

**PRECARIOUS LIFE by Judith Butler**

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p. xi The five essays collected here were all written after September 11, 2001, and in response to the conditions of heightened vulnerability and aggression that followed from those events. It was my sense in the fall of 2001 that the United States was missing an opportunity to redefine itself as part of a global community when, instead, it heightened nationalist discourse, extended surveillance mechanisms, suspended constitutional rights, and developed forms of explicit and implicit censorship. These events led public intellectuals to waver in their public commitment to principles of justice and prompted journalists to take leave of the time-honored tradition of investigative journalism.

p. xii One insight that injury affords is that there are others out there on whom my life depends, people I do not know and may never know. This fundamental dependency on anonymous others is not a fact. What this means, concretely, will vary across the globe. There are ways of distributing vulnerability, differential forms of allocation that make some populations more subject to arbitrary violence than others. But in that order of things, it would not be possible to maintain that the US has greater security problems than some of the more contested and vulnerable nations and peoples of the world. To be injured means that one has the chance to reflect upon injury, to find out the mechanisms of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from permeable borders, unexpected violence, dispossession, and

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fear, and in what ways. If national sovereignty is challenged, that does not mean it must be shored up at all costs, if that results in suspending civil liberties and suppressing political dissent. Rather, the dislocation from First World privilege, however temporary, offers a chance to start to imagine a world in which that violence might be minimized, in which an inevitable interdependency becomes acknowledged as the basis for global political community. I confess to not knowing how to theorize that interdependency. I would suggest, however, that both our political and ethical responsibilities are rooted in the recognition that radical forms of self-sufficiency and unbridled sovereignty are, by definition, disrupted by the larger global processes of which they are a part, that no final control can be secured, and that final control is not, cannot be, an ultimate value.

p. xiv One can even experience that abhorrence, mourning, anxiety, and fear, and have all of these emotional dispositions lead to a reflection on how others have suffered arbitrary violence at the hands of the US, but also endeavor to produce another public culture and another public policy in which suffering unexpected violence and loss and reactive aggression are not accepted as the norm of political life.

p. xv The military tribunals that have, at this date, not been used, represent a breach of constitutional law that makes final judgments of life and death into the prerogative of the President. The decision to detain some, in not most, of the 680 inmates currently in Guantanamo is left to "officials" who will decide, on uncertain grounds, whether these individuals present a risk to US security. Bound by no legal guidelines except those fabricated for the occasion, these officials garner sovereign power unto themselves. Whereas Foucault argued that sovereignty and governmentality can and do coexist, the particular form of that coexistence in the contemporary war prison has yet to be charted. Governmentality designates a model for conceptualizing power in its diffuse and multivalent operations, focusing on the management of populations, and operating through state and non-state institutions and discourses. In the current war prison, officials of governmentality wield sovereign power, understood here as a lawless and unaccountable operation of power, once legal rule is effectively suspended and military codes take its place. Once again, a lost or injured sovereignty becomes reanimated through rules that allocate final decisions about life and death to the executive branch or to officials with no elected status and bound by no constitutional constraints.

p. xvi As a result, the humans who are imprisoned in Guantanamo do not count as human; they are not subjects protected by international law. They are not subjects in any legal or normative sense. The dehumanization effected by "indefinite detention" makes use of an ethic frame for conceiving who will be human, and who will not. Moreover, the policy of "indefinite detention" makes use of an ethnic frame for conceiving who will be human, and who will not. Moreover, the policy of "indefinite detention" produces a sphere of imprisonment and punishment unfettered by any laws except those fabricated by the Department of State. The state itself thus attains a certain "indefinite" power to suspend the law and to fabricate the law, at which point the separation of powers is indefinitely set aside. the Patriot Act constitutes another effort to suspend civil liberties in the name of security, one that I do not consider in these pages, but hope to in a future article. In version 1 and 2 of the Patriot Act, it is the public intellectual culture that is targeted for control and regulation, overriding longstanding claims to intellectual freedom and freedom of association that have been central to conceptions of democratic political life.

