

All In

I MUST ADMIT, THIS MEDITATION, which is more like a philosophical encomium articulated through critical trans theorizing, as it were, engendered immense timidity. Timidity, yes, because of something much grander than what is referred to as imposter syndrome. I am among thinkers who have edified me from afar, thinkers who are quite deeply responsible for the modalities through which I think. To wit, I have, in the hallway of my apartment—a high-ceilinged abode in Chicago, a literal stone’s throw away from the always queer Boystown where Marsha P. Johnson’s visage is etched into a golden pillar in front of a Whole Foods—a wall of scholars. The faces of and quotations from some of the most influential thinkers to impact my partner and me appear in a series between light sconces. The very first, no lie, is Judith Butler. Another, in fact, is someone else who graces the pages of this issue. Another, the greatest novelist of all time, in my opinion. This is all to say that I am, as I’ve told those who surrounded me when I received the invitation to write this, in rarefied air.

All of this is conveyed to you, reader, not because of the resident youngster’s need to genuflect to academic elders. Rather, I convey all of this to attend to the provisional and precarious call of the invitation: to note our *proximities* to the ethical and political, indeed our relational propinquity to the discourses that have quite literally molded us. These discourses are not “merely” intellectual, the conversational topics of navel-gazers and ivory-tower musers; they are truly affective, emotional, political, and, yes, intellectual. To think alongside performativity or grievability or gender is no trivial matter; to think alongside people like Judith Butler and Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, not to mention, closer still to my disciplinary home, Denise Ferreira da Silva and Hortense Spillers and C. Riley Snorton and Nahum Chandler, is immensely on the ground, as others like to say as an oppositional juxtaposition to the intellectual. If such people are, to my mind, thinkers, people who philosophize; and if, as Socrates has said, philosophy is practice for death and dying; and further, if I am to do work and scholarship in service of those to whom my work is given, which is to say the Black and trans, as both demographic and analytic; then to do the kind of

philosophical thinking I have been called, *sent*, to do by someone like Butler is the only work I ought to be doing. Because the emphasis is to be on the entirety of that Socratic dictum: not only the death and dying but the *practice*, which occurs in life, as life, in service of the proliferation of life in excess of that death and dying. And few people have gifted me a cultivated terrain on which to practice like the reason for this academic season: Judith Butler.

We have been tasked with the following: to select a single passage of Butler's writerly and intellectual corpus that has been particularly influential and meditate on the various modes of thought—or rather, more preferable to me, modes of *thinking*, in that Heideggerian sense, where thinking is a philosophical handicrafting that alludes and provokes and incites—fostered by reading *with* Butler. We are to *read* alongside Butler, in light of Butler, within and after Butler. I receive this invitation eagerly, and, in that eagerness, and in my general academic flouting of rules and requisites, I cannot help but choose not one, as I've been told, but two passages.

Prior to the passages, it is imperative that stakes be made clear. Where Butler has been deeply useful for me in my work is in relation to trans theorizing. Trans theorizing is, for me, always woven through the Black and feminist—they are, indeed, constitutive of one another, these three sociopolitical and intellectual vectors¹—a kind of thinking and agitating in service of gender radicality and, fundamentally, gender abolition. For sure, I am aware that Butler is less inclined to use this language or to favor certain iterations of abolishing gender. That is a different conversation, for a different day. Nevertheless, what Butler has gifted me, truly *gifted* me, is an emphasis on an iconoclastic posture with respect to gender, where gender is understood as a normative regime, a coercion, something that one is required to move through in order to access personhood. From this view, gender emerges as something that is not merely descriptive and righteously coveted, reclaimed, or the like; gender, instead, becomes something we can disavow. In this disavowal there is space, then, to reconfigure, rework, blaspheme, and, most enticing to me, *irrevere*.

The first passage of the two on which this meditation will dwell emerged discursively in 1994, in an introduction for *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. “Against Proper Objects” excavates the illegibilities and implications of the manners in which certain disciplinary formations, namely “lesbian and gay studies,” are erected as properly concerning certain aspects of life that other disciplines, by implication, are not (sufficiently) concerned with. That is, if lesbian and gay studies’ “proper object” of study is sexuality, it touts itself as the best or most valid methodological ambit in which to examine sexuality: all other examinations, be they in English or sociology or cultural studies or what have you, are

