007, 135; Carver & Chambers 2008a, 155; Thiem 2008, 244; Brady & Schirato 2010, 33; Shippers 2014, 19).³³ In order

³² As Enke (2013, 19) points out, the term ‘transsexual’ is usually used as a “[m]edical and popular term describing persons with significant cross-gender identity.” As Enke specifies, “[d]ue to varying life circumstances, transsexuals may or may not live their gender identity some of or all the time; depending on medical access, legal options or restrictions, financial means, physical appropriateness, and desire, transsexuals may or may not change bodily characteristics and/or achieve legal sex reassignment through hormonal and surgical means” (Enke 2013, 19). On the other hand, ‘transgender’ refers usually to three discrete but overlapping meanings. First, it can refer to “*a social movement* that insists on the right of all people to determine for themselves their own personal and legal gender statuses (gender self-determination),” and second, to “*an ever-expanding social category* that incorporates the broadest possible range of gender nonconformity for the purposes of movement building, organizing, and social-service recognition,” and finally, to a “[t]ransgender identity [that] may include a gender identity that differs from the sex assigned at birth; a gender expression that differs from that conventionally expected of people according to their bodily sex; and/or a desire for alteration of body’s sex/gender characteristics” (Enke 2013, 18–19, emphasis in original). When deploying the adjective ‘trans’ (such as “trans issues,” or “trans people”) I use it in a general and inclusive sense.

³³ Gill Jagger (2008) is an exception in this respect, for she devotes a whole chapter to the question of trans issues in her book on Butler, focusing on her theorization of performativity and materialization. Yet, surprisingly, she does not include *Undoing Gender* in her analysis. Anita Brady and Tony Schirato (2010, 33, 89) also address transgender issues and politics but do not offer an extensive elaboration of the topic. Here, it is also worth noticing that Moya Lloyd’s recent article “Heteronormativity and/as Violence: The ‘Sexing’ of Gwen Araujo” (2013) deploys compellingly Butler’s notion of gender norms in order to critically analyze the violence related to both the killing of Gwen Araujo, a trans woman of

to fill this gap, I provide a detailed reading of Butler's discussion of trans issues, with a specific focus on her theorization of the relationship between gender norms and trans embodiment; her critique of the psychiatric pathologization of trans persons related to the diagnosis of gender identity disorder (GID); and her account of gender self-determination.

While Butler frames her theorization of gender norms in *Undoing Gender* through the question of "the continuum of gender violence," and in this sense continues the Wittigian legacy to examine sex and gender in terms of discursive violence (see Chapter 1), she utilizes in particular a Foucauldian framework to interrogate the pathologization of transgender lives and to theorize gender as "the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place" (UG, 42). Although Butler focuses a great deal on questioning the normalizing operations of gender pertaining to the GID diagnosis, she strongly emphasizes the possibility of transformation inhering in the very operation of these gender norms.

To elucidate Butler's notion of gender as both regulative (i.e. normalizing) and transformative, and her twofold account of norms more broadly, I suggest that we have to examine her discussion of transgender lives not only in light of her critique of normalization but also in connection to her theorizations of gender self-determination and trans embodiment. In order to highlight Butler's twofold approach to norms, I bring her views in critical dialogue with other Foucauldian feminist scholars who have discussed transgender pathologization but draw quite different conclusions than Butler.

Within Foucauldian feminist studies, a number of scholars have problematized the pathologizing discourses of gender, seeking to bring to light the genealogy of the concept of "gender" and the GID diagnosis (Feder 2007; Germon 2009; Hausman 1995; Repo 2016).³⁴ Jennifer Germon, for instance, has complicated the now commonplace feminist deployments of the concept of "gender" by reminding us that it was originally invented and institutionalized in 1950s psychiatric sexology as part of the diagnostic efforts to treat intersex conditions and what sexologists called "transsexualism" (see e.g. Germon 2009, 85–86; 63–64). Although all these aforementioned scholars put forward a Foucauldian-feminist critique of the sexological discourse of gender, Bernice L. Hausman and Jemima Repo take a step further by arguing that the pathologizing discourse of gender actually produced the transsexual *subject* position, which therefore became necessarily dependent on the medical-

color, in 2002, and the legal case that followed it. As her focus is on this specific case of violence her aim is not to elaborate on Butler's discussion of trans lives.

³⁴ Although many Foucauldian feminists have analyzed the medical emergence of gender, it has to be noted that Foucault himself never dealt with the concept of 'gender.'

ized “gender discourse” (Hausman 1995, 9; Repo 2016, 72). On the basis of this argument, they further conclude that feminist scholars today should not only be aware of the psychiatric history of the concept of gender, but they should also reject it as a theoretical and political tool and return to the concept of “sex” (Hausman 1995, 200; Repo 2016, 180).

Another aspect that Hausman and Repo share in their problematization of gender is their criticism of Butler’s approach to gender. They claim that Butler’s notion of gender is ahistorical because it lacks a detailed genealogical description of the medical emergence of the concept of “gender.” The result of this, they contend, is that her view does not challenge gender as a biopolitical strategy (Repo 2016, 7), but ends up—with her aim of “proliferating gender”—reinforcing the normalization of gender (Hausman 1995, 179).³⁵

In this chapter, I argue that Hausman’s and Repo’s contention that we should let go of the concept of gender not only ignores the possibility of the critical rearticulation of gender but also runs the risk of excluding those persons who identify themselves as transgender or genderqueer persons from feminist theory and politics. Although Butler also problematizes the pathologization of trans identities, her critique does not lead to the conclusion that “gender” as a concept should be renounced. By juxtaposing Butler’s approach to that of Hausman’s and Repo’s, my aim is to explicate Butler’s position in relation to this particular strand of Foucauldian-feminist critique of gender. Against Hausman and Repo, I argue that Butler’s discussion of trans issues offers us a less deterministic and more sophisticated critique of gender normalization because Butler takes seriously the questions of trans embodiment and gender self-determination, thus foregrounding the possibility of thinking gender otherwise. As I will demonstrate, Butler’s discussion of trans lives vis-à-vis gender normalization is strongly informed by her twofold approach to norms.

Since Butler’s broader aim with her critique of gender normalization is to make room for those who live or experience their gender non-normatively, she also acknowledges the GID diagnosis as something that can contribute to greater autonomy with regard to gender self-determination, a crucial aspect that affects the lives of trans and other gender nonconforming people. In this sense, and as I will show, Butler’s approach reflects her theorization of “livability,” namely, an analysis of the ways in which gender norms affect our understanding of what kinds of gendered lives can be conceived as worth living and flourishing. For this reason, and in opposition to Hausman’s and Repo’s critique of gender, I argue that Butler’s stance can be regarded as a trans-affirmative position in feminist theory.

³⁵ Repo also claims that another failure of Butler’s is the omission of biopolitics from her analysis (Repo 2016, 6–7; see also Repo 2014). For a critical evaluation of Repo’s criticism, see Sawicki (2016).

I begin by giving a short overview of the emergence of gender in psychiatric sexology. Then I move to critically scrutinize Hausman's and Repo's arguments. In the third section, I discuss Butler's theorization of the possibility of resistance against gender normalization by examining her accounts of livability and trans embodiment. The fourth section gives a reading of Butler's critique of the GID diagnosis from the perspective of gender self-determination. I conclude by summarizing why Butler's approach can be conceived as a contribution to trans-inclusive feminist theory and politics.

2.1 A brief genealogy of gender

In 1955, American sexologist John Money coined the concept of "gender." His initial concern was the psychosexual development of children born with "ambiguous" genitalia, namely, intersexed or "hermaphroditic" children as they were then called. Borrowing the term "gender" from linguistics (philology), Money and his research team—sexologists Joan Hampson and John Hampson—aimed to provide a clear way of determining sex in cases where biological variables (i.e. chromosomes, external genitals, gonads, hormones, and internal accessory structures) were incongruent and thus could not provide an unequivocal determination of a person's sex. Drawing from their clinical research on intersexed children, the team argued that the biological variables of sex did not predict a person's psychological sex, that is, "gender role" as they called it.³⁶ On the basis of these findings, Money and the Hampsons reasoned that "gender role" was not an innate feature of a body but an outcome of *postnatal* experiences and learning (Germon 2009, 32; Hausman 1995, 79, 94–97; Repo 2016, 30–32).

Working within a behaviorist framework, Money and the Hampsons understood gender in terms of the theory of stimulus and response; they believed that gender role was psychologically learned as a response to a perceptual stimulus of one's genitals during a "critical period" that in their view lasted 18 months after birth. According to this model, gender was learned in the

³⁶ By "gender role," Money and the Hampsons referred to "[a]ll those things that a person says or does to disclose himself or herself as having the status of boy or man, girl or woman, respectively. [...] Gender role is appraised in relation to the following: general mannerisms, deportment and demeanor; play preferences and recreational interests; spontaneous topics of talk in unprompted conversation and casual comment; content of dreams, daydreams and fantasies; replies to oblique inquiries and projective tests; evidence of erotic practices, and, finally, the person's own replies to direct inquiry." (Money, Hampson, and Hampson 1955, 302.) Their concept of "gender role" was inspired by Talcott Parsons's role theory, according to which different sex roles within the nuclear family was necessary for the maintenance of social order. See, for example, Parsons & Bates (1956); for more on the relationship between Money and Parsons, see Germon (2009, 32, 46).

early years of childhood and once it was learned it became a relatively fixed feature of a person's self (Germon 2009, 36–37, 55; Hausman 1995, 97, 101; Repo 2016, 33–34; see also Money, Hampson, and Hampson 1955, 310).

According to Germon's feminist historical account, it is for this reason that the team started to develop and promote medical protocols for the surgical "correction" of the bodies of intersexed children (Germon 2009, 44). They believed that if genitals were operated on after birth, the child would be more likely to develop a "normal" gender role as either male or female (*ibid.*). In this way, the risk of getting "wrong" perceptual stimuli—and thus the development of an abnormal "gender role"—was prevented. In addition to surgical procedures, the development of "normal" gender roles within this model required also, as Repo points out, "the disciplinarization and normalization of the family," since the successful establishment of a proper gender role also needed socialization and parental supervision in order to preclude any gender confusion in the child (Repo 2016, 37, 38–39; see also Germon 2009, 43). Although many intersex and LGBTIQ as well as human rights organizations have criticized the coercive genital surgeries, the medical "case management of intersex children" developed by Money and his team is still being practiced in several countries.³⁷

The sexological discourse on gender also contributed to the medicalization of transsexuality and was, as Germon writes, "especially profitable to psychoanalysts and others who were [...] theorizing transsexuality as a phenomenon" (Germon 2009, 63). Building on Freudian psychoanalysis³⁸ and object-relations theory, psychiatrist Robert Stoller developed Money's ideas further by introducing a new concept, "gender identity", as a part of his clinical and theoretical work on transsexuality.³⁹ While Stoller accepted Money's idea that "gender role" refers to behavioral manifestations and social expectations (i.e. femininity and masculinity), he suggested that "gender identity" refers to one's psychological sense of self as female or male (Stoller 1968, 10). For him, gender identity was an outcome of the psychosocial development of personhood in early childhood. Although Stoller believed that "gender identity"

³⁷ For example, the agenda of the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA) is, as described on their website, to work toward "systemic change to end shame, secrecy, and unwanted genital surgeries for people born with an anatomy that someone decided is not standard for male or female." <http://www.isna.org> (accessed 15 May 2017).

³⁸ As Germon notes, postwar American psychology was influenced by Talcott Parson's structuralist functionalism, and Money, for example, had studied under Parson's supervision in the doctoral program in the Psychological Clinic and Department of Social Relations at Harvard University at the end of the 1940s (Germon 2009, 25, 32–33, 46).

³⁹ Drawing on Money's idea of the "critical period" of gender acquisition, Stoller suggested that the result of this developmental phase is a "core gender identity," which he understood as a permanent and unchangeable sense of oneself as male or female (Stoller 1968, 29–30).

became established in early childhood, he held that gender identity continued to develop through adolescence (Stoller 1968, 29–30).

According to Repo, Stoller introduced “gender identity” in order to study

how children developed “normal” gender identity through their emotional relationships and unconscious identifications with their parents. Such knowledge would reveal which factors in a person’s environment and intimate relationships needed to be managed and how this should be done to prevent the development of deviant gender identity. (Repo 2016, 56–57)

Indeed, Stoller’s project was to study and find a cure for “abnormal cases,” and he was particularly interested in feminine boys, whose gender identity seemed to be in opposition to their sex (Stoller 1968, 10). He held that whereas a “normal” boy developed his gender identity by identifying with the same-sex parent, that is, the father, an “abnormal” boy—the transsexual child—identified with his mother.

For Stoller, “male childhood transsexualism” was a “potentially malignant personality disorder,” which resulted from the overly symbiotic relationship between the male child and the ambivalently gendered (e.g. “bisexual” mother, see Stoller 1968, 94, 125) and/or psychologically “empty” mother, who attempts to feminize her son either consciously or unconsciously (Stoller 1968, 90, 96, 109, 113–117).⁴⁰ According to him, the pathology of these children manifested itself in their “feminine” behavior: they wanted to dress in women’s clothes; mimic feminine gestures, such as styles of walking and speaking; in games they preferred female roles; and while urinating, they wanted to sit (Stoller 1968, 90).

When it came to the possible treatability of this “personality disorder,” Stoller concluded that “[f]ortunately, adult transsexuality, which is a malignant condition irreversible by psychological methods, may be treatable and reversible in the small children” (Stoller 1968, 140). As a cure, Stoller proposed corrective psychotherapy, the aim of which “should be to make the child feel that he is a male and wants to be a masculine boy,” which meant uprooting all “gender perversions” (Stoller 1968, 251–252). But with regard to “adulthood transsexualism,” Stoller lamented that the only option seemed to be to

⁴⁰ For Stoller, female-to-male transsexualism was “very rare,” since the primary caregiver—and thus the source of normal and pathological gender identification—was usually the mother, not the father. See Stoller (1968, 197). Curiously, in comparison to mothers, whom Stoller saw as the main culprits in “ruining” the child’s normal gender identity, Stoller did not pay much attention to fathers; he only noted that their physical absence may contribute to the child’s abnormal gender development (see e.g. Stoller 1968, 96–97).

surrender to the requests of the transsexual “to have his body changed so that he becomes as completely female as medical techniques can contrive” (Stoller 2016, 246).

In sum, and as Germon notes, “Stoller’s work followed a long tradition of medical and scientific studies that have sought to demarcate the boundaries of normality by turning to those whose bodies and/or subjectivities betray some level of anomaly” (Germon 2009, 72). Yet, these bodies are never defined as “anomalous or even nonconformist” but “always ‘abnormal,’ ‘defective,’ or ‘unfinished’ and most recently, ‘disordered’” (ibid).⁴¹ Indeed, the Stollerian discourse of gender identity resulted in the establishment of new diagnostic categories. Although the American Psychiatric Association (APA) removed homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) in 1973, the new diagnoses “Gender Identity Disorder” (GID) and “Gender Identity Disorder in Children” were added to the DSM-III in 1980.⁴²

Notwithstanding Money’s and Stoller’s pathologizing accounts of gender, Germon points out that certain second-wave Anglophone feminists adopted the concept of gender in the 1970’s in order to question biological essentialism, laying thus the groundwork for contemporary feminist theorizations of gender (Germon 2009, 86–87).⁴³ These feminist thinkers were especially interested in Stoller’s sex/gender split, arguing that if gender was *learned* through socialization, then the sexual division of labor along with the different gender roles were not biological facts but socially learned and thus something that could be changed (ibid.). Therefore, the concept of gender offered a promising—though much-debated—concept for the problematization of women’s oppression. As Germon critically notes, however, “the origins of gender in sexology have, almost without exception, been elided” from feminist theory (Germon 2009, 3). For her, this can be explained by the lack of critical analyses of Money’s work in feminist theorizations on gender. As a consequence of this, Germon argues that feminist thinkers have also ignored the precarious position of the intersex population at the heart of the inception of gender, thus contributing—though unwittingly—to its “ongoing status [...] as the impossible ‘Other’” (ibid.).

According to Repo (2016), on the other hand, the psychiatric and sexological gender discourse established by Money and Stoller was specifically a biopo-

⁴¹ For more on the history of the demarcation between normal and abnormal in relation to pathology, see Canguilhem (1991).

⁴² Several scholars have argued that GID builds on and thus continues, though implicitly, the pathologization of homosexuality. See, for example, Sedgwick (1991); Feder (1996); and Bryant (2006).

⁴³ Germon discusses particularly the works of Kate Millet, Germaine Greer, Ann Oakley, Gayle Rubin, Nancy Chodorow, Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna (Germon 2009, 86–120).

litical strategy targeting not only intersex but also transsexual populations, and more generally, the roles of men and women within the sphere of the family. She contends that

[t]he idea of gender identity emerged in conjunction with *the transsexual subject*, which was entangled with other budding attempts to regulate the emotional economy of families to maintain a sexual order of things around the social, political, and economic ideal of the nuclear family. (Repo, 2016, 50–51, my emphasis)

According to Repo’s genealogy, the emergence of “the transsexual subject” thus served broader biopolitical aims of stabilizing the normative ideal of the nuclear family in postwar USA. Here, Repo sides with Hausman (1995), who claimed two decades before Repo that “the transsexual subject” was *created* by the medical establishment. Before turning to Butler’s critique of the pathologization of trans lives, I scrutinize Hausman’s and Repo’s lines of reasoning more closely, since they both conclude on the basis of their arguments that feminists should discard the concept of gender.

2.2 Giving up the concept of gender?

On the basis of her genealogical analysis, Repo posits that the emergence of the transsexual subject was substantially conditioned by medical discourse, which sought to normalize transsexual bodies by performing surgical operations on those whose gender identity did not match their sex:

In addition to the psychological profiling, diagnosis, and treatment elicited by gender, the apparatus also created new possibilities for surgically altering an individual’s genitals (“sex”) in order to align them with the person’s mind (“gender”). Where for Money, gender justified *pre-emptive* genital surgery on infants, for Stoller, gender also justified the *normalizing* surgical alteration of the genitals of adult transsexuals. (Repo 2016, 73, emphasis in original)

According to Repo, reassignment surgery was marketed for transsexual patients as a way to achieve personal self-fulfillment and freedom, a strategy of power that aligned with the individualistic and liberal capitalist discourses of self-discipline and self-realization circulating during postwar America (Repo 2016, 70). While she is right in claiming that Stoller suggested surgeries for “male-to-female transsexuals,” he did it very hesitantly, noting that only the most feminine transsexuals should be operated and that the surgical techniques should be used cautiously and only as “research techniques” (Stoller 1968, 251). In fact, as Joanne Meyerowitz and Carol Riddell have pointed out, only a small number of surgeons performed reassignment surgeries in

the US, while the majority of the medical establishment opposed the procedures and expressed hostile attitudes toward transsexuals (Meyerowitz 2002, 98–129; Riddell 2006, 151; see also Beemyn 2014). Overlooking these historical facts, Repo intimates that “the medical establishment” justified the surgeries by invoking the principles of self-fulfillment and freedom (Repo 2016, 70).

Although Repo’s theoretical aim is to disclose the biopolitical rationalities behind the inception of the concept of gender and the emergence of “the transsexual subject,” her ultimate aim, however, is to formulate a critique against feminist deployments of the concept of “gender”. Repo argues that although the second-wave feminist adoption of gender

produced powerful contestations of biological determinism, they came at the price of turning a blind eye to the corporeal and psychiatric discipline of sex it enabled, whether it was the outright violence done to intersexed infants and their genitals or the more strategically ambiguous but nonetheless pathologized policing of adult male transsexuality. (Repo 2016, 165–166)

Against the understanding that gender can be a useful concept for feminism, Repo asserts that “gender is an apparatus of power and that therefore it cannot be taken for granted politically as its deployment always has limitations” (Repo 2016, 76). Furthermore, Western feminism was, according to her, “always already entangled in medical and psychological discourses of normalization” (Repo 2016, 178). On these grounds and because “[t]he concepts that feminists use must open up possibilities for critical thought and transformative politics,” Repo reasons that they “must be ready to discard concepts when they lose their critical edge,” arguing that feminists should reject the concept of gender (Repo 2016, 171, 176–178). Finally, she concludes that “Feminists today must be vigilant about asking whether their engagement with the discourse of gender advances a critical agenda [...] *when often it might simply suffice to refer to sex, sexual difference, or women instead*” (Repo 2016, 180, my emphasis).

While I think Repo’s “biopolitics of gender” can function as a critical reminder for contemporary feminist and queer theorists to take seriously the regulative and normalizing aspects of gender, I think her conclusion regarding the harmfulness of the concept of gender is problematic. On the one hand, Repo criticizes second-wave feminists for ignoring “the perfunctory instrumentalization of Money’s and Stoller’s intersexed and transsexual patients” and for “thus *depoliticizing* the conditions of their plight,” but on the other hand she suggests that feminists should return to “sex,” “sexual difference,” or “women” in order to maintain the critical edge of feminist theory and politics (Repo 2016, 166, my emphasis). However, this raises the question on what

grounds should feminists use just these three categories? And why now, when for example the tenacious efforts of transwomen to radically update feminist theory and activism are finally starting to bear fruit?⁴⁴ Why shouldn't for instance "transsexuals," "transwomen," "transmen," and "genderqueer" persons be included in feminism as well? And furthermore, why should we assume that the categories of "sex," "sexual difference," and "women" are not biopolitically produced?⁴⁵

Although Repo urges feminist theorists to pay critical attention to the normalizing discourses of gender, her selective genealogy risks reinforcing the exclusion of trans issues and trans persons from feminist theory and politics. In this way, her reading not only overlooks the counter-discourses ("counter-dispositifs") that the psychiatric discourse and the "apparatus" of gender later enabled (such as the ideas of "transgender" and "genderqueer"), but also *depoliticizes* trans identities and experiences by downplaying their relevance for feminist theory and politics.⁴⁶

Upon closer scrutiny, Repo's biopolitical account of the emergence of the "transsexual subject" repeats certain problematic arguments made earlier by Hausman in *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender* (1995), a study that also utilizes what Hausman's calls the "Foucauldian paradigm" (Hausman 1995, viii).⁴⁷ Although Hausman does not discuss the biopolitical dimensions of gender, her argument regarding the emergence of "transsexualism" bears a clear resemblance to that of Repo's. Indeed, Hausman's main argument is that the possibility of transsexual identity and subjectivity depends on the historical emergence of the concept of "gender" as well as on the invention of sex-reassignment technologies (Hausman 1995, 7, 9). Interestingly, Hausman also concludes that due to the medicalized roots of gender, feminist theorists should reject it by returning to the concept of "sex" (Hausman 1995, 200).

⁴⁴ In recent years, there has been a growing body of multidisciplinary feminist research published by trans scholars. See, for example, Bettcher (2014b; 2012); Koyama (2003); and Namaste (2000).

⁴⁵ I would like to thank Catherine Mills for pointing this out for me.

⁴⁶ Importantly, and as Stryker and Bettcher (2016, 8) have pointed out, transwomen participated actively in feminists struggles already in the 1970s, despite the fact that they were often excluded by separatist feminists.

⁴⁷ Hausman (1995, viii) explains her position as follows: "Foucault's emphasis on the analysis of discourse as a method of 'doing history' has deeply influenced my approach to the cultural study of medicine and of the phenomenon of transsexuality. In this book, I focus narrowly on the 'official discourses' of transsexualism—those produced both by medical personnel and by transsexuals—in order to ascertain the discursive conditions that made the emergence of the demand for sex change and its recognition within medicine possible in the twentieth century."

A crucial element of Hausman's argumentation is her critique of trans persons themselves. She claims that their subjectivities cannot be taken seriously because they are necessarily tied to medical techniques (Hausman 1995, 3–4). She writes:

[i]t is possible that the concept of gender identity gone awry (that is, the conviction of being the other sex) covers over some kind of subjectivity that would more openly demonstrate the dependence of transsexualism on a demand for technological intervention—a demand, in other words, to engineer oneself as a human subject. (Hausman 1995, 137)

Hausman goes as far as to argue that “transsexuals are the dupes of gender” because of their “compulsive relation to technology” through which “they produce themselves as the simulacra of sexual difference” (Hausman 1995, 140; see also Hausman 2001, 477).

Without addressing Hausman's biased understanding of trans persons, Repo refers to Hausman to back her own arguments. For example, Repo argues that in order to gain access to sex reassignment surgery and hormonal therapy, “[p]eople who previously *felt they were different but were able to live with this feeling* now engaged in practices of self-identification, self-diagnosing themselves as transsexuals” (Repo 2016, 71, my emphasis). Reducing trans experiences and identities prior to the invention of surgical techniques to mere *feelings*, Repo further argues—citing Hausman—that the psychiatric and sexological discourse of gender and the surgical techniques related to it produced and normalized “the transsexual” as a subject category (Repo 2016, 72). Yet, she remains silent about the full scope of Hausman's claim. On the same paragraph to which Repo refers, Hausman asserts that “[d]emanding sex change is therefore part of what constructs the subject as a transsexual,” adding that “[b]ecause of this, we can trace transsexual's agency through their doctors' discourses” (Hausman 1995, 110). For Hausman, trans resistance against gender normalization is not possible, since the agency of trans subjects is necessarily tied to the pathologizing discourse of gender (Hausman 1995, 196–199). Whereas Hausman explicitly dismisses the possibility of resistance, in Repo's analysis the question concerning trans resistance is conspicuous by its absence.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ It has to be mentioned that in the concluding pages of her book, Repo brings up the question of trans activism by acknowledging “the gradual achievements of the trans movement to render ‘transgender’ an intelligible category of subjectivity” (Repo 2016, 180). Yet, she quickly reminds us that even in these struggles gender must be seen as “a highly contentious instrument” (ibid.) due to its functioning as a biopolitical discourse. Furthermore, and rather ironically, Repo dismisses the fact that the trans movement has also sought to render not just “transgender” but, indeed, “transsexual” an intelligible category of gendered experience and subjectivity.

Hausman's assumptions bear a resemblance to radical feminist theorists Janice Raymond's ([1994]1979) and Sheila Jeffreys's (2014) arguments that the medicalization of gender is the reason behind the emergence of the phenomenon of transsexuality and, further, that reassignment surgeries are violations and mutilations against bodily integrity because they reinforce patriarchal gender stereotypes.⁴⁹ In addition, they both argue for the eradication of gender from feminist theory and activism as well as for the abolition of "transsexualism" and "transgenderism." Raymond, for example, asserts that "the problem of transsexualism would be best served by morally mandating it out of existence" (Raymond 1979, 178). Similarly, Jeffreys maintains that "[i]f the growing new wave of feminism has more success in challenging the edifice of gender than the previous stages in women's movement have had, transgenderism will disappear" (Jeffreys 2014, 187).

Given that Hausman's position not only implicitly mirrors these trans exclusionary statements but that she also explicitly cites Raymond (see Hausman 1995, 197–108), Repo's failure to critically engage with Hausman's arguments has significant consequences for her genealogy of gender. Especially so when Repo also ignores the criticism by several trans scholars who have exposed the overtly simplified logic behind the kind of reasoning that reduces trans subjectivities to surgical technologies.

