

In Solidarity

THERE IS A POIGNANT AND rare glimpse of Judith Butler's coming-of-age young adult years in a film by Bruce Robbins titled *Some of My Best Friends Are Zionists*.¹ In this talking-heads documentary featuring the who's who of anti-Zionist Jewish Americans, Butler recounts bringing home some of Edward Said's writings, presumably to solicit reasoned political debate during the family dinner. But their infuriated mother, having none of it, lifted up the table where they sat and "[threw] it against the wall." Although no doubt there was some kind of queer provocation at work, Butler recounts that, at that moment, they realized that "this wasn't going to be a conversation we were going to have very easily." Later in the film, Butler reflects that, in the context of their Jewish schooling as a young person, to abhor the Nazis meant to sanction Israel. "To take that linkage apart was to cleave my own soul."

From this film one gets the impression that staking an anti-Zionist positionality as a Jew could be thought of as the new coming-out story. Butler might as well have been telling their mother they were a lesbian (and who knows, maybe there was an even earlier table-throwing incident). Having already come out as a lesbian, however, Butler still faced the thornier confessional task. There is merit to this analogy. In the years following 9/11, Butler did take a distinctive turn in their work on queer theory, gender, and sexuality that would condition its future iterations. In concert with numerous discussions on the politics of public mourning, Butler published a series of texts on "transversal grief," or what they have elsewhere called the "metrics of grievability" and the "biopolitical management of the ungrievable."² From *Precarious Life* (2004) to *Frames of War* (2009) and beyond, Butler persistently asks, "What is the condition under which we fail to grieve others?"

Lest the conversion narrative appear overdetermined, the entwinement of grief and politics in Butler's thought is enduring. In a 2010 interview with Udi Aloni in *Haaretz*, Butler clarifies the through line: "The question of grievability has linked my work on queer politics, especially the AIDS crisis, with my more contemporary work on war and violence, including the work

on Israel-Palestine.”³ The discussion of melancholy in *Gender Trouble*, they explain, emanates from their upbringing in a Jewish community, but this focus on mourning and melancholia also presages “the Jewish Question” that has animated much of Butler’s work in the last twenty years. In the oscillation from the psychoanalytic to the biopolitical, from the psyche to the community, from Sigmund Freud’s subject of psychic interiority to the global stage of political violence, Butler’s work on grief has given us tools to shed these bifurcations and has examined anew what it might mean to always see one’s grief, and processes of grieving, as an ethicopolitical commitment to being in relation. Necessarily, then, grieving for others also entails grieving a world within which the grief of others is systematically denied.

While grievability indexes a biopolitics of value and worth, whether human, animal, ecological, or inhuman, the demand for privatizing one’s own grief runs deep, and the actual journey of grieving, of being with grief and being openly explicit about this being with, runs counter to every fiber that constitutes the composed liberal subject of self-care. If in *Gender Trouble* the melancholic subject of gender performativity mourns the lost love object, denied via the prohibition of homosexual desire, in later years we see Butler’s increasing attention to the public expression of who is grievable and who has the right to grieve, whose grief is seen as legitimate. Much of Butler’s questioning revolves around the denial of both to Palestinians. This link between grievability and those denied their grief marks the violent conditions under which grieving is authorized or denied, and what shapes and temporalities legitimate grief can inhabit.⁴ As Butler writes, “the 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.”⁵ These public insurgencies of grief—I think of the protest-funeral for four young Palestinian men that I with thousands of others attended in the West Bank a few years ago—are as much an affective mobilization of political rage as they are a refusal to privatize and, in the case of Palestine, subalter-nize the profound grief, both sharp and quotidian, that permeates the lives of the occupied. In short, these insurgencies become an anticolonial praxis of grieving.

