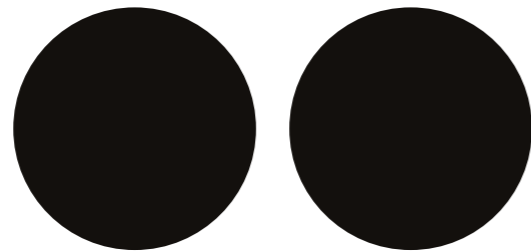


# JUDITH

## The Artistry of Nonviolence

# BUTLER



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INTERVIEW CHARLES SHAFAlEH

THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER AND GENDER THEORIST JUDITH BUTLER UPENDED OUR WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT GENDER. TODAY, SHE ADVOCATES FOR AGGRESSIVE NONVIOLENCE IN A NEW BOOK, EXAMINING THE DANGERS OF INDIVIDUALISM, THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF THE SELF AND OTHERS, AND THE ROLE OF INTENSE PASSIONS.

When Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble* in 1990, questioning how sex, gender and sexuality are determined and expressed was not commonplace in America and Europe. Her theories concerning “gender performativity” – that gender is not innate but rather continuously formed and reiterated through one’s actions, which themselves are historically and socially coded – were novel at the time and harshly dismissed by many academics and feminist critics alike. Despite her arguments’ dilution and even misinterpretation during the following decades, their global influence has become inescapable. The widespread celebration of queerness alone exemplifies, in part, how critical theory can transcend scholarly debate and impact daily life.

A professor at the University of California, Berkeley, since 1993, Butler long ago extended her concerns beyond gender and sexuality. In *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009), *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015) and other work, she discusses the means by which governments and the media portray some people as worth mourning while characterizing entire populations in ways that make them ungrievable, and she emphasizes the precarity that defines all lives on Earth. In *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020), the focus of the following edited e-mail interview, she formulates an original view of nonviolence that asks that we reconceptualize no less than our

understanding of the self and the other, stressing their fundamental interdependence.

Butler not only understands the ambitiousness of her argument but also celebrates what she calls their “unrealism.” Bringing a new world into existence will never be simple. Yet few theorists today have witnessed, as she has, the ways in which their radical and complex ideas transformed society – however long that evolution may take.

**CHARLES SHAFAlEH** Camus once wrote, “Through a curious transposition peculiar to our times, it is innocence that is called upon to justify itself.” *The Force of Nonviolence* suggests the same holds true today for nonviolence. What was the primary catalyst that necessitated your defense?

**JUDITH BUTLER** I am not sure that there was one contemporary situation to which the book was responding. I had been giving lectures on the topic for the last several years. There were strong nonviolent commitments in several movements that I have been witnessing or participating in, including the local demonstrations at the University of California against tuition hikes, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, the collective resistance to rising authoritarianism in Turkey and the wave of feminist movements throughout Latin America. Years ago, I wrote something on the Rodney King trial,

showing how the defense for the police sought to reverse the sequence of events, arguing that King was the violent force and the police were engaged in self-defense. So, for me, this book was not only about defending nonviolence as a way of life, but showing as well how “violence” and “nonviolence” can get reversed and twisted in racist forms of logic.

**CS** The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek argues that the oft-quoted statement, “If God does not exist, then everything is permitted,” should be inverted: that if God does exist, everything is permitted. Your arguments in the book regarding violence, such as how it often effaces itself in the name of self-defense, may suggest a similarly provocative variation of his claim: if self-defense exists, then everything is permitted.

**JB** I see that the main point of your question is whether once “self-defense” is used to legitimate any and all sorts of violence, does it not lose its meaning and effectiveness? Does it become, in other words, a generalized alibi for violence? My response is that yes, it sometimes does work to exonerate police and military powers of their violent crimes, but that does not mean that it has lost all meaning or that we should not fight for a more honest formulation. Just because a term can be appropriated by a foe does not mean that we let the term go. We fight to stabilize its semantics, to insist on

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its meaning, and we refute all those who use it for spurious reasons. Along the way, we have to give an analysis for why and how they use it to exonerate their violence, so we can have an operative public distinction that lets us criticize that noxious appropriation from the one we want to preserve.