For example, trans scholar Dean Spade writes that this kind of analysis ignores "the fact that people (transsexuals and non-transsexuals) change their gender presentation to conform to norms with multiple other technologies as well, including clothing, make-up, cosmetic surgery [...], training in gender-specific manners, body building, dieting, and countless other practices" (Spade 2006a, 318). He also takes issue with the idea that trans people are mere victims and/or promoters of "false consciousness" perpetrated by the medical establishment, noting that "[a] review of literature written by trans people [...] suggests a self-conscious strategy of deployment of the transsexual narrative by people who [...] seek to occupy ambiguous gender positions in resistance to norms of gender rigidity" (Spade 2006a, 326). Feminist trans scholar Viviane K. Namaste has summarized the untenable logic behind the reasoning of trans exclusive feminist scholarship as follows:

Transsexuals in this type of scholarship can only exist in medical practice, so individuals who live and identify as transsexuals are best understood as victims of sexist or capitalist ideology. Taken to its logical

⁴⁹ In her concluding remarks, Hausman cites Raymond in order to stress that even the newer term "transgenderism," which was invented in the 1990s to refer to those trans persons who did not necessarily want to transition through surgery, does not provide any prospects of resistance because "one cannot 'escape' gender by switching roles or performances and thereby confuse the binary logic, because that logic defines the possibility of the switching in the first place" (Hausman 1995, 197–198).

conclusion, this position argues that transsexuality as a social phenomenon, and therefore transsexuals as individuals, should not exist. (Namaste 2000, 34)⁵⁰

Moreover, both Hausman and Repo (as well as Raymond and Jeffreys) seem to understand the (medical) discourse of gender as a relatively stable and deterministic structure of power. By over-emphasizing the normalizing functions of “the gender discourse,” they not only come to portray social power as a monolithic structure but they also end up overlooking the possibility of changing and resisting it. Even if we were to accept the problematic arguments that “the gender discourse” merely serves the biopolitical regulation of populations (Repo’s argument) or consolidates normative heterosexuality (Hausman’s argument, see Hausman 1995, 194), wouldn’t it still be possible to reconceptualize the *concept* of “gender”? If the concepts of “sex,” “sexual difference,” and “women” are not fixed to their prior meanings but open to reinterpretations and redeployments and can thus be relevant tools for feminist theory and politics, why does the same not hold true of “gender”? Indeed, gender is *already* being redeployed in contexts where its normalizing functions are explicitly contested, such as in trans and queer communities.

Furthermore, the understanding that the concept of gender is not fully determined by its prior deployments is also more consistent with the key aim of Foucault’s own genealogical approach, which is to show that concepts are, as Foucauldian scholar Eduardo Mendieta puts it, “historically contingent, produced, mutable and thus open to transformation” (Mendieta 2011, 113). According to this understanding, Foucauldian genealogy can be conceived as “a science of freedom, a creative freedom that opens up horizons of being by challenging us to exceed, to transgress, to step over the limit established by existing modes of subjectivity and subjectivation” (ibid.; see also Oksala 2011, and Pulkkinen 1996).⁵¹ Here, one only needs to consider the various critical analysis and reworkings of the concept of gender that transgender

⁵⁰ See also, for example, Bettcher & Stryker (2016, 5–7); Prosser (1998, 7–9); Riddell (2006, 149–155); and Stone ([1992]2006, 229–230).

⁵¹ Foucault explains his understanding of the relationship between power and transformation as follows: “I seek to carry out the most precise and discriminative analyses I can *in order to show in what ways things change, are transformed, are displaced*. [...] I set out to grasp the mechanisms of the effective exercise of power; and I do this because those who are enmeshed in these relations of power, *who are implicated in them, may, through their actions, their resistance, and their rebellion, escape them, transform them*—in short, no longer submit to them. [...] From this perspective my entire research rests on the postulate of an absolute optimism. I do not undertake my analyses to say: look how things are, you are all trapped. *I do not say such things except insofar as I consider this to permit some transformation of things.*” (Foucault 1976, 911–912, trans. SK, my emphasis.)

scholarship has provided in recent years (see e.g. Bettcher 2014a; Currah 2006; Heyes 2007; Salamon 2010; Spade 2003; 2006a; 2006b).⁵²

Against this backdrop, Hausman's and Repo's suggestion that feminists should discard the concept of gender is hasty and one-sided at best, and at worst, falls prey to a position that tries to legitimize the exclusion of trans issues and persons from feminist theory and politics. The suggestion that we should give up gender not only overlooks trans activism and the emerging field of transgender scholarship but it also misconstrues genealogical thinking. My position is that the pathologizing discourse of gender by no means exhausts or determines the multiple meanings we give to gender today—let alone the diverse ways in which transsexual, transgender, or genderqueer identities and experiences are *lived* today.

In contrast to Repo and Hausman, Butler's critique of gender normalization does not lead to the rejection of the concept of gender. Here, it is important to analytically disentangle gender norms that are lived and experienced from the pathologizing and medical discourses of gender. This is not to say that the lived experiences of trans persons, for example, are not conditioned by normalizing discourses of gender but only that the ways in which gender norms are lived cannot simply be *reduced* to these discourses. In order to highlight these crucial differentiations that point toward the possibility of transformation and resistance and, indeed, toward the idea of the twofold function of norms, I turn to Butler's discussion of livability and embodiment.

2.3 Disrupting gender normalization: embodiment and trans livability

While Butler does not engage in the genealogical analysis of the psychiatric-sexological inception of the concept of gender, it has to be noted that she does offer a critical analysis of the work of John Money through analyzing gender as a historical and regulative regime; a sexological norm; and an "apparatus of knowledge" (UG, 67) that produce certain kinds of truth claims regarding bodies. But rather than focusing on the conditions that made "gender" possible as a sexological discourse, Butler is more interested in formulating a critique of these normalizing discourses, "a critique which," she paraphrases Foucault, "is precisely the desubjugation of the subject within the politics of truth" (UG, 74). In other words, Butler's critique of gender is

⁵² See also the inaugural issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* (2014, volume 1, number 1–2) titled "Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies," which provides short essays about the key concepts in transgender studies, including for instance 'biopolitics,' 'gender,' 'cisgender,' 'depathologization,' 'gender self-determination,' 'normal,' and 'transgender.'

informed by her twofold approach to norms and centered on the question of critical transformation.

Germon (2009), whose genealogical account of gender resembles that of Repo's and Hausman's, also points to the question of transformation when she comments on the possibility of resistance against gender normalization. Unlike Repo and Hausman, she does not jump to the conclusion that feminists should give up the concept of gender. Quite the contrary, she asks, "[c]ould gender be used in the interests of those who have historically been most marginalized by it?" (Germon 2009, 188–189). It is my contention that Butler's discussion of livability and embodiment provides a response to this crucial question raised by Germon.

In the introduction to *Undoing Gender*, Butler points out that her theorizing in the book is inspired by "the 'New Gender Politics' that has emerged in recent years, a combination of movements concerned with transgender, transsexuality, intersex, and their complex relations to feminist and queer theory" (UG, 4). In dialogue with these movements, Butler's aim is to problematize those norms that idealize the dimorphic notion of human anatomy, norms that "produce a differential sense of who is human and who is not, which lives are livable, and which are not" (UG, 4). Butler seeks to expose what she calls "the continuum of gender violence," which refers to different forms of violence related to gender norms, such as surgeries on intersex infants and children; the harassment and violence against trans people, especially trans people of color; as well as the medical pathologization of trans experiences and identities (UG, 6).

Before delving deeper into Butler's discussion of trans lives, it has to be noted, though, that certain trans scholars have expressed hesitation concerning Butler's turn to trans issues. Viviane K. Namaste, for example, has accused Butler of appropriating the "Trans Question" only for the service of her broader, queer feminist theoretical arguments concerning the social constitution of gender (Namaste 2009, 11–12; see also Prosser 1998, 30–32). While it is true that Butler's early work (e.g. *Gender Trouble*, 1990; and *Bodies That Matter*, 1993) focused much on demonstrating how transsexuality—along with other alternative gendering practices such as drag and butch/femme identifications—can be regarded as an example illustrating the queer-crossing of normative heterosexuality, her discussion of transgender in *Undoing Gender* takes a slightly different direction.⁵³ Although she still strives

⁵³ For example, in *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler discusses "transsexuality" and drag in the context of her theorization of the possibility of subverting conventional gender categories, and in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) she analyzes *Paris Is Burning* (1990), a documentary film about the ball culture within drag and transsexual communities in New York City, in order to locate possible occasions for resistance against heteronormativity.

toward theorizing sex, gender, and sexuality in ways that might disrupt the hegemonic understandings of bodies, her discussion of trans lives is actually, and crucially, informed by the question of gender self-determination—a question that has made Butler reconsider her views about the desirability of “stable” gender categories.

In a recent interview with Sara Ahmed (2016), Butler addresses this particular issue by commenting on the tension between queer theory and trans and intersex movements with respect to the question of stable identity categories:

But the strongest criticism of ‘queer’ lately has come from the trans community. [...] I accept these criticisms as necessary, and have found myself revising my views in response to some of what has been said. [...] If ‘queer’ means that we are generally people whose gender and sexuality is ‘unfixed’ then what room is there in a queer movement for those who understand themselves as requiring – and wanting – a clear gender category within a binary frame? [...] the message to the advocates of ‘queer’ seems quite pertinent: some people very much require a clear name and gender, and struggle for recognition on the basis of that clear name and gender. *It is a fundamental issue of how to establish and insist upon those forms of address that make life liveable.* (Butler in Ahmed 2016, 9–10, my emphasis)⁵⁴

Already in *Undoing Gender* Butler acknowledges the role that a “stable” identity category plays for those whose experiences and identifications have previously been denied and excluded. As she reminds us, “the transsexual desire to become a man or a woman is not to be dismissed as a simple desire to conform to established identity categories,” and continues by stating that “[b]ut even if there are [...] desires for stable identity at work, it seems crucial to realize that a livable life does require various degrees of stability” (UG, 8). Indeed, Butler’s discussion of trans issues is based on the ethical and political question of why certain gender nonconforming populations, such as trans and genderqueer people, are made more susceptible to harassment, violence, and pathologization than others. Accordingly, her theoretical task has to do with “distinguishing among the norms and conventions that permit people to

⁵⁴ In an interview with the *TransAdvocat* Butler comments on the common misconception regarding her theorization of gender performativity: “Some trans people thought that in claiming that gender is performative that I was saying that it is all a fiction, and that a person’s felt sense of gender was therefore ‘unreal.’ That was never my intention. I sought to expand our sense of what gender realities could be. [...] I did not mean to argue that gender is fluid and changeable (mine certainly is not). I only meant to say that we should all have greater freedoms to define and pursue our lives without pathologization, de-realization, harassment, threats of violence, violence, and criminalization. I join in the struggle to realize such a world.” (Butler in Williams 2014)

breathe, to desire, and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself” (UG, 8).

Given that gender norms, for Butler, can operate both ways simultaneously depending on the context, it is crucial to

cease legislating for all lives what is livable only for some, and similarly, to refrain from proscribing for all lives what is unlivable for some. The differences in position and desire set the limits to universalizability as an ethical reflex. *The critique of gender norms must be situated within the context of lives as they are lived and must be guided by the question of what maximizes the possibilities for a livable life, what minimizes the possibility of unbearable life or, indeed, social or literal death.* (UG, 8, my emphasis)

The question of “a livable life” brings me back to Hausman’s and Repo’s argument that feminists should discard the concept of gender. Contra Repo and Hausman, for Butler, the critique of gender must be grounded on an account that considers gender not only to be a normalizing discourse but also to be a *lived* bodily identity and experience. Therefore, the emphasis Butler puts on the notion of gendered lives “as they are lived” points to the crucial question of embodiment, that is, the ways in which gender is lived, embodied, and contested by those who have been most marginalized by it—including trans persons.

In other words, Butler’s critique of gender norms must be understood in relation to her account of livability, or what I call *trans livability*, to emphasize that it is particularly the question of trans embodiment that fuels Butler’s critique of gender norms in this context. It is my contention that the idea of trans livability adds a necessary layer to the critique of gender, since it brings to light the ethical and political question concerning trans embodiment as a mode of resistance against unlivable gender norms.⁵⁵ In this sense, the concept of “trans livability” illustrates Butler’s twofold approach to norms: for her, gender is not only a violent norm or a mechanism of normalizing power but also a mode of social transformation and resistance.

As Samuel A. Chambers and Terrell Carver have pointed out, “*Undoing Gender* would have been appropriately subtitled ‘the livable life’” (Chambers & Carver 2008a, 69). In the context of gender norms, Chambers and Carver define a “livable life” as one that does not deviate from the normative expectations of sex, gender, and sexuality but conforms to them. Conversely, those who do not fit these normative understandings are conceived as less valuable and their lives as less “livable” (Chambers & Carver 2008a, 70). It is for this

⁵⁵ Spade (2003) also discusses trans embodiment as a form of resistance against gender normalization.

reason that Butler insists that trans lives “[h]ave a potential and actual impact on political life at its most fundamental level, that is, who counts as a human, and what norms govern the appearance of ‘real’ humanness” (UG, 28). Therefore, the question of trans livability must be thought of against the backdrop of gender normalization and the history of the violent discrimination and exclusion of LGBTIQ lives, and more specifically, in relation to the psychiatric pathologization and regulation of trans experiences and identities.

For Butler, the question of livability is directly connected to her critique of gender normalization. By normalization, she refers to the ways in which gender norms “hold sway over embodied life, provid[ing] coercive criteria for normal ‘men’ and ‘women’” (UG, 206). She notes that when these norms are defied, “it is unclear [...] whether our lives are valuable, or can be made to be, whether our genders are real, or ever can be regarded as such” (UG, 206). Indeed, at the heart of Butler’s interrogation of “livable lives” is an attempt to disclose and tackle the normalizing operations of gender that have led to the pathologization of those who do not conform to the binary notion of bodies, which in turn has contributed to the legitimization of psychiatric regulation, political control, and social stigmatization of trans populations. Therefore, Butler’s turn to trans issues in *Undoing Gender* must be read in light of her critique of gender norms that serves the purpose of trying to make more room for trans and gender nonconforming people.

Another aspect that often goes unnoticed in Butler’s account of “livable lives” *vis-à-vis* gender normalization is that, for her, livability is necessarily linked to the question of critical transformation and resistance. In the beginning of the book, Butler writes:

Sometimes a normative conception of gender can undo one’s personhood, undermining the capacity to persevere in a livable life. Other times, the experience of a normative restriction becoming undone can undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one that has greater livability as its aim. If gender is a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, [...] it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, *it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint.* (UG, 1, my emphasis)

To clarify the idea of “improvisation” with regard to gender regulation, I want to briefly come back to the idea of social temporality I discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. As I showed there, Butler’s conception of gender is based on her theorization of the temporal (i.e. “repetitive,” “performative” or “citational”) operation of norms. It is this temporal dimension of social norms that gives them their stabilizing and normalizing power, yet it is

also the aspect that opens up the horizon of critical intervention and invention.

It is in this sense that trans embodiment can be understood as a critical reworking of and resistance against gender normalization. Butler asks “[h]ow is it that [...] transgender [...] enters into the political field?” and answers that “[i]t does this [...] 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).⁵⁶ On the same page, Butler further elaborates her conception of the relationship between embodiment and norms, pointing implicitly to her theorization of gender performativity:

As a consequence of being in the mode of becoming, and in always living with the constitutive possibility of becoming otherwise, *the body 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.* These corporeal realities are actively inhabited, and this “activity” is not fully constrained by the norm. Sometimes the very conditions for conforming to the norm are the same as the conditions for resisting it. When the norm appears at once to guarantee and threaten social survival [...] then conforming and resisting become a compounded and paradoxical relation to the norm, a form of suffering and a potential site for politicization. (UG, 217; see also UG, 29, my emphasis)

As Butler specifies in this passage, the embodied, or what also might be called creative, relation to the norm gives rise to a productive ambivalence: it *both* conditions the intelligibility of bodies *and* enables and opens up—because of its citationality and temporality—the possibility of transformation and resistance.

Whereas Hausman’s and Repo’s understanding of bodies seem to be based on an assumption that bodies—especially gender nonconforming bodies—are passive objects of normalization, Butler proposes a notion of embodiment that highlights gender normalization as an *active* process.⁵⁷ Although the process of gender embodiment is conditioned, and indeed made possible, by the mechanisms of normalization, it is not fully determined by them. In con-

⁵⁶ For a sustained analysis of trans embodiment, see, for example, Salamon (2010), who theorizes trans embodiment by drawing on Butler’s discussion of materialization, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of bodily schema, and Freud’s account of bodily ego.

⁵⁷ In *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) Butler theorizes this in terms of subjection (i.e. the “internalization” of norms) by bringing together Foucault’s notion of subjectivation (*assujettissement*) and Freud’s writings on melancholic identifications.

trast to Repo and Hausman, Butler points out in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015) that bodies are not just passive objects of normalization. This is to say that although “gender is received” to the extent that it produces us discursively and normatively through “the psychosocial imposition and slow inculcation of norms,” it is “not simply inscribed on our bodies as if we were merely a passive slate obligated to bear a mark” (NPTA, 30). Rather, gender norms “inform the lived modes of embodiment we acquire over time, and *those very modes of embodiment can prove to be ways of contesting those norms, even breaking with them*” (NPTA, 29, my emphasis). As Butler continues:

Although there are authoritative discourses on gender—the law, medicine, and psychiatry, to name a few—and they seek to launch and sustain human life within discrete gendered terms, they do not always succeed in containing the effects of those discourses of gender they bring into play. Moreover, it turns out that there can be no reproduction of gendered norms without the bodily enactment of those norms, and when that field of norms breaks open, even provisionally, we see that the animating aims of a regulatory discourse, as it is enacted bodily, *give rise to consequences that are not always foreseen, making room for ways of living gender that challenge prevailing norms of recognition*. Thus we can plainly see the emergence of transgender, genderqueer, butch, femme, and hyperbolic or dissent modes of masculinity and femininity, and even zones of gendered life that are opposed to all categorical distinctions such as these. (NPTA, 31–32, my emphasis)

For Butler, one clear example of how authoritative discourses on gender “break open” is when the initial gender assignment is rejected or revised (NPTA, 30). Here Butler points to the different practices of transgender affirmation and gender reassignment (including but not limited to surgical or hormonal modifications) that strive toward a greater livability for trans and genderqueer lives. In order to further illustrate Butler’s discussion of transgender in relation to her twofold approach to gender norms—that is, an approach that conceives gender as simultaneously a conditioning *and* an enabling norm—I examine next her critique of the “Gender Identity Disorder” diagnosis. As will become clear, Butler draws entirely different conclusions from the diagnostic tradition than Hausman and Repo.

2.4 Pathologization versus gender self-determination: the question of transautonomy

The main problem of Hausman’s and Repo’s account of gender is, I argue, that they dismiss the question of gender self-determination. That is, the

question “of trans people making conscious, informed choices about the best ways to live their own embodied lives” (Stryker & Bettcher 2016, 7). The right to decide one’s own gender and the idea of gender self-determination have been and continue to be key topics in transgender scholarship (see, for example, Bettcher 2012; Spade 2006a & 2006b; Stanley 2014). In the following excerpt, Spade summarizes what is at stake with the idea of gender self-determination with regard to medical discourses on gender:

An approach that recognizes the possibility of a norm-resistant, politicized, and feminist desire for gender-related body alteration need not reject the critique of medical practice regarding transsexuality nor embrace the normalizing regulations of the diagnostic and treatment processes. [...] Such an analysis requires seeing the problem not as fundamentally lying in the project of gender change or body alteration, but in how the medical regime permits only the production of gender-normative altered bodies, [...]. An alternative starting point for a critique of the invention and regulation of transsexualism is a desire for a deregulation of gender expression and the promotion of self-determination of gender [...]. (Spade 2006a, 319)

This is precisely the kind of approach Butler undertakes in her critical scrutiny of GID in *Undoing Gender*. To fully grasp what is at stake in Butler’s critique of the diagnosis, I suggest that it must be contextualized through the question of how should we understand gender self-determination in relation to the operation of gender norms and normalization? Contextualizing Butler’s critique of GID in this way also sheds more light on Butler’s twofold conception of gender as *both* a regulative *and* a transformative norm.

Although Butler analyzes GID as it stands in DSM-IV, in my view her criticism applies also to the latest 2013 diagnosis, “gender dysphoria.” In the fourth edition of the manual (DSM-IV) published in 1994, the term “transsexualism” was replaced by the phrase “Gender Identity Disorder” as a diagnostic category. In 2013, when the APA introduced the DSM-5, GID was removed from the grouping of “Sexual and Gender Identity Disorders” and given a new diagnostic name, “gender dysphoria.” While the aim of the revisions was to lessen the stigmatization of trans people as mentally ill, the diagnostic criteria remain quite similar compared to GID, only with a couple of changes.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ In the DSM-5 the aim of the new diagnosis (“Gender Dysphoria”) is described in the following way: “DSM-5 aims to avoid stigma and ensure clinical care for individuals who see and feel themselves to be a different gender than their assigned gender. [...] Replacing ‘disorder’ with ‘dysphoria’ in the diagnostic label is not only more appropriate and consistent with familiar clinical sexology terminology, it also removes the connotation that the patient is ‘disordered.’” See also p. 14 in *Highlights of Changes from DSM-IV-TR to DSM-5* (2013).

Furthermore, given that “gender dysphoria” is still a diagnostic category in the manual that classifies mental disorders, the stigmatization of trans people as mentally ill is hard to avoid.⁵⁹ By saying this I do not mean to implicitly accept the possible social stigmatization regarding those DSM categories that are not related to gender or sexuality. Nor do I want to endorse an ableist position that excludes the experiences of suffering by trans persons and disabled persons. My point is only to stress that as long as trans experience is categorized as a severe mental disorder and as long as disabled persons are discriminated against on all levels of society, it remains easier for states and institutions to legitimize certain normalizing interventions, such as compulsory therapy, institutionalization, and sterilization practices against trans persons.⁶⁰ For this reason, I find Butler’s discussion of GID still relevant today.

Despite the fact that “gender dysphoria” continues the normalization of trans identities and experiences in terms of psychiatric diagnoses, “[t]he diagnosis,” as Butler points out, “is crucial for many individuals who seek insurance support for sex reassignment surgery or treatment, or who seek a legal change in status” (UG, 5). Getting the diagnosis is still in several countries the only way to have one’s juridical gender changed to correspond to one’s gender identity and/or have access to particular gender affirmation practices, such as health services, treatments (e.g. surgery and hormone therapy), and legal recognition. Hence, the diagnosis can provide the necessary means for gender self-determination and thus a more livable life.

In this sense, the diagnosis can be understood as both restrictive *and* enabling. On the one hand, the diagnosis “facilitates access to a variety of medical and technological means of transitioning” (UG, 75), which, in turn, not only contributes to the general well-being and flourishing of those persons who wish to undergo medical transitioning but can also be necessary for one’s very survival. In addition, many insurance companies in the US, for example, require that a person who wishes to transition by undergoing surgery has been diagnosed with “gender dysphoria” by mental health professionals.⁶¹ As Butler stresses, this point has to do especially with socio-economic justice as poor and working class trans people as well as trans people of color

⁵⁹ Also, the International Statistical Classification of Diseases (ICD-10), published by the World Health Organization (WHO), still maintains the diagnostic category of “Gender Identity Disorders,” which includes “Transsexualism,” “Dual-Role Transvestism,” and “Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood.”

⁶⁰ For more on the history of trans sterilization, see Honkasalo (2016b), who traces the pathologization of gender nonconformity to the eugenic movement in the US through a Foucauldian genealogy. For theorizations of solidarity politics in trans and disabled communities, see Kafer (2013).

⁶¹ Paradoxically, despite the diagnosis, trans people are not covered and protected under the American Disability Act (see Spade 2003).

may not have the necessary funds to cover the expenses of the procedures provided by private clinics (UG, 76, 90).

However, the problem is that the diagnosis is based on the normative assumption that those who do not conform to the binary model of gender are mentally ill and thus in need of psychiatric intervention. In this way, the diagnosis can strengthen the stigma already attached to those who transgress gender norms. On the other hand, the motivation for subjecting oneself to pathologizing categories in order to get something one needs may itself be understood as practices that realize one's autonomy. "After all," Butler writes, "one might argue [...] that the way that the diagnosis facilitates certain entitlements and insurance benefits, to medical treatment, and to legal status, *actually works in the service of what we might call transautonomy*" (UG, 76, my emphasis).

Yet, given the pathologizing and normalizing functions of the diagnosis, it is difficult to see it *only* as a neutral instrument for achieving autonomy. This raises the question how should we understand the idea of gender self-determination in relation to the pathologizing aims of the diagnosis? Here we have to bear in mind that if gender norms, as Butler argues throughout her work, constitute us as socially intelligible subjects, there is no position "outside" of these norms. As Butler explains:

What precisely autonomy means, however, is complicated [...], since it turns out that choosing one's own body invariably means navigating among norms that are laid out in advance and prior to one's choice [...]. Indeed, individuals rely on institutions of social support in order to exercise self-determination with respect to what body and what gender to have and maintain, so that self-determination becomes a plausible concept only in the context of a social world that supports and enables that exercise of agency. *Conversely (and as a consequence), it turns out that changing the institutions by which humanly viable choice is established and maintained is a prerequisite for the exercise of self-determination.* In this sense, individual agency is bound up with social critique and social transformation. (UG, 7, my emphasis)

In other words, and as this passage illustrates, we have to think of transautonomy and agency in relation to the critique of gender norms. When considered from the perspective of "gender dysphoria," we should thus ask: How does the diagnosis maintain and further consolidate the medicalized understanding of gender and, more generally, the norm of binary gender?⁶² What

⁶² In an attempt to make more room for those trans experiences and identities that fall outside the binary framework of man/woman or masculinity/femininity, Austin Johnson (2016) has suggested that

are the normative consequences of the diagnosis? And, furthermore, if we see the diagnosis as a strategy to achieve autonomy (if we understand autonomy here as the freedom to determine one's gender), is it possible, at the same time, to resist and contest the normalizing functions of the diagnosis? How can the tension between gender self-determination and normalization be reconciled?

When understood as a strategy, and especially from the standpoint of an individual, the diagnosis can be understood as an "instrument by which to further one's self-expression and self-determination" as well as to secure one's status and funding for transition (UG, 88). On the other hand, the diagnosis "may well be used by the medical and psychiatric establishments to extend its pathologizing influence on populations of transsexuals, trans youth, and lesbian, bi-, and gay youth as well" (UG, 88).

When considered as a means of normalization, it is important to see how the medical and psychiatric discourses that maintain and regulate the criteria for the diagnosis produce certain assumptions of trans subjects by entrenching particular norms of masculinity and femininity. In order to get the diagnosis, one has to submit oneself to what Butler calls, referring to Foucault, a "regulatory apparatus" (UG, 90) that produces and maintains a set of standards and norms that regulate who can meet the criteria set by the psychiatric establishment. In the DSM-5, the main requirement is "a marked incongruence between one's experienced/expressed gender and assigned gender of at least 6 months duration." The individual must also show emotional and psychological distress due to the incongruence.⁶³

The diagnostic features also include relatively long descriptions about how gender dysphoria manifests itself in different age groups. For example, pre-pubertal "natal girls"⁶⁴ with "gender dysphoria" are characterized as "prefer[ring] boys' clothing and hairstyles" and "[c]ontact sports, rough-and-tumble play, traditional boyhood games, and boys as playmates" (DSM-5, 453). On the other hand, boys with the diagnosis "have a preference for dressing in girl's or women's clothes" and "are intensely interested in female fantasy figures" and "female-type dolls (e.g., Barbie)" as well as "feminine activities, stereotypical games, and pastimes (e.g., "playing house"; drawing

the medical understandings of transgender can be analyzed as "transnormative" discourses. According to Johnson, these discourses seek to make trans experience, identification, and narratives intelligible only by medical standards.