inadequate. And furthermore, as this objective propriety is set up, feminist studies becomes the proper field to examine “sex” or “gender” (although these, historically, have been discursive stand-ins for putative assigned or assumed or normatively conceived anatomical configurations) to the exclusion of sexuality. In short, certain disciplines “own” certain objects of study, and encroachment on this territory becomes a fireable offense. Specifically, on that 1994 issue’s sixth page, Butler writes: “The institution of the ‘proper object’ takes place, as usual, through a mundane sort of violence. Indeed, we might read moments of methodological founding as pervasively anti-historical acts, beginnings which fabricate their legitimating histories through a retroactive narrative, burying complicity and division in and through the funereal figure of the ‘ground.’”² The presumption of a proprietary hold over a founding methodological origin, legitimating the professed ownership, as merely a descriptive endeavor is, quite simply, off the mark. It is, as Butler says, a violence, one that obscures the utter impurity, the utter promiscuity, of the byzantine vectors contributing to the “founding” of a field of study. And, I must add, it allows for a “ground” to be established, a ground that, in its concretized sedimentation, cannot hold space—a necessary space—for the ways, I think, that insurrectionary trans theorizing urges a conception of the ground as always unsettled and thus, necessarily, urges the very unsettling of groundedness. But more on this in a bit.

And passage two, from Butler’s most recent book to date, *The Force of Nonviolence*:

If the self that I defend is me, my relatives, others who belong to my community, nation, or religion, or those who share a language with me, then I am a closet communitarian who will, it seems, preserve the lives of those who are like me, but certainly not those who are unlike me. Moreover, I apparently live in a world in which that “self” is recognizable as a self. Once we see that certain selves are considered worth defending while others are not, is there not a problem of inequality that follows from the justification of violence in the service of self-defense? . . .

. . . Such a self can function as a kind of regime, including as part of its extended self all those who bear similitude to one’s color, class, and privilege, thus expelling from the regime of the subject/self all those marked by difference within that economy.³

The self might be indefensibly defensible precisely because the “self” is a construction of the validity of the “inside” and the justifiability of violating those “outside.” The threshold of this self, however, is laden with the various antagonisms and violences that construct the very notion of the self—indeed, the self and the desire to defend it on its own grounds is inextricable from the violence that follows from defending that self against others who are, ostensibly and by implication, not properly “selves.” If the self does not

require that a blow be initiated before it defends itself, if the self needs only the possibility of threat—a possibility that can be and has long been conjured, a phantasmic threat given purported actuality by virtue of the incoming threat’s proximity to racialized and nonnormatively gendered, and otherwise “tainted,” specters—then the self can justifiably violate non-selves, that is, things that do not bear a similitude to the self doing the defending, which indeed defines those being defended against as effectively excavated of selfhood. The self then 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. How, then, is the very notion of the self and its desired preservation not in the end a desire to violate others on the grounds that they are not proper selves? The self, as Butler says, is a regime.

This juxtaposing of Butler in 1994 and, twenty-six years later, in 2020 conditions the emergence of a mode of thinking I come to by way of trans theorizing, not to mention the paraontological radicality of Black studies. Of concern here, and that which will concern the remainder of this meditation, is the possibility of emerging in relation to sociality by way of something not quite a self, indeed emerging in relation to sociality as the vitiation of a self such that the vitiation is the modality through which sociality manifests. There is, I think, a veritable obsession with demarcating the parameters of a self, with all its attending taxonomic criteria, which, it seems to me, the kind of trans theorization to which I adhere seeks to level a critique against or, more precisely, subvert. What I have as my aim is an understanding of the “proper” as a categorical regime of regulative violence, insofar as the proper is the instantiation of the a priori exclusion of that which might have been or how something might have been otherwise. Furthermore, my aim is to assert that the very notion of the self—not merely certain unsavory selves, those selves easily deemed not so good, such as those selves clutching whiteness or masculinity—is a disseminator of violence by dint of its embedded propriety, making selfhood itself a categorical regime of regulative violence. What, then, is possible, what is joyously, imaginatively emergent, when we no longer need to be a self and never needed to be one at all?

I have been permitted, as it were, via the work of Butler in these two selected passages, to shimmy down into a kind of philosophically iconoclastic abyss whose dismal density is in fact generative for thinking that which often is disallowed to thought: the subversion of, and conceptualization of subjectivity without, the subject. A detachment and, indeed, abolition of the subject and its base—its ground, its foundation, its hubristic stasis (even in understandings of the subject as always in flux, one is still, always, *a* subject, *the* subject that one has been and will continue to be)—is what is grasped at.

