

## Proximities

TO READ JUDITH BUTLER IS to read in community, joining what are now generations of readers around the world. It is to court the experience of disorientation, exhilaration, alienation, or uncannily recognition that entering (however incompletely) into the thought of another variously affords. To read Butler is also to read Butler reading and thus to encounter both the example and the challenge of reading well. In creating this special issue, we invited a number of Butler's readers to think and write alongside Butler, unfolding lines of flight from a passage of their choice that has served, as the idiom has it, as "food for thought." Food, which is to say nourishment: just as the mattering of the body depends on an ever-renewed incorporation of the world's material (through processes of ingestion, transmutation, absorption, metabolization, and elimination), so the mattering of thought—as Butler's work demonstrates at every turn—is never *sui generis*. It emerges from the encounter, involving analogous processes of listening, distinguishing, affirming, questioning, mirroring, or negating. We invited our authors, from their different geographical and disciplinary locations, to select a passage that has generated an alchemy of thinking. In the responses collected here, Butler's readers read Butler, accompanying Butler's thought, where this accompaniment takes the form, by turns, of inhabitation, paraphrase, questioning; leaning into or away from; moving in parallel, entwined, or at a magnetic distance. The title of the special issue, *Proximities*, designates these various modes of intellectual accompaniment, of "eating well," as Jacques Derrida once put it, since thinking is always an enactment of proximity.<sup>1</sup>

That proximity is differently named in the preposition in the subtitle: *Reading with Judith Butler*. "With" can be silent, like the *a* in *différance*: to read with Butler is to read Butler, where the meaning of "reading" could itself be variously inflected, including in the drag ball sense of offering a *read*. In reading with, at least two voices emerge: that of the text one reads (Butler's) and the voice of the reading itself, in synchrony, in harmony; contrapuntal or parallel; in alignment and dispersion. Just as Sigmund Freud once

quipped that a sexual encounter is never just between two individuals, the two voices that here speak in stereo turn out to be more than two. They include the explicit or implicit references that are incorporated into the narrative voices both of Butler and Butler's reader, the authorial ego-ideals or refused identifications, melancholic introjections, imaginary protagonists and antagonists that speak through us every time we speak (making the first-person singular always already a first-person plural, which also means a mediation of the second- and third-person). To put it this way is both to characterize a general condition of speaking, writing, and thinking as constitutively dialogic and to describe an aspect of Butler's philosophical method that shapes its particular character. Over and again, Butler demonstrates that philosophy does not proceed from a priori principles but from specific textual encounters that preserve their texture as they open out to other scenes of address.<sup>2</sup>

Consider an apparently originary (if not primary) moment in Butler's work on gender, namely their quotation, repurposing, and account of Simone de Beauvoir's famous aphorism: "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one." (On more than one occasion, Butler will put this line in dialogue with Aretha Franklin's rendition of the Carole King song: "(You Make Me Feel Like) a Natural Woman."<sup>3</sup>) The statement, which opens book two of *The Second Sex*, is repurposed by Butler as another beginning, appearing as the first epigraph to the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*. Singled out in this way, it appears of primary significance, offered at first without commentary, as a quotation, a provocation, an orientation, awaiting a reading that the text will not withhold but will enact several times over, each time with a difference.

Butler's first attention to Beauvoir's phrase appears in a section of the chapter dramatically titled "Gender: The Circular Ruins of Contemporary Debate." After quoting the phrase, Butler continues (our interpolations appear in italics):

For Beauvoir, gender is "constructed," but implied in her formulation is an agent, a *cogito*, who somehow takes on or appropriates that gender and could, in principle, take on some other gender. [*Here Butler's reference to Cartesian dualism and the intrusion of "somehow" suggest an authorial perspective that seems to establish itself at some distance from its object, questioning the legitimacy of any implication of a volitional aspect to gender, even if the phrase "in principle" suggests unspecified limits on its enactment that may or may not be already implicit—the authorial voice does not specify—in Beauvoir's own formulation.*] Is gender as variable and volitional as Beauvoir's account seems to suggest? Can "construction" in such a case be reduced to a form of choice? [*We observe retrospectively that Butler's equally implicit critique of what appears to be Beauvoir's evocation of agential choice—formulated, in the manner of Socrates, only as a questioning—is the very one that will later be made, albeit as a misreading, of Gender Trouble itself.*] Beauvoir is clear that one "becomes" a woman, but always under a cultural

compulsion to become one. [Now Butler has reversed from critique in the form of Socratic questioning to clarification framed as free indirect discourse, leaving it unclear (even while mentioning that “Beauvoir is clear”) whether the crucial qualifying phrase “under a cultural compulsion” belongs to Beauvoir’s thinking or is added by Butler or emerges precisely in their encounter. It is unclear, in other words, whether the authorial position here is one of paraphrase, corrective, or some other form of proximity.] And clearly [!], the compulsion does not come from “sex.” There is nothing in her account that guarantees that the “one” who becomes a woman is necessarily female. [Here Butler reads what Beauvoir doesn’t say in order to draw out an unanticipated radicality of the text that departs from its author’s own articulation without contradicting it.] If “the body is a situation,” as she claims, there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along.<sup>4</sup>