⁶³ For the complete list of the requirements, see DSM-5 (2013), "Gender Dysphoria," pp. 451–459.

⁶⁴ By using the phrase "natal girl" in relation to a transman implies a problematic bias at the heart of the diagnostic language: it is based on the normative presumption that, before transitioning, transmen are "girls."

feminine pictures; watching television or videos of favorite female characters)” (DSM-5, 453).⁶⁵

As is clear from these excerpts, the diagnosis of “gender dysphoria” not only presumes that gender is a relatively fixed and stable phenomenon, but it also promotes a conventional, binary notion of “girlhood” and “boyhood.” Within this diagnostic model, which reflects the history of GID, culturally typical “traits” of masculinity and femininity is understood as normal aspects of personhood and behavior, while transgressive behavior becomes conceived of as abnormal—as if “non-transsexual people grow up with minimal to no gender trouble or exploration,” as Spade points out (Spade 2006a, 321).

For this reason, Butler worries what the diagnosis might do to those who are most vulnerable. Even if certain populations could use the diagnosis strategically as an instrument, Butler asks, “[b]ut are children and teens always capable of effecting the distance necessary to sustain a purely instrumental approach to being subjected to a diagnosis?” (UG, 82). The worry is thus that although certain adults might have critical resources to resist the normalizing operations of the diagnosis, this is by no means self-evident with more vulnerable groups, such as children.⁶⁶ Butler summarizes the counterarguments for maintaining the diagnosis as follows:

So even if the diagnosis is approached as an instrument or vehicle for accomplishing the end goal of transitioning, the diagnosis can still a) install a sense of mental disorder on those whom it diagnoses, b) entrench the power of the diagnosis to conceptualize transsexuality as a pathology, and c) be used as a rationale by those who are in well-funded research institutes whose aim is to keep transsexuality within the sphere of mental pathology. (UG, 83)

In light of Butler’s critique of gender norms, then, the GID/gender dysphoria diagnosis can be seen as a mechanism of normalization that contributes to the intensification of the binary notion of gender. In this way, the diagnosis works as a regulatory tactic that aims to produce subjects that conform to prevailing gender norms.

⁶⁵ In problematizing these descriptions about the development of cross-gender identifications, Butler notes that “The DSM assumes that the doll you play with is the one you want to be [...]” But, as Butler adds, this is not self-evident, as “[p]erhaps the norm itself is being played, explored, even busted” (UG, 97).

⁶⁶ Especially so when there are still psychologists (e.g. Emeritus Professor of Neuropsychiatry and Behavioral Science, George Rekers at the University of South Carolina and his followers) who consider nonconforming gender identities in children to be pathological diseases.

In my view, a related problem here is that retaining the “gender diagnosis” can depoliticize transgressions of gender and thus contribute to the psychologization and individualization of political phenomena. For example, one of the requirements of the diagnostic tests is that the person who wishes to transition must show remarkable emotional “distress.”⁶⁷ The diagnosis implies that the origin of this distress and related “emotional and behavioral problems”⁶⁸ and even the risk of suicide are psychological in origin.⁶⁹ However, and as Butler rightly notes, “[t]he diagnosis does not ask whether there is a problem with the gender norms that it takes as fixed and intransigent, *whether these norms produce distress and discomfort*, whether they impede one’s ability to function, or whether they generate sources of suffering for some people or for many people” (UG, 95, my emphasis).

In other words, the diagnosis neglects the social and often violent operation of gender norms against trans persons. It says nothing, for example, about the alarming numbers of homicides of transwomen worldwide, a normalization of violence that affect disproportionately the trans communities of color.⁷⁰ Yet, to get rid of the diagnosis altogether is not an unproblematic option, since most of the states (most EU member states and the US, for example) and insurance companies (specifically in the US context) still require it as proof of the “seriousness” of the medical and psychiatric reasons for undergoing the procedures.

One possibility to resist the normalizing operations of the diagnosis would be to turn its psychologizing and individualizing logic upside down. According to a Foucauldian feminist scholar, Ellen K. Feder, some mental health professionals “understand the problem to lie instead in the hostile conditions that gender variant” persons may face and thus conceive a gender nonconfirming people as not suffering from a mental disorder but from social prejudice that should be “the focus of intervention” (Feder 2011, 65). Feder continues that rather than doing away with the diagnosis, “another possibility could be to rename and reformulate the diagnosis” in accordance with this understanding as well as to “direct treatment toward the most appropriate means of alleviating distress and promoting flourishing” (ibid.).

In sum, as long as medical, psychiatric, and legal discourses keep grounding their conceptions of transsexuality as well as transgender experiences and identities on the assumptions that the reason for “gender dysphoria” can be

⁶⁷ The DSM-5 explains this as follows: “*Gender dysphoria* refers to the distress that may accompany the incongruence between one’s experienced or expressed gender and one’s assigned gender” (DSM-5, 451, emphasis in original).

⁶⁸ See DSM-5, 459.

⁶⁹ See DSM-5, 454.

⁷⁰ See, for example, <http://tgeu.org/tmm-idahot-update-2015/>

found from a person's mind or behavior, problematization of gender norms that inform these pathologizing and individualizing discourses proves indispensable to the struggles for greater claims of gender self-determination and transautonomy. In this sense, for Butler, a critique of gender norms is a crucial aspect of resistance against the normalizing functions of the diagnosis.

2.5 Conclusion: toward a trans-affirmative feminist theory

When asked in a recent interview “Do you think that living in a world without ‘gender’ is possible?” Butler answered:

gender can be very important to us, and some people really love the gender that they have claimed for themselves. If gender is eradicated, so too is an important domain of pleasure for many people. And others have a strong sense of self bound up with their genders, so to get rid of gender would be to shatter their self-hood. I think we have to accept a wide variety of positions on gender. (Butler in Williams 2014)

By juxtaposing Hausman's and Repo's arguments with Butler's discussion of trans lives I have aimed to interrupt the revitalization of the particular strand of feminist scholarship that keeps recycling narrow and biased views not only about trans persons and trans communities but also the choices trans people make about their bodies and their lives. Through my analysis of Butler's discussion of trans embodiment and livability I have sought to illustrate that while it is crucial to expose and question the normalizing power of gender, it is equally necessary to acknowledge that gender also means a lived identity that potentially reworks and disrupts the normalizing discourses of gender. As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, this is the case especially with marginalized gender identities, such as transsexual, transgender, and genderqueer identities.

The argument that gender is a redundant or harmful concept for feminist theory and politics is based on a one-sided understanding of the relationship between norms, normalization, and social and political transformation. In order to avoid simplified accounts of gender normalization, we need to make more adequate distinctions between the medical and normalizing discourses of gender *and* the different deployments and redeployments of the concept of “gender,” as well as between normative notions of gender (i.e. masculinity and femininity) *and* the nonconforming and norm-resistant ways in which genders are lived today. By spelling out these distinctions as part of my reading of Butler's discussion of trans lives, I have illustrated how gender can exceed and break away from its prior deployments. For this reason, I believe that the concept of gender is not only a valuable critical tool for feminist the-

ory and politics but that it is an important concept for *trans and gender-queer inclusive* feminism.

In addition, by providing a reading of Butler's discussion of trans lives, and through emphasizing it as a question of trans livability, I have attempted to highlight crucial but previously overlooked aspects of her problematization of gender norms. By underlining the possibility of critical transformation, and indeed, the different future of gender, the concept of trans livability brings to light the ethical and political aim of Butler's critique of gender norms. In her words, "[t]he conception of politics at work here is centrally concerned with the question of survival, of how to create a world in which those who understand their gender [...] to be nonnormative can live and thrive" (UG, 219). Concretely, this raises the "question of developing, within law, within psychiatry, within social and literary theory, a new legitimating lexicon for the gender complexity that we have always been living" (UG, 219). Only by taking into account trans and other gender nonconforming lives "as they are lived" can we start to formulate a radical account of feminist politics, one that takes seriously the medical and pathologizing discourses of gender but recognizes and supports the diverse and complex ways gender is currently being lived—and contested.

In sum, in this chapter I have sought to show that in order for feminist accounts of gender normalization to maintain their critical, and indeed ethical, aspiration they must always be accompanied by questions of gender embodiment, trans livability, and gender self-determination. In the following chapter, I expand upon my discussion of livability by exploring in more detail Butler's critical analysis of the normative production of "life" in the context of her theorization of precarity.

3 THE NORMATIVE PRODUCTION OF KILLABLE LIVES: BUTLER'S NOTION OF "LIFE" AND THE CALL FOR ANIMAL ETHICS

Butler's recent work (e.g. *Precarious Life* 2004; *Frames of War* 2009; *Parting Ways* 2012, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* 2015) provides a powerful critique of violence in the context of contemporary global conflicts and wars by asking whose lives count as valuable enough for protection against violence and suffering. Underlying Butler's analysis lies her ethical notion of vulnerability, which is based on the idea that although all bodily life can be understood as precarious and thus physically vulnerable to violence, our ability to respond ethically and politically to the suffering of certain populations is conditioned by the social norms that differentiate between livable and unlivable lives. As I have argued in the first chapter of this dissertation, Butler's critique of violence has thus focused on exposing and disrupting the norms that produce only certain lives as valuable. Emphasizing the political and ethical dimensions of Butler's conceptualization of bodily vulnerability and livability, commentators have characterized her recent work using such concepts as "new corporeal humanism" (Murphy 2011b), "the political philosophy of the human" (Schippers 2014), and "the political problem of the human" (Lloyd 2015).

However, I argue that during this period of her thought, Butler performs a significant shift that moves her critical focus from "the human" to the consideration of the normative construction of "livable lives" more generally. It is my contention that by this move Butler also incorporates nonhuman animals into her concept of "livable lives" and thus into her theorization of ethics as well. Indeed, Butler explicitly, and throughout her recent work, comments on the necessity to include nonhuman animals into the concept of precarious lives (see e.g. UG, 12; FW, 13, 17, 19, 75–76; NPTA, 35, 131–132).

Despite the fact that Butler starts hinting at "the animal" already in *Undoing Gender* (2004) and also takes up the question in interviews (e.g. Kirby 2006; Antonello and Farneti 2009), the emerging body of literature in Butler scholarship (e.g. Chambers & Carver 2008a; Jagger 2008; Loizidou 2008; Lloyd 2007; 2015, Thiem 2008; Brady & Schirato 2010; Schippers 2014) completely overlooks the problem of "the animal" in her work. On the other hand, several scholars working in the emerging field of critical animal studies, most prominently Cary Wolfe (2013), Richard Iveson (2012), and Chloë Taylor (2008), have argued that although Butler's recent work would allow her to address the systematic forms of violence faced by nonhuman animals as well, her notion of livability falls prey to the anthropocentric divide of human/animal and thus excludes animals from ethical theorizing.

Despite the fact that Butler stresses the importance of including nonhuman animals into the concept of livability, it is true, as these critiques state, that she leaves “the animal” to the margins of her work. However, I contend that her critique of the norms that regulate livability offers us promising tools for theorizing violence against animals. Since one of Butler’s key aims in her theorization of norms is to question normalized forms of violence against those lives regarded as unlivable, and since she has actually started to problematize anthropomorphism in her later work, I argue that this extension is not only a possible but also a necessary step forward in Butler’s critique of norms. Hence, this chapter engages in a critical development of what I have called Butler’s twofold account of norms. By building on Butler’s embryonic problematization of anthropocentrism I seek to expose the norms that uphold the distinction between “the human” and “the animal” and call them in-to question. The aim of this chapter is thus to push Butler’s critique of norms toward a theorizing that takes not only humans but also nonhuman animals into ethical consideration.

James Stanescu has pointed out that Butler’s work offers “occasional brilliant ruptures” of anthropocentrism and can thus be put in the service of animal ethics (Stanescu 2012, 576). But whereas Stanescu has sought to establish “queer and feminist animal studies” by utilizing Butler’s account of grief and mourning (Stanescu 2012, 568), my interest lies more specifically in the question of how Butler’s critique of norms might be employed to examine the normative hierarchy between livable and unlivable nonhuman animals.

However, to fully understand the normative production of unlivable animal lives—or, what I call “killable lives”—I will pay specific attention not only to the question of how the norms that govern livability separate the human from nonhuman animals, but also how they distinguish between different kinds of animals. Most strikingly, this normative hierarchy appears in the differential way we treat our pets and those we call “food animals”: whereas pets are valued, loved and cared for, farmed animals are raised only to be killed for their meat. For this reason, I will pay particular attention to the ways in which norms produce “livable” and “protectable” animals on the one hand, and “killable” and “consumable” animals on the other. It is my contention that a critique of the distinction between “livable” and “killable” nonhuman animals has important implications for Butler’s notion of ethical responsibility and nonviolence.

I begin the first section (section 3.1) by briefly outlining the key ideas behind Butler’s notions of vulnerability and precarity, before I explore the critical readings offered by Taylor, Wolfe, and Iveson (divided into subsections 3.1.1, 3.1.2, and 3.1.3). In the next section (3.2), I extend and challenge these interpretations through offering an alternative reading that highlights Butler’s conceptualization of precarious lives in terms of her critique of anthropocen-

trism. Developing further these ideas, I then move on to discuss and problematize the normative production of “lovable” and “killable” animals by focusing first (section 3.3) on the normalization of killing and then (section 3.4) on the question of our ethical responsibility toward animals.

3.1 Precarious lives and Butler’s ambivalent animals

In the midst of her sustained critique of the US’s military response to 9/11 in *Precarious Lives* and *Frames of War*, Butler begins to develop an account of the fundamental vulnerability of our bodies and the political and ethical implications that in her view vulnerability entails. By “vulnerability” Butler refers to the fact that “[...] the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence” (UG, 21). Due to the vulnerable condition of our bodies, a dimension that characterizes our life from birth and through adulthood, our lives are dependent on what is outside of us and, therefore, we can never be fully self-sufficient beings. According to Butler, to deny this “common human vulnerability” is to deny the physical condition of corporeal life (PL, 30).

That our bodies are vulnerable is not for Butler a physical fact alone but also a social and political condition of our lives. From very early on (e.g. in *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies That Matter*, *Excitable Speech*, and *The Psychic Life of Power*), Butler has theorized how historical power relations and social norms organize the cultural intelligibility of our bodies: how gendering and racializing norms, for example, shape the morphology of bodies by violently excluding those who do not fit the current conceptions of what can be conceived of as a “real” body or a “normal” human. Given that our very “humanity” is in this sense dependent on the normative frameworks that uphold idealized versions of “the human,” it is thus a failure in Butler’s view to theorize bodies as bounded entities or in terms of bodily autonomy (UG, 21; see also FW, 52).

Challenging thus the basic presuppositions that undergird liberal-individualist frameworks, Butler seeks to theorize bodies in terms of “relationality,” “interdependency,” and “social ontology” (PL, 24, xii; FW, 3). Yet, these concepts are not synonymous with “intersubjectivity” but, instead, she refers by them to the more fundamental way in which our very survivability is conditioned by and dependent on known and unknown others and on the norms that regulate what kind of lives can be recognized as “livable lives.”

Although questions of gendering and racializing norms also run through Butler’s more recent work, she now theorizes the question of vulnerability through her discussion of precariousness and precarity. By “precariousness”—a twin concept to vulnerability—she refers to “our radical substitutability and anonymity in relation both to certain socially facilitated modes of

dying and death and to other socially conditioned modes of persisting and flourishing” (FW, 14). Although the concept of “precariousness” stands for the “existential” understanding of bodily vulnerability, it is for Butler primarily a political concept. This is because the conditions of precariousness are always socially, politically, and normatively organized; we only recognize and attend to the precariousness of those populations we conceive of, *a priori*, as valuable, or as Butler terms it, “livable.”

As Butler notes, precariousness cannot be understood merely as the “existential” fact of our bodies, since it is differentially distributed globally through particular political regimes and policies (NPTA, 119).⁷¹ Or, as Butler explains:

To say that a life is injurable, for instance, or that it can be lost, destroyed, or systematically neglected to the point of death, is to underscore not only the finitude of a life (that death is certain) but also its precariousness (that life requires various social and economic conditions to be met in order to be sustained as a life). (FW, 13–14)

Butler uses the term “precarity” to capture the specific ways through which precariousness is regulated and exploited by normative power relations (FW, 3). As Moya Lloyd puts it, precarity “signals a politically generated condition of heightened risk, jeopardy and threat for specific populations. It has thus been used by [Butler] to distinguish between primary vulnerability [...] and concrete particular, historical conditions of insecurity and liability faced by some” (Lloyd 2015, 175–176). In this sense, Butler deploys the concept of precarity to designate the social and political conditions “under which lives become unlivable” (NPTA, 201), such as the forms of state violence; police violence; war; failing networks of social and economic support; dispensable workforces; conditions of poverty; starvation; occupation, imprisonment, and forced emigration; and differential exposure to illness, mortality, and premature death (see, for example, FW, 25–26; DPP, 43; NPTA, 33, 48, 201).

For Butler, the problematic of precarity is crucially connected to her account of recognition and recognizability. Reading the Hegelian notion of recognition (i.e. the dialectics of recognition) through her theorization of norms, Butler argues that our ability to recognize a living being in its precariousness “is dependent on norms that facilitate that recognition” and, as a result, “there are ‘subjects’ that are not quite recognizable as subjects, and there are ‘lives’ that are not quite—or, indeed, are never—recognized as lives” (FW,

⁷¹ Butler elaborates on this point in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*: “So as soon as the existential claim is articulated in its specificity,” that is, as a mode of precarity, “it ceases to be existential” and because, as Butler argues, “it must be articulated in its specificity, it was never existential” (NPTA, 119).

4).⁷² From this insight follows, for Butler, that “the differential distribution of norms of recognition directly implies the differential allocation of precarity” (DPP, 89). By “recognizability” Butler means the “historically articulated and enforced” terms, conventions, and norms, or “frames” as she terms them in *Frames of War*, that differentiate between “livable” and “unlivable” lives (FW, 3–5, 7). Since the frames that regulate our capacity to recognize certain lives as “real” lives operate historically and socially (through temporal “iterability” as Butler has it) they are open to social transformation (FW, 4). As Butler explains, “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” (FW, 12). Thus, the ethical and political task is to expose and interrupt the norms of recognizability that seek to uphold exclusive hierarchies between “livable” and “unlivable” populations.

As Lloyd observes, although Butler sometimes addresses the economic connotations of the concept of “precarity,” she usually deploys it in a more philosophical sense, to describe the normative production of unlivable lives (Lloyd, 2015, 174).⁷³ For Lloyd, Butler’s theorization of precarity and livability boils down to the question of how “the human” is normatively produced through differential power relations. Therefore, Lloyd argues that precarity can be portrayed “in terms of [...] *the political problem of the human*” (Lloyd 2015, 174, emphasis in original; see also Lloyd 2007, 134). Ann V. Murphy also argues that Butler’s “explicit attempt to distance herself from [...] liberal individualism is accomplished via reference to the human as the most meaningful designation through which to engage the figure of the precarious and vulnerable body” (Murphy 2011b, 587–588). Thus, Murphy suggests that Butler’s theorization of precarity can be understood as an attempt to theorize a “humanistic ethics” and a “new corporeal humanism” (ibid., 587, 589). In a similar manner as Lloyd and Murphy, Birgit Schippers has also analyzed Butler’s approach to livability and precarity in terms of “the political philosophy of the human” (Schippers 2014, 38–39).

⁷² While Hegelian themes of desire and recognition run throughout Butler’s work, her first major published book *Subject of Desire* ([1987]1999) provides the most detailed discussion of Hegel’s philosophy. For an analysis of Butler’s critical deployment of Hegel, see, for example, Pulkkinen (2010) and Roman-Lagerspetz (2009).

⁷³ It should be noted, however, that in her more recent work Butler has also started to formulate “precarity” in economic terms. For example, in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* she addresses the problems of “the institutionalization of neoliberal rationalities” as well as the issues of “responsibilization” and “precarization” in relation to what she calls the emergence of “post-Fordist forms of flexible labor” and the individualizing values of “market rationalities” (see, for example, NPTA, 11–12, 15, 23, 201).

While Lloyd, Murphy, and Schippers have all provided generally sympathetic readings of Butler's account of precarity, it is precisely the question of "the human" that certain other scholars have found problematic. For example, Taylor (2008), Wolfe (2013), and Iveson (2012) have argued that although Butler's conceptualization of precarious lives seeks to challenge basic humanist tenets regarding the notion of bodies, it itself rests on certain unchallenged humanist presuppositions, namely, the anthropocentric exclusion of nonhuman animals. However, they argue that there is in fact nothing in Butler's account of precarity and livability that would justify such a theoretical framing. To gain a picture of these readings and to critically expand upon them later in this chapter (in section 3.2), I discuss each of them below.

3.1.1 *The precarious lives of animals*

In "The Precarious Lives of Animals: Butler, Coetzee, and Animal Ethics" Taylor states that although "Butler's account of an ethics of interdependency, embodiment, vulnerability, and mourning is a compelling incentive for thinking about the lives not only of humans, but of animals more generally [...]," Butler completely sidesteps the question of animals (Taylor 2008, 61). Since Taylor's critique is focused on Butler's Levinasian ethics of nonviolence, it is helpful first to reiterate the key ideas behind Butler's deployment of Levinas (see also Chapter 2).

Although Butler's analysis of Levinas's ethics of nonviolence forms a part of her critical response to the US's War on Terror and therefore constitutes an attempt to explore the possibilities of nonviolent global relations, or, indeed, a "Jewish ethic of nonviolence" (PL, 131), her employment of Levinas mirrors also her more general argument regarding the question of "moral authority." According to Butler, moral authority, or ethics more generally, cannot be reduced to the reflexivity or deliberation of individual subjects but must be understood as something that stems from our social interaction, or, as Butler puts it, through "the situation of being addressed" by others (PL, 130):

Indeed, this conception of what is morally binding is not one that I give myself; it does not proceed from my autonomy or my reflexivity. It comes to me from elsewhere, unbidden, unexpected and unplanned. In fact, it tends to ruin my plans, and if my plans are ruined, that may well be the sign that something is morally binding upon me. (PL, 130)

In *Precarious Lives*, Butler's attempt is thus to theorize the question of what binds us morally through Levinas's ethics, which focuses on the precariousness of "the other." Here, Levinas's figure of "the face" is especially important for Butler. Following Levinas, she notes that the "face" represents the precarious life of "the other," one that communicates to us an ethical demand of

“thou shalt not kill” (PL, 134). Since Butler seems to, at least partly, accept Levinas’s claim that this encounter with an “other” can evoke a defensive and aggressive impulse of self-preservation in us—indeed, “the desire to kill”—she comes to conceptualize the ethics of nonviolence as a “struggle” to hear the call for nonviolence over and against our own “murderous” desires (PL, 135–136).⁷⁴

Although for Levinas the moral authority regarding the demand of the preservation of “the other” seems to come ultimately from a “divine source” (PL, xviii), for Butler at stake here is the argument that the preservation of “the other” (and social relations more generally) also seems to be a prerequisite for the preservation of oneself. For Butler, this argument rests ultimately on her notion of interdependency, which I already discussed above. On the basis of her discussion of Levinas, Butler seeks to theorize the conditions of possibility to a nonviolent response in the states of injury. As I read Butler, her key thesis is that if the precariousness of our bodies is not denied but recognized as a shared and thus general condition of interdependency, we might start to understand the political urgency to arrest cycles of self-defensive violence. Indeed, Butler holds that our shared experiences of corporeal vulnerability can be thought of as a new ground for nonviolent ethics and politics (PL, xii–xiii).

However, the recognition of our shared vulnerability is not enough when formulating an ethics of nonviolence. Given that norms (regarding gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and race, for example) differentiate between recognizable and unrecognizable “faces,” it might be difficult or even impossible for us to recognize the precariousness and suffering of certain “others,” let alone ethically respond to their call for nonviolence (PL, 146–147). For Butler, the normative demarcation between “faces” can itself be understood as “the violence of derealization,” a form of violence that she also calls “radical effacement” and “dehumanization” (PL, 33, 140, 147). As she notes, “sometimes these normative schemes work precisely through providing no image, no name, no narrative, so that there never was a life, and there never was a death” (PL, 146). According to Butler, “the violence of derealization” operates through producing not only “unlivable lives” but also “ungrievable deaths” (PL, 34–35). Since the lives of these populations are not valued, their deaths, too, remain unrecognized as “real” deaths.

Interestingly, Taylor argues that for Butler “the face” as a figure of precariousness and suffering should not in fact be exclusively interpreted as a human face and neither should we understand “the call” for nonviolence only in terms of human language (Taylor 2008, 60; see also PL, xviii, 135). Indeed,

⁷⁴ For more on Butler’s account of the relationship between aggression and self-preservation, see her discussion on Levinas and Melanie Klein in *Giving an Account of Oneself* and in *Frames of War*.

Butler writes that the demand not to kill is “an utterance, that is not strictly speaking linguistic” but “a scene of agonized vocalization,” or a “wordless vocalization of suffering” (PL, 133–134). As Taylor remarks, the call “may also be silent, evoked simply by the site of a suffering body, by a back or shoulder blades, or a bent neck, as in an example of Levinas’s” (Taylor 2008, 60). On the basis of these observations, Taylor states that:

Butler seems to be setting the stage to be able to claim—or allow others to claim—that the cries of animals in slaughterhouses, the sight of their struggling bodies as they are dragged to their deaths, of their silent corporeally-expressed grief as they live out their brief lives in factory farms, fur farms, and laboratory cages, address us with the ethical command: “thou shalt not kill,” and that we must respond to this command even if it “ruins all our plans”—our plans for dinner, for profit, for research, for fashion, for entertainment, for sport. (Taylor 2008, 60)

Despite this possibility of also addressing the suffering of animals, Taylor argues that Butler’s ethical theorizing is centered on the question of the “human” (Taylor 2008, 61). While she notes that this is understandable to the extent that Butler’s aim in *Precarious Life* is to “dislocate” the hegemonic (e.g. heterosexist and racialized) frame of “the human” by including those who are currently dehumanized, she asserts that Butler fails to dislocate her own frame “beyond the sphere of the human” (ibid.). Although Butler uses such concepts as “corporeal vulnerability,” “our exposure to violence,” “livable life,” and “grievable death” that do not refer exclusively to *human* lives, she repeatedly attaches them, Taylor argues, to the concept of “the human” (ibid.).⁷⁵ As she notes, Butler even declares “I propose to start, and to end, with the question of the human (as if there were any other way for us to start or end!)” (Butler cited in Taylor 2008, 62; see also PL, 20). But as Taylor insists:

That we must start and end with the human when considering an ethics of corporeal vulnerability is by no means obvious, since corporeal vulnerability does not start and end with the human, but with all those beings with bodies, which are consequently exposed to harm from other bodies. Given the vulnerable and embodied state of non-human and human animals alike, it would in fact seem more obvious to start and end with animals in general, and not with one specific species of animal, the human. (Taylor 2008, 62)

⁷⁵ In the context of her discussion of the figure of “the face,” Butler writes for example: “[N]ormative schemes of intelligibility establish what will and will not be human, what will be a livable life, what will be a grievable death. These normative schemes operate [...] by producing ideals of the human that differentiate among those who are more and less human” (PL, 146).