p. xvi "The change of Anti-Semitism: Jews, Israel, and the Risks of Public Critique" considers one effort to quell public criticism and intellectual debate in the context of criticisms of Israeli state and military policy. The remark made by Harvard's President,

Lawrence Summers, that to criticize Israel is to engage in “effective” anti-Semitism is critically examined for its failure to distinguish between Jews and Israel, and for the importance of acknowledging publicly those progressive Jewish (Israeli and diasporic) efforts of resistance to the current Israel state. I consider the consequential implications of his statement, one that expressed sentiments that many people and organizations share, for censoring certain kinds of critical speech by allying those who speak critically with anti-Semitic aims. Given how heinous any identification with anti-Semitism is, especially for progressive Jews who wage their criticisms as Jews, it follows that those who might object to Israeli policy or, indeed, to the doctrine, and practice of Zionism, find themselves in the situation of either muting critical speech or braving the unbearable stigma of anti-Semitism by virtue of speaking publicly about their views. This restriction on speaking is enforced through the regulation of psychic and public identifications, specifically, by the threat of having to live in a radically uninhabitable and unacceptable identification with anti-Semitism if one speaks against Israeli policy, or, indeed, thereby depriving the charge of its meaning and importance in what surely must remain an active struggle against existing anti-Semitism.

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p. xvii “Precious Life” approaches the question of a non-violent ethics, one that is based upon an understanding of how easily human life is annulled. Emmanuel Levinas offers a conception of ethics that rests upon an apprehension of the precariousness of life, one that begins with the precarious life of the Other. He makes use of the “face” as a figure that communicates both the precariousness of life and the interdiction on violence. He gives us a way of understanding how aggression is *not* eradicated in an ethics of non-violence; aggression forms the incessant matter for ethical struggles. Levinas considers the fear and anxiety that aggression seeks to quell, but argues that ethics is precisely a struggle to keep fear and anxiety from turning into murderous action. Although his theological view conjures a scene between two humans each of which bears a face that delivers an ethical demand from a seemingly divine source, his view is nevertheless useful for those cultural analyses that seek to understand how best to depict the human, human grief and suffering, and how best to admit the “faces” of those against whom war is waged into public representation.

p. xx Public policy, including foreign policy, often seeks to restrain the public sphere from being an open to certain forms of debate and the circulation of media coverage. One way a hegemonic understanding of politics is achieved is through circumscribing what will and

will not be admissible as part of the public sphere itself. Without disposing populations in such a way that war seems good and right and true, no war can claim popular consent, and no administration can maintain its popularity. To produce what will constitute the public sphere, they hear, what they see. The constraints are not only on content – certain images of dead bodies in Iraq, for instance, are considered unacceptable for public visual consumption – but on what “can” be heard, read, seen, felt, and known. The public sphere is constituted in part by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, and what will not. It is also a way of establishing whose lives can be marked as lives, and whose deaths will count as deaths. Our capacity to feel and to apprehend hangs in the balance. But so, too, does the fate of the reality of certain lives and deaths as well as the ability to think critically and publicly about the effects of war.

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p. 142 So we seem to be charting a certain ambivalence. In a strange way, all of these faces humanize the events of the last year or so; they give a human face to Afghan women; they give a face to terror; they give a face to evil. But is the face humanizing in each and every instance? And if it is humanizing in some instances, in what form does this