CS You problematize the “self” in “self-defense.” How must we change our understanding of the self?

JJ When one is not protected by the state, when the state is perhaps that from which one needs protection, how does one proceed? In the first instance, one proceeds with others because one is not alone in that predicament, and it can be analyzed and countered only with others, through collaboration. Second, there has to be an understanding that it is not just this individual body that is subject to violence, but a number of bodies similarly situated. Vulnerability is not just an attribute of this self, but a way of specifying social relations. I am vulnerable to any number of people and institutions, and we can say that vulnerability is always a vulnerability to something. That object, that other, that police force, all define my vulnerability socially; vulnerability implicates us in the external world, one on which we depend to survive, one that also has the power to retract the very means we require for living. Those interrelationships should, ideally, constitute supportive and life-affirming infrastructures of life, but too often they fail, and they fail some people much more than others. We can see this clearly in the case of health care: Black and brown communities are disproportionately deprived of the very services they need to live and are, hence, vulnerable to debilitation and death in high numbers.

Nonviolence has to do with this recognition of interdependency, the fact that it can be – and has been – exploited but also that it constitutes the possibility of a material equality no longer based on individualism. When any of us oppose nonviolence, it is because we [fail to] recognize that we are not only responsible for each other’s life, but also that our own life is composed of these bonds. We strike the other and, in so doing, strike at the relations that let any of us live.

CS Your critique of normative understandings of the self ties into your critique of individualism. What do you find most pernicious regarding our obsession with individualism?

JJ I am not sure that individualism is a contemporary obsession. Perhaps we have to return to C. B. MacPherson’s *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* to understand how the individual became naturalized as the basic unit of society. In other words, how did an anti-social concept become the basis of society? In fact, I think we can understand the individual as a social form. When we ask who counts as an individual, we can see all the criteria of social inclusion and exclusion at work in the making of an individual. They surely include gender, race, class, but also able-bodied status and age. Of course, under conditions of neoliberalism, the individual is defined differently, seeking to enhance human capital or becoming an entrepreneur of the self not as commodity or property, but as human capital, credit-worthy, always on the lookout for new opportunities to have the self branded and rated so it can “exist” within those social terms. Here again, I am not sure how generalizable this view of the self is, but it does seem to constitute a distinct moment of selfhood in the midst of neoliberal

logics of financialization and marketization.

All this makes the case for reanimating more substantial ideas of social democracy or, indeed, democratic socialism for the present. During the pandemic and these times in which increasing numbers of people are subject to increased precarity, it seems crucial to ask who we are in relation to each other, to animals and life processes more generally, to the earth, and to expand our selfhood beyond individualism. Or, better yet, to live to the side of self-serving forms of individualism in the name of the collective future of human and other life-forms. If we don’t get that connection as basic, we will destroy it.

CS You emphasize the ways in which stories we tell ourselves condition – and limit – how we understand the self, the other, ethics and morality, among other subjects. In at least America today, fictional stories are often judged by the degree to which one “sees oneself” in the narrative or “identifies with” specific characters. Is this mode of reading unproductive, even damaging? And how might it relate to the popular notion that fiction teaches us empathy?

JJ It always feels difficult to come out against empathy because most people recoil and conclude that anyone who argues that way must be in favor of coldness and moral indifference. My concern with empathy and identification is that it often extrapolates or projects the existing experience of a self to grasp what is going on with someone else. Perhaps it is more important to pause, to accept that someone else is telling you a different story than the one you already know, a different story than your own. If I say I understand someone on the basis of my own experience, then I have not really opened to that other. I have assumed that my experience is sufficient

for knowing another and that there is nothing for me to encounter out there. In my view, it is important to be surprised, if not upended, by what another tells you, to accept what is other and to listen hard, not so you can explain it all within the terms you already have. No, some encounters require that I have to allow my concepts and schemes of understanding to be revised. That strikes me as a more serious form of ethical responsiveness than identification. I do not have to “identify” to understand. Sometimes I have to give up identification to understand. Paradoxically, both identification and empathy can be ways of enlarging and projecting the self, letting the self engulf alterity itself.