As Taylor critically paraphrases Butler, “If to be a real life is to be a human life, whereas to be inhuman—to be another species of animal, for instance—is to be ‘already dead’ and something which ‘cannot, therefore, be killed,’ then animal lives never were real, and their deaths are not real either” (Taylor 2008, 63). She even goes as far as to argue that Butler’s inability to take animals into consideration resembles Descartes’ infamous notion of animals as “mere automata,” whose apparent ability to feel pain and despair is nothing but “simulations on the part of creatures that in fact do not feel, and are thus not vulnerable” (Taylor 2008, 63).

As Taylor argues, by overlooking the suffering of animals, Butler—like the vast majority of us—shuts her eyes to the plight of animals: “There is a silence about animals because we want to continue defining real lives, grievable lives, as ‘human,’ as does Butler, so that we can use animals without being concerned for them [...]” (Taylor 2008, 64). Taylor thus concludes that our, and Butler’s, inability to take animal deaths into consideration results from an unwillingness to face their suffering. Or, as she formulates it by borrowing the vocabulary of Butler’s ethics, “we wish to avoid having a face-to-face relationship with animals because we want to avoid our ethical responsibility” and, thus, we tend to think that we can “kill them with impunity—as we do” (Taylor 2008, 63).

3.1.2 Species trouble

It seems that as long as Butler does not question *the norm of the human* itself, her critique of the normative processes of humanization and dehumanization falls prey to anthropocentrism. In other words, Butler’s discussion of the normative production of the human seems to be compromised by “species trouble” as Richard Iveson (2012; see also Stanescu 2012) has formulated the problem. Iveson argues that although Butler’s whole project is dedicated to criticizing certain liberal-humanist paradigms (e.g. individualism and universalism) by interrogating the social and historical processes through which “the human” is normatively constituted, she leaves some of her own humanist presuppositions unchallenged (Iveson 2012, 26). According to Iveson, Butler fails to take into account that “the human” is not just a normative effect of power relations but that “humanness” is itself “a regulatory norm which, through the inculcation of viable ways of being, reproduces itself by way of the constitutive outside of ‘the animal’ [...]” (Iveson 2012, 23, 27). As he notes, “the human” is a normative and repetitive practice of “human-ing” through which the species line is socially constituted (Iveson 2012, 4).

For Iveson, theorizing the normative exclusion of animals plays a crucial role in understanding the operation of other regulative norms, such as gender,

sex, sexuality, race, and class, for instance. In his words, “species difference serves to ‘ground’ all the other norms at the same time as it is reciprocally ‘grounded’ by them” (Iveson 2012, 25). Therefore, Butler’s exclusion of animals is not only problematic from the perspective of animal ethics but also in terms of her theorization of norms. Iveson points out that due to “the naturalization of speciesism in Butler’s texts,” she fails to analyze for instance “the animalization of racialized gender” and “the normative sexualization of animality” (ibid.).

It should be noted, however, that Butler does actually hint at the mechanisms of animalization. In *Precarious Lives* she notes for example that the normative production (i.e. dehumanization) of the “enemy” as “less-than-human” in Guantánamo Bay detention camp was based on a “reduction of these human beings to animal status, where the animal is figured as out of control, in need of total restraint” (PL, 78). Indeed, the prisoners “were rendered faceless and abject, likened to caged and restrained animals” (PL, 73). Yet, she goes on to insist that “It is important to remember that the bestialization of the human in this way has little, if anything, to do with actual animals, since it is a *figure* of the animal against which the human is defined” (ibid., my emphasis).

Butler’s rhetorical employment of the “figure” of the animal seems to support Iveson’s argument. As he points out, “insofar as Butler refuses to think with nonhuman animals, she is thus compelled to invoke the empty yet foreclosed domain of ‘the inhuman’ as the constitutive outside of the human, an invocation that remains more or less constant throughout her work” (Iveson 2012, 26). Complicating Butler’s differentiation between “the-less-than-human” and “the animal,” Iveson argues that Butler’s “inhuman” can actually be understood as “the indecipherable *nonhuman* animal” that “haunts the boundaries of the properly human” (ibid., emphasis in original). As he continues:

The animal, in other words, is essential to the hierarchical functioning of the more and the less, in that “the animal” is always the least of the less, the negative pole to be transcended – more and less – along a humanist teleology which reaches its apotheosis in the phantasmatic ideal of the white human male. Only once this is recognized does it then become possible to understand how the machinations of power legitimize the slaughter of human animals by way of the prior “animalization” of a specifically targetted [sic] human or human grouping, a reconfiguration that strips its target of a fully human status and, in so doing, constitutes a non-subject that can thereafter be killed with impunity. (Iveson 2012, 28)

To put it differently, as long as we automatically exclude animals from ethical theorizing we are unable to theorize and problematize the interconnected re-

lations of exposure to violence of both humans and nonhuman animals alike. Iveson's challenge to Butler is thus this: rather than with the human, "the question of ethics must begin with nonhuman animals" (Iveson 2012, 32).

3.1.3 A biopolitical critique of anthropocentrism

In *Before the Law: Humans and Animals in Biopolitical Context* (2013), Cary Wolfe provides an account of the factory farming and mass slaughter of domesticated animals by drawing especially on Foucault, Agamben and Esposito's discussions of biopolitics.⁷⁶ He notes that Butler's *Precarious Life* (2004a) and *Frames of War* (2009) can be regarded as her turn to biopolitical thinking, for her primary aim is not to theorize humanism but to ask how certain power mechanisms and legal discourses, such as the "state of exception" declared after 9/11, operate by dehumanizing certain populations and making them susceptible to different types of violence.⁷⁷ Wolfe notes that during this period of her thought, "Butler hints at how her approach to the biopolitical might bear on fundamentally rethinking the human/animal divide" (Wolfe 2013, 19).

If not yet in *Precarious Life*, then in *Frames of War*, Butler indeed takes issue with anthropocentrism by pointing out, for example, that "there is no firm way to distinguish in absolute terms the *bios* of the animal from the *bios* of the human animal," because "the human animal is itself an animal" (FW, 19, emphasis in original).⁷⁸ Yet these statements seem to allow Butler only to arrive at the conclusion that "animality is a *precondition* of the human, and there is no human who is not a human animal" (FW 19, my emphasis). By stating this, Butler thus appears in this context to normatively differentiate between animals and humans, implying that "the human" somehow trans-

⁷⁶ According to Wolfe, as long as theorizations of biopolitics do not take animals into consideration, they end up construing very restricted conceptions of current power relations. He writes, "[C]urrent practices of factory farming [...] constitute not just some embarrassing sideline of modern life that has nothing to do with the politics proper [...]. Rather, such practices must be seen not just as political but as in fact *constitutively* political for biopolitics in its modern form. Indeed, the maximizing control over life and death, of 'making live,' in Foucault's words, through eugenics, artificial insemination and selective breeding, pharmaceutical enhancement, inoculation, and the like are on display in the modern factory farm as perhaps nowhere else in biopolitical history. It can hardly be debated, I think, that 'the animal' is, today—and on a scale unprecedented in human history—the site of the very ur-form of that *dispositif* and the face of its most unchecked, nightmarish effects" (2013, 46, emphasis in original).

⁷⁷ For more on Butler's position on biopolitics, see Sawicki (2016).

⁷⁸ As James Stanescu points out, by highlighting the intertwinement of the *bios* of the animal and the *bios* of the human, Butler takes issue with Agamben's concept of "bare life" (Stanescu 2012, 572).

gresses “the animal,” which comes to be viewed only as a precondition to its transgression, to its “humanity.”

Wolfe pays critical attention to this tension, arguing that one of the main difficulties in Butler’s budding critique of anthropocentrism is her Hegelian and Levinasian notion of ethics, understood as a reciprocal practice. In Wolfe’s words, Butler’s “concept of ethics and of community remains tied to a reciprocal model based on a ‘mutual striving for recognition’” (Wolfe 2013, 19). Building on Hegel’s dialectics of recognition, Butler does intimate in *Precarious Lives* that the process through which we become culturally viable persons is a “*reciprocal exchange*, an exchange that dislocates us from our positions, our subject-positions, and allows us to see that community itself requires the recognition that we are all, in different ways, striving for recognition” (PL, 44, my emphasis).⁷⁹

The problem here, as Wolfe sees it, is that if ethics is understood as a mutual and reciprocal practice, those populations that might not be capable of mutual recognition and ethical reciprocity, including animals (not to mention children and humans with certain disabilities), are excluded at the very outset of ethical theorizing (Wolfe 2013, 19–20).⁸⁰

Interestingly enough, in elucidating our fundamental dependency on others and social norms Butler usually takes up children as her example, for they are *par excellence* dependent on others and on care, even if “for some this primary scene is a scene of abandonment or violence or starvation, that theirs are bodies given over to nothing, or to brutality, or to no sustenance” (PL, 31; see also PL, 45).⁸¹ Ethically considered, this condition of “primary

⁷⁹ However, it should be noted that one of the key reasons why Butler deploys Levinas’s ethics is that, unlike Wolfe claims, he actually *rejects* the idea of reciprocity. In *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler writes: “For Levinas, reciprocity cannot be the basis of ethics, since ethics is not a bargain: it cannot be the case that my ethical relation to another is contingent on his or her ethical relation to me, since that would make that relation less than absolute and binding, and it would establish my self-preservation as a distinct and bounded sort of being as more primary than any relation I have to another. For Levinas, no ethics can be derived from egoism; indeed, egoism is the defeat of ethics itself” (NPTA, 108). On the other hand, Butler’s reading of Hegel’s dialectic of recognition also puts more emphasis on the mutual (but potentially hierarchical and exploitative) *interdependency* that the struggle for recognition implies than on “reciprocity” as Wolfe implies.

⁸⁰ More on the critique of ableism in regard to animal ethics, see Taylor (2017).

⁸¹ It needs stressing that although with the notion of “primary vulnerability” Butler refers to the condition of infant dependency, the condition of vulnerability continues to “haunt” our adult life as well, since we are—as bodily vulnerable beings—always potentially susceptible to others, to social norms, to power relations, and to violence. It is also the case that certain populations in particular are more susceptible than others due to the differential logic by which vulnerability is politically and socially distributed (PL, 26–27).

vulnerability” (PL, 31) is far from a reciprocal relation but is necessarily an *unreciprocal* one.

To use Wolfe’s terminology, which he borrows from analytic moral philosophy, infants are not “moral agents” but “moral patients,” that is, we do not evaluate their moral behavior but the ways in which they are treated (Wolfe 2013, 20). Despite the fact that Butler illuminates primary vulnerability by invoking the example of children, and although this—because it moves beyond the purview of reciprocal ethics—could also raise the question of how we treat other “moral patients,” such as animals, she does not, Wolfe laments, make this theoretical move.

For Wolfe, Butler’s negligence of animals implies that her turn to biopolitical thinking does not, after all, fully overcome the anthropocentric assumption according to which genuine ethical relations require mutual reciprocity. In order to formulate a more comprehensive critique of violence against human and nonhuman populations alike, it would be necessary, in Wolfe’s view, to completely dismantle the human/animal divide (Wolfe 2013, 105).⁸²

3.2 Butler’s notion of “life” and the inclusion of nonhuman animals

In *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), Butler returns to the question of recognition vis-à-vis precarious lives, reminding us of the mechanisms through which only certain kinds of subjects become recognizable as humans while others remain unrecognizable as such due, for example, to the differential operation of racializing and gendering norms. In this context, Butler adds, surprisingly, that:

This is surely one question posed by the animal rights movements, since why is it that only human subjects are recognized and not non-human living beings? Does the act by which humans achieve recognition implicitly pick out only those features of the human that could arguably be separated off from the rest of animal life? The conceit of this form of recognition founders on itself, for would such a distinctly human creature actually be recognizable if it were somehow separated

⁸² Concerning Butler’s focus on the relationship between ethics and the processes of dehumanization, Wolfe writes that “Butler is certainly right [...] that ‘dehumanization’ is a fundamental mechanism for producing a ‘Western’ idea of the ‘man’ over and against populations considered ‘dubiously human.’ But [...] as long as the automatic exclusion of animals from [ethical] standing remains intact simply because of their species, such a dehumanization by means of the discursive mechanism of ‘animalization’ will be readily available for deployment against whatever body happens to fall outside the ethnocentric ‘we.’” (Wolfe 2013, 21).

from its creaturely existence? What would it look like? (NPTA, 35–36, my emphasis)

Although this passage might look like Butler's attempt to revise her previous position due to the critique discussed above, it should be noted that the question of "the animal" is not completely a new idea in her most recent work, but that she has actually problematized the human/animal divide already in her previous texts.

In *Undoing Gender*, for example, Butler underscores that "it is imperative to separate the question of a livable life from the status of a human life, since livability pertains to living beings that exceed the human" (UG, 12, my emphasis). Similarly, in *Frames of War* she states that "there ought to be recognition of precariousness as a shared condition of human life (indeed, as a condition that links human and nonhuman animals) [...]" (FW, 13). In an interview with Vicky Kirby from 2006, Butler points out that "One problem with using the framework of humanization and dehumanization is that it leaves the question of the animal to the side" (Butler in Kirby 2006, 153). Also in *Dispossessions* (2013), a published conversation with Athena Athanasiou, Butler brings up the intertwinement of the human and the animal by stating the following:

If we are moving toward a relational view [of the human], then it would follow that the human not only has a relation to animals (conceived as the other), but is itself implicated in its own animality. The point is not to find the right typology, but to understand where typological thinking falls apart. The human animal might be one way of naming that collapse of typological distinction. (DPP, 35)⁸³

Despite the fact that Butler does not herself develop further the question of "the animal" in her work, I argue that we must take these aforementioned statements seriously, for they function in my view as an encouragement to theorize "livable lives" beyond the anthropocentric framework of "the human," hinting thus at the possible extension of Butler's notions of livability and precarity. Therefore, I argue that to fully grasp Butler's notions of "precarious" and "livable lives" we must detach these notions from anthropocentric presuppositions and understand them not only in relation to the question

⁸³ Intriguingly, Butler also implies in the same conversation that "there is also a street politics of the animal," but does not develop this idea any further. Although Butler's key focus is on "street politics" in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), she does not come back to this idea—though she does mention "the animal rights movements" as an example of street politics (see NPTA, 35).

of the human but also, and importantly, in terms of *the political problem of life* more generally.⁸⁴

However, although Butler refers to “animal rights” movements when problematizing the separation of human and nonhuman animals in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, her account of the normative production of livable and unlivable lives does not put forward a theorization of animal rights but, rather, it offers insights into the theorization of the normative production of “livable” and “unlivable” animal lives as well as into the theorization of ethical responsibility and nonviolence. I will deal with these questions in more detail in the next section (3.3). In order to bring Butler’s discussion of norms to bear on the question of “the animal,” we need first to explicate what is the role of nonhuman animals in Butler’s theorization of precarious lives.

Unlike in *Precairous Life* where Butler theorizes precarious lives mainly in terms of “the human,” in *Frames of War* she starts to use such concepts as “living being,” “human animal,” “animal,” and “non-human animal” (FW, 5, 13, 62). This change of vocabulary indicates, in my view, a more explicit inclusion of nonhuman animals into her notion of precarious lives. Butler begins the book with a discussion of the ontological and epistemological “framing” of life. Her key argument is that since historical and normative power relations (i.e. norms, conventions, and categories) regulate our capacity to recognize something as a “life,” our understandings and conceptions of what we currently call “life” are never politically neutral (FW, 3–5).

In this sense, for Butler, “life” is always a political concept and a question of power. The normative regulation of life raises the further question of violence: if certain lives are not recognized as real lives, then we might not recognize their destruction as real violence. As Butler notes, the epistemological and ontological questions regarding our capacity to recognize a life are thus crucially tied to ethical questions, such as the following: whose lives come to be viewed as valuable enough for sustenance and protection? Indeed, Butler often theorizes the normative regulation of life in light of the question of nonviolence.

Yet, her position regarding nonviolence vis-à-vis precarious lives is not systematic. For example, in *Precairous Life* Butler states (in the context of her critique of Israeli state violence against Palestinians) that our common condition of bodily vulnerability and suffering might give rise to an (Jewish) ethic of nonviolence that “seeks to recognize the sanctity of life, of all lives” (PL,

⁸⁴ Here I am indebted to Moya Lloyd’s (2015, 174) characterization of Butler’s theorization of precarity as “the political problem of the human,” a concept I want to develop further by analyzing the question of “precairous lives” in terms of the political problem of *life* more generally.

104). However, in *Frames of War* Butler argues that from the fact that something is living does not automatically follow that we must protect it. Rather than emphasizing the sanctity of all lives, she now holds that “(...) it can be argued that processes of life themselves require destruction and degeneration, but this does not in any way tell us which sorts of destruction are ethically salient and which are not” (FW, 16).

In the same context, she also writes that “After all, plants are living things, but vegetarians do not usually object to eating them” (ibid.). Here, Butler seeks to expose what she calls “a certain anthropocentrism” that cherishes an “omnipotent fantasy” according to which humans could have a complete control over life processes (FW, 18). Although it is worth noting—as a critique against Butler—that human-induced climate change is exactly an evidence of the enormous power humans in fact exercise over the whole planet, Butler’s point here is simply that destruction and degeneration are essential aspects of life without which there would be no life in the first place.⁸⁵

Although Butler clearly argues that she does not regard all living beings as something that could be understood as “precarious lives” (i.e. those lives that are ethically salient) she does not explicate exactly where we should draw the line between “living beings” and “precarious lives.” To classify beings or lives in this way is not Butler’s aim, however. Rather, her aim is to critically interrogate the social, political, and normative conditions under which we come to view only certain lives as worthy of protection.

Hasana Sharp and Chloë Taylor (2016) argue that Butler’s remarks about vegetarians as well as her comments on the omnipotent fantasy of anthropocentrism seek to exclude animal activists as potential interlocutors from her discussion of life. They interpret that Butler’s critique rules out a “radically species-egalitarian position” that would recognize the ethical value of not just human animals but also nonhuman animals.

Although Butler’s point – that many lives come into being and die on this planet that are beyond human control – is undeniable, human decisions impact billions of nonhuman animal lives every day, and so we cannot simply dismiss it as anthropocentric to wish to intervene in those lives and deaths. (Sharp & Taylor 2016, 14)

They conclude that although Butler’s discussion of life offers insights into theorizing the normative framing of life and corporeal vulnerability, it does

⁸⁵ Butler’s critique of anthropocentrism in this context is also related to her critique of the so-called “pro-life” movement in the US that campaigns against women’s reproductive freedom. More on this aspect of Butler’s discussion, see Taylor & Sharp (2016).

not provide critical enough tools for thinking about interspecies relations (Sharp & Taylor 2016, 16).

I agree that Butler does not elaborate on the question of interspecies relations in the context of her theorizing of life. However, I think Butler's discussion of the normative regulation of life is more complicated than Sharp's and Taylor's interpretation allow. Butler does not reject the possibility to theorize interspecies relations as ethically relevant, for example. Rather, for her, it is precisely the interdependent relations between humans and nonhuman animals that generate the need to rethink the concept of life. As Butler writes in *Frames of War*:

The point [is] to reconceive life itself as a set of largely unwilling interdependencies, even systemic relations, which imply that the "ontology" of the human is not separable from the "ontology" of the animal. *It is not just a question of two categories that overlap, but of a co-constitution that implies the need for a reconceptualization of the ontology of life itself.* (FW, 75–76, my emphasis)⁸⁶

In *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler elaborates further the idea of the shared interdependency that characterizes humans and nonhuman animals:

The human creature is, after all, already in relation to the animal, and not in the sense that the animal is the "Other" to the human, but because the human is already an animal [...]. Moreover, a large set of life processes cross the human and the animal and maintain a rather steadfast indifference to the distinction between the two. [...] the forms of dependency between human and animal suggest that in part they are constituted by and through one another. *If we take that dependency to be central, then the difference between animal and human becomes secondary* (they are both dependent, and they are dependent on each other, depending on each other to be the kinds of beings they are). (NPTA, 132, my emphasis.)

As this passage intimates, the interdependency that characterizes all animals is, for Butler, fundamental in articulating the idea of precarious lives. Therefore, I contend that although Butler does not include every living being into the category of precarious lives, she does include nonhuman animals. Since Butler's notion of precarious lives includes not only humans but also nonhumans, her theoretical framework of interdependency lets us theorize our relations to animals as ethically significant ties. Here, we could also come

⁸⁶ In this context, Butler refers (in a footnote) to Donna Haraway's books *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (1991) and *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003).

back to Butler's remark regarding the dietary choices of vegetarians and note that, upon a closer look, what Butler actually implies is that even though vegetarians usually do not object to eating plants, what they do object to eating is—indeed, animals.

Here it is important to recall that, in Butler's view, the fact that we are interdependent beings gives rise to ethical questions concerning exploitation and violence: to recognize that we all are dependent on others and social norms is to recognize that we all are vulnerable to suffering and violence. From this follows, for Butler, that we should attend to the differential ways in which certain populations are made more susceptible to forms of violence than others. However, this raises the question of how we should understand the differential distribution of livability in relation to nonhuman animals.

Not only do we share the bodily condition of precariousness and interdependency with other animals, we have also made certain domesticated animals (e.g. cows, pigs, lambs, chicken) very concretely dependent on us due to our agricultural practices and eating habits, and therefore—if we follow Butler's idea of interdependency—our relations to these animals are ethically significant, even if we do not wish to recognize them as such (see also Taylor 2008, 62).

On these grounds, and in contrast to Wolfe's criticism according to which Butler's theorization of precarious lives excludes animals due to her commitment to reciprocal ethics, I argue that Butler's conceptualization of precarious lives in terms of interdependencies actually moves beyond the anthropocentric framework of ethical reciprocity. This is a theoretical move, I propose, that allows us to extend Butler's ethical framework of livability to nonhuman animals as well.

Here, Butler's theorization of precarious lives in relations to the *conditions* of life becomes relevant. Emphasizing that there is no such thing as "life itself" that could somehow be separated from the different—and differential—conditions of life that either make life livable or unlivable, she notes that "life requires support and enabling conditions in order to be livable life" (FW, 21). Quite obviously, this means that precarious lives are dependent on the broader environment and basic support such as food, shelter, care, and protection against injury and violence (FW, 22–23).

Having said that, it is worth noting that for Butler "the conditions of life" do not refer to basic support alone but also, and importantly, to the social, political, and normative conditions of life. There are two points to be made here. First, Butler argues that these basic supports of life are differentially and unequally distributed among populations due to social policies that govern access to "shelter, work, food, medical care, and legal status," for example (FW,

13). Second, the unequal distribution of the conditions of life is regulated by the norms that decide what can be recognized as a precarious life; these norms of recognizability affect our understanding of what kinds of lives can be considered as valuable enough for sustenance and protection (FW, 6). What, then, are the ethical implications of Butler's conceptualization of the conditions of life?

While Butler refrains from claiming that *all* life processes impose us an ethical obligation to preserve life, she argues that it is precisely the *conditions* for sustaining a livable life that do obligate us ethically:⁸⁷

To sustain life as sustainable requires putting those conditions in place and militating for their renewal and strengthening. Where a life stands no chance of flourishing, there one must attend to ameliorating the negative conditions of life. Precarious life implies life as a conditioned process, and not as the internal feature of a monadic individual or any other anthropocentric conceit. *Our obligations are precisely to the conditions that make life possible, not to "life itself," or rather, our obligations emerge from the insight that there can be no sustained life without those sustaining conditions, and that those conditions are both our political responsibility and the matter of our vexed ethical decisions.* (FW, 23, my emphasis)

This is to say that we must think of precarious lives in relation to those social norms and power relations that regulate "recognizability" and make the conditions of life "livable" only for certain populations. Therefore, the starting point of our ethical considerations should be the normative conditions of life through which only certain lives are recognized as valuable and are thus provided with the possibility of living and flourishing. It is against this background that Butler's concepts of "precarious" and "livable" lives should be understood. The concepts point to the ethical task of contesting the differential distribution of precariousness.

Intriguingly, Butler invokes here an (liberalist) idea of egalitarianism and seeks to rethink it in light of her concept of precariousness:

Precariousness has to be grasped not simply as a feature of *this* or *that* life, but as a generalized condition whose very generality can be denied only by denying precariousness itself. And the injunction to think precariousness in terms of equality emerges precisely from the irrefutable generalizability of this condition. On this basis, one objects to the

⁸⁷ For Butler, the conditions of life that obligate us ethically encompass also *the ecological* conditions of life (see FW, 75; NPTA, 113).

differential allocation of precariousness [...]. (FW, 22, emphasis in original)

In *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler goes so far as to argue that our critical reflections on and struggles against the differential distribution of precarity (i.e. the unlivable conditions of life), “has to be based on the demand that [precarious] lives should be treated equally and that they should be equally livable” (NPTA, 67, see also *ibid.*, 43).⁸⁸ Unfortunately, however, she does not explicate further the political and ethical implications of this argument but leaves the question open.⁸⁹ Given that Butler systematically rejects those notions of ethics that are based on abstract universal moral principles (see e.g. GAO, 5–7), I suggest that the notion of the equal value of precarious lives can be interpreted in this context as a critical and heuristic strategy that seeks to push the boundaries of the current normative frameworks that regulate the recognizability of precarious lives.

When interpreted as a critical heuristic, we can start to see that Butler’s radical notion of the equal value of precarious lives bears an interesting resemblance to the critique of those animal scholars who have argued that the liberal-individualistic framework of “animal rights” is not adequate enough for problematizing the exploitation of and violence against nonhuman animals (see e.g. Wolfe 2013; Calarco 2008).⁹⁰ Wolfe, for example, reminds us of a paradox regarding the situation where only certain kinds of nonhumans become potentially recognized as “subjects” and thus bearers of certain rights. For instance, in 2008 the Spanish Parliament approved human rights to chimpanzees, gorillas, orangutans, and bonobos, relying on a conventional model of human rights. These new rights include three basic rights that Wolfe summarizes as follows:

- 1) “The Right to Life,” which means that “members of the community may not be killed except in very strictly defined circumstances” such as self-defense; 2) “The Protection of Individual Liberty,” which forbids imprisonment “without due process” and only where it can be shown to be “for their own good, or necessary to protect the public”;

⁸⁸ Interestingly, Butler seems here to rethink the principle of equality (that derives from the liberalist tradition) through her theorization of norms.

⁸⁹ Although Butler articulates the idea of equality generally as “an equal value of all life,” in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* Butler ties the question and the concept of “equality” to Hannah Arendt’s notion of “the right to have rights” and the “right to appear” (see e.g. NPTA, 25–26; 48–49; 60–61). I will discuss this topic in terms of resistance in the final chapter of this dissertation (Ch. 4).

⁹⁰ The most influential animal rights theorists include, for example, Peter Singer, Tom Regan, Gary Francione, David DeGrazia, Mark Rowlands, Evelyn Pluhar, Julian H. Franklin, Gary Varner, Robert Garner, Alasdair Cochrane, and Will Kymlicka.

and 3) “The Prohibition of Torture,” which forbids “the deliberate infliction of severe pain on a member of the community. (Wolfe 2013, 11)⁹¹

Although the legal recognition of “great apes” can be understood as a significant step forward in rethinking of our relations to animals within the legal framework of liberal democracy, Wolfe asserts, quite rightly I think, that “it might well be seen [...] as essentially a kind of tokenism in which nonhumans who are ‘racially’ similar enough to us to achieve recognition are protected” (Wolfe 2013, 104, 11; see also Calarco 2008, 97). The paradox is thus this: although we are ready to grant some human rights to certain animals, such as to our animal “cousins,” we continue to mass kill certain other animals in order to eat their meat. These animals are not regarded as subjects of rights but as raw material and profit in the food industry.