This would invite a detachment from context and the fixity of positionality, an unsettling of ground that is, too, an unsettling (and perhaps, more forcefully, a vitiation) of that which uses the ground to remain standing. If the notion of a self has buried within it a notion of exclusivity, and if it also has within it a notion of propriety, where I arrive is an oppositional place, which is to say the self is made possible by a fundamental exclusion, and that exclusion is a violation of not only other purported nonselves but also the very subject that is said to be a self, inasmuch as that subject has excluded, from the jump, other kinds of selves and nonselves it might have been were it not for the regime of the self as the only proper way to exist in the world. I arrive, that is, at a thorough undermining of positioning as such, insofar as positioning gains its coordinates via a grid instantiated by racial capitalism, transantagonism, and patriarchy. The self, even somewhat capaciously thought, is, as Butler writes, a conception of selfhood through vectors of similarity, which then necessitates dissimilar selves that are rightly and righteously excluded on the grounds of race, nation, religion, gender, and the like. But since these categorizations are modalities of legibility erected by and offering footholds for the state and its various machinations, what might it be like to, in our radicality, imagine subjectivity without these things—subjectivity without the archive of the subject?⁴ To not wish to own anything, especially that which is at base a colonial imposition, all those attending things that were forged in the cauldron of delimitation and subordination—“even such ‘hard’ categories as gender, race, sex, and orientation are not *causes* of our oppression but its *effects*,” as Riki Wilchins said so many years ago—is perhaps what it means to revoke the sovereignty of the self and subject.⁵ And in revoking such a regime, a regime that disallows the kind of coalition for which abolition and trans theorizing yearn, we get ever closer to conceiving of that imaginative sociality into which we emerge when we jailbreak the strictures keeping us in this hellish place we call the world.

These strictures are, in my view, characteristic of the things that serve as footholds for sociality. That is, it seems that the notion of a self and all its propriety—propriety as both a thing to be owned and as properness—comes into view by way of a disavowal and, via that disavowal, a sedimentation that masks such a disavowal. What is understood as the “self” gathers that which is proper to a self and instantiates it as necessary for viability: binary gender (or, more liberally, one’s chosen gender, which, to me, is still a regime), a taxonomic racial classification, legible sexuality, neurotypicality, subjective discretion, and so on. These things are the proper objects of a subject, and to not concede to any of these as indexical of one’s subjectivity, or to do, performatively, any of these things reiteratively or improperly, is to then be thrust outside of viability, sanctioning exclusion and violation by virtue of one not measuring up, as it were. The grounds of the

subject are settled and sedimented in ways that supervene along ultimately normative lines of legible subjecthood. And while these grounds purport their stability and, indeed, singularity, they are thoroughly fractured. But the hubris of their cohesion and stability, which comes to structure the grounds on which not simply certain things are excluded but *the possibility of, desire for, and the sensibility of exclusion as a mode of (non)relation* are excluded, is precisely that which my understanding of trans theorizing seeks to trouble. For it is not that the institution of a proper object or conception of personhood stems from how we've settled on the definition of this or that framework; it is that this or that framework is settled and thus has a ground on which to institute the very idea of a proper and stable self.

How I've entered and, balancing a sober acknowledgment of my own impact in trans studies with the specter of cockiness, contributed to trans studies moves me toward a mobilization of the trans, analytically, as precisely a modality of refusing the "proper" of proper objects (and perhaps the "objects," too) as well as a dissolution of the desirability of a self. The trans studies to which I adhere is suffused with abolition, where abolition is, in part, the possibility of life and livability without the very things said to promote and structure life and livability. It is a trans studies deeply given over to a desire not to reform, which is to say, a desire to proliferate the validity of any and all genders. It does not simply wish to rid subjects of having to adhere to "bad" gendered compartments. Rather, there is, here, an understanding of gender itself as a kind of originary violence insofar as gender is, from the jump, an imposition, an imposed and coerced and (purportedly) unable to be refused ontology. Gender itself—not the bad kinds or the ones that you did not self-determine (a "self" that is to undergo critique)—forecloses what is improper and, in this foreclosure, constitutes, fundamentally, what is possible for and as the "self." Gender is the proper object that then mundanely violates, is complicit and divisive, fundamentally, in service of its buttressed persona as whole and natural and leak-free, via the funereal ground of "biology" and the binary. Because of this, I have been perversely and perhaps unintentionally enabled by Butler to want—to demand—the execution of the self. The "self" has, necessarily, "territorial limits and boundaries," as Butler says, so it stands that gesturing toward non- and deterritoriality, as the territorial is a colonial impulse that is not to be entertained in any iteration when it comes to proliferating the trans, necessitates an undermining of the self. This is the abolition of the self. Less of concern here is a strict fidelity to Butler—if I may, with utmost respect and humility—and more importantly a moving in the groove of what Butler has offered to me in terms of a radicality I have taken and have run with. I may, admittedly, have run off into the busy street and launched myself in front of a truck. But I wonder if I have actually run off and fallen, right before that

truck, into an open sewer hole, with others who know not of the light above nor of its economies or systems, only boisterousness of another kind, another type—a different rhythmic bop that vibrates into existence what it could be like to not be assaulted by the hubristic discretion and exclusion and ownership of the kinds of selves in the above world.