The future perfect tense condenses the complications of authorial perspective we have been underscoring as constitutive of Butler’s reading-with: *sex will be shown to have been gender all along*. Shown when, by whom? Already shown, if not written, by Beauvoir? Or shown by the book that Butler is in the process of writing in which these lines will have appeared? This final sentence—which deconstructs the sex/gender opposition that appeared, at the beginning of the paragraph, to be crucial to the coherence of Beauvoir’s claim that “sex” does not determine “gender”—articulates a radically new perspective whose attribution, in this rhetorical mode of philosophical free indirect discourse, remains uncertain and unstable, seeming now to depart from Beauvoir, now to be immanent to her text. The thought is opened up by Butler’s ventriloquizing—accompanying, entering the thought of—Beauvoir and following its articulated and unarticulated threads, its implied premises and its unimplied consequences. This paragraph both establishes a critical position on Beauvoir’s claim (“Is gender as variable and volitional as Beauvoir seems to suggest?”) and derives from that very claim a radical theory of gender that belongs at once to Beauvoir and Butler, emerging from a proximity that encompasses dissensus, critique, riffing, and alignment.

But the reading offered in this preliminary paragraph—which appears to arrive at a formulation we might associate with the argument of *Gender Trouble* itself<sup>5</sup>—does not settle the matter, and Butler later circles back to Beauvoir’s formulation, picking up the thread of Socratic questioning, rechanneling it via free indirect discourse, and subjecting it to another layer of textual mediation in a further series of readings that now includes Monique Wittig as reader of Beauvoir and Butler as reader of Wittig of Beauvoir.<sup>6</sup> At these moments, the text reaches a sublime level of dialogic intensity, Butler’s voice carrying within it the voices of feminist forebears that Butler by turns (often in the same sentence or paragraph) critically questions, dialectically inverts, and powerfully rearticulates. Through this authorial

polyphony, patient and raucous, Butler refashions the perspective of the “I” that is moved to write as that of a chorus of voices whose alternating convergence and divergence is the very means of their solidarity. The “I” is plural, and proximity—or the work of thinking and writing—is not a simple harmony, but embodies the dissonant complexity of relationality itself.

This co-authored introduction enacts its own multiplicity, produced through the act of reading together. In what follows, the internally differentiated authorial voice splits into divergent and convergent threads, mapping three distinct scenes of encounter with Butler’s texts, each considering the way proximity works as both method and thematic. The first examines Butler reading Mahmoud Darwish reading Edward Said, in a dense passage in which language depends on a metonymy that is figured as a physical proximity, albeit one confronting a blockage. The second turns to the domain of the visual and to Butler’s work on the face, which embodies the precariousness and vulnerability that proximity entails, again bound up in linguistic metaphors and exceeding language. The third summons an authorial chorus that expands across media, reading Butler on Bracha Ettinger’s paintings of Eurydice, staging the continuities and recursions of historical and mythic time. To mark our own proximate differentiation as co-authors, we offer these brief texts as distinct but interwoven accounts.

### 1.

In *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*, in the midst of a reading of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, Butler arrives at the formulation that “contiguity and proximity” are the condition of language, dependent as it is on figuration.<sup>7</sup> Darwish’s poem is itself titled “Edward Said: A Contrapuntal Reading,” a reading of/with Edward Said on the occasion of his death. Butler reads Darwish reading Said, each exponential level spanning the divide between the time of life and the time of death, a divide that is refigured on each occasion: Darwish addresses Said who has died, and Butler addresses Darwish after his death. Reading enables a proximity that reflects the proximity of language’s own metonymic process, transcending the spatiotemporal limits of mortal being as one might traverse a river. Butler writes,

Darwish writes, “Metonymy was sleeping on the river’s bank; had it not been for the pollution / it could have embraced the other bank” (178). An extraordinary line because not only is metonymy itself personified—figure laid upon figure—but metonymy is apparently sleeping alone, not able to make the links that can happen only by contiguity and proximity. After all, metonymy shows us how to get from one thing to another with which it obviously has not much in common. In this poetic scene, there is no crossing over that river, polluted as it is. Too much toxicity stands

in the way of what might otherwise be a surprising or felicitous contact, indeed, a form of highly cathected entanglement, if not the kind of unwilling up-againstness that belongs to a wretched bond. (*PW* 220)

Darwish's poem realizes, in its own figurations, the very crossing whose failure it narrates in the personification of metonymy as a solo sleeper. In Butler's commentary, "links"—itself a capacious figure suggesting multiple registers of linkage—"can happen only by contiguity and proximity." Contiguity and proximity (synonymic or mutually supplementary) are what enable (and name kinds of) links, and linkage is both a metaphor for and a condition of meaning, which requires "get[ting] from one thing to another," making connections between distinct things.