To put it differently, and to stretch Butler’s vocabulary of “livability” one step further: as long as animal ethics does not radically question the norms that produce only certain animals as “precarious lives,” that is, as livable and protectable, it runs the risk of reinforcing speciesism. As a result of this anthropocentric hierarchy, we come to think that we are ethically responsible to make “the conditions of life” sustainable and flourishable merely for those animals we are ready to accept as “individuals” or “subjects,” such as those who resemble us in terms of the species, or those we have historically and socially come to view as our “companion species,” such as dogs and cats and other pets.⁹²

To thoroughly expose and interrupt the production of “unlivable” lives, we need, in Butler’s terms, “a critical approach to the norms” that exclude certain lives from the ethical sphere (NPTA, 37). Only then, as she stresses, can we “begin to dismantle those more vicious forms of logic that uphold forms of [...] anthropocentrism” (ibid.). If norms of recognizability separate between livable and unlivable lives as Butler claims, then our capacity to respond ethically to those we do not recognize as “precarious lives” is, too, necessarily limited. Therefore, the question of the equal value of precarious lives—and its flipside: the unequal distribution of precarity and the production of unlivable lives—is connected to the problem of ethical responsiveness. Next, I develop these questions further by critically scrutinizing the normative distinction between “livable” and “killable” animal lives.

⁹¹ Wolfe cites here *The Great Ape Project* (1994), a coedited book by animal rights philosophers, Peter Singer and Paola Cavalieri.

⁹² The concept of “companion species” originates in Donna Haraway’s (2003) analysis of the relationships between humans and animals (specifically dogs).

3.3 Killable animals and the ethics of responsiveness

According to the American Pet Products Association, 68% of US households own a pet (this equates to 84.6 million homes) and in 2016, Americans spent \$66.75 billion on pet products, including \$28.23 billion on pet food alone. Currently, dogs are the most popular pets: 60.2 million US households own dogs, the total number of dogs owned in the US being 89.7 million.⁹³ As this already implies, pets, especially dogs and cats, enjoy many privileges compared to animals raised for food. For example, dogs are nurtured with optimal diets, quality care, toys, cognitive exercises, and special services. They have their own hospitals, insurances, daycares, grooming services, spas, and even luxury terminals at airports (such as “the Ark at JFK”). The lives of dogs are sustained as “livable” and “flourishable,” and upon death, they are often euthanized peacefully and with respect, and afterward deeply mourned. In contrast to farmed animals, the lives of pet dogs, for example, are not maintained because of their economic value but simply because they are valuable in their own right—or, at least as our “companions.” Indeed, we conceive of dogs as what I call “lovable” animals since they are our friends, companions, and family members.

For this reason, our general reaction to dog abuse, neglect and cruelty (such as dogfights), is shock and moral disgust. As animal scholar Jen Wrye points out, “in contrast to most other animals, such behaviors are largely judged to be socially unacceptable” because “[t]he presumption is that pets are loved and adored [...]” because they are conceived as “pets” and not as food (Wrye 2015, 99). As she explains, “Pets are not categorized as such because of inherent characteristics, but through human practices and social relations,” although there is “nothing definitively distinctive about a cow or a pig that would warrant inhumane living conditions or would even justify their consumption” (Wrye 2015, 98–99). However, we view dogs as “lovable” animals and kill and eat cows and pigs. Moreover, we also feed “beef” and “pork” to our pets; a practice that, as Wrye notes, further strengthens our understanding of farmed animals as not “lovable” individuals but as “meat-to-be” (Wrye 2015, 95, 99).⁹⁴

⁹³ The next most popular US pets are cats: 47.1 million US households own cats, a total of 94.2 million cats. The data is based on the statistics provided by the American Pet Products Association. The statistics are available at: http://www.americanpetproducts.org/press_industrytrends.asp (accessed May 25, 2017).

⁹⁴ For more on the current practices of eating meat, see, for example, Barbara King’s *Personalities on the Plate* (2017).

In *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight* (2011),⁹⁵ political scientist Timothy Pachirat notes that the line speed in a typical US cattle-slaughterhouse is approximately 300 cattle per hour, or, as the title of his book suggests, one animal every twelve seconds (Pachirat 2011, 17–18).⁹⁶ Despite its unprecedented massiveness, Pachirat argues that the daily practice of industrialized killing is nevertheless distanced and concealed from the larger society in order “[t]o enable us to eat meat without the killers or the killing, without even [...] the animals themselves” (Pachirat 2011, 3). According to him, this happens through the de-individualization of the animals as well as through the routinization and mechanization of their killing:

The living creature, the *animal* that is herded off a truck and into the production sequence of the kill floor [...] arrives in varied shapes and sizes, each distinct, each unique. Some balk when prodded up the chute leading to the kill box, some collapse from exhaustion or disease, some have horns that are especially difficult to cut off, some are pregnant and about to give birth, some are unusually large, and some unexpectedly small. The kill floor must make concession to this uniqueness, this regular irregularity. [...] its function is to erase individuality and produce in its place a raw material, an input. Already stripped of all individuating characteristics of hide, horns, and sex, the carcass that reaches the cooler is further homogenized: the very texture of the flesh is reduced to one temperature, one consistency, one thing identical to the thing next to it, which is identical to the thousands of things next to it, all ready to be fabricated into a series of meat “products.” (Pachirat 2011, 40, emphasis in original)

Another strategy of the routinization of killing identified by Pachirat is the hierarchical supervision of the slaughterhouse work.⁹⁷ Since the line speed of

⁹⁵ Pachirat’s research is based on his detailed ethnographic fieldwork (undercover participatory-observation) on the kill floor of a cattle-slaughterhouse in Omaha, Nebraska in 2004.

⁹⁶ The National Agricultural Statistics Service of the United States of Department of Agriculture (USDA) has provided the following statistics of US red meat production from 2016: the number of cattle slaughtered during 2016 totaled 30.6 million head (up 6% from 2015); calf slaughter totaled 487,700 head, (up 8% from 2015); hog slaughter totaled 118.2 million head (up 2% from 2015); sheep and lamb slaughter totaled 2.24 million head (up 1% from 2015). According to the USDA, there were 814 slaughter plants under USDA inspection on January 1, 2017. The data is available at: <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/current/LiveSlauSu/LiveSlauSu-04-19-2017.pdf> (accessed May 26, 2017).

⁹⁷ The hierarchical supervision also reflects the way the slaughterhouse is architecturally designed: the front office of the facility is on the farthest side from the kill floor, thus distancing the managerial, white-collar work from the “dirty” work of the killing (Pachirat 2011, 4, 27–28). Notably, this separation between the office and other parts of the slaughterhouse is also gendered and racialized: most of

killing translates directly into economic profit, the workers' main task is to make sure that the production line keeps running as quickly as possible. The surveillance and control of workers by The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) inspectors on the kill floor further reinforces this function (i.e. the efficacy) of the killing work. That is, the focus of the workers is not so much on the killing of living animals (let alone their welfare) but on the effort of avoiding making mistakes that could slow down or disrupt the production line. Or, in the words of one of Pachirat's kill floor colleagues when asked about the ruthless use of the electric prods, "if we don't keep these cows moving through, they're gonna call us up to the office and we're going to get fired" (Pachirat 2011, 148). As a consequence of these techniques of distance and concealment, the actual acts of mass killing start to fade away even in the middle of killing and even under the very eyes of those who participate in it.⁹⁸

Pachirat argues that as a result of this kind of routinized killing, even the kill floor workers who directly participate in the process of killing do not perceive the mass slaughtering of live animals as "real" killing (Pachirat 2011, 255–256). Elsewhere he has also added that our intensified care of pets and our moral responses to their abuse "don't contradict the industrialized killing of billions" but are in fact "a part and parcel of that system" (Pachirat cited in García 2015, 175). Wrye's and Pachirat's observations raise the question of how, then, should we understand the differential way we currently treat domesticated and companion animals? It is my contention that the differential production of "lovable" and "consumable" animals is based on two interrelated and violent mechanisms of norms: on the one hand, it is based on the normalization of the killing of "food animals," and, on the other hand, on the normative regulation of our ethical responses to animal suffering. Utilizing Butler's notion of the normative regulation of lives, I discuss each of these mechanisms of power below, beginning with the rationalization of the practice of killing.

the office workers are white women and men, whereas the vast majority of the kill floor workers are immigrant and refugee men from Central and South America, Southeast Asia, and East Africa (Pachirat 2011, 17; see also Thierman 2010, 103).

⁹⁸ Another result of these techniques is that in cases when an animal survives the "knocking box" (according to Pachirat, this happens regularly), it is possible that the animal stays sensible when entering the processing line where the disassembly machines such as "side puller," "tail puller," and "down puller" cut the animal into pieces. Since the workers whose task is to make preparatory cuts into the supposedly stunned animal before it enters the machines "stand on a platform elevated ten feet above the kill floor, the head of the cow is invisible to them" and thus they can be "unaware that they are cutting into a sentient animal" (Pachirat 2011, 60). Pachirat notes that the only way to notice the cow's reactions to pain is from the floor *beneath* the processing line (after they have been stunned by a gun, cattle are shackled and hung upside down) and can only be observed from "the movements of the cow's head and eyes" (ibid.).

As Butler notes, the fact that we are precarious beings does not automatically lead to the ethical and political sustenance of the precarious lives of “others” but, and especially when we do *not* acknowledge our interdependent relations, it can give rise to forms of domination and violence (FW, 31). For Butler, this is particularly evident in the context of war. As she remarks, the US’s military response to 9/11 (i.e. the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan) is a striking example when “the shared condition of precariousness” leads “to a specific exploitation of targeted populations,” because they are regarded as “destructible” and “lose-able” lives (ibid.). This is so because these lives are normatively “framed as being already lost or forfeited; [...] rather than as living populations in need of protection [...]” (ibid.). As a consequence, their killing becomes normalized, since, “in the twisted logic that rationalizes their death, the loss of such populations is deemed necessary to protect the lives of ‘the living’” (ibid.).

While the mass killing of animals for food can hardly be understood as necessary for the protection of human lives, I argue that it is nonetheless rationalized with a similar logic that Butler describes, namely, through the norms that differentiate between those animal lives we consider “protectable” and “lovable” (e.g. dogs and cats), and those we view as necessarily “lose-able” and “killable.”⁹⁹ Generally, making farmed animals “killable” is informed by the capitalist logic of commodification whereby these animals become mere raw material for profit (Gillespie & Lopez, 2015, 8).¹⁰⁰

However, I argue that the mass killing of “food animals” is rationalized not only through economic norms (i.e. market value) but also through the norms that regulate our eating practices. These norms seek to uphold the idea of human exceptionalism by viewing certain other animals as “killable” and “consumable,” while constructing “humans” (and some of their pets¹⁰¹) as carnivorous beings whose very livability is dependent on the flesh—on the killing—of other animals. In this sense, and paraphrasing Butler, the mass killing of certain animals is deemed necessary for the sustenance of certain, particularly Western, human populations, their consumption and culinary

⁹⁹ My concept of “killability” builds critically on Donna Haraway’s concept of “making beings killable” (Haraway 2008, 80). Another critical deployment of Haraway’s concept in the context of animal ethics can be found in Gillespie & Lopez (2015).

¹⁰⁰ James Stanesco has called the intertwinement of the commodification and killing of animals “dead-ing life,” by which he means that the (normative and literal) production of farmed animals is “fundamentally about [their] death, [their] consumption” (Stanesco 2013, 148).

¹⁰¹ As Wrye notes, the pet food industry, which is a crucial part of the meat industry, construes (e.g. through advertisements) pet dogs, for example, as carnivorous beings comparable to wolves, although dogs have in fact evolved as “opportunistic omnivores” (Wrye 2015, 105).

habits, as well as their normative practices of valuing only certain animals as “lovable.”¹⁰²

In addition, and as Taylor (2010, 75) has also pointed out, the practice of eating non-human flesh can be understood as a way through which humans seek to construe their superiority over other animals. Far from being neutral practices, Taylor notes that our eating habits are highly disciplined and socially regulated through “alimentary norms” that seek to normalize meat-based diets as “natural” for humans, while making, for instance, plant-based diets “abnormal” or even pathologizing them as eating disorders (Taylor 2012, 132, 141–143).¹⁰³ Despite the growing scientific evidence of the unsustainability (e.g. the disastrous ecological consequences and the serious problems regarding animal wellbeing)¹⁰⁴ of meat-based diets, these norms are maintained through media, advertisements, the animal agribusiness, and government-funded nutritional science expert discourses, for example. In addition to the capitalist and alimentary norms that contribute to the rationalization of the mass killing of certain animals, I argue that the normalization of killing—the production of “killable animals”—also happens through the regulation of our ethical responsibility.

Donna Haraway argues in *When Species Meet* that our ethical responsibility should not concern the act of killing animals itself but the practice of “making beings killable” (Haraway 2008, 80). While she does not explicate what is the key difference between “killing” and “making killable” (she only vaguely points to the practice of killing that has reached “unprecedented historical proportions,” thus pointing implicitly to the mass slaughtering of animals for food), she nevertheless claims that feminists, mentioning specifically those who advocate vegetarian or vegan ethics, should let go of the command “Thou shalt not kill.” This is so, in her view, because it is not possible to live without killing: “Try as we might to distance ourselves, there is no way of living that is not also a way of someone, not just something, else dying differen-

¹⁰² According to the latest data (from 2015) provided by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Australia, USA, and Israel are, respectively, the top three meat consumers globally. The data is available at: <https://data.oecd.org/agroutput/meat-consumption.htm> (accessed May 26, 2017)

¹⁰³ Taylor refers here to the new diagnosis of “orthorexia nervosa.” Interestingly, she notes that the introduction of this diagnosis is connected to gender normalization: “Because anorexia nervosa is strongly associated with women, the choice of orthorexia nervosa as the name for a new eating disorder, which resonates with the better known eating disorder, also genders it feminine. This suggests once again that alimentary normalization will be caught up with sexual and gender normalization [...]” (Taylor 2012, 144.)

¹⁰⁴ 99% of the meat produced in the US is raised in confined animal facilities, so called “factory farms.” For a scientific report on the connections of mass meat production and climate change, see, for example, Steinfield & al. (2006).

tially” (ibid., 80). She goes on to explain that she does “not think we can nurture living until we get better at facing killing,” insisting therefore that “human beings must learn to kill *responsibly*” (ibid., 81, my emphasis). Rather than the killing itself, the ethical problem for her is “to learn to live *responsibly* within the multiplicitous *necessity* and labor of killing [...]” (ibid., 80, my emphasis).

While Haraway may be right that it is not possible to live without killing (the cultivation of crops, fruits, and vegetables kills rodents and insects, for example), to jump to the conclusion that therefore killing is *necessary* is to make a hasty generalization. As Gillespie & Lopez have also stated, Haraway’s argument “sets up a false construct of living and dying wherein killing certain bodies is taken-for-granted and ethical considerations focus only on *how* animals live and are killed, not *whether* they should be killed at all” (Gillespie & Lopez, 2015, 9, emphasis in original). If this is the case, then Haraway’s understanding of “responsible killing” only further reinforces the normative divide between “protectable” and “killable” animals.

Indeed, Haraway’s notion of responsible killing bears a resemblance to the idea of “humane slaughter,” a current law in the US that regulates the killing of food animals by requiring them to be stunned before processing.¹⁰⁵ The mass killing of animals is considered to be a “humane” practice, insofar as it is carried out “responsibly.”¹⁰⁶ In my view, Haraway’s argument begs the question of the definition of “ethical responsibility.” By defining it narrowly to concern only *the way* animals are killed, she ignores the possibility that our conception of “responsibility” can actually serve as the very justification for the killing of certain animals. In contrast to Haraway, I argue that Butler’s work offers us a more promising notion of responsibility.

According to Butler, one of the mechanisms through which the norms of recognizability (i.e. the norms that regulate which lives are recognized as lives

¹⁰⁵ Federal regulation of the treatment of “food animals” in the US is very limited, including only two major laws: the Twenty-Eight-Hour Law, which requires that livestock should be unloaded, fed, watered and rested for at least five hours after 28-hour interstate transportation; and the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act (HAS), which requires that livestock animals should be made insensible to pain before slaughter (poultry is excluded from the law). However, Pachirat argues on the basis of his slaughterhouse ethnography that although the implementation of HAS is controlled by USDA inspectors, it does not prevent violence against animals but actually enables the normalization of the whole process of industrialized killing through the practices of hierarchical surveillance of the kill floor workers as well as through the detailed division of labor and space on the kill floor (Pachirat 2011, 239–240).

¹⁰⁶ A compelling critique of “humanely” raised and slaughtered meat and a defense of a (non-universalist) vegan ethics can be found in Sunaura Taylor’s *Beasts of Burden* (2017), which discusses the common ground of animal and disability politics.

and which are not) work is the regulation of our ethical responsibility. Here, it is important to reiterate that for Butler, “the ethical” does not refer to forms of “conduct” or “disposition” but, as she states in *Senses of the Subject*, it “characterizes a way of understanding the relational framework within which sense, action, and speech become possible” (SS, 12). In other words, for Butler, “the ethical” is informed by the social and historical power relations that condition and regulate our moral deliberation and ethical principles through different kinds of norms (e.g. regarding our conception of what can be conceived of as a “livable live”), and for this reason she finds it indispensable to theorize ethics in relation to a “social critique” of norms (GAO, 82, 110–111).

Butler’s concept of “ethical responsibility” also refers to a normative “structure of address in which we are called upon to act or *to respond in a specific way*” (SS, 12, my emphasis). Butler thus theorizes the question of ethical responsibility in terms of the problem of “responsiveness.”¹⁰⁷ In *Frames of War*, she emphasizes that “responsibility requires responsiveness,” which is “a way of responding to what is before us with the resources that are available to us” (FW, 50). Indeed, our capacity to respond to the world and to others is thus not a neutral faculty but a socially mediated practice that is normatively regulated through different kinds of interpretative frameworks. In this sense, our capacity—both collective and individual—to respond ethically to the suffering of certain populations depends on the broader social and political frameworks that govern our understanding of what can be regarded as a “livable life” (FW, 64, 180). It is the normative regulation of our ethical responsiveness that explains, according to Butler, “why we react to certain forms of violence with horror and to other forms with a sense of acceptance” (FW, 49).

She further notes that the norms that regulate our ethical responses are often enacted through visual frames, such as media representations, that seek to limit our ethical perception (FW, 75). Butler’s typical example is the regula-

¹⁰⁷ For Butler, “responsiveness,” or “impressionability” as she also calls it, names the capacity of our bodies to react affectively (e.g. through senses and emotions) to others and to the world. Although Butler views this capacity to “respond” as a fundamental dimension of our bodies (ultimately, it results from the fact that our bodies are vulnerable and dependent on others), she emphasizes, however, that our responses are not “automatic” but socially conditioned. In *Senses of the Subject*, she argues that it is this “primary impressionability” that socially operating norms come to “exploit” in their operation: they “impress themselves upon us, and that impression opens up an affective register” (SS, 5). As she explains, “Norms form us, but only because there is already some proximate and involuntary relation to their impress; they require and intensify our impressionability. Norms act on us from all sides [...]; they act upon a sensibility at the same time that they form it; they lead us to feel in certain ways [...].” (SS, 5.) For more on Butler’s theorization of affects and responsiveness, see, for example, Rushing (2015) and Schippers (2015).

tion of war photography during the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11 (the so-called “War on Terror”). In *Frames of War*, she discusses, for instance, how the US authorities used media for the service of the war effort by seeking to allow only the circulation of certain kinds of pictures, such as US victims, while attempting to limit others, such as pictures of civilian victims and torture committed by US military personnel (FW, 29, 38, 40). The reason for this, of course, is that by seeking to regulate the circulation of certain media representations, US authorities aimed to block critical public response to the war. On a more fundamental level, this kind of regulation can be seen as an attempt to exacerbate our capacity to ethically recognize our interdependent relations—our shared precariousness to violence and suffering—beyond the hegemonic (here: nationalistic and imperialistic) norms of recognizability (FW, 28–29).

I argue that the differential way we respond to the suffering of animals can also be explained by the regulation of our ethical responsiveness.¹⁰⁸ This is evident, for example, in the vast media attention around a video footage recorded during the filming of a recent movie, *A Dog’s Purpose* (2017). This footage, which circulated globally in the news media and in social media, showed a terrified dog, a German Shepherd, being forced into surging water during the shooting of the film’s water scene.¹⁰⁹ The ensuing moral outrage led to the cancelling of the red carpet premiere of the film, followed by public apologies from the producers and the director of the film.

Now, the problem here is not the moral response to the abusive treatment of the dog at the film scene *per se*, but rather how the media representations of sporadic cases of dog abuse enliven and strengthen our conception of dogs (or other pet animals) as “lovable” and “protectable” animals. The sensational representations of the suffering of our companion animals intensify and anchor our reactions to the abuse and violence against those animals we already regard as, to use Butler’s vocabulary, “precarious” (we learned from the news that the name of the German Shepherd was “Hercules” and that he was, despite the incident, “happy and healthy”¹¹⁰), while we at the same time remain silent on the more systematic violence that is going on in slaughterhouses every day.

¹⁰⁸ Kelly Oliver (2010) has also provided an account of animal ethics in terms of ethical responsiveness. Her discussion on animals seeks to deconstruct the human-animal -binary in the works of Derrida, Freud, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and de Beauvoir. Although I am very sympathetic toward Oliver’s work on animals, my perspective differs from hers in that by drawing on Butler’s critique of norms I want to put more emphasis on the ways in which norms regulate our capacity to respond ethically.

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, *New York Time’s* coverage (and the video) of the incident:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/19/movies/a-dogs-purpose-film.html> (accessed 6 March, 2017).

¹¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/19/movies/a-dogs-purpose-film.html>

The normative regulation of our ethical responses to “killable animals” sometimes also happens through law. In the US, animal-agriculture lobbyists have managed to pass so called “ag-gag” bills in several states.¹¹¹ These bills refer to a class of anti-whistleblower laws that prohibit with severe penalties unauthorized access to, and undercover recording or filming in, animal facilities, such as farms and slaughterhouses. Indeed, these laws make it a felony to expose and report neglect, abuse, and violent treatment of animals in the agriculture industry. The law also prohibits the possession and distribution of visual, audio, or print documentation regardless of who—an activist, journalist, researcher, or a worker, for instance—originally produced them (see, for example, Pachirat 2011, 7–8).

Following Butler’s account of ethical responsiveness, it is my contention that the hierarchy between “lovable” and “killable” animals is produced and maintained through the normative frameworks that regulate our ethical responsiveness. Unless we do not expose and question the violent operations of the norms that make certain animals “lose-able” and thus “killable,” systematic violence against them remains unrecognized as real violence, precluding thus our capacity to ethically respond to it. As Butler formulates this point in *Frames of War*:

The critique of violence must begin with the question of the representability of life itself: what 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? (FW, 51, my emphasis)

Later on in the book, she stresses that the idea of nonviolence must therefore be allied with a critique of forms of “epistemic inequality,” by which she means that our ethical formulations of nonviolence must be mindful of the norms that affect our capacity to recognize something as a precarious life (FW, 6–7, 180–181).¹¹²

I argue, then, that in order to critique the unequal ways that precarity is currently distributed among nonhuman animals, we need to consider the ways in which our very understanding of ethical responsibility—our capacity to respond to suffering, violence, and death—is already conditioned by the norms

¹¹¹ Ag-gag bills have to date been passed in Idaho, Iowa, Missouri, North Carolina, Utah, and Arkansas.

¹¹² Butler writes about the normative conditions for the epistemological capacity to recognize a life as follows: “The epistemological capacity to apprehend a life is partially dependent on that life being produced according to norms that qualify it as a life or, indeed, as part of life. In this way, the normative production of ontology thus produces the epistemological problem of apprehending a life, and this in turn gives rise to the ethical problem of what it is to acknowledge or, indeed, to guard against injury and violence” (FW, 3).

that differentiate between “lovable” and “killable” animal lives. As Butler puts it, “Perhaps such a responsibility can only begin to be realized through a critical reflection on those exclusionary norms by which fields of recognizability are constituted” (FW, 36). For this reason, our ethical consideration of violence against animals must start with the critique of those norms that separate between “lovable” and “consumable” animals, and rationalizes the killing of the latter. Only then can we begin to articulate a radical critique against the unequal distribution of precarity, a critique that seeks to take responsibility for the precarious lives of not just human animals and “lovable” nonhuman animals, but also those animals we currently treat only as “meat-to-be.”

3.4 Conclusion: the animal ethics of nonviolence

In this chapter I have sought to show that Butler’s recent work on precarity does not focus only on the question of the normative constitution of “the human” but also, and importantly, on the problem of the normative regulation of “livable lives” more generally. I argue that this shift of emphasis is significant, since it points toward the inclusion of nonhuman animals into Butler’s notion of livable lives. Through my reading of her notion of “life,” I have demonstrated that Butler explicitly rejects anthropocentrism and includes nonhuman animals into her critique of the norms that regulate the recognizability of lives. My reading thus challenges the criticisms presented previously by Taylor, Iveson, and Wolfe.

Furthermore, by expanding upon Butler’s theorization of livability and by providing a critical analysis of the normative production of “killable” animals I have demonstrated that the inclusion of nonhuman animals is not only possible but also a necessary step forward in her critique of norms. Although I agree with the critics that the question of “the animal” remains marginal in Butler’s work, I argue that her work nevertheless opens up new avenues of inquiry into animal ethics.

In this chapter I have highlighted specifically two such possible avenues: her critique of the normalization of killing, and her notion of the normative regulation of ethical responsiveness. In sum, I argue that Butler’s critique of norms offers promising tools for theorizing a radically inclusive notion of the ethics of nonviolence. In the next chapter, I examine Butler’s critique of norms by looking more closely at her notion of “critique” in the context of her ethics of grievability.

4 MOURNING, CRITIQUE, RESISTANCE

[T]he ungrievable gather sometimes in public insurgencies of grief, which is why in so many countries it is difficult to distinguish the funeral from the demonstration.

(*Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*)

According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), in 2016 the number of refugees who drowned in boat sinkings while trying to migrate to Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea is one-third higher than in any other year: while the number of deaths officially recorded in 2015 was 3,771, in 2016 it raised to over 5,000 deaths.¹¹³ This means that an average of 14 people died in the Mediterranean every day. Although certain individual losses from shipwrecks have attracted significant media attention, such as the widely circulated image of the corpse of the 3-year-old Aylan Kurdi, there has not been systematic political mobilization regarding the deaths and the crisis remains unresolved by the EU and its member states (Kovras & Robins 2016, 45). Rather than establishing legal and safe migration routes, the EU has on the contrary strengthened its borders and intensified its surveillance techniques such as drones, satellites, and border patrolling. Pointing to the normalization of the deaths at the EU's frontiers, the UN has called the situation "a scary new 'normal.'"¹¹⁴

In a recent keynote address, Butler suggested that one possible way to critically approach the deaths of the refugees and migrants in the Mediterranean is the question of "grievability," that is, "who will be publicly grievable and who will not?" as she puts it in *Frames of War* (FW, 36). In the lecture, Butler stated that this question could offer insights into problematizing the "necropolitical"¹¹⁵ ways in which certain government policies produce systemat-

¹¹³ <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/briefing/2016/12/585ce804105/mediterranean-sea-100-people-reported-dead-yesterday-bringing-year-total.html> (accessed 4th April 2017).