This is perhaps a yearning for an impossibility, maybe even a misguided assessment that others would call a mistaken, though understandable, pursuit of radicality. But that's the thing: radicality *is*, in many ways, a yearning for, and attempted imaginative cultivation of, impossibility. And I pursue such a radicality via the trans. The theorizing that trans does, or the transness articulated through and as theorizing, genuinely carried out, propounds a radicality I might call, alternatively and appositionally, nonnormative. Importantly, this is not the “resistant” or the “counter” or the “anti”—the “non” of nonnormativity expresses a declination, which, when affixed to (or better yet, deviously *unaffixed* to, proximal only to promote a delinking and severance from) normativity, declines and makes inoperative the normative, that stand-in for the universalization of the proper, masking its perforated edges and implying, wrongly, its ubiquity. When Butler critiques gay and lesbian studies' attempted institution of its proper object of study as sexuality, it is on the grounds that such an institution, this very impulse, emerges via violence. That violence is not tied strictly to the disciplinary field at hand; that violence, in fact, is endemic to attempts to institute propriety. And propriety establishes, or tries to establish, a ground, a fundament, an origin, from which all else stems. It is in this sense of the originary, one that stands in opposition to the more radical project someone like Nahum Chandler wishes to render terminologically through an originary *displacement*—indeed, propriety's originariness as an originary *emplacement*—that something like a self is made intelligible.⁶ For the self is said to be the origin of a subject, its reference point, its coherent site of origination. But the self might in fact be a foreclosure of what the subject might have been; or, further, a foreclosure of what one might become were it not required to be a “self” in order to become anything at all. Through the trans, or at least my understanding of it, an understanding laced with the mutinousness of the nonbinary and abolition, I settle nowhere other than within the desire to not be, to not have to be, to not even find desirable the notion of, a self.

Conclusively, here, the commitments I've been gifted by Butler's intellectual corpus, in likely byzantine and unanticipated ways, are, to quote another scholar briefly, exploratory of a “self outside the constraints of conventional identity categories” and “escape from confinements of many types.”⁷ But perhaps this needs to be pushed a bit more: the qualifier “conventional” feels like a mild capitulation. There is no need for it here. And

maybe there needn't be a "self" that is outside of these categories, for it may not truly be a "self" if it is outside. If the self is a regime, as noted above, and that regime must protect itself to maintain its regimented stability, it becomes a kind of bouncer guarding the door, checking IDs and assessing proper gender ratios and sufficient social status. If one is not sufficiently sober, properly dressed, adherent to the established protocols, willing to pay the fees and costs, on "the list," then that regime is authorized to kick you out. But no one ought to be kicked out. Indeed, I desire that no one *can* be kicked out because we are all already in. And if we are already in we cannot be, and need not be, selves that, definitionally, need to have ins and outs. We are all in because we are all in.

Notes

1. Indeed, my monograph, *Black Trans Feminism* (Durham, NC, 2022), is a sustained meditation on this.
2. Judith Butler, "Against Proper Objects," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2/3 (Summer–Fall 1994): 6.
3. Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London and New York, 2020), 11–12.
4. This is, of course, deeply conversant with subjectless critique. Subjectless critique has also been met with various interrogations, namely that it is ensconced in a kind of privilege, where only those subjects who have historically been subjects get to now, curiously, claim the death of subjecthood. And such a subjectlessness is scarily close to the hubris of a view from nowhere that characterizes, in particular, whiteness's status as default and universal. I wish not to inhabit such a discourse. Indeed, I have my own responses to such criticisms, responses that are expounded upon in my current manuscript-in-progress. I suppose all I will say now is that I maintain that the very notion of the subject, of the self—although the two are not to be entirely, uncritically conflated—is one that is not innocent. The subject, the self, is not a transparency that provides unmediated knowledge of the identificatory and affective innards of someone or something. Rather, in short, the self is a construction that attends and, in fact, precedes *and* supersedes the being it is believed to simply make visible. It is a circumscription, an a priori curtailment.
5. Riki Anne Wilchins, *Read My Lips: Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender* (Riverdale, NY, 2013), 206, emphasis in original. See also "Conversación Los Abajocomunes," published in *The New Inquiry*, in which Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (it is unclear which of them said this, although the question of ownership of the response is irrelevant and, in fact, refused) ask, "What if it turns out that at a really fundamental level coloniality is an imposition of the proper, and of propriety, which critiques of appropriation advance rather than retard, all in the interest of a certain stillness, an inertial resistance? There's a general non-belonging to which we want (deviantly, of necessity) to belong"; Yolotl Gómez Alvarado, Juan Pablo Anaya, Luciano Concheiro, Cristina Rivera Garza, and Aline Hernández, "Conversación Los Abajocomunes: Stefano Harney and Fred

Moten in Conversation on the Occasion of the Spanish Translation of *The Undercommons*,” *New Inquiry*, 5 September 2018, <https://thenewinquiry.com/conversacion-los-abajocomunes>.

6. See Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *X—the Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York, 2014).
7. Doreen M. Drury, “Boy-Girl, Imp, Priest: Pauli Murray and the Limits of Identity,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 147.