With these ruminations on grief, Butler began their foray into mainstream public debates about anti-Semitism, academic freedom, and Jewish identity. The first writing of this ilk that I could locate was a piece from 2003 in the *London Review of Books* titled “No, It’s Not Anti-Semitic.”⁶ In what is largely a response to then-Harvard president Larry Summers’s proclamation that critique of Israel is anti-Semitic, Butler reroutes the praxis of criticism as a “Jewish value,” foreshadowing their thinking on politicoethical Jewish theology that would later appear in *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique*

of *Zionism* (2012). Unsurprisingly, Butler makes mincemeat of Summers's convoluted logic, surgically dissecting Jewish identity from the Zionist project of the Israeli state. Part of this "soul-cleaving" severing for Butler meant recognizing the transformations of Jewish racialization and victimization during the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and proposing an ethics of challenging what could be called "self-subalternization." "No political ethics can start from the assumption that Jews monopolise the position of victim," Butler avers. In typically wry fashion, Butler untangles the anxieties at the heart of a subject formation that has without question undergone radical and rapid revision: "Historically we have now reached a position in which Jews cannot legitimately be understood always and only as presumptive victims. Sometimes we surely are, but sometimes we surely are not."⁷

Butler further probes the enmeshment of anti-Semitism and free speech in a 2006 article in *Radical Philosophy*, pointing out the deleterious consequences of academic freedom debates that tarry in abstraction. Academic freedom, Butler argues, can only exist in a context within which democratic freedoms more generally flourish. Avowing that the implementation of academic freedom is the implicit purpose of such abstractions, Butler states that "if the exercise of academic freedom ceases or is actively thwarted, that freedom is lost, which is why checkpoints are and should be an issue for anyone who defends a notion of academic freedom."⁸ The reference to checkpoints intentionally attends to the relationship of freedom to mobility, of apartheid as intellectual enclosure, and takes its cue from the Right to Education movement in Palestine. It also looks forward to debates emerging from 2010 onward regarding the adoption of boycott resolutions by academic associations, most notably the American Studies Association.

Butler's interventions were also prescient in no small part because they gestured to the simmering force of the accusation of being "anti-Israel." Some twenty years later, the "new anti-Semitism" or the "anti-Semitism of the left"—tags used to dismiss legitimate criticism of Israeli state violence—has been codified in the International Holocaust Remembrance Association definition of anti-Semitism. Butler might today call this a "radically diluted" charge of anti-Semitism that is "used to defend Israel at all costs."⁹ These arguments were not confined to the page, and a crucial part of "reading with" Butler entails tracing the solidarity praxes that underpin their writing. Like other scholars committed to solidarity politics, Butler navigated and continues to navigate the tricky terrains of academic celebrity, instrumentalizing platforms, desires for complex theoretical work and mainstream communication, and the interstices of intellectual and political debates. Butler has engaged carefully and thoughtfully with the politics of solidarity in Palestine by organizing networks, appearing on activist panels, enduring

vitriolic blowback from Zionists, and championing the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. They met with Palestinian queer groups al-Qaws, Aswat, and Palestinian Queers for BDS and attended a critical session at the Audre Lorde Project during the 2011 US tour “Palestinian Queers Talk Politics,” organized by writer and activist Sarah Schulman. Butler was also part of long-term efforts to bring a BDS resolution to the Modern Language Association, lobbying that preceded their tenure as president. For years they have been an active board member of Jewish Voice for Peace, perhaps the organization in the United States most insistent on the need for debate within Jewish communities.