¹¹⁴ The United Nations special rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, François Crépeau said in a statement to *Business Insider* that "Through slowly stripping away the rights of asylum seekers and migrants, Europe is creating a scary new 'normal.'" <http://www.businessinsider.com/francois-crepeau-statement-on-migrant-crisis-in-europe-2016-2> (accessed 4th April 2017).

¹¹⁵ Here, Butler refers to Achille Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics" that draws on and develops further Foucault's notion of biopolitics. According to Mbembe, necropolitics refers to "the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of

ic forms of negligence and abandonment that let certain populations die.¹¹⁶ Extending on my previous chapter (Ch. 3), where I discussed the differential distribution of precarity in the context of animal ethics, in this chapter I elaborate Butler's critique of norms from the perspective of her account of grief and mourning. By doing this, I seek to foreground Butler's twofold approach to norms in light of her notion of critique as resistance.

In much of the recent commentary literature the question of "grievability" is often viewed as but one dimension of Butler's more general theorization of "livability." As, for example, Birgit Schippers states, "For Butler, the litmus test for a liveable life, and for the operation of an expansive frame that facilitates such a life, is the idea of grievability: that is, the acknowledgement of loss and the recognition of a life lived" (Schippers 2014, 41). Similarly, Moya Lloyd states that rather than addressing the specific practices regarding the politics of grief and mourning, "grievability" is, for Butler, "shorthand for referring to liveable lives" (Lloyd 2015, 178; see also Lloyd 2007, 136; and Chambers & Carver 2008, 69–70).¹¹⁷ Lloyd further argues that "grievability" in Butler's more recent texts does the same conceptual work as "abject" and "cultural intelligibility" did in her previous writings, that is, it points to the normative mechanisms that "differentiate between lives that are eligible for rights, support and recognition (grievable lives) and those that are not (ungrievable lives)" (Lloyd 2015, 178). Another emerging way of interpreting Butler's approach to "grievability" is to articulate it in terms of Butler's theorization of emotions, affects, and sensibilities that attends to the different (emotional, social, and political) modes of dispossession through which subjectivity is construed as relational and "ek-static" (Rushing 2010; 2015, Schippers 2015; Braunmühl 2012; Feola 2013).

persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (Mbembe 2003, 40, emphasis in original).

¹¹⁶ Butler gave the key note lecture "Grievability and Resistance" on 6th October 2016 at the event "Borders and the Politics of Mourning" at the Zolberg Institute on Migration and Mobility (ZIMM), the New School for Social Research, New York City. The lecture is available on the Institute's website: <http://blogs.newschool.edu/zolberg-center/2016/11/23/watch-judith-butlers-keynote-address-grievability-and-resistance-and-the-borders-and-the-politics-of-mourning-panel/>

¹¹⁷ In fact, Butler often uses the concepts of "livable life" and "grievable life" interchangeably. She writes, for example, that: "An ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all" (FW, 38). Although I agree that the questions of "livability" and "grievability" are intertwined in Butler's work, I argue that her account of grief and mourning has an additional theoretical significance that warrants a closer look. The subtitles of Butler's books in themselves point to the emphasis Butler puts on the question of grief and mourning: *Precarious Lives: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) and *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009).

Although I agree that Butler's account of "grievability" relates centrally to all of these discussions, I argue that subsuming "grievability" under the topics of "livability" or "affects" risks obscuring the integral role that the question of grievability plays in Butler's work. Or, as David McIvor has put it, "While it could be argued that, for Butler, mourning is merely one mode of 'dispossession,' [...] the frequency with which Butler invokes mourning gives her work an internal thematic continuity" (McIvor 2012, 411–412). On the other hand, Butler's discussion of "grievability" has sparked trenchant criticism as well. One of the most influential criticisms has been Bonnie Honig's recent argument that by turning to questions of grief and mourning in her more recent work (which Honig sees as a "turn to ethics") Butler's theorizing of political action shrinks into "a sentimental politics of shared feeling" that focuses only on "lamenting" ungrievable deaths (Honig 2013, 64; see also, for example, Benhabib 2013; McIvor 2012; Shulman 2011; Dean 2009). Characterizing Butler's recent work on precariousness and mourning as "mortalist humanism," she further claims that "an ethics of mortalism and suffering is no adequate replacement for a (post)humanist politics with agonistic intent" (Honig 2010, 1).

As I have already (in Chapter 3) challenged the suitability of the terminology of "humanism" in regard to Butler's theorization of "precarity" by arguing that her notion of precarious lives extends to nonhuman animals as well, in this chapter my focus will be on the relationship between norms and grievability. In order to fully understand the emphasis Butler puts on the practices of mourning and grief, I suggest that it should be analyzed in terms of Butler's critique norms. Reading Butler's notion of grievability in light of her theorization of norms allows me to highlight the aspects of critique and political contestation that Butler associates with questions of grief and mourning. By foregrounding Butler's account of grievability in relation to her discussion of critique and the "politics of the street," I argue—contra Honig—that Butler's account of grievability can be read as a theorization of resistance.

I begin my analysis (section 4.1) by mapping Butler's discussion of mourning in her early work on gender melancholia, arguing that already there Butler connects her notion of grief to political contestation. The second part (4.2) explicates Butler's more recent theorization of "grievability" and addresses the recent criticisms leveled against Butler's account of grief. In the third part (4.3), I respond to these critical readings by discussing Butler's notion of "critique" in light of the question of resistance. In the fourth part (4.4), I develop further my argument regarding the relationship between grievability and resistance by turning to Butler's radical democratic discussions of street politics. In the conclusion (4.5), I assess the implications Butler's account of grievability have for her theorization of norms.

4.1 Grief inside out: normative heterosexuality as social melancholia

The relationship between the normative constitution of subjectivity and the practice of mourning is a key question running through Butler's oeuvre, originating in her critical discussion of Freudian psychoanalysis and the concept of "melancholia" in *Gender Trouble* (1999[1990]) and *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997).¹¹⁸ In these books, Butler reads Freud in order to explain the psychosocial constitution of gender identifications, focusing particularly on the constitutive role that disavowed homosexuality plays in the formation of heterosexual identity. In order to understand the relevance of the concept of melancholia for Butler's account of "grievable lives," it is helpful first to discuss Freud's notion of melancholic identifications.

In "The Ego and the Id" ([1923]1989) Freud suggests that in comparison to mourning, which ends after one has successfully dealt with grief after losing a particular love object (i.e. the person accepts the loss and adapts to the situation), melancholia refers to an unconscious mode of grieving where a person is not aware of what has been lost. This unawareness leads to the inability to "get over" the loss: the melancholic does not accept the loss but incorporates the lost object inside the ego by *identifying* with it. Although in "Mourning and Melancholia" ([1917]1957) Freud understood melancholia as a pathological state (i.e. depression), he later changed his view in "The Ego and the Id." There, Freud now conceives melancholia as the general mode through which an infant develops an ego through identification, a process also known as "The Oedipus complex." As Sara Salih summarizes the basic idea behind the "drama" that in Freud's model is triggered by the taboo against incest:

Initially the infant desires one or other of its parents (these are its primary object-cathexes), but the taboo against incest means that these desires have to be given up. Like the melancholic who takes the lost object into her- or himself and thereby preserves it, the ego introjects the lost object (the desired parent) and preserves it as an identification. (Salih 2002, 54)

But, as Salih notes, the object choices that the child makes seem to be predetermined, that is, they seem to be "the result of primary dispositions, i.e. whether one is innately 'masculine' or 'feminine'" (Salih 2002, 54). Indeed, Freud's presumption regarding the internal gender dispositions is the point of departure for Butler's critical reading.

¹¹⁸ The wider context of Butler's discussion of melancholia is the question of subjection (i.e. the constitution of the subject through social power). In *The Psychic Life of Power* Butler brings Freud's notion of melancholia together with Foucault's notion of power and seeks to theorize the psychic forms that normalization takes. In the book, Butler also draws on the works of Althusser, Hegel, and Nietzsche.

Butler accuses Freud of heterosexualizing the mechanism of identity formation and contends that heterosexual identification is “produced not only through implementing the prohibition on incest but, prior to that, by enforcing the prohibition on homosexuality” (PLP, 135). As a result, “heterosexuality is cultivated through prohibitions, and these prohibitions take as one of their objects homosexual attachments, thereby forcing the loss of those attachments” (PLP, 136–37). In this sense, heterosexuality can be understood as a melancholic identity: it is based on the unresolved grief concerning the enforced rejection of homosexual attachments. Of course, according to this model, homosexual identities are also “melancholic” to the extent that they, too, are formed through identification. Yet, the difference is that heterosexuality is culturally recognized, valued, and normalized, whereas homosexuality is normatively proscribed (PLP, 147–149).

Despite Butler’s criticism of Freud’s normative presumptions, she, however, adopts his understanding of melancholic identification and uses it strategically to explain the process through which gender norms become psychically incorporated. Here, the feeling of guilt plays a crucial role. In order to fully grasp Butler’s argument, we must again turn back to Freud. In Freud’s notion of melancholia, the subject (i.e. the “ego”) that has lost a love object starts to feel anger (as a result of the feelings of rejection) toward the lost object. Since the lost object is no longer present, the feeling of anger cannot be acted out on the object but becomes instead turned against the ego itself (Freud [1917]1957, 246, 248–249). The ego starts to reproach him/herself and expects to be punished. This “turning against itself” explains, according to Freud, the heightened risk of suicide related to melancholic states (*ibid.*, 251–252). The self-beratement of the melancholic is, as it were, a circuitous revenge for the loss and alleged rejection. For Butler, this circuitous “revenge” can be understood as an incorporation of a certain kind of punitive, self-reflective moral agency:

Clearly, Freud conceptualizes the ego in the perpetual company of the ego ideal which acts as a moral agency of various kinds. The internalized losses of the ego are reestablished as part of this agency of moral scrutiny, the internalization of anger and blame originally felt for the object in the external mode. (GT, 81)

In fact, for Freud, the internalization of anger (or, aggression)—and its transformation into a sense of guilt—is the mechanism through which the ego¹¹⁹ gains conscience and the capacity to reflect on oneself morally:

¹¹⁹ In Freud’s account the ego is analytically divided into the id (which includes “drives” or “instincts”), the ego (which acts according to the “reality principle” and tries to balance between the id and the superego) and the superego (the conscience; the sense of guilt; the ego ideal) (see, e.g. Freud [1923]1989,

As a child grows up, the role of father is carried on by teachers and others in authority; their *injunctions and prohibitions remain powerful in the ego ideal and continue, in the form of conscience*, to exercise the moral censorship. The tension between the demands of conscience and the actual performances of the ego is experienced as a sense of guilt. *Social feelings rest on identifications with other people, on the basis of having the same ego ideal.* (Freud, [1923]1989, 643, my emphasis)

With regard to this, Butler notes that it is possible to understand “the peculiar phenomenon whereby homosexual desire becomes a source of guilt” in light of Freud’s notion of conscience (PLP, 140–141). Here, Butler’s understanding of the melancholic formation of the “self” comes quite close to Freud’s notion of conscience. For both, the internalization of “morals” (in Freud) and “norms” (in Butler) is a *social* process. On the basis of Freud’s notion concerning the development of guilt and conscience, Butler concludes that the “ego” is not only an outcome of the psychic process of identification, but also an effect of social power that regulates identities through gendering and heterosexualizing norms (PLP, 181). In this sense, for Butler gender identity is a psychic “trace” of that regulatory power. One of the mechanisms through which normative heterosexuality (including binary norms of “femininity” and “masculinity”) operates is thus the voice of conscience and guilt, that is, the internalized moral principle that regulates who one must love, mourn, and establish relationships with.¹²⁰

Indeed, for Butler, the production and regulation of conscience and guilt can be understood as an indirect, insidious operation of social power, whereby the subject begins to self-regulate its own actions. In other words, melancholic identification can therefore be conceived as the process through which gender norms operate (PLP, 24–25, 171). Stressing the regulative dimension of identifications, Butler links the idea of the “foreclosure” (i.e. repudiation or repression) of certain love attachments to Foucault’s notion of a regulatory ideal, “an ideal according to which certain forms of love become possible and others, impossible” (PLP, 25). She goes on, drawing on Foucault, to argue that this kind of foreclosure operates not only to repress existing desire but to “produce certain kinds of objects and to bar others from the field of social production” (PLP, 25). As a result, Butler concludes that the foreclosure of certain love objects “produce[s] a sociality afflicted by melancholia, a sociality in which loss cannot be grieved because it cannot be recognized as loss,

631–645). Butler uses the terms “ego,” “self,” and “subject” somewhat analogously in her reading of Freud.

¹²⁰ In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), Butler analyzes the internalization of moral principles and norms through which the subject emerges in terms of Adorno’s concept of “ethical violence.”

because what is lost never had any entitlement to existence” (PLP, 24). For Butler, this kind of social melancholia is thus informed by a double-denial: “I have never loved,” so “I have never lost” (PLP, 23).

Having thus argued that melancholia can be understood as the psychosocial way through which gendering and heterosexualizing norms produce and regulate the objects of love and loss, Butler further notes that this regulation is also, and significantly, informed by the culturally-specific conventions and public rituals of grief. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler illustrates this through her example of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the US in the 1980’s and 90’s. As she remarks, the psychosocial operation of the norm that prohibits homosexual desire and object choice leads to the cultural failure to acknowledge and openly grieve the deaths of homosexual people by the wider (heterosexual) public. She goes on to argue that the inability to mourn the deaths of homosexual people generates a melancholic sociality haunted by the “ungrievable” lives, lives that were already—before their actual death—marked as “socially dead” (PLP, 27, 138).¹²¹

Consequently, heterosexist melancholia produces, as it were, a double marginalization: the normative prohibition against certain love objects excludes and marginalizes homosexual people and, further, makes it difficult for them to openly grieve the loss of their love objects. Or, as David W. McIvor puts it: “The prohibition of public mourning, in effect, doubles the trauma of loss” (McIvor 2012, 416).

Given the pervasiveness of the social melancholia that results from the prohibition to mourn homosexual losses, one might wonder whether this kind of foreclosed grief can ever be worked through in any politically affirmative way. Indeed, as McIvor argues, while generally sympathetic to Butler’s account of grief and mourning as resources for ethics and politics, Butler’s reliance on Freud leads her to theorize “the subject” as necessarily “melancholic” and thus essentially entangled in its punitive origins (McIvor 2012, 410). He goes on to argue that, as a result, Butler comes to view political contestation against the normative regulation of grief as an overly limited practice: as a contestation against one’s own super-ego, that is, as “a curious (if not paradoxical) enraged nonviolence” that “seems to inevitably drift towards violence” due to the unresolved grief at the origins of the melancholic subject (McIvor 2012, 422).¹²²

¹²¹ Although Butler’s focus is on the deaths of homosexual people, she also mentions sex workers and drug users, for example (see PLP, 27).

¹²² McIvor also notes that Butler’s reading of Freud’s concept of melancholia is inadequate. As he writes, “Ultimately, Freud provides two distinct accounts of the superego. In normal development the superego prohibits the child’s libidinal advances towards the parental dyad but also helps to sublimate this libido into productive love-relationships. This ‘mild’ superego offers prohibitions alongside en-

I think McIvor is right in noting that Butler's notion of melancholia sometimes over-emphasizes the punitive aspects of regulatory power at the expense of the enabling ones. In fact, in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), Butler notes that "In *The Psychic Life of Power*, I perhaps too quickly accepted this punitive scene of inauguration for the subject" (GAO, 15). Revising her previous emphasis on prohibition and punishment, in *Giving an Account of Oneself* Butler examines, by following Foucault's later work on ethics, critical reflexivity as codes of moral *conduct* (i.e. ethical practice or action) and not primarily as codes of punishment. This allows Butler to develop her account of the incorporation of morality and norms in terms of a practice that takes a critical relation to these norms. I will return to this idea in section 4.3.

Here, it has to be noted, however, that already in *The Psychic Life of Power* Butler implies that the "melancholic" incorporation of norms produces not only forms of critical self-reflexivity (i.e. the critical and moral voice of conscience) due to internalized anger or rage, but also, crucially, modes of reflexivity that can be put in the service of a more *affirmative* political action.¹²³ This is evident especially in the context where Butler talks about queer activism:

The emergence of collective institutions for grieving are thus crucial to survival, to reassembling community, to rearticulation of kinship, to reweaving sustaining relations. Insofar as they involve the publicization and dramatization of death—as in the case of 'die-ins' by Queer Nation—they call for being read as *life-affirming* rejoinders to the dire psychic consequences of a grieving process culturally thwarted and proscribed. (PLP, 148, my emphasis)

In this passage I read Butler as hinting toward the possibility that grief can indeed be worked through. To put it differently: the "sociality afflicted by melancholia" can be contested through political action that aims, by making

ticements. However, the superego can also transform into a 'one-sided' and cruel agency of prohibition and control" (McIvor 2012, 414). On the basis of this, he notes that "Butler elides the distinction Freud draws between the normal sense of guilt and the melancholic superego" (ibid.).

¹²³ Although Butler's focus in *The Psychic Life of Power* is on the "guilty" subject, it is worth noting that she does acknowledge the possibility of affirmative—not only negative—aspect of the process of melancholic psychic incorporation when she writes, in the context of discussing Freud's notion of melancholia, that: "Here, of course, an unexplored point deserves remark: internalization does not have to take the form of mercilessly violent conscience [...]" (PLP, 195). And she continues by citing Derrida: "Indeed, Derrida insists, with the later Freud, that 'mourning is the affirmative incorporation of the Other' and that, in principle, there can be no end to mourning" (ibid.).

the deaths visible and indeed “grievable,” to restore the value of the lives lost—but also the value of the lives still living and struggling.

The activist practice and tactic called “die-in” refers to public demonstrations where people occupy a public space, often a street, a sidewalk, or a square, and lie down, simulating being dead. Protesters usually cover themselves with banners and signs, seeking to interrupt the flow of people and get their attention. The tactic has long been used in environmental, animal, and HIV/AIDS activism, and lately the strategy has also been adopted by #BlackLivesMatter protestors as well as activists in European cities (e.g. in London) who have sought to draw public attention to the migrant and refugee deaths in the Mediterranean.¹²⁴ As Butler notes in the passage above, HIV/AIDS activists used the tactic in order to politicize grief by challenging the hetero-sexist norms that sought to institute a politically debilitating silence around HIV/AIDS deaths.

Since Butler explicitly points toward the possibility of political resistance against the normalization of melancholia, I argue that her reflection on the politicization of grief in *The Psychic Life of Power* significantly prefigures her later discussion of the unrecognized losses of the so-called war on terror in *Precarious Life* (2004a) and *Frames of War* (2009), as well as her more recent considerations of grievability and the politics of the street in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015). I will come back to the question of grievability vis-à-vis the politics of the street toward the end of this chapter. Since Butler’s later work on grievability arises specifically from her critical response to US military politics after 9/11, it is necessary first to take a closer look at how the question of grief plays out in this critique.

4.2 Normative regulation of grief and the problem of grievability

As I showed in the previous section, Butler’s early reading of Freud centers on the role of melancholia with regard to the incorporation of norms (in that context, specifically gender norms), as well as on the question of how the internalization of normative prohibitions produces modes of critical reflexivity that can be put in the service of a political contestation against the normative production of “ungrievable” lives. As I have argued in Chapter 1, the question of grievability also informs Butler’s post-9/11 writings that deal with such topics as ethical responsibility, vulnerability, and the ethics of nonviolence.

¹²⁴ See, for example, a newspaper article by the *New Republic* that discusses the tactic of the “die-in” used by #BlackLivesMatter: <https://newrepublic.com/article/122513/blacklivesmatter-breathing-new-life-die>. For a newspaper article about the “die-in” demonstration against EU border politics in London, see: https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/die-in-migrant-deaths-bethell-hudson-833.

As in *The Psychic Life of Power*, in *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War* Butler similarly addresses the political implications of the social disavowal of certain losses as well as the regulation of public mourning.

At the beginning of *Precarious Life* (2004a), Butler asks, referring to the US military response (in Afghanistan and Iraq) to the losses of 9/11, “what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war” (PL, xii). In *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War* (2009) Butler sets out to answer this question as part of her critical response to the War on Terror. A pivotal aspect of Butler’s discussion of the relationship between grief and politics is her understanding of vulnerability and precariousness. As I have already discussed these questions in Chapter 3, it suffices here to note that for Butler the experience of losing somebody—an experience we all are familiar with—points to the fact that we are not only mortal but also interdependent beings, to whom death and loss are necessary dimensions of life. To the extent that loss is inevitable, the tasks of grief and mourning are also fundamental aspects of our lives. Indeed, for Butler, grief that follows a loss is not a transient emotional state but something that “exposes the constitutive sociality of the self” (UG, 19).¹²⁵ Although Butler acknowledges the devastating losses and mourning that followed 9/11, she is critical of the way these experiences were immediately put into the service of military retribution. Against this backdrop, Butler poses the following question: “Is there something to be gained from grieving, from tarrying with grief, from remaining exposed to its unbearability and not endeavoring to seek a resolution for grief through violence?” (PL, 30).

By connecting the idea of relationality and interdependency to the task of mourning, Butler challenges President George W. Bush’s statement, given only a few days after 9/11, that the US had finished the task of mourning and must now take action.¹²⁶ For the Bush administration, this meant wars first in Afghanistan and later in Iraq, as well as heightened border practices, de-

¹²⁵ Butler writes, “Despite our differences in location and history, my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a ‘we,’ for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all. [...] Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (PL, 20).

¹²⁶ President Bush stated for example that, “Tonight we are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom. Our grief has turned to anger and anger to resolution. Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done.” He also declared that, “Great harm has been done to us. We have suffered great loss. And in our grief and anger, we have found our mission and our moment. Freedom and fear are at war.” *The New York Times* has published the full speech as “A Nation Challenged: President Bush’s Address on Terrorism before a Joint Meeting of Congress,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2001, p. B: 4. The transcript of the speech can also be found online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/21/us/nation-challenged-president-bush-s-address-terrorism-before-joint-meeting.html>

tainment and torture of those suspected as terrorists, and the suspension of civil liberties under the name of the Patriotic Act. Butler interprets Bush's statement through her Freudian notion of melancholia, arguing that Bush's claim can be understood as "the narcissistic preoccupation of melancholia" that refuses grief through violent action, which attempts to restore a notion of sovereignty by denying vulnerability and interdependent global ties (PL, 30).¹²⁷ Against Bush's statement, Butler develops an understanding of grief as a critical and affirmative resource for politics and ethics, one that recognizes the mutual interdependency of our lives and resists the quick resolution of grief through violence.

However, Butler does not argue that grief or mourning themselves must be the goal of politics. Her argument is instead that "without the capacity to mourn, we lose that keener sense of life we need in order to oppose violence" (PL, xviii–xix). As she further explains, "To grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics [...] may be understood as *the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself*" (PL, 30, my emphasis). Therefore, the task of grieving can be formulated as a question of "who else suffers from permeable borders, unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear, and in what ways" (PL, xii). In this sense, grief can be turned into a practice of empathizing with the suffering of others that can bring about, as Butler hopes, "a new basis for global political community" (PL, xiii, 150). In other words, Butler sees grief as a possibility of transforming the experience of loss and violence into a rearticulation of politics that recognizes and seeks to affirm the mutual interdependency of our lives.¹²⁸

In *Frames of War* Butler develops her account of grief further by arguing that it is not only a potential resource for nonviolent politics but that it is, significantly, the *precondition* of a livable life (FW, 14, 98). Here, she attends to the way in which the feeling of grief is regulated through the normative framework of "grievability." She defines "grievability" as follows:

¹²⁷ Articulating US military politics as a way of re-establishing the idea of a sovereign subject, Butler writes: "When the United States acts, it establishes a conception of what it means to act as an American, establishes a norm by which that subject might be known. [...] its actions constitute the building of a subject that seeks to restore and maintain its mastery through the systematic destruction of its multi-lateral relations, its ties to the international community. It shores itself up, seeks to reconstitute its imagined wholeness, but only at the price of denying its own vulnerability, its dependency, its exposure, where it exploits those very features in others, thereby making those features 'other to' itself" (PL, 41).

¹²⁸ Butler theorizes the possibility of turning aggression into nonviolent political action by drawing, among others, on Melanie Klein's psychoanalytic reflections on aggression, self-preservation, and relational ties (see, for example, FW, 173–177).

[A]ccording to the future anterior [...] grievability is a condition of a life's emergence and sustenance. The future anterior, "a life has been lived," is presupposed at the beginning of a life that has only begun to be lived. In other words, "this will be a life that will have been lived" is the presupposition of a grievable life, which means that this will be a life that can be regarded as a life, and be sustained by that regard. Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life. Instead, "there is a life that will never have been lived," sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost. The apprehension of grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of precarious life. (FW, 15)

For Butler, "grievability" is not only something that marks the value of life, it also refers to the normative differentiation between "grievable" and "ungrievable" lives. Like "livability" (see my Chapter 3), "grievability" is also, according to Butler, differentially distributed across populations. Butler's discussion of the "differential allocation of grief" (PL, 37) is centered, as in *The Psychic Life of Power*, on the problematic of public mourning: only certain lives are openly grieved, whereas others are not. For her, the regulation of the practices and rituals of public mourning has to do with the question of who can appear in the public sphere; whose lives are recognized as lives, and whose deaths are counted as deaths. To put it differently: the practices of public mourning reflect the norms that govern the recognizability of precarious lives.

In *Precarious Life*, Butler addresses the problematic of public mourning through her analysis of obituary writing (especially in the context of 9/11 and its aftermath), which she understands as an act of nation-building (PL, 34). As she notes, the fact that American newspapers do not publish obituaries of those the US has killed implies that there is a "hierarchy of grief" (PL, 32). Indeed, as Butler argues, "the obituary functions as the instrument by which grievability is publicly distributed," adding that it operates in this way normatively as "the means by which a life becomes, or fails to become, a publicly grievable life, an icon for national self-recognition [...]" (PL, 34). Butler also comments on the way in which, for example, normative heterosexuality and racism function in the obituaries. The obituaries written for the victims of 9/11 excluded certain queer people and undocumented immigrants and thus produced representations of who can belong to "the idea of national identity" and who cannot (PL, 35; FW, 38).

The same logic operated, as Butler notes, in the way the *San Francisco Chronicle* refused to publish obituaries for two Palestinian families who had been killed by Israeli soldiers. The newspaper explained the rejection by saying that they did not want to "offend" anyone. Immediate question arises, what is "offensive" in the recognition of these losses, and for whom is the

recognition “offensive”? Indeed, as Butler notes, the newspaper’s refusal seemed to be “mandated through an identification” not with the victims of military violence but “with those who identify with the perpetrators of that violence” (PL, 36).