humanization occur, and is there also a dehumanization performed in and through the face? Do we encounter those faces in the Levinasian sense, or are these, in various ways, images that. Through their frame, produce the paradigmatically human is established? Although it is tempting to think that the images themselves establish the visual norm for the human, one that ought to be emulated or embodied, this would be a mistake, since in the case of bin Laden or Saddam Hussein the paradigmatically human is understood to reside outside the frame; this is the human face in its deformity and extremity, not the one with which you are asked to identify. Indeed, the disidentification is incited through the hyperbolic absorption of evil into the face itself, the eyes. And if we are to understand ourselves as interpellated anywhere in these images, it is precisely as the unrepresented viewer, the one who is to capture and subdue, if not eviscerate, the image at hand. Similarly, although we might want to champion the suddenly bared faces of the young Afghan women as the celebration of the human, we have to ask in what narrative function these images are mobilized, whether the incursion into Afghanistan was really in the name of feminism, and in what form of feminism did it belatedly clothe itself. Most importantly, though, it seems we have to ask what scenes of pain and grief these images cover over and derealize. Indeed, all of these images seem to suspend the precariousness of life; they either represent American triumph, or provide an incitement for American military triumph in the future. *They are the spoils of*

*war or they are the targets of war.* And in this sense, we might say that the face is, in every instance, defaced, and that this is one of the presentational and philosophical consequences of war itself.

p. 144 It is important to distinguish among kinds of unrepresentability. In the first instance, there is the Levinasian view according to which there is a “face” which no face can fully exhaust, the face understood as human suffering, as the cry of human suffering, which can take no direct representation. Here the “face” is always a figure for something that is not literally a face. Other human expressions, however, seem to be figurable as a “face” even though they are not faces, but sounds or emissions of another order. The cry that is represented through the figure of the face is one that confounds the senses and produces a clearly improper comparison: that cannot be right, for the face is not a sound. And yet, the face can stand for the sound precisely because it is *not* the sound. In this sense, the figure underscores the incommensurability of the face with whatever it represents. Strictly speaking, then, the face does not represent anything, in the sense that it fails to capture and deliver that to which it refers.

p. 144 For Levinas, then, the human is not *represented by* the face. Rather, the human is indirectly affirmed in that very disjunction that makes representation impossible, and this disjunction is conveyed in the impossible representation. For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give.

In this sense, the human is not identified with what is represented but neither is it identified with the unrepresentable; it is, rather, that which limits the success of any representational practice. The face is not “effaced” in this failure of representation, but is constituted in that very possibility. Something altogether different happens, however, when the face operates in the service of a personification that claims to “capture” the human being in question. For Levinas, the human cannot be captured through the representation and we can see that some loss of the human takes place when it is “captured” by the image.

p. 145 An example of that kind of “capture” takes place when evil is personified through the face. A certain commensurability is asserted between the ostensible evil and the face. This face *is* evil, and the evil that the face *is* extends to the evil that belongs to humans in

general – generalized evil. We personify the evil on military triumph through a face that is supposed to be, to capture, to contain the very idea for which it stands. In this case, we cannot hear the face through the face. The face here masks the sounds of human suffering and the proximity we might have to the precariousness of life itself.

The face over there, though, the one whose meaning is portrayed as captured by evil is precisely the one that is not human, not in the Levinasian sense. The “I” who sees that face is not identified with it: the face represents that for which no identification is possible, an accomplishment of dehumanization and a condition for violence.

p. 145 Of course, a fuller elaboration of this topic would have to parse the various ways that representation works in relation to humanization and dehumanization. Sometimes there are triumphalist images that give us the idea of the human with whom we are to identify, for instance the patriotic hero who expands our own ego boundary ecstatically into that of the nation. No understanding of the relationship between the image and humanization can take place without a consideration of the conditions and meanings of identification and disidentification. It is worth noting, however, that identification always relies upon a difference that it seeks to overcome, and that its aim is accomplished only by reintroducing

the difference it claims to have vanquished. The one with whom I identify is not me, and that “not being me” is the condition of the identification. Otherwise, as Jacqueline Rose reminds us, identification collapses into identity, which spells the death of identification itself. This difference internal to identification is crucial, and, in a way, it shows us that Disidentification is part of the common practice of identification itself. The triumphalist image can communicate an impossible overcoming of this difference, a kind of identification that believes that it has overcome the difference that is the condition of its own possibility. The critical image, if we can speak that way, works this difference in the same way as the Levinasian image; it must not only fail to capture its referent, but *show* this failing.