In this poem, the metonymic passage that generates meaning is blocked. Butler describes what is impeded by this blockage in several ways: first as "a surprising or felicitous contact," which is then rephrased as "indeed, a form of highly cathected entanglement." The "surprise" contact, whose "felicitous" quality suggests it was unanticipated, now turns out to be "highly cathected," a phrase that evokes a more durational form of psychic attachment and thus a contact that may, "indeed," turn out to have been anticipated, intensely so. Moreover, what proximity enables seems to have lost the levity and spontaneity of a "surprising or felicitous contact," now carrying the weighty complexity of an "entanglement." This linguistic transition introduces an ambiguity and ambivalence that then extend into the syntax itself through the equivocating conjunction "if not." Does "if not" mean "though not"? Or does it mean "or possibly even"? The sentence, already formulated in the negative as describing a contact foreclosed by the toxic river, sustains both possibilities, the positive and the negative sense of "if not." That conjunction reframes the "highly cathected entanglement" (that was itself a reframing of a "surprising or felicitous contact") as now (positively or negatively) "the kind of unwilling up-againstness that belongs to a wretched bond." To the synonymic pair of proximity and contiguity is thus added a neologism, "up-againstness," which now seems to be less "felicitous," since it is "unwilled," and is finally refigured as a "bond" that is "wretched."

Clearly, proximity is not the same thing as happiness, nor is it sentimentally invested. While it names the connectivity that is immanent to the process of language, it may also be a "wretched bond" that includes "unwilled up-againstness" as much as "surprising or felicitous contact."

It is also a material condition of existence. Elsewhere in the same text, now reading Hannah Arendt, Butler writes that "unwilled proximity and unchosen cohabitation are preconditions of our political existence," with Israel/Palestine the explicit referent in Butler's reading of what, in Arendt,

is a general principle (*PW* 24). “Proximities . . . are historically and geographically fraught,” bound up in “the scenes of violence that inform daily life” (*PW* 17). Proximity names a “being bound to one another” that “is precisely not a social bond that is entered into through volition and deliberation; it precedes contract, is mired in interdependency, and is often effaced by those forms of social contract that presume and instate an ontology of volitional individuals” (*PW* 130). What we are proximate to is “the suffering of others.”<sup>8</sup> In the various ways the term appears across Butler’s oeuvre, proximity carries an ethical burden, that of responsibility; it is thus a term that encompasses both language and the material interconnectedness of living and nonliving beings; it bears on Butler’s method of reading and their philosophy of ethics—and is the very figure of their intertwining.

## 2.

Something altogether different happens . . . when the face operates in the service of a personification that claims to “capture” the human being in question.

—Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*

The face is enshrined in contemporary regimes of rights and representation as a figure for another’s humanity: the media seeks to put a face on crisis and conflict; racialized, minoritized, precarious others are accorded humanity through the face; the face is said to *personify*, personhood materialized as physiognomy. Yet the face can also be defaced to index the antihuman. In the aftermath of 9/11 and frames of war that snuffed out lives deemed ungrievable, Butler taught us that personification can dehumanize as swiftly as it may humanize. The face serves as easily as a synecdoche for “terror” as it does for personhood and humanity.

Butler’s philosophical reflections on the face as a competing site for political and ethical claims are all the more urgent today, when the naked face continues to be mobilized as a metonym for personhood and a site of “liberation,” even when, from bans on the Muslim veil to antimasking in pandemic times, such freedoms infringe upon the rights and protections of others. Under neoliberal governance and its watchful technologies, the face is tracked and controlled, marketized by social media platforms such as (the aptly named) Facebook, exhibited in selfies, captured in acts of care and coercion, derealized into data, and monitored through facial recognition programs that reanimate old legacies of racialized violence.

Butler’s meditations on the face, with its proximities to a Levinasian ethics—in which the face-to-face encounter is a summons to responsibility—envisage the Other not as a subject of recognition and capture, but as an alterity that unravels us as it demands witness. The face is not the

figure for a bounded personhood to be plotted on a sliding scale of humanity. It is a precarious and persistent form, a vibrant and vulnerable matter, that commands me to enter into an ethical encounter in which I am undone. From this undoing, I discover “the proximity of difference that makes me work to forge new ties of identification” (*PL* 38). It is this proximity of difference rather than the intimacy of identification that animates one’s efforts to weave ties of solidarity with others both close and distant.