For Butler, the genre of obituary writing in these instances can be understood as a normative mechanism of dehumanization that forecloses certain deaths from the public sphere. Since the lives of these people had never been recognized as valuable—and indeed grievable—in the first place, their deaths too remain unmarked and thus ungrievable. This is to say that “the prohibition on certain forms of public grieving itself constitutes the public sphere on the basis of such prohibition” (PL, 37). As a result, Butler argues that the public sphere becomes constituted as “a generalized melancholia” (PL, 37), that is, as a disavowed mourning that can be understood as the hidden “continuation of the violence itself” against the “ungrievable” (PL, 148).¹²⁹

As she notes, the “normative schemes” that contribute to the generalized melancholia “work precisely through providing no image, no name, no narrative, so that there never was a life, and there never was a death” (PL, 146). Here, we could also think of the deaths in the Mediterranean Sea. As Iosif Kovras and Simon Robins have noted, the exact figures of the migrant and refugee deaths in the Mediterranean are unavailable, since the European Union has declined to quantify the deaths (Kovras & Robins 2016, 40).¹³⁰ The EU’s unwillingness to register the deaths has direct ethical and political consequences for the politics of mourning. As Kovras and Robins write:

Although official policies include DNA testing, limited efforts are made to identify individual bodies and bury them in a dignified way, thereby depriving families of the capacity to mourn or bury loved ones. The result is that the bodies of the dead are literally lost in a fog of bureaucratic ambiguity, unmourned and uncounted. This highlights

¹²⁹ In *Frames of War*, Butler discusses public mourning in terms of the normative regulation of affective responses following the work of Talal Asad (2007). For an analysis of Butler’s deployment of Asad’s theorization, see Schippers (2015, 104–105).

¹³⁰ Whereas officially recorded deaths at the EU border in the period 1990–2014 was 3,188 persons (Last & Spijkerboer, 2014), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that between 2000 and 2014 the total number of deaths at the EU borders was 22,400 (Brian & Laczko, 2014). In 2015, Professor Thomas Spijkerboer (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) and his research team (“The Human Costs of Border Control”) urged the European Parliament to establish a centralized “European Migrant Death Observatory” by using the data collected and digitalized by the research team. However, according to an interview with Spijkerboer conducted by “Investigate Europe” (an investigative cross-border journalist network) in February 2017, the research group had not yet received an answer. <http://www.investigate-europe.eu/en/the-uncounted-invisible-deaths-on-europes-borders/> (accessed 5th February, 2017).

the transnational affective impact of death at the border: death creates a new border as a direct result of the presence of the physical frontier, which separates families from their relatives and even from news of dead loved ones. (Kovras & Robins 2016, 48)

Indeed, not only the unavailability of information, such as the names, of the dead makes the mourning processes of the families of missing persons more difficult. But, following Butler, it could be said that it also establishes the EU border as a melancholic frontier that produces certain populations as “ungrievable”—even before their literal death.

For Butler, as Birgit Schippers notes, Butler’s discussion of grievability and precariousness is “underpinned by her profound commitment to ethics, and by an explicit shift to normative theorizing” that is evident, for instance, in Butler’s argument regarding the obligation to sustain our relations to others (Schippers 2014, 43). Schippers remarks that Butler’s vocabulary of ‘ought’ and ‘should’ also indicates the normative aspirations related to her more recent work (ibid.). Most clearly, Butler’s commitment to certain normative principles is visible in her appeal to the equal value of precarious lives, a topic I explored in Chapter 3 in relation to precarity, nonviolence, and nonhuman animals. In a similar way, Butler articulates grievability in terms of equality. In *Frames of War*, Butler writes that:

This work seeks to reorient politics on the Left toward a consideration of precarity as an existing and promising site for coalitional exchange. For populations to become grievable does not require that we come to know the singularity of every person who is at risk or who has, indeed, already been risked. Rather, it means that policy needs to understand precariousness as a shared condition, and precarity as the politically induced condition that would deny equal exposure through the radically unequal distribution of wealth and the differential ways of exposing certain populations, racially and nationally conceptualized, to greater violence. The recognition of shared precariousness introduces *strong normative commitments of equality* and invites a more robust universalizing of rights that seeks to address basic human needs for food, shelter, and other conditions for persisting and flourishing. (FW, 29, my emphasis)¹³¹

¹³¹ It should be noted, however, that although Butler explicitly relies on “certain liberal principles [...] including equality and universality,” she rejects the liberal-individualistic framework that presupposes “an ontology of discrete identity,” since it “cannot yield the kinds of analytic vocabularies we need for thinking about global interdependency and the interlocking networks of power and position in contemporary life” (FW, 31).

However, this raises the question of what should be done in order to interrupt and *resist* the “necropolitical” production of “ungrievable” deaths? According to Bonnie Honig, it is precisely the notion of political contestation and action that is lacking in Butler’s account of grievability.¹³² In her critique, Honig compares Butler’s notion of the shared vulnerability of our bodies to Hannah Arendt’s concepts of labor and work.¹³³ Here, Honig refers to Butler’s notion of vulnerability understood as a range of possibilities “that include the eradication of our being at the one end, and the physical support for our lives at the other” (PL, 31). As Honig notes:

Notably the two end points of Butler’s range of human commonality map onto Hannah Arendt’s labor (in which we are governed by the time of mortality and risk eradication) and work (in which we insulate ourselves from the time of mortality by fabricating physical supports of life that outlast a human life). (Honig 2013, 43)

The problem for Honig is, however, that Butler seems to replace sovereignty (i.e. the way in which for example the US replaced mourning with a violent re-establishment of sovereign power after 9/11) with “lamentation” through which Butler seeks, according to Honig, to theorize a new kind of “mortalist humanism” (Honig 2013, 43; see also Honig 2010, 26–27). Honig claims that Butler’s otherwise Arendtian notion of mortality misses the third aspect of “the human condition,” that is, “Arendtian action, a collective non- or quasi-sovereign endeavor whose principle is natality” (Honig 2013, 43). Honig explains that “Arendtian action is of interest here because it points beyond the sorts of sovereignty whose violence Butler worries about, but also beyond the grievability with which [Butler] replaces them” (ibid.).

Here, I am not interested that much in whether Butler’s notion of vulnerability is Arendtian or not, but rather in Honig’s argument that Butler replaces politics (i.e. political action and contestation) with her “humanist politics of grievable life” (Honig 2013, 50). Indeed, another element of Honig’s argument is that by focusing on the question of grievability in her recent work, Butler performs a “turn to ethics,” which Honig sees as a turn *away* from politics. Honig claims that Butler’s “universalist ethics of lamentation in which the focus is on suffering” ignores the question of collective political action, since it replaces the task of political contestation with the idea of equal grievability (Honig 2013, 42, 45, 64). Honig insists that Butler’s manner of theorizing grief “does little for our shared democratic futures” but, on the contrary, “may even feed a certain left melancholy” (Honig 2013, 55). This

¹³² Honig’s broader framework of critique relates to Butler’s interpretation of Sophocles’ *Antigone* in *Butler’s Antigone’s Claim* (2000).

¹³³ I will explicate these concepts in section 4.4 as part of my analysis concerning Butler’s critique of Arendt’s notion of action.

argument has also been recently made by McIvor, who maintains that to the extent that Butler theorizes precariousness and grievability “at the level of abstract, universal humanism” (McIvor 2012, 430), she neglects the concrete practices of politics “within the discursive space of the polis” and thus ends up “endlessly” reiterating “the scene of melancholic subjugation” (ibid., 410).

Given that Butler often discusses grievability in the context of her theorization of shared vulnerability and precariousness, it is easy to see why critics have interpreted Butler’s account of grief in terms of an abstract, existentialist or universalist ethics. However, another line of interpretation has emphasized that when Butler’s account of grievability is brought to the context of her discussion of “critique,” her ethico-political notion of (critical) action in the context of precarity becomes visible. Fiona Jenkins, for example, has stressed that in order to fully understand Butler’s notion of political contestation that lies, she argues, at the heart of her theorization of grief and mourning, her account of grievability must be read through her Foucauldian notion of “critique” (Jenkins 2015, 130).

According to Jenkins, Butler’s notion of grievability does not point to the abstract conception of the universal ethics of grieving (as Honig and others have argued), but actually to the possibility to *disrupt* through political action and contestation the nationalist frameworks through which the regulation of the public remembrance of death often takes place (Jenkins 2015, 121; see also Lloyd 2015, 178–180). In this sense, Butler’s account of grievability could be read as a critique of “the nationalism of grieving,” and, more generally, as a questioning of (especially US’s and Israel’s) nationalism and the nation-state (Jenkins 2015, 121; see also, for example, FW, 26–28).¹³⁴

Following Jenkins, I argue that the problem of grievability is intertwined with questions of political action and contestation in Butler’s work. However, I contend that by reading Butler’s theorization of grievability through her discussion of “critique” it becomes possible to view her “ethics of grievability” in terms of her larger theoretical project, that is, her account of the twofold notion of norms. This reading, I argue, has important implications for the way we come to view Butler’s notion of political resistance. In the next two sections, I will elaborate further on these questions.

¹³⁴ For more on the critique of US nationalism, see Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s jointly published *Who Sings the Nation-State?* (2007). Given that Butler’s book *Parting Ways: A Critique of Zionism* (2012) puts forward a critical analysis of Israel’s nationalism, military violence, and occupation on Palestinian land, it, too, can be considered a critique of nationalism. In the introduction to the book, Butler also characterizes her effort to theorize ethics beyond the assumption of “sovereignty” in terms of a critique of nationalism (see, for example, PW, 9).

4.3 Critique of norms as a practice of resistance

What Honig and other critics overlook is that Butler concludes both *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War* (books that explicitly deal with the question of grief) by addressing the role of critique in relation to the possibility of resistance. At the end of *Precarious Life* Butler returns, while discussing the civil victims of the US war in Afghanistan, to the problem of what is the relationship between violence and the prohibition against the public grieving of “ungrievable” deaths. Butler asks, “How does the prohibition on grieving emerge as a *circumscription of representability*, so that our national melancholia becomes tightly fitted into *the frame for what can be said, what can be shown?*” (PL, 148, my emphasis). “Is this not,” she continues, “the site where we can read [...] the way that melancholia becomes inscribed as *the limits of what can be thought?*” (ibid., my emphasis). Indeed, it is precisely the normative limits of representability (i.e. the question of whose lives count as grievable and whose not) and of “what can be thought” that Butler seeks to challenge with her account of grievability. I argue that it is for this reason that Butler brings up the idea of “critique” at the end of these books. In order to expose these normative limits, the task is, as Butler puts it,

to reinvigorate *the intellectual projects of critique, of questioning*, of coming to understand the difficulties and demands of cultural translation and dissent, and to create a sense of the public in which oppositional voices are [...] valued for the instigation to a sensate democracy they occasionally perform. (PL, 151, my emphasis)

In the same manner, Butler ends *Frames of War* by calling for “a critical intervention” into the norms that operate by making it difficult to “stay responsive to the equal claim of the other for shelter, for conditions of livability and grievability” (FW, 184; see also Jenkins 2015, 130). This kind of critique, Butler maintains, can help us “to break with the closed circle of reflexivity” (FW, 184) that “produces a permanent ground for legitimating (and disavowing) [...] violent actions” (FW, 179). Here, Butler notes that this kind of critical intervention that refuses violent retribution (that she associates with the US military response to 9/11) can be conceived of “as a mode of resistance, especially when it refuses and breaks the frames by which war is wrought time and again” (FW, 184). Here, “the frames” of war refer especially to those norms and normative frameworks (i.e. ethnic and racist frames, see Chapter 1 in this dissertation) that distinguish between “grievable” and “ungrievable” populations and establish prohibition against the public acknowledgement of certain deaths.

I interpret Butler’s turn to the concept of “critique” as an attempt to *interrupt* the national melancholia (or, more broadly formulated: the normative schemes of recognizability) through which the violence against those who are

already regarded as ungrievable becomes legitimized time and again. The task of critique emerges here as a mode of resistance against violence and, importantly, as a way of questioning the normative differentiation between grievable and ungrievable lives. In this sense, critique opens up the possibility to apprehend the “radically egalitarian character of grievability” (FW, 183). I will come back to the question of the relationship between grievability and resistance in the next section. But for now, it is necessary first to explicate Butler’s notion of critique, since it is, I argue, crucially related to her notion of (nonviolent) resistance, as already pointed out in Chapter 1, in the context of Butler’s reading of Monique Wittig. Indeed, as I suggested there, Butler’s notion of critique can be understood as a feminist practice of nonviolence. In order to emphasize Butler’s notion of critique as a form of resistance, I turn now to Butler’s reading of Foucault.

Butler provides her most extensive elaboration on critique in her articles “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue” (2002) and “Critique, Dissent, Disciplinary” (2009)¹³⁵ as well as especially in those parts of *Giving an Account of Oneself* where she addresses Foucault’s later work on ethics. In “What is Critique?” Butler discusses Foucault’s ethics by focusing on his formulation of critique as virtue.¹³⁶ Notably, in her reading, Butler is specifically interested in the question of “the place of ethics within politics” (“WIC,” 215). As Butler remarks, critique for Foucault is “a certain mode of questioning” and a “practice in which we pose the question of the limits of our most sure ways of knowing” (“WIC,” 213, 215). Butler notes that this kind of questioning is a social practice: a practice of a subject, or a quality that describes a certain kind of practice or action. Ethics defined in this way, as “the practice of critique,” differs from those formulations of ethics that seek to offer objectively defined commands, imperatives, norms, rules, or laws. As Butler emphasizes, ethics as critique “is, more radically, a *critical relation to those norms*” (“WIC,” 215, my emphasis). In other words, the practice of critique can be conceived of as “a non-prescriptive form of moral inquiry” (“WIC,” 216) that inquires not only into “the conditions by which the object field is constituted, but also [into] *the limits of those conditions*, the moments where they point up their contingency and their transformability” (“WIC,” 222, my emphasis).

To the question of what motivates this kind of critical questioning Butler answers that:

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

¹³⁵ This text partly builds on Butler’s previous text “Academic Norms, Contemporary Challenges: A Reply to Robert Post on Academic Freedom” (2006c).

¹³⁶ Butler has named her article after Foucault’s lecture “What is Critique?” ([1984]2002).

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 [...]. (“WIC,” 215, my emphasis)

Following in the footsteps of Foucault, Butler stresses in “Critique, Dissent, Disciplinarity” (2009) that critique does not emerge from our inherent capacity to reason as humans (as, for example, Kant would have it with his notion of “practical reason”) but from “a specific historical reality and demand” and against a particular form of governmental authority (“CDD,” 788, 791). In other words, critique as a social practice can only take place in relation to—or as a response to—certain changing historical conditions and practices that seek to limit the domains of the “speakable” and “thinkable” (“CDD,” 777). And, I would add, the domains of the “livable” and “grievable.” Therefore, the practice of critical questioning cannot be articulated as “how to be radically ungovernable” but, rather, “how not to be governed” in relation to specific forms of governmental authorities or norms (“WIC,” 219). As she goes on to argue:

[critique] follows, rather, from a distinct and largely contingent historical accumulation and formation of conventions that produce subjects who, in turn, open up a set of possibilities within that historical horizon or, rather, by virtue of it. The norms that establish the modes of intelligibility and recognizability for a subject are themselves queried, called into question, and so the very social basis for the intelligibility of the subject is risked at the moment in which such historical norms are interrogated. (“CDD,” 788)

Yet, the subject who engages in “risky” (cf. Foucault’s concepts of “courage” and *parrhesia*) critical practice is not external to the norms that she criticizes and, in this sense, the practice of critique is immanent to the field of its application, that is, to the field of norms.¹³⁷ In other words, the element of “risk” implies the possibility that a subject who engages in the practice of critique (i.e. takes a critical relation to norms) might become unintelligible within the particular frameworks of recognizability and/or normative practices that the subject puts in question. This is evident for instance in cases when one problematizes certain “truths” that are taken to be self-evident, such as when animal activists are ridiculed for their concern for nonhuman animals. Or, when anti-racist activists are mocked for promoting political correctness over free speech.

¹³⁷ As Butler writes, “Only with reference to this prevailing ontological horizon, itself instituted through a set of practices, will we be able to understand the kinds of relations to moral precepts that have been formed as well as those yet to be formed” (“WIC,” 216).

On the other hand, Butler emphasizes that the subject who undertakes the practice of critique is not only formed by norms and networks of power-knowledge but that the subject also becomes, through the very process of formation, self-forming (“WIC,” 225). For Foucault, as Butler interprets him, the process of self-forming within the politics of “truth”—or, as Butler puts it, within “the politics of norms”—is exactly the practice that makes it possible for the subject to take *a critical distance* from authorities and norms (“WIC,” 226). Here one can see echoes from Butler’s earlier notion of critical reflexivity that she developed, as I showed in section 4.1, in the context of her reading of Freud and melancholic incorporations. However, I suggest that in her reading of Foucault’s notion of critique Butler rethinks her previous Freudian notion of the prohibitive origins of subject formation (i.e. critical self-reflectivity) through a Foucauldian understanding of critical action as an *inventive* and disruptive aspect of our constitutive relation to norms.

As Butler points out in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, for Foucault the ethical subject that is engendered by different moral injunctions is not “a self-berating psychic agency,” like the one in Freud, but “inventive” to the extent that it “compels the act of self-making” that takes place “in relation to an imposed set of norms” (GAO, 18). In this sense, the practice of critique can be understood in terms of a reworking of the norms and social conventions of one’s formation and thus “we might [...] participate in the remaking of social conditions” (GAO, 134–135). To highlight the aspect of inventive self-formation, Butler distinguishes in “Critique, Dissent, Disciplinarity” two interrelated dimensions in Foucault’s notion of critique: i) critique as a form of disobedience understood “as a way of refusing subordination to an established authority” and ii) “an obligation to produce or elaborate a self” (“CDD,” 787). Taken together, these aspects refer to the possibility of “invention” in the scene of subjectivating norms (i.e. the framework of recognizability), a possibility that can be conceived of as a practice of resistance against authorities and, hence, a practice of freedom (“WIC,” 217–219; see also GAO, 19 and UG, 31).¹³⁸ However, this kind of conception of resistance should not be interpreted as a radical anarchism or original freedom but as a provisional

¹³⁸ As Jakub Franěk has noted, “freedom,” for Foucault, can be conceived of as “consist[ing] of an active engagement in power relations” (Franěk, 2014, 303). Butler also understands Foucault’s notion of freedom as this kind of immanent practice. She writes, “But perhaps what [Foucault] is offering us by way of ‘critique’ is an act, even a practice of freedom, which cannot reduce to voluntarism in any easy way. For the practice by which the limits to absolute authority are set is one that is fundamentally dependent on the horizon of knowledge effects within which it operates. The critical practice does not well up from the innate freedom of the soul, but is formed instead in the crucible of a particular exchange between a set of rules or precepts (which are already there) and a stylization of acts (which extends and reformulates that prior set of rules and precepts). This stylization of the self in relation to the rules comes to count as a ‘practice’” (“WIC,” 11). For an extensive analysis of Foucault’s notion of freedom, see Oksala (2005).

or tactical practice—as a “provisional anarchism”¹³⁹—that takes a critical relation to existing authorities, norms, or codes of moral conduct (“CDD,” 791).

In sum, the aim of critique in Foucault, and I would argue in Butler as well, is thus not to offer moral evaluations or judgments whether certain objects, such as social conditions, institutions, practices, forms of knowledge, or discourses, are good or bad or even right or wrong, but rather to expose and problematize the very frameworks of evaluation and judgment itself (“WIC,” 214). Here, critique has “a double task”: on the one hand, it exposes the normative frameworks through which the intelligibility—or, in Butler’s terms, recognizability—is constituted (“WIC,” 222). This happens for instance by asking “What is the relation of knowledge to power such that our epistemological certainties turn out to support a way of structuring the world that forecloses alternative possibilities of ordering?” (“WIC,” 214). But, on the other hand, the task is to track the breaking points and discontinuities of the framework, locating “the sites where it fails to constitute the intelligibility for which it stands” (“WIC,” 222). In other words, the task of critique as an ethical practice is to enact “the possibility of *thinking otherwise*” beyond the norms that govern “the thinkable” (“WIC,” 214, my emphasis).

I contend that it is just this kind of ethical questioning that Butler engages in at the end of her essay “What is Critique?” when she poses the following set of familiar questions: “who will be a subject” and “what will count as a life” (“WIC,” 226). Or, indeed, when she asks in *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War* “whose lives are grievable and whose are not”? (FW, 74; see also PL, 146). In other words, by posing these questions Butler’s ethical task is to broach the normative limits of “thinkable” and “speakable” and expose and disrupt the norms that separate “recognizable” from “unrecognizable” lives. To put it differently, and in contrast to Honig’s reading, to pose these kinds of questions is to practice ethics *within* politics.

However, in “Critique, Dissent, Disciplinarity” Butler also takes issue with Foucault’s notion of “self-formation” and “self-invention,” arguing that these concepts put too much emphasis on an individual subject, and thus on an “ontology of individualism” as a result of which Foucault disregards the question of the social conditions of subjectivity and critical agency (“CDD,” 789:

¹³⁹ In a recent interview, Butler also calls herself a “provisional anarchist”: “So anarchism in the sense that interests me has to do with contesting the ‘legal’ dimensions of state power, and posing disturbing challenges about state legitimacy. The point is not to achieve anarchism as a state or as a final form for the political organization of society. It is a disorganizing effect which takes power, exercises power, under conditions where state violence and legal violence are profoundly interconnected. In this sense, it always has an object, and a provisional condition, but it is not a way of life or an ‘end’ in itself” (Butler in Heckert, 2010, 94).

n12; see also Schippers 2014, 134).¹⁴⁰ Here, Butler's critique is directed against Foucault's discussion of Baudelaire's reflections on European modernity and the aesthetics of dandyism (i.e. the "flâneur") in "What is Enlightenment?" In Butler's view, Foucault puts too much emphasis on an analysis of the Baudelairean "self-crafting" subject and, therefore, overlooks his "idea of *the crowd* as a way to rethink the sociality of the subject and the problem of agency" ("CDD," 789: n12, my emphasis). Critically reworking Foucault's notion of "self-invention," Butler thus asks: "Can we imagine that the operation of critique emerges neither from a radically unconditioned freedom nor from a radical act of individual will, but *from a kind of jostling that happens in the midst of social life* [...]" (ibid., my emphasis).

I argue that the idea of a crowd, or more precisely *an assembly*, is crucial to understand the dimension of contestation that Butler attaches to her notion of critique. Therefore, and in order to fully understand the ethico-political implications of Butler's account of grievability, I want now to further elaborate Butler's notion of critique by contextualizing it through her recent essay "Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?" ([2012]2015).¹⁴¹ This reading strategy, I suggest, brings into relief Butler's conception of critique as a form of political action and resistance.

4.4 When the ungrievable amass: the ethical dilemma of the good life and the politics of the street

In "Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?" Butler offers a follow-up to Theodor Adorno's famous claim according to which "Wrong life cannot be lived rightly"¹⁴² (NPTA, 193; see also Adorno, 1974, 39). For Adorno, this statement referred to the dilemma of posing the ethical question of how could one pursue a good life for oneself in the midst of systemic forms of inequality and exploitation.¹⁴³ Reformulating Adorno's claim as a question—"Can one lead a good life in a bad life?"—Butler seeks to mobilize Adorno's query in our present time (NPTA, 196).

¹⁴⁰ Interestingly, in *Dispossession* (2013), Butler asserts that "I think Foucault makes clear that the crafting of the self takes place within a normative horizon [...]" (DPP, 67).

¹⁴¹ The essay is based on Butler's Adorno Prize Lecture delivered in Frankfurt in 2012 and was first published in *Radical Philosophy* 176 (November / December 2012). In this chapter I refer to the essay as it was published (with only very minor changes) in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015). By this choice I want to emphasize the broader context of Butler's theorizing, which is, in my view, her radical democratic notion of resistance and political action.

¹⁴² "Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen" (Adorno 1951, 43). *Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschäftigten Leben*. Suhrkamp, Berlin/Frankfurt am Main.

¹⁴³ Adorno wrote the book between 1944 and 1949 while living in America in exile from Nazi Germany.

Following Adorno, who wrestled with the tension between individual moral conduct and the broader relations of social power and domination, Butler notes that the classic moral philosophical questions of “how best to live” or “how ought I to act” cannot be asked in isolation from larger networks of social power. Butler argues that by posing the question of “how best to live” one is already negotiating the norms that regulate not only our understandings of “what is good, but also what is living, and what is life” (NPTA, 195). Since the question of the good life can only be asked by invoking certain ideas of “goodness,” “value,” and of “life,” Butler holds that we already have—by posing the question—arrived at the framework of biopolitics.¹⁴⁴ She writes:

The most individual question of morality—how do I live this life that is mine?—is bound up with biopolitical questions distilled in forms such as these: Whose lives matter? Whose lives do not matter as lives, are not recognizable as living, or count only ambiguously as alive? (NPTA, 196)

Significantly, Butler adds that in order to understand the intertwinement of individual morality to the broader frameworks of “livability” (see Chapter 3 of this study), we need to turn to the question of grievability. As she maintains, “The biopolitical management of the ungrievable proves crucial to approaching the question, how do I lead this life?” (NPTA, 196–197).¹⁴⁵ This is because the question concerning “how best to live” already presupposes that “*there are lives* to be led,” that the life of the “I” who asks the question is recognized as a grievable life, one that is mourned when lost and, therefore, also maintained and safeguarded so as to prevent its premature death (NPTA, 198, emphasis in original). In other words, the possibility of posing the question “how best to live” already presumes that one’s life is recognized as a life to begin with. But given that certain lives are excluded from grievable lives, the question itself is entangled in the very norms that contribute to the heightened mortality of certain populations.

Referring to the work of Ruth Gilmore, Butler argues that the differential exposure to early mortality that “currently characterizes the lives of subjugated peoples and the precarious” is often informed by systematic forms of racism and calculated abandonment (NPTA, 48; see also Gilmore 2007, 28). Following Achille Mbembe, Butler calls this form of power “necropolitics” in order to emphasize how the normative production of “the ungrievable” does not

¹⁴⁴ Here, Butler defines biopolitics, following Foucault, as “those powers that organize life, even the powers that differentially dispose lives to precarity as part of a broader management of populations through governmental and nongovernmental means, and that establish a set of measures for *the differential valuation of life itself*” (NPTA, 196, my emphasis).

¹⁴⁵ In her lecture “Grievability and Resistance” Butler called the biopolitical management of grievability “the demographic of grievability” (see footnote 116 in this chapter).

only take place through the maintenance of those considered “livable” but also through the creation of the “socially dead” prior to their actual destruction (NPTA, 12, 197; see also Mbembe 2003, 40).¹⁴⁶ In other words, “mortality” in Butler’s vocabulary not only refers to the fundamental aspect of our shared bodily existence (i.e. vulnerability or precariousness) as for example Honig claims, but, more importantly, to the ways in which norms operate by making certain, such as racialized, populations ungrievable and thus more susceptible to the forms of precarity and premature death than others.