In the fall of 2012, Butler was awarded the prestigious Adorno Prize, to be presented in Frankfurt on 11 September 2021. The announcement incited a widespread campaign in Europe, led by the Scholars for Peace in the Middle East, demanding the rescinding of the award.¹⁰ At issue then in Germany, as still today, was Butler’s support for BDS, as well as their stellar recently published takedown of the Israeli state’s claim to Franz Kafka’s unpublished writing.¹¹ In their response to these attacks, Butler challenged the discursive terms upon which the accusation of anti-Semitism rests: “When one set of Jews labels another set of Jews ‘anti-Semitic,’ they are trying to monopolize the right to speak in the name of the Jews. So the allegation of anti-Semitism is actually a cover for an intra-Jewish quarrel.”¹² I am not suggesting that losing awards, speaking invitations, and readers is equivalent to what Palestinian scholars have suffered; the case of Steven Salaita is exemplary in this regard. But Butler has borne the pressure of being a very visible lightning rod for intracommunal debates, whether as a “self-hating Jew” or—in the case of Germany—as a site of projection of underprocessed anti-Semitism too loaded with historical weight to be directly confronted. Perhaps the most well-known attack on BDS that involved Butler was an event in 2013 at Brooklyn College with BDS co-founder Omar Barghouti. New York City council members threatened to withhold funds from CUNY if Brooklyn College did not cancel it. Organized by the Students for Justice in Palestine, what was to be a conversation about the boycott movement inevitably turned into a referendum on the conditions of free speech that allow or prohibit such a conversation to take place. Butler’s talk was characteristically incisive, but it was their reflection on the furor of the prior weeks that bespoke a rare moment of vulnerability and conveyed the taxing toll of the work: “At the time I thought it would be very much like other events I have attended, a conversation with a few dozen student activists in the basement of a student center. So, as you can see, I am surprised and ill-prepared for what has happened.”¹³

We never find out what Butler’s mother made of their explicit anti-Zionist politics over the years, or if this family dinner table ever got easier

to navigate. But Butler’s work made this conversation just a tad less difficult for untold numbers of Jews in the United States and elsewhere. This is far from a comprehensive survey of Butler’s vast writings on anti-Semitism, Judaism, academic freedom, and Israel and Palestine. But much engagement with their corpus of writing proceeds through an absencing and avoidance of their work on Palestine, as if Palestine is not animating, even central, to their thought, as if it’s possible to ignore that one of academia’s most celebrated queer theorists has carried with them Said’s “question of Palestine” throughout their career. Beyond the political conservatisms of US queer theory, Butler crafted an academic praxis of solidarity that honors what Angela Davis calls the “indivisibility of justice.”¹⁴

Notes

1. Bruce Robbins, *Some of My Best Friends Are Zionists* (2013), video at Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/67424923>.
2. “Metrics of grievability” and “transversal grief” are from Judith Butler, “‘Mourning Becomes the Law’—Judith Butler from Paris,” *Sexuality Policy Watch*, 18 November 2015, <https://sxpolitics.org/mourning-becomes-the-law-judith-butler-from-paris/13688>; the “biopolitical management of the ungrievable” can be found in Judith Butler, “Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?” *Radical Philosophy* 176 (November/December 2012), <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/can-one-lead-a-good-life-in-a-bad-life>.
3. Judith Butler, “As a Jew, I Was Taught It Was Ethically Imperative to Speak Up,” interview by Udi Aloni, *Haaretz*, 24 February 2010, <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5052023>.
4. Butler, “Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?”
5. *Ibid.*
6. Judith Butler, “No, It’s Not Anti-Semitic,” *London Review of Books* 25, no. 16 (21 August 2003), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v25/n16/judith-butler/no-it-s-not-anti-semitic>.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Judith Butler, “Israel/Palestine and the Paradoxes of Academic Freedom,” *Radical Philosophy* 135 (January/February 2006), <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/israelpalestine-and-the-paradoxes-of-academic-freedom>.
9. Butler, “No, It’s Not Anti-Semitic.”
10. For the text of the Adorno Prize Lecture, see Butler, “Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?”
11. Judith Butler, “Who Owns Kafka?” *London Review of Books* 33, no. 5 (3 March 2011), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n05/judith-butler/who-owns-kafka>.
12. Judith Butler, “Judith Butler Responds to Attack: ‘I Affirm a Judaism That is Not Associated with State Violence,’” *Mondoweiss*, 27 August 2012, <https://mondoweiss.net/2012/08/judith-butler-responds-to-attack-i-affirm-a-judaism-that-is-not-associated-with-state-violence/>.

13. Judith Butler, "Judith Butler's Remarks to Brooklyn College on BDS," *Nation*, 7 February 2013, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/judith-butlers-remarks-brooklyn-college-bds/>.
14. Angela Davis, "'The Indivisibility of Justice' Angela Davis Speech at Gallaudet University," *Northend Agent's*, 9 January 2017, <https://www.northendagents.com/indivisibility-justice-angela-davis-speech-gallaudet-university/>.