

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE LIVES: JUDITH BUTLER'S GRIEF AND THE LOSS OF BLACK SELF

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Abstract: *By looking at Butler's theories on grief and mourning, I focus on her concept of ecstasy, or the state of being outside of one's self, which illustrates the dependency individuals have on social norms as well as the vulnerability such a system of recognition entails. Using this framework, I discuss how the private and the public spheres can construct public bodies. If this happens, individuals can have little say over how their bodies are socially signified. To show this, I use the case of Black women in the USA, where systemic oppression constantly draws their bodies into the public's eye.*

Keywords: *black women in USA, grief, Judith Butler, mourning, normative violence, self-autonomy.*

1. Introduction: Grievable Lives

Butler begins *Undoing Gender* by posing a seemingly basic question: "What makes for a grievable life?" (2004:18). Grief, put bluntly, is loss, or rather a newly presented lack which gives rise to uncontrollable emotions that display our vulnerability to others. Grief demonstrates how we, as social subjects, are constantly "in the thrall of our relations with others," and the attempt to give an account of these emotions relies on an account of others rather than a merely self-referential narrative—or "unfolding," as Butler calls it—such that it "challenge[s] the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control" (Butler 2004:19). It is through grief—typically taken to be private—that we open up and show our vulnerability to an external dependency for survival, whether social or literal, and this dependency on others to give an account of ourselves reveals the extent to which we are constituted through them. Nevertheless, this grief is accompanied by mourning, which is the process of coping with loss.

In this article, I explain how Butler connects this issue of grief to a treatise on the interdependency individuals face as social subjects. Through ecstasy, or the state of being

outside of one's self, individuals face an absence of complete control over their own identities and bodies. In the first section, I tie her theory of ecstasy to the problems this creates for the notion of the public-private dichotomy, such that individuals' bodies are, paradoxically, public and private entities simultaneously, with autonomy being deeply interwoven with the publicness of bodies. I elaborate upon this in the second section by examining the situations of Black women in the USA. Not only have their bodies been made public in certain ways, but their participation in signifying their own bodies and their self-determination over their own identities has largely been foreclosed, at least compared to other identities. In such a scenario, it is essential to find ways to reinscribe greater self-agency into these oppressive situations.

2. Autonomy at Fault: Mourning and Normative Violence

In psychoanalytic literature, mourning is how one responds to loss, but in *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler claims ignorance of when such mourning is actually successful as a coping mechanism; however, she asserts that adequate mourning is not forgetting the lost object but instead “that one mourns when one accepts the fact that the loss one undergoes will be one that changes you [. . .] that mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation the full result of which you cannot know in advance” (2004:18). Through grief we lose control of ourselves, and mourning enters as a degree of acceptance of our loss, as we no longer submit ourselves to the notion of being the masters of our fate and we embrace a transformation that alters who we are. One accepts that (part of) this lost object or individual defined them as a person in one way or another. As Kathy Dow Magnus explains, “The dynamics of recognition [of mourning] do not lead to the rediscovery of oneself, but rather to the discovery of oneself *as other* than one remembered oneself to be” (2006:96). Through mourning, Butler asks what it means to speak of “*my gender*,” explaining that gender is never possessed but received through a dependency on social norms; gender is “to be understood as *modes of being dispossessed*, ways of being for another or, indeed, by virtue of another” (2004:19). Against this process of grief and mourning—the loss and re-discovery of self—a fundamental concept emerges for Butler: ecstasy.

Rather than the traditional connotation of being overjoyed, Butler construes ecstasy as the state of being outside, beside or beyond oneself due to passion, be it rage, joy or even grief. In this way, individuals become “ec-static” during the grieving process because they lose control over their identities; there is an opening up of one's self to what is external, displaying a reliance on something that is not self (Butler 2004:20). The loss of a loved one

throws an individual into a state where “we do not know who we are or what to do,” thereby requiring one to rediscover one’s self due to circumstances extending beyond their own being (Butler 2004:19). The experience of ecstasy exposes one’s inherent vulnerability to external dependency, meaning one’s dependency on social norms, necessary for the constitution of any identity; however, sometimes a way of existing is socially foreclosed, and there is an inability to successfully grieve, meaning one is blocked from re-establishing their identity after it has been displaced; when this happens, it “eradicate[s] one of the most important resources from which we must take our bearings and find our way” (Butler 2004:23). One could recall here the AIDS epidemic in the USA during the 1980s and 1990s, with many homosexual communities unable to grieve the constant loss due to a stigmatisation of the disease; this AIDS scare sullied the image of the homosexual body in the public’s eye. For many, the re-discovery of the self was not a plausible possibility, and homosexuals were treated as an infection rather than acknowledged as persons. Without the capacity to grieve, to transform, one loses the ability to be coherently constituted as a human being and thus becomes unintelligible or neglected, even being treated as “less-than-human,” which leaves individuals in a situation where their lives are unliveable, whether literally (their lives could be put in danger) or socially (they could be deprived of certain things) (Butler 2004:2). In the midst of this AIDS epidemic, the gay community was torn from the shadows; the gay body became a public concern, and thereby a public identity, while private selves were slowly eroded away and thus unable to grieve.

The degrees of vulnerability to which individuals are exposed are the consequence of contingent circumstances, yet everyone relies on their existential vulnerability in various aspects of their lives: “Lives are supported and maintained differently, that there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe” (Butler 2004:24). Homosexuals rely on the recognition of their sexual preference for same-sex marriage; transsexuals depend on the recognition of sexual identification to make their lives liveable; ethnic minorities depend on legal sanctions to protect their bodies from physical violence. It is simultaneously these recognitions that reveal where the spaces of vulnerability for these individuals are. Though Butler stresses this dependency individuals have on others for social constitution, it can be tied to how such recognition through social norms affects not only our private selves but also our capacity to maintain a distinction between the public and the private on an individual basis: “The particular sociality that belongs to bodily life [. . .] establishes a field of ethical enmeshment with others and a sense of disorientation for the first-person. [. . .] As bodies, we are always for something more than, and other than,

ourselves” (