Since the “first-person modality of ethical questioning” is always disrupted by the larger operations of power that differentiate between grievable and ungrievable lives, the question of “how best to live” is, for Butler, necessarily a political problem. It is for this reason that Butler argues that the question of “how best to live” is “bound up with a living practice of critique” (NPTA, 200). As she writes:

So though I must and do ask, how shall I live a good life? and this aspiration is an important one. I have to think carefully about this life that is mine, that is also a broader social life that is connected with other living beings in ways that engage me in a critical relation to the discursive orders of life and value in which I live or, rather, in which I endeavor to live. *What gives them their authority? And is that authority legitimate?* Since my own life is at stake in such an inquiry, the critique of the biopolitical order is a living issue for me, and as much as the potential for living a good life is at stake, so too is the struggle to live and *the struggle to live within a just world*. (NPTA, 200, my emphasis)

Posing these Foucauldian questions, Butler thus urges us to pay attention to the normative presumptions grounding the question of “the good life,” since the question itself can operate as a normative ideal and a norm that effaces the differential distribution of livability and grievability—or, indeed, prema-

¹⁴⁶ Stressing the necropolitical elements of biopolitics, Butler also deploys in her theorization of precarity Orlando Patterson’s concept of “social death” by which Patterson (1982) refers to the condition of institutionalized marginality in his study on slavery. Acknowledging the differences between contemporary conditions of precarity (here Butler mentions for example “the institutionalization of neoliberal rationalities”) and the condition of slavery, Butler notes that it is important to differentiate between different modalities of social death. Yet, she defends her concept of precarity and argues that “the term ‘precarity’ can distinguish between modes of ‘unlivability’: those who, for instance, belong to imprisonment without recourse to due process; those who characterize living in war zones or under occupation, exposed to violence and destruction without recourse to safety or exit; those who undergo forced emigration and live in liminal zones, waiting for borders to open, food to arrive, and the prospect of living with documentation; those who mark the condition of being part of a dispensable workforce [...]” (NPTA, 201).

ture death—across populations. Here, one can, for example, consider those who currently struggle to survive under conditions of politically and economically induced precarity, such as migrants and refugees who attempt to cross the Mediterranean in order to live a more livable life but who in growing numbers are left to die at sea. As Butler points out, the question of “how best to live” can work as a cruel “moral imperative” for those who actually live the modality of being ungrivable, “who live in a daily way within a collapsed temporal horizon, suffering a sense of damaged future in the stomach and in the bones” (NPTA, 201). She continues, “How can one ask” in these conditions “how best to lead a life [...]?” Recalling that Butler’s theorization of livability is based on the idea of the equal value of precarious lives, the moral question concerning “how best to live” should thus be understood in light of this normative commitment.

Discussing Butler’s ethical notion of grievability, Drew Walker argues that “although Butler’s insistence on the grievability of all lives as an ethical ideal for politics seems to difficult to dispute” Butler, in his view, fails to consider “the ways that her ‘dehumanized’ others do in fact appear in the public realm, and the possibility that this analysis itself devalues the struggle of those whose lives are read as derealised and spectral” (Walker 2015, 145). While it is true that in *Precarious Life*, for example, Butler often describes those populations that are rendered as “socially dead” and “ungrivable” as only “spectrally” marking the limit of the (melancholic) public sphere, in her reading of Adorno it becomes clear that this is only one dimension of her argument regarding grievability. I argue that another dimension is the struggle of the “ungrivable.” Indeed, Butler states that “the question of the biopolitical management of grievability” becomes most urgent for those who actively live the condition of ungrivability (NPTA, 196–197).

Here, Butler performs an interesting shift of perspective. While she has previously focused mainly on the normative differentiation between grievable and ungrivable lives from the perspective of the normative regulation of public grief, she now also underscores the viewpoint of “the ungrivable” who actively live, sense, and experience the condition of being ungrivable at the present moment (NPTA, 197).¹⁴⁷ This change of perspective, I think, allows Butler to place a stronger emphasis on the ways in which those who have been excluded from the normative frameworks of grievability nonetheless *resist* contemporary operations of power.

Worth noting here is that the original version of the essay “Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?” that was published as her “Adorno Prize Lecture” is divided into two sections: the first is entitled “Biopolitics: the ungrivable”

¹⁴⁷ Butler writes, “If it turns out that I have no certainty that I will have food or shelter, or that no social network or institution would catch me if I fall, then I come to belong to the ungrivable” (NPTA, 197).

and the second “Resistance” (see Butler 2012, 10, 16). Given that Adorno resolved the dilemma concerning the good life by arguing that the moral question needs to be rearticulated as a task of resistance against the “bad life” (see, for example Adorno 2002, 167–168), Butler’s choice of dividing her essay into the topics of grievability and resistance seems to mirror Adorno’s reasoning.¹⁴⁸ Similarly as Adorno, and out of the insight that one’s “own” life is connected to and made possible by the broader conditions of life that regulate grievability, Butler reasons that one “must become critical” of the unequal conditions of life and struggle against them, indeed, as I quoted earlier, “struggle to live within a just world” (NPTA, 199–200).

However, although Butler seems to partly accept Adorno’s conclusion that the pursuit of the good life in a bad life (i.e. for Butler: the biopolitical and normative management of the ungrievable) must lead to the practices of critique and resistance, she ultimately rejects Adorno’s definition of resistance. For Adorno, the motivation and resources for resistance seems to be generated through the social critique by “the most progressive minds” (NPTA, 215–216; see also Adorno 2002, 167–168). As Butler remarks, “it seems that Adorno appoints himself to the elect group of those who are progressive and capable enough to conduct critical activity that must be pursued” (NPTA, 216). Contra Adorno’s narrow understanding of resistance, Butler defends a notion of “popular resistance,” which she conceives as “*forms of critique that take shape as bodies amass on the street* to articulate their opposition to contemporary regimes of power” (NPTA, 216, my emphasis). Interestingly, to highlight resistance as a “popular resistance” Butler turns in the end of the essay to Arendt’s conception of action.

Whereas Honig claims, as I showed in the section 4.3, that Butler completely neglects Arendt’s notion of political action, other scholars have observed, paradoxically, *similarities* between them. For example, Elene Loizidou has pointed out that despite the differences in their theoretical approaches “we can even trace Butler’s understanding of the political in terms of resistance in Arendt’s thought” (Loizidou 2007, 131). Although I agree that Butler partly relies on Arendt’s notion of resistance, in order to better fathom out this reliance I argue that we also have to pay attention to the fact that Butler actually problematizes certain key elements of Arendtian conception of political action. Indeed, throughout her work, Butler has contested what she sees as a problematic division between the public and the private spheres in Arendt’s notion of action (see, for example, AC, 81–82; PW, 174; NPTA, 44, 206–207; Butler 2016, 14).

¹⁴⁸ As Butler notes, Adorno’s query about “how to pursue the good life in a bad life culminates in the claim that there must be resistance to the bad life in order to pursue the good life” (NPTA, 215).

In *The Human Condition* ([1958]1998), in the context of her discussion of the Greek *polis*, Arendt distinguishes the public sphere (the *polis*) from the private sphere and defines it as the political sphere, that is, “the realm of speech and action” and “the realm free of necessity” (Arendt [1958]1998, 27–32). Whereas the political sphere, for her, can be identified in terms of freedom and equality, the private sphere (the sphere of household and family, or “the social sphere”) refers to the realm of necessity and survival, since its primary function is to reproduce and maintain life by satisfying bodily needs for food and sleep for example (ibid., 28). Along these lines of necessity and freedom, Arendt differentiates three categories that describe “the general condition of human existence”: labor, work, and action (ibid., 8, 73). While labor refers both to individual survival and to the survival of the human species, work designates the activity through which humans create material products and artifacts (ibid., 8). For Arendt, these activities belong to the private sphere and, though encompassing the crucial dimensions of being human, cannot be understood as properly political.

In contrast to labor and work, only action can realize the human potentiality for freedom and independency, which is activated by coming together and speaking together (i.e. “acting in concert”) within the public “space of appearances” (ibid., 13, 178, 198). Arendt illustrates her notion of action through her concept of “natality,” which characterizes political action as a practice of freedom that, just like the act of being born, creates something new into the world (ibid., 9). Further, action is in this sense also “plural,” for every actor—though belonging to the same species—is a unique person and brings this uniqueness into the sphere of political participation (ibid., 7–8). For Arendt, political action is thus something that differentiates human lives (*bios politikos*) from other animals (*zoë*) (Arendt 1978, 20).

Since the distinction between the public and private spheres has historically been used to legitimize certain exclusions from politics (in the context of Greek *polis*: specifically women, slaves, children, and those considered as “barbarians”), Arendt’s distinction has been a subject of ongoing debates in feminist interpretations of Arendt for decades (see, for example, Honkasalo 2016a). Also Butler challenges Arendt’s conceptual distinction between the public and the private as well as between the social and the political. Given that the distinguishing of humans from animals indicates a movement from mere survival and dependency (“necessity”) to the sphere of political action understood as public speech, Butler is especially critical of Arendt’s anthropocentric notion of the human (NPTA, 133, 207–208; see also PW, 174). Recalling that Butler defines “humans” in terms of human *animals* that are dependent—as precarious lives—on normative and physical conditions of livability (see my Chapter 3), it does not come as a surprise that she takes issue with Arendt’s humanist understanding of political action as separated from

the questions of “mere” survival and bodily needs.¹⁴⁹ In this sense, Butler’s idea of the mutual interdependency of humans and animals alike radically challenges Arendt’s conception of action. Butler writes:

If action is defined as independent, implying a fundamental difference from dependency, then our self-understanding as actors is predicated upon a disavowal of those living and interdependent relations upon which our lives depend. If we are political actors who seek to establish the importance of ecology, the politics of the household, health care, housing, global food politics, and demilitarization, then it would seem that the idea of the human and creaturely life that supports our efforts will be one that overcomes the schism between acting and interdependency. (NPTA, 44–45)¹⁵⁰

In other words, for Butler, political action becomes possible only through the conditions of livability and survivability that provides the necessary support for action. In her recent article “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance” (2016), Butler elaborates on this idea further by noting that action is not thinkable in isolation of the “norms” that “constitute the intersubjective and infrastructural conditions for livable life” and, therefore, we cannot think of action as something that “overcome[s] these prior and constituting dimensions of social normativity” (Butler 2016, 19; see also NPTA, 148). In light of Butler’s critique, the problem with Arendt’s notion of action is, then, that it normatively excludes—and thus *depoliticizes*—those struggles that seek to challenge the norms that make the conditions of life—or, indeed the conditions of *the good life*—unlivable for those regarded as “ungrievable.”

However, despite the fact that Butler strongly criticizes Arendt’s humanist presuppositions, she nevertheless draws upon her notion of “concerted action” in order to rethink political resistance in terms of embodied plurality in the form of a public assembly. Whereas for Arendt public speech is the cornerstone of political action, for Butler already the gathering of people on the street or in the square or in other types of public space—and their bodily gestures of movement, stillness, refusal to move, silence, singing, chanting—represents embodied political action and resistance (NPTA, 11, 88–89, 218; see also WSN, 62–64).¹⁵¹ Here, Butler invokes specifically Arendt’s concep-

¹⁴⁹ For a critical analysis of Arendt’s notion of the body, see also, for example, Zerilli (1995) and Pulkkinen (2003).

¹⁵⁰ Butler even calls her critical rejoinder to Arendt’s notion of political action (and that of “co-habitation”) as a “an ecological supplement to Arendt’s anthropocentrism” (NPTA, 133).

¹⁵¹ It should be noted that Butler stresses emphatically that the public sphere is also conditioned and framed by media representations as well as “constituted in part through sites of forcible sequestering” and therefore “the borders that define the public are also those that define the confined, the sequestered, the imprisoned, the expelled, and the disappeared” (NPTA, 167, 172). Here, she refers to Angela

tion of “the right to have rights” which Butler conceives as a practice of resistance that performatively enacts the very rights that have been denied for those (in Arendtian framework: refugees and the stateless) who nevertheless lay claim (through “citing”) to the rights of political participation and belonging (NPTA, 48–49, 81–83; WSNS, 65; see also Arendt 1973, 296).

It is in this context that Butler connects most clearly the question of grievability to resistance. In the end of “Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?” Butler argues that by coming together and gathering in public demonstrations, “the ungrievable” mark “their demand to live a life *prior* to death” (NPTA, 217, emphasis in original). Butler illustrates this in her essay “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street” (also included in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*):

[I]n the public demonstrations that often follow from acts of public mourning—as often occurred in Syria before half of its populations become refugees, where crowds of mourners became targets of military destruction—we can see how the existing public space is seized by those who have no existing right to gather there, [...]. Indeed, it is their right to gather, free of intimidation and the threat of violence [...]. To attack those bodies is to attack the right itself, since when those bodies appear and act, they are exercising a right outside, against, and in the face of the regime. (NPTA, 82–83)¹⁵²

Another timely example of these kinds of gatherings is the continuous peaceful demonstrations in Helsinki where hundreds of asylum seekers and pro-immigration and anti-racist activists gather together in the city’s main squares as well as in the Helsinki Vantaa Airport to protest against Finland’s tightened immigration policy and the forcible deportations of asylum seekers. Or, when refugees, migrants, and activists throughout Europe have assembled together carrying signs saying “refugees welcome” to demonstrate

Davis, whose work (see, for example, Davis 2003 & 2017) has clearly demonstrated the relationship between structural racism and imprisonment in the US, for example. For this reason, Butler is also mindful of the practices of resistance that do not take place in the visible and actual public sphere or on the street but in such places as prisons, refugee camps, or detention centers (e.g. hunger strikes). As Butler notes, the very freedom to gather “is haunted by the possibility of imprisonment” (NTPA, 173; see also Butler 2016, 20). Therefore, the critical question remains: “[...] what will be the public space and who will be admitted to public assembly?” (NTPA, 173).

¹⁵² Notably, Butler’s Arendtian idea of “the right to have rights” flashes already in *Excitable Speech*, when she comments on one of the most symbolic moments of the Civil Rights Movement as follows: “When Rosa Parks sat in the front of the bus, she had no prior right to do so guaranteed by any of the segregationist conventions of the South. And yet, in laying claim to the right for which she had no *prior* authorization, she endowed a certain authority on the act, and began the insurrectionary process of overthrowing those established codes of legitimacy” (ES, 147, emphasis in original).

against the strengthening of EU borders and the rising anti-immigration movements and far-right parties. In May 2017, for example, activists gathered in Milan's Piazza della Scala to protest against the EU border policies that contribute to the deaths of migrant and refugee populations in the Mediterranean.

In Butler's terms, this kind of political action can be considered "a way of enunciating and *enacting value* in the midst of a biopolitical scheme that threatens to devalue such populations" (NTPA, 208, my emphasis).¹⁵³ In this way, the "right to have rights"—which in Butler's framework can be understood, I would suggest, as the "right for a livable and grievable life"—comes into being when bodies amass and protest against violent regimes, deadly borders, and the heightened forms of precarity. In other words, for Butler, the plural and embodied enactment of "equal grievability" is a form of critical resistance that disrupts the norms that attempt to set up frontiers between grievable and ungrievable lives.

4.5 Conclusion: ethics as political practice

In this chapter I have discussed Butler's account of grief by tracing it to her interpretation of Freud's notion melancholia and to her early discussion of the psychic incorporation of norms. As I have shown, this early discussion where she merges the Freudian notion of melancholia with Foucault's account of normalization lays the groundwork for her later theorization of the differential distribution of grievability. Already in this early reading Butler seeks to articulate the psychic forms of critical reflexivity that can be put in the service of critical resistance against the norms that regulate whose lives count as grievable lives. As I have demonstrated, the aspect of critique is also significant in Butler's later work on the ethics of grievability, which should not be understood as an account of existential mortality, as Honig and others have claimed, but as a political problem concerning the biopolitical and neopolitical production of ungrievable populations.

¹⁵³ For Butler, this kind of "acting together" can also be considered a spatiotemporal expression and exercise of provisional forms of "popular sovereignty" that can potentially be revolutionary (see, for example, NPTA, 16, 160–163, 171). Notably, although Butler notes that also lynch mobs, anti-Semitic, racist, or fascist congregations could be understood as public gatherings, she underscores that the aim of her radical democratic notion of assembly is not simply to endorse any kinds of "surging multitudes" but to enact solidarity between precarious groups in order to "establish more sustaining conditions of livability in the face of systematically induced precarity and forms of racial destitution" (183). Bearing this in mind, I suggest that Butler's notion of "assembly" has to be thought of in terms of the principle of the equal value of life, an ethical principle that strongly calls into question any kind of effort that seeks to limit the "livable life" only to certain kinds of groups or communities (such as forms of national belonging).

Through my discussion on Butler's reading of Foucault's notion of critique, Adorno's reflections on the good life, and Arendt's conception of action, I have emphasized Butler's notion of grievability in terms of her conception of critique as resistance. When Butler's account of grief and mourning are brought to her broader theorization of norms—to her notion of norms as a mechanism of social power and as the conditions and modes of social change—her ethics of grievability becomes visible as an intervention into the contemporary power relations that regulate the recognizability of losses. In contrast to recent criticisms that Butler's account of grievability represents a turn away from politics, I contend that it should instead be understood as a theorization that seeks to make radical political contestation possible.

CONCLUSION

In this study I provide the first systematic analysis of Judith Butler's theorization of social norms. My central argument is that Butler's theorization of norms must be understood in light of what I here call her *twofold notion of norms*. As my examination of Butler's discussion of norms demonstrates through four thematic chapters, Butler conceives norms, first, as mechanisms of social power that produce the field of what can be regarded as socially recognizable subjects, bodies, lives, and deaths. In this first instance, norms, such as gender norms and racializing norms, distinguish between what Butler calls "livable" and "unlivable lives," exposing those populations to negligence and heightened violence that do not fit the contemporary standards of what counts as a valuable life. In this study I examine the violent effects of norms by addressing Butler's critique of the US war on terror, her problematization of the pathologization of trans lives, as well as her critical discussion of the necropolitical production of ungrievable populations. In addition, my study extends Butler's critique of norms to the question of animals as well and exposes the process through which certain animals are normatively produced as killable lives.

Secondly, throughout this study, I show that in order to understand Butler's account of norms, we also have to look carefully at the other sense of her notion of norms. That is, the possibility of change and resistance. Even though she finds, much in line with Michel Foucault, norms as constitutive and enabling characters of social life, my study elucidates that by conceptualizing norms in terms of social temporality (i.e. repetition and "iterability") and action, Butler is able to theorize transformation as a crucial dimension of norms. By highlighting both aspects of Butler's approach to norms my study constitutes an original contribution to previous Butler scholarship that has tended to overemphasize Butler's theorization of norms as a theorization of violence: more specifically, as an account of "ontological," "transcendental," or even "fundamental violence." In contrast to such readings, this study establishes Butler as first and foremost a theorist of critical agency and resistance.

The four chapters of the study highlight Butler's twofold approach to norms through a discussion of the following problematics: Butler's critical debt to Monique Wittig's notion of discursive violence; Butler's critique of gender normalization in the context of her discussion of trans lives; her problematization of anthropocentrism; and her discussion of grievability as a politics of resistance. Each chapter thus examines a particular problematic related to mechanisms of social power as well as violence. Taken together, the chapters provide a systematic analysis and a sustained discussion of Butler's response to social norms.

I began my study by establishing *Gender Trouble* as the textual source in which Butler first begins to develop her notion of norms through her discussion of Wittig's conception of discursive violence. Although the book has provoked extensive debates in the field of feminist and queer studies, Butler's Wittigian background has remained a highly marginal topic in secondary literature. My study challenges mainstream interpretations of *Gender Trouble* by arguing that Butler's notion of the binary notion of gender as a violent norm appears first in the context of her critical reading of Wittig's argument. As I show, for Wittig, the system of heterosexuality as well as the categories of sex and gender can be understood as forms of discursive violence.

Contesting the common readings that take Butler to be merely debunking Wittig's ideas, I claim that, on the contrary, Butler in fact draws from Wittig's work on discursive violence. Inquiring into Butler's early reading of Wittig is important for two major reasons. First, it makes visible Butler's feminist theoretical background from which her notion of norms originally emerges. Second, a thorough analysis of Butler's deployment of Wittig's conception of discursive violence makes it clear that although Butler builds on Wittig's work, she does not accept her claim that the categories of sex and gender, or the social system of normative heterosexuality, are violent in essence. My detailed explication elucidates that instead, Butler complicates Wittig's argument by reading it through her own notion of social norms understood as repetitive—performative—bodily practices. This tactic allows Butler to theorize how gender might be done differently. Making visible Butler's critical adoption of Wittig's notion of discursive violence further clarifies that contrary to the readings that emphasize Butler as a theorist of ontological violence, *Gender Trouble* already exemplifies a twofold approach to norms.

While Butler's interpretation of Wittig lays the groundwork for her understanding of norms as both mechanisms of violence as well as modes of social change/critical agency, the theorization of norms is developed further in her later critique of the pathologization of gender, especially in *Undoing Gender*. Although Butler here still conceives of the binary norm of gender as a form of violence, her discussion of trans lives makes it evident that her overall theorization on gender is motivated by an aim to show that the gender binary is not fixed but is open to rearticulation. In my study, I propose that Butler's reflections on trans embodiment and trans autonomy throws into stark relief her conception of norms not only as violent mechanisms of power but, importantly, also as mechanisms of transformation.

As becomes clear from my analysis of Butler's understanding of gender self-determination (that is, the right to "choose" one's gender), gender norms do not work on our bodies as if we were mere passive targets of their normalizing functions. On the contrary, the norms and their normalizing effects are *actively* embodied and lived. Although gender norms work forcefully in the

sense that they mark only certain kinds of bodies (often only heterosexual and normatively gendered bodies) as valuable and livable, embodying norms is always a *negotiation* with power. Sometimes the negotiation can risk one's life, leading to an unlivable life: to forms of exclusion, discrimination, unwanted pathologization and even criminalization and violence. However, negotiation with norms, including gender norms, also makes possible a form of conditioned, critical agency. The example that Butler repeats throughout her work is the way in which the original gender assignment—one given at birth—can be rejected, revised, and even reassigned. This is clearly evident in the complex and diverse ways in which gender is currently lived and challenged across the trans and genderqueer spectrum.

In the context of Butler's discussion of trans embodiment, I develop a new concept, namely, *trans livability* to illustrate the twofold operation of norms. By the concept of trans livability I not only foreground Butler's twofold conception of norms in the context of her work on gender norms, but my concept also opens a novel interpretative angle to previous commentary literature that has overlooked Butler's contribution to transgender theorization. By providing a multifaceted analysis of Butler's discussion of trans lives, my study stresses the significance of this topic for her overall theorization of norms. Considering the theoretical width of Butler's analysis of gender pathologization and trans embodiment, as well as the passionate, ethical tone of her writings on this particular issue, I contend that it deserves as much scholarly attention as her other, more recognized, major topics such as gender performativity. In sum, my explication of Butler's discussion on trans lives suggests that her twofold notion of norms can be conceived of as a trans affirmative contribution to feminist theory.

As has been extensively discussed in the secondary literature, Butler's more recent work is characterized in particular by the problem of "livability." In recent writings, Butler addresses ethical and political questions regarding the unequal distribution of bodily exposure to violence and mortality across different populations, a condition that she terms "precarity." The predominant interpretative approach to Butler's work on precarity has been to discuss it through the question of "the human," that is, the question of who counts as normatively human and who does not. Many scholars have analyzed this problematic, particularly in close connection with Butler's critique of the US War on Terror and Israeli state violence against the Palestinian population in occupied territories. Scholars have attempted to analyze these topics with interpretative notions such as Butler's "new corporeal humanism," "mortalist humanism," "the political philosophy of the human," and "the political problem of the human."

My study departs from these interpretative strategies and suggests a different approach. I contend that even though Butler discusses the different ways in

which “the human” is produced, she does not accept it as a point of departure for theorizing ethics or politics. Nor is her aim to include more lives into the universal category of “the human.” Instead, as my interpretation underscores, she seeks to *interrupt* the whole category. For Butler, “the human” is a normative category that regulates what we come to recognize as precarious lives. My reading illustrates that Butler actually moves from the framework of the human to theorize more broadly the normative conditions of *life* and the regulative power through which destroying certain lives comes to be viewed as more legitimate—or even necessary—than destroying others. My discussion of Butler’s notion of livability demonstrates that upon closer reading, by this move Butler in fact calls anthropocentrism into question and explicitly includes animals into her conception of precarious lives.

Unfortunately, however, Butler does not elaborate to any great extent on the theoretical—and indeed ethical and political—implications of her intriguing move for her overall critique of norms. Instead, she leaves the question of “the animal” aside, or leaves it for others to pursue. For this reason, by building on Butler’s discussion on livability, which rests on a rejection of anthropocentrism, I provide a critical development of Butler’s twofold approach to norms. My analysis thus makes use of and further develops Butler’s argument that norms not only operate through incorporation and embodiment but also by normatively establishing the broader conditions of life only for those kinds of beings that are recognized as valuable.

My study elucidates this aspect of norms by problematizing the prevalent and naturalized differentiation between companion animals and food animals. By exposing this distinction as *normatively* constituted I engage in a critical scrutiny of the norms that rationalize the violent mass killing of certain animals within the widespread practice of industrialized slaughter. My analysis points out particularly the norms that regulate our eating practices and the norms that anchor our ethical responsiveness only to the suffering of those animals that are regarded as our companions. Through the concept of *killability* I offer a critical rejoinder to Butler’s concept of “livability.”

By bringing Butler’s account of norms in dialogue with critical animal studies, my reading establishes a new analytical framework to previous scholarly analyses that have prioritized the anthropocentric framework of “the human” in their interpretations of livability. When anthropocentrism is questioned as a self-evident interpretative framework to discuss Butler’s notion of livability, her critique of norms becomes discernible as a more radical intervention into current power relations than previous interpretations allow. The significance of my analysis thus lies in bringing Butler’s critique of norms to bear on animal ethics. In this way, my study opens a path to theorize a more inclusive notion of ethics, one that stays responsive not only to humans but also to other animals.

Finally, my elaboration on livability is followed by a discussion of a related problematic in Butler's work: the question of grievability. My concluding examination provides a sustained response to a recent criticism by scholars who have claimed that Butler's turn to the ethics of grieving in her more recent work compromises her notion of political contestation and shrinks it into a sentimentalist politics of feeling. I claim instead that when Butler's discussion of grief is brought to the broader framework of her twofold approach to norms, it becomes visible as a theorization of political contestation. As my examination demonstrates, the question of grievability runs through Butler's oeuvre and is not something to which she only turns in her later work on ethics. On the contrary, already in her early reading of Freud's notion of melancholia Butler politicizes grief by asking what kinds of deaths become socially recognizable as grievable losses and whose deaths disappear from view.

As becomes clear from my analysis, Butler's more recent critique of different forms of state violence (such as the war on terror) continues the politicization of grief by interrogating the differential distribution of grievability and early mortality across populations. To emphasize the political implications of Butler's discussion of grievability I read it through her Foucauldian notion of critique, her critical deployment of Adorno's conception of resistance, and finally, her interpretation of Arendt's notion of concerted action. My reading strategy articulates Butler's theorization of grievability as a question of critique and resistance. In other words, I conceive Butler's ethics of grievability as an intervention into the contemporary power relations that regulate the recognizability of losses. In contrast to critiques according to which Butler's account of grievability represents a turn away from politics, my analysis demonstrates that it should instead be understood as a theorization that discloses radical possibilities for political contestation.

Taken together, all the four chapters of my dissertation illuminate Butler's theorization of norms as a practice of feminist critique. By explicating the relationship between norms, violence, and social change, my study emphasizes the close relationship between feminist and queer practices of political resistance and the critique of norms. Only by paying careful attention to the ways in which norms differentiate between livable and unlivable lives, can we provide effective ways to contest the current power relations that support only certain lives at the expense of others.

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