Consider how Butler stages this proximity of difference and its ethics of entanglement in the very texture of a textual address:

For if I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster a “we” except by finding a way in which I am tied to “you,” by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know. (*PL* 49)<sup>9</sup>

This passage can be read as a scene of address that stages Butler’s poetics of relation on the page.<sup>10</sup> Unlike the conventional use of the first person in philosophical discourse, the tone is here interlocutory rather than authoritative: Butler locates me in relation to a voice I read but do not hear and invokes a citational “we” that has yet to emerge—that is *à-venir*—through a confounding dispossession. Yet who or what is this I that reads you and, by so doing, also dwells within you through the partitive (“of me”)? The “we” toward which Butler forges a path is envisioned in relation to a speculative “you,” one that is distinct from the you—that is to say, me, as reader—previously addressed. I am pronominally summoned, oriented by the address yet dislocated, entangled, streaked with opacities, returned to myself as another. The encounter is not a matter of translation and conversion, but of rupture in the language and syntax of the self, in a welcoming of what leaves us unmoored. Traversed by the contents of another, the human emerges as relationality in breakage, confounded and unfounded. These are the conditions under which we may forge the bonds that “reimagine what it means to belong to a human community” (*PL* 38). Butler challenges us to imagine the face and the human at the cusp of what is visible, audible, and palpable. This is no crisis of representation in which we are empty forms unintelligible to ourselves and each other. It is an ethics of entanglement that strives to “muster a ‘we’” through the promise of dispossession.

What does the face in this encounter look like, feel like, sound like, given the constraints of our contemporary scenes of appearance? Butler has laid out the philosophical conditions, political possibility, and ethical necessity of such encounters with dazzling clarity, urgency, and analytic force. Alongside these accounts of the proximities and entanglements that bind

us, Butler's poetics of relation also offers glimpses of how to dream that face and sense the "we" it promises. Their rhetorical approach to ethics has always confounded the distinction between matter and meaning, ground and figure, flesh and signification.<sup>11</sup> Throughout their works, subject positions such as I, you, and the promise of a "we" emerge through figural displacements and condensations, but also from a sensorial encounter with the other in their (or its) embodied vulnerability and appeal. To adapt Butler's comments on truth in Paul Celan's "Ein Dröhnen," the face of another appears before us as a "thick and flurrying set of metaphors" while, at the same time—and paradoxically—as a "crossing of the senses."<sup>12</sup> The face is mediated through a density of figures and also sensed through modes that are as confounding as they are vivid. Butler's scenes of address invite us to envisage the other—toward whom we are responsive and responsible—as a disjunction between face, voice, language, and recognition: "One would need to hear the face as it speaks in something other than language to know the precariousness of life that is at stake" (*PL* 151). Somewhere between the images that the visual field produces and what remains unseen, in a resonance that defies auditory capture, Butler's synesthesia of dispossession moves and mobilizes "us" toward uncharted conditions of representation, encounter, and solidarity.

### 3.

Eurydice cannot be captured, cannot be had. She appears only in the moment in which we are dispossessed of her. There is something of our dispossession in her, the one by which we come into being, through another, as another, that links us not only with this or that maternal origin, but perhaps more emphatically, with her history, the one she cannot tell.<sup>13</sup>

—Judith Butler, "Bracha's Eurydice"

In their lyrical commentary on Bracha Ettinger's cycle of Eurydice paintings—an emblematic example of their attention to creative art as a form of critical theory—Butler urges us to read Eurydice's appearance in disappearance, on these hazy, luminous yet opaque pictorial surfaces, as a figuration of the (com)prehension, ethical and epistemological, that generates the loss it disavows.<sup>14</sup> This (com)prehension amounts to a quasi-predatory clinginess striving to stretch out the instant of epiphany into the fantasy of a repaired, restored time, a time devoid of trauma and of trauma's intermittent, disruptive insistence. "She is coming towards us, she is fading away from us, and both are true at once, and there is no resolution of the one movement into the other" (*BE* 96). In Virgil's text, Eurydice's *presence*—the appearance of loss, the appearance of disappearance—is almost haptically felt in the half line describing Orpheus's frustrated prehensile efforts (*prensantem nequiquam umbras* ["seeking to grasp, vainly, shadows"]), in