p. 147 The war coverage has brought into relief the need for a broad de-monopolizing of media interests, legislation for which has been, predictably, highly contested on Capitol Hill. We think of these interests as controlling rights of ownership, but they are also, simultaneously, deciding what will and will not be publicly recognizable as reality. They do not show violence, but there is a violence in the frame in what is shown. That latter violence is the mechanism through which certain lives and deaths either remain unrepresentable or become represented in ways that effects their capture (once again) by the

war effort. The first is an effacement through occlusion; the second is an effacement through representation itself.

p. 148 In the initial campaign of the war against Iraq, the US government advertised its military feats as an overwhelming visual phenomenon. That the US government and military called this a “shock and awe” strategy suggests that they were producing a visual spectacle that numbs the senses and, like the sublime itself, puts out of play the very capacity to think. This production takes place not only for the Iraqi population on the ground, whose senses are supposed to be done in by this spectacle, but also for the consumers of war who rely on CNN, or Fox, the network that regularly interspersed its war coverage on television with the claim that it is the “most trustworthy” news source on the war. The “sock and awe” strategy seeks not only to produce an aesthetic dimension to war, but to exploit and instrumentalize the visual aesthetics as part of a war strategy itself. CNN has provided much of these visual aesthetics. And although the *New York Times* belatedly came out against the war, it also adorned its front pages on a daily basis with romantic images of military ordnance against the setting sun in Iraq or “bombs bursting in air” above the streets and homes of Baghdad (which are not surprisingly occluded from view).

p. 149 Tragically, it seems that the US seeks to preempt violence against itself by waging violence first, but the violence it fears is the violence it engenders. I do not mean to suggest by this that the US is responsible in some casual way for the attacks on its citizens. And I do not exonerate Palestinian suicide bombers, regardless of the terrible conditions that animate their murderous acts. There is, however, some distance to be traveled between living in terrible conditions, suffering serious, even unbearable injuries, and resolving on murderous acts. President Bush traveled that distance quickly, calling for “an end to grief” after a mere ten days of flamboyant mourning. Suffering can yield an experience of humility, of vulnerability, of impressionability and dependence, and these can become resources, if we do not “resolve” them too quickly; they can move us beyond and against the vocation of the paranoid victim who regenerates infinitely the justification for war. It is as much a matter of wrestling ethically with one’s own murderous impulses, impulses that seek to quell an overwhelming fear, as it is a matter of apprehending the suffering of others and taking stock of the suffering one has inflicted.

p. 150 In the Vietnam War, it was the pictures of the children burning and dying from napalm that brought the US public to a sense of shock, outrage, remorse, and grief. These were precisely pictures we were not supposed to see, and they disrupted the visual field and

the entire sense of public identity that was built upon that field. The images furnished a reality, but they also showed a reality that disrupted the hegemonic field of representation itself. Despite their graphic effectivity, the images pointed somewhere else, beyond themselves, to a life and to a precariousness that they could not show. It was from that apprehension of the precariousness of those lives we destroyed that many US citizens came to develop an important and vital consensus against the war.

**p. 150** We have been turned away from the face, sometimes through the very image of the face, one that is meant to convey the inhuman, the already dead, that which is not precariousness and cannot, therefore, be killed; this is the face that we are nevertheless asked to kill, as if ridding the world of this face would return us to the human rather than consummate our own inhumanity. 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. But what media will let us know and feel that frailty, know and feel at the limits of representation as it was currently cultivated and maintained? If the humanities has a future as cultural criticism, and cultural criticism has a task at the present moment, it is no doubt to return us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense. We would have to interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at the

imits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense. This might prompt us, affectively, to reinvigorate the intellectual projects of critique, of questioning, of coming to understand the difficulties and demands of cultural translation and dissent, and to create a sense of the public in which oppositional voices are not feared, degraded or dismissed, but valued for the instigation to a sensate democracy they occasionally perform.