Perhaps our students do seek to identify with characters, and this is invariably a moment in reading a novel. The situation is different with poetry, where plot tends to be absent, and we are left to fathom a voice that comes to us from nowhere. Even if we are engaged with plot, however, we can come to understand social realities like marriage, progress, debt and ways of dying. The ability to link literary texts to social realities depends on letting the form lead you in directions that you may not have anticipated.

CS Looking more specifically at language, you emphasize that even verb tense – the conditional, in particular – impacts how we see others and ourselves.

JJ It seems to me that ethical capacity depends on the possibility of imaginary variation – that is, taking a given reality and wondering what it would be like if seen from another angle, realizing that the angles through which we see in some ways constitute our sense of the situation. Filmmakers know this, but have we learned this kind of critical thinking in our ordinary lives?

I remember reading Sophocles’s *Antigone* when I was very young and becoming very upset when I realized that if Creon could have felt remorse a bit earlier, he could have freed her from the cave and saved her life. Remorse as an ethical sentiment depends on being able to look at a situation and to wish that one could have approached it differently. So the “what if” and the “conditional” are crucial linguistic components of everyday ethical reflection.

CS In *Precarious Life* (2004), you discuss how passion, grief and rage take us outside ourselves, undoing us in unpredictable and unknowable ways. Power keeps those intense emotions and actions in check, in order to maintain control of individuals and populations. Consider the implied need for the cessation of mourning during the pandemic, when various cities and nations declared themselves free of Covid. As a result, mourning becomes an act of protest. What is the importance of allowing the expression of these intense emotions?

JJ It is interesting that you say that power keeps intense emotions in check. It seems to me that quite the opposite happened with Trump. He understood on some level that white men were mourning the loss of their supremacy. And instead of saying, “Yes, it is time for you to mourn that loss in the name of racial equality, freedom and justice,” he stoked their grievances and resentments. In that case, he relied upon – and incited – the intensification of excessive masculine emotions in order to support his regime, his illegitimate claims of election fraud, his attack on women’s rights and LGBTQI rights, and the forms of white supremacy upon which his election had depended and that it came to embody. So, perhaps we have

to ask, “Which power wants to suppress emotions, and which emotions would those be?” It seems clear that verbal anger directed against racism and sexual harassment in the last few years has been twisted by those who want to suppress the anger. Speaking out, even calling out, may make some people deeply uncomfortable, but they are both legitimate forms of speech, even aggressive forms of nonviolence, with which we should live. I mean we should live with them if we are willing to be challenged. If we are not willing to be challenged, then we have recourse to “civility” and other civilizational virtues.

CS Why do you advocate for aggressive nonviolence, as opposed to the popular view that nonviolence is a calm or, pejoratively, “passive” practice?

JJ My defense of nonviolence depends on preserving the social bonds, even though we may wish to destroy. A wish to destroy is not the same as the act of destruction, and knowing and living that difference is the first opening to nonviolence. We don’t have to be peaceful in our souls to practice nonviolence. We can be enraged, and yet know that if we engage in violence as a response to injury, we will only make a more violent world. Even when we are brimming with murderous passion, we can still take a look at that passion, hold it at bay, draw a picture or a poem from that passion, recognize the countervailing passions. An aggressive nonviolence is one that does not convert rage into violence, but it does find its form. And its form can be aggressive without being either hateful or destructive. Finding the form for that is the artistry of nonviolence, one that can only really be practiced in concert with others. 🌹