which *praesentem* seems to be replaced, with a light exchange of letters, by *prensantem*, a heavy word in a line borne down by the exertions of hands adhering to the air, groping for a presence beyond and against the shadow, refusing the nonhuman pressure of the caliginous opacity that halts and, at the same time, enables the encounter.<sup>15</sup> As Butler observes elsewhere (in a reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty), “there can be no ‘I’ without feeling,” without the alterity that occasions the subject—but proximity is “nonconceptualizable.”<sup>16</sup> This is the contradiction of the phrase that, in Ovid, fixes Orpheus’s gesture (*arripit auras*), where a ghostly hapticity is sustained by the conflation of the violence of *rapio* and the prepositional projection of *ad*—a “towardness” that resists full phonetic assimilation (or “conceptualization”) and the sameness creeping even into the gap between the two verb forms in *prendique et prendere* (the “passive” being touched and the “active” touching both convulsively and compulsively sought out by Orpheus).<sup>17</sup> Eurydice is located in the graphic gap that pushes against the metrical conflation of *prendique* and *et*, a literal *con-ceptualization* (“seizing together”) that would force the voice to merge the two actions into identity. Orpheus’s refusal of a contact with the loss is also a refusal of the principle that, as Butler observes in *The Senses of the Subject*, “before I start to work with my own hands . . . [I am] in the ‘hands’ of . . . an organic and inorganic object field that exceeds the human” (SS7). This object field may be encompassed by writing itself, which spectralizes the hand (as Butler might put it) while placing it in proximity to, making it an impressing agent of, a surface (SS 35).

In the void filled by Orpheus’s prehensile gestures, or by Ettinger’s dense chromatic tonalities, an excessive feeling, or the feeling of excess, emerges: as Butler observes, “Eurydice is . . . already lost, already gone, already dead” (BE 95). The murkiness that Orpheus grapples with—which, in Ettinger’s paintings, does not replace Eurydice but coincides with her—is an infinite space of grievability, an atmospheric layer of the melancholy indispensable for subject formation. (As Butler has demonstrated, “there can be no ego without melancholia.”<sup>18</sup>) The murkiness in Ettinger’s nonrepresentation of the classical encounter stems from the opaque colors; it is the infinity of proximity, of the projection *toward*, which, rather than dissolving the “I,” thickens it, suspending it in the uncertainty of the address, in the very excess that is “proximity,” a superlative not just of “near” but also of “nearly,” “almost.” *Proximity* cannot but evoke its supplemented congener *approximation*—where the *addition* of an extra level of proximity (*ad*) generates an asymptotic motion, expands the murky space of almostness, as it were.<sup>19</sup> Proximity is the space of almostness, the space where the “I” manifests itself only by breaking up, becoming itself by shedding a fantasized

totality, that is, by becoming *nearly* itself, by embodying the almostness that is the necessary condition of its existence.

Eurydice is an icon of the fantasy of return, of frustrated restoration, of impossible reparation. Her Greek name (*Euru-dikê*) contains the Latin adjective for a returning exile (accusative *reducem*) but anagrammatically reshuffled. In this name, the hierarchical dimension of re-storation/reparation showcased by *reducem*, in which we recognize the hegemonic directionality of “education,” if not *ducem* (as in *il duce*), is unsettled by “justice” (*dikê*) and situated in “width” (*euru-*), in an interval, in a breadth that emerges from the coming apart in the encounter. The *reduction* of one entity into another that can be sanctioned by restoration gives way to a diphthongal opening, to a liquid barrier (as in *ru-*, “to flow”) like the river of the Underworld, that makes justice (*dikê*) a hindrance to sameness: the defense of the right to elude capture (or reduction to totality), to claim brokenness, to inhabit our shared “almostness.” Rereading Aeschylus’s *Eumenides*, Butler has recently remarked that a “radical possibility of equality or freedom or democracy or justice . . . means stepping out of a settled understanding.”<sup>20</sup> Stepping out, receding from the settled understanding of the objectifying Law of the Father, which Orpheus reinforces even while apparently violating it, with his gaze, his desire to *com-prehend*, Eurydice makes herself into the incomprehensibility that is *dikê*.

An appearance as disappearance, a breaking *rhythm* (etymologically, a “flowing”), connects us with Sarah Ruhl’s play, where Eurydice proclaims, “I don’t know if I want to be an instrument” when the self-absorbed Orpheus fantasizes using her hair as strings of his lyre:

I could never spell the  
word  
rhythm –  
it is such a difficult

word to spell –  
r – y – no – there’s an H  
in it –  
somewhere – a breath –

rhy – rhy –  
rhy –<sup>21</sup>

“The body breathes, breathes itself into words,” showing that it “is outside itself” and “does not belong to itself,” writes Butler in *Frames of War*.<sup>22</sup> The breath is interruption; it does not just break *rhythm* but also Eurydice’s own name into repeated rhythmical fragments (*rhy-rhy-rhy*) that inscribe themselves on the surface of the page just as the desperate motions of Orpheus’s

hands do, as he clasps at and seeks to break through the air. This encounter of bodies breaking themselves, in order to (dis)appear or to fight off the other's effort to disappear, unleashes proximity's ethical force, which thrives on the "radical and originary dispossession of the 'I,'" whose emergence—"traumatic, scattered, partial, multiple, non-unified and non-unifiable"—approximates justice (*BE* 98, 100).

#### 4.

The pieces that follow extend this reflection on proximity in numerous directions, while also enacting it as a mode of attention, which is to say reading and thinking. Jack Halberstam mulls over the illuminating albeit unsettling proximities of *Gender Trouble* to contemporary popular culture. Even when we unexpectedly discover Butler's epochal text among the dulled and dulling *pharmaka* in the purse of a female character lounging poolside in Maui in the HBO series *White Lotus* (2021), we can still feel a renewed appreciation of its traction against toxic masculinities and "white heteronormative love and life," as Halberstam puts it. In spite of its predictable reinscription of heteronormative closure, *White Lotus* is enveloped by a melancholic atmosphere, the very melancholia of the heterosexual subject that, Halberstam writes, "resides . . . in the way they mistake their genitalia as being generative of gender." This is the melancholia induced by the disavowed perception that, as we read in Butler's critique of Jacques Lacan in *Bodies That Matter*, the penis is always the phallus, the materialization of loss, absence, impotence. The heterocentric melancholia virally circulated by the physical copy of *Gender Trouble* in *White Lotus* hollows out the male fantasy of "stability" and "natural right" not with utopia but, as Halberstam points out, with an inexhaustible "theory of anticolonial queer revolt," one that, we might say, has the potential to generate new alliances or camaraderies, unpredictable, disidentificatory, dissensual proximities.

In "All In," Marquis Bey expounds upon a long-standing intellectual proximity, at once "affective, emotional, [and] political," to Butler's work to offer a theorization of self-abolitionism. Reading Butler's early essay "Against Proper Objects" alongside *The Force of Nonviolence*, Bey reflects on the propriety that is constitutive of the "self." This self, Bey suggests, is "made possible by a fundamental exclusion" and "serves as a repository for the defense against, and genocidal elimination of, things marked as opposed to a normative self, with its attending racialized, gendered, classed, and abled archive." Bey's challenge to the self opens onto the notion of trans ungroundedness or paraontology—the "mutinous," insurrectionary politics of abolitionism. This abolitionist position is a forceful expression

of a Butlerian radicality as, in Bey's words, an "imaginative cultivation of impossibility," a radicality that is non-normative rather than antinormative—it makes the implicit hierarchy of selfhood inoperative rather than agonistically battling it. Proximity to Butler enables Bey to plumb the "impossible" possibility of rupturing the ontology of the self in order to imagine a "subjectivity without the archive of the subject."

Saidiya Hartman's "Litany for Grieving Sisters" bears poetic witness to the destruction of Black lives, invoking Butler's *Antigone's Claim* on kinship, mourning, and the law. In this meditation on loss, a grieving sister roams through a city in ruins, clutching a child she could not save from death, in search of a brother who might no longer be alive. While the sister nurtures life, she cannot protect her kin from destruction by the state and the law. An Antigone of the "black morning" and of Black mourning, she is condemned "to witness the ruin of the world, to lose everyone she has ever loved and be forced to continue, to persist in their absence." Hartman's Antigone is a site of memory for lives destroyed, "unwept and unburied," wasted and ungrievable. She is a figure of tragic care, obligated by love to break the law, to hold on to the dead, to grieve without consolation. Those who are broken by the law must, in turn, break the law. Under these conditions, Hartman asks us, citing Butler, "What of her fate is in fact a social death?"

Tavia Nyong'o, in a reading of *Giving an Account of Oneself*, takes up Butler's contention that any account of the prehistory of the subject must necessarily be a work of fabulation. If philosophy and theory privilege the transparency of rational thought over the obscurity of storytelling, Butler's antifoundationalism invokes opacity, fiction, and speculation within the subject's formation and, hence, its capacity for accountability. As Nyong'o puts it, there is an "irreducible moment of 'irresponsible' invention at the heart of every attempt at seeking responsibility." Illuminating proximities between Butler and Édouard Glissant on opacity and the formation of the subject, Nyong'o offers a reading of Jean Toomer's modernist short story "Kabnis" (1923), set in the racial violence of the post-Reconstruction South. How does Butler's account of opacity resonate within a Black context that is constituted through terror and trauma? Can a poetics of relation be drawn between Butler, Glissant, and Toomer, given the particular relationship that blackness and blackening bear to opacity? What does it mean to give an account of oneself and to be accountable under conditions of racialized violence?

Maggie Nelson's "The Call" is an intimate response to Butler's declaration, "Let's face it, we are undone by each other" (*PL* 23). This sentence took up residence in Nelson "like the shard of a beloved song," from the aftermath of 9/11 to pandemic times. In a vivid translation of Butler's philosophical register into the realm of lived experience and personal

reflection, Nelson wonders what it means to confront our undoing, and why we might even want to be undone given the messiness of our lives, the fragility of our bodies, and the perils of our attachments. She describes how Butler's generous vision of interdependency inspires her to imagine the world otherwise, how it sustained her during the trial of a murdered aunt, and how *Precarious Life* was resignified by her friend Christina Crosby who wrote of her spinal injury in *A Body, Undone: Living On After Great Pain* (2016). Nelson probes the difficulty and reward of Butler's call to undone-ness as the condition of friendship.

Zeynep Gambetti urges us to re-approach—that is, to come close again—to Butler's theory of performativity, to heed how their capacious re-theorization of this concept employed by John Austin and Derrida “make[s] room for singularity as a *potentia* that accounts for the emergence of the unexpected and new.” Asking, “Are we bound to each other by what makes us similar or by what differentiates us?,” Gambetti points to the possibility of recovering, in Butler's immensely influential take on the performative, a space for an ethical level of personal responsibility that pushes against “the impersonal workings of the performative,” the “particular interpellations” that structure the relations between the subject and the social, that make the subject social.

Taking her lead from the journey that Butler took to Chile and Argentina in April 2019, Nelly Richard gathers together many threads of Butler's influence as both an intellectual and an activist in Latin America, an influence expressed and experienced as an overdetermined bond of proximity and mutuality: cultural translation as an intimate encounter of languages and contexts through continuing shifts and transferences of meaning; precarious lives and vulnerable bodies forming an affective register of solidarity and reciprocity between identities marginalized by neoliberal design; the activist weaving together of transverse alliances against neofascist violence; the emotional propinquity to artistic and scholarly practices that may offer opportunities for opening up critical imagination in new directions; the antiacademic gesture of bringing theoretical practice close to the ethical and political framework in which civic judgment and responsibility are grounded; and the never-fading vicinity to the traumatic memories of Latin American dictatorships in the opposition and resistance work of human rights movements.

Jasbir K. Puar, writing in (and about) solidarity, argues that Butler's work on Israel/Palestine is not tangential but, rather, central to Butler's thought and their oeuvre, an oeuvre in which theory and praxis have always been entangled. “Reading with,” suggests Puar, need not only be on the page. Identifying continuities between Butler's work on queer theory, gender, and sexuality, and their engagements with Jewishness, Zionism, and

justice in Palestine, Puar shows, for example, how the treatment of melancholy in *Gender Trouble* presages Butler's post-9/11 writings on the biopolitics of mourning. Examining Butler's intellectual and political work in the public sphere, Puar points out that Butler's vision of grief, not as private process but as ethical and political protest, displaces the "liberal subject of self-care" with "an academic praxis of solidarity."

Lee Edelman reads Butler's essay "Solidarity/Susceptibility," first delivered as the José Esteban Muñoz Memorial Lecture, three years after Muñoz's untimely passing. In reading Butler on Muñoz, Edelman is also reading Butler on Edelman, who, although his name appears only once in Butler's text, assumes his well-known role there as theorist of a "no future" to which Muñoz's "then and there of queer futurity" is posed as an antithetical retort. In good dialectical fashion, Butler's reading of Muñoz locates the disidentification (which is to say, negativity) at the heart of the utopian "no-place," as well as the creativity (indeed, the restless generativity) of the negative. Hovering over the futurity/no future debates that have, across their polemical declensions, energized the field of queer theory for almost two decades, is the underlying binary of reparative versus paranoid, formulated by Muñoz's mentor, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a binary that also turns out to be chiasmic. Sedgwick thus silently presides over this party of queer theorists, a party of the living and the dead, at which gossip is its own form of reading. Edelman, reading with Butler, stages the relational, social, and intellectual entanglements—the proximities—that have shaped the texture of a field. The title of Edelman's essay, leaning on Butler's, is "On Solidarity," a solidarity that maintains its relation to "impossibility" but that the essay nevertheless enacts through a labor of careful textual attention and a project of critique that it shows to be held in common.

Kadji Amin brings Butler's work to bear on the "contemporary proliferation of queer and trans identities"—a proliferation it no doubt helped to enable—with a critical focus on the "umbrella category of *nonbinary*." Despite avowing some misgivings about what he (debatably, in our view) calls the "linguistic idealism" of Butler's earliest work on gender, Amin nevertheless shows how that work can be repurposed to challenge a contemporary belief in "the purity and distinctness of identity categories." For Amin, the terms *binary* and *cisgender* (like *heterosexuality*), invented only secondarily, are too often positioned as idealized normative identities, shielded from their own (inevitable) gender trouble. Amin shows how, by maintaining a belief in the coherence of those categories, we also risk reducing gender to a volitional act of self-nomination. Identity categories are inevitably "misfits," and it is crucial, writes Amin, for contemporary gender politics to remember that gender categories "are social and interpersonal, not individual."

As these summaries—themselves readings of readings—attest, reading with is never a simple affair. Sometimes it has the quality of a “surprising or felicitous contact”; sometimes the reading surprises the reader, and no doubt would (and will) surprise the author of the text that, in its coming into being as text, announces its autonomy from authors and readers alike. But these contributions, like our introduction, also share in a commonality, constituting a polyvocal and collective tribute to Butler: to their generosity as a reader, interlocutor, colleague, advocate, activist, friend; to their singular contributions to an intellectual world capacious enough to hold open “the proximity of difference that makes [us] work to forge new ties of identification and to reimagine what it means to belong to a human [and indeed, more-than-human] community” (*PL* 38).

## Notes

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1. Jacques Derrida, “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York, 1991).
2. That process may arrive at a priori principles retroactively, as it were. If there is any such principle in Judith Butler’s oeuvre, it is the existential fact of “proximity” as a fraught togetherness that imposes both an ethical and a moral obligation.
3. “‘Like a natural woman’ is a phrase that suggests that ‘naturalness’ is only accomplished through analogy or metaphor. In other words, ‘You make me feel like a metaphor of the natural,’ and without ‘you,’ some denaturalized ground would be revealed”; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990), 154–55n34.
4. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 12.
5. For example, in a later section on the biology of sex differentiation, Butler writes that “cultural assumptions regarding the relative status of men and women and the binary relation of gender itself frame and focus the research into sex-determination. The task of distinguishing sex from gender becomes all the more difficult once we understand that gendered meanings frame the hypothesis and the reasoning of those biomedical inquiries that seek to establish ‘sex’ for us as it is prior to the cultural [that is, gendered] meanings that it acquires”; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 109.
6. For example, in a movement that echoes the one we have just described, Monique Wittig, who at first is presented as refuting the sex/gender distinction that had rescued Beauvoir’s formula from incoherence, turns out in that refutation not to reject but rather to radicalize the formula: “Hence, for Wittig, we might say, one is not born a woman, one becomes one; but further, one is not born female, one becomes female; but even more radically, one can, if one chooses, become neither female nor male, woman nor man. Indeed, the lesbian appears to be a third gender or, as I shall show, a category that radically problematizes both sex and gender as stable political categories of description”; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 113.

7. Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York, 2012), 220. All subsequent references to this work will be parenthetical in text after the abbreviation *PW*.
8. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York, 2020), 38. All subsequent references to this work will be parenthetical in text after the abbreviation *PL*.
9. Butler's usage returns us to the root of the term, *confundēre*, that is, "to pour or mingle together."
10. The echo of Édouard Glissant's *Poétique de la relation* is intentional given the resonance with the Martiniquan poet's reflections on opacity, as Tavia Nyong'o suggests in his contribution to this issue. See Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation* (Paris, 1990).
11. There are proximities to pursue between Butler's theorization of precarious life and Hortense Spillers's theorization of Black flesh in the aftermath of slavery as "the registering of a wounding," the flesh in its "seared, divided, ripped-apartness"; Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 67.
12. Stuart J. Murray, "Ethics at the Scene of Address: A Conversation with Judith Butler," *Symposium* 11, no. 2 (2007): 416.
13. Judith Butler, "Bracha's Eurydice," *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 1 (2004): 99. All subsequent references to this work will be parenthetical in text after the abbreviation *BE*.
14. Some of Bracha Ettinger's Eurydice paintings can be seen at <https://www.wikiart.org/en/bracha-ettinger/eurydice-n-19-1996>.
15. Virgil, *Georgics*, 4.501. All translations are our own.
16. Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York, 2015), 43, 53. All subsequent references to this work will be parenthetical in text after the abbreviation *SS*.
17. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 10.58–59: *prendique et prendere certans / nil nisi cedentes infelix arripit auras* ("struggling to be seized and to seize, he, wretched, does not catch anything except receding air").
18. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, 1997), 171; see also: "The 'turn' that marks the melancholic response to loss appears to initiate the redoubling of the ego as an object; only by turning back on itself does the ego acquire the status of a perceptual object" (168).
19. We recall, from a quite different context, Butler's statement that gendering, too, "is a kind of impersonation and approximation"; Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York, 1993), 313.
20. Judith Butler, "Fury and Justice in the Humanities" (Danziger Lecture, University of Chicago, November 11, 2021).
21. Sarah Ruhl, *Eurydice* (New York, 2008), 12, 61.
22. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London, 2016), 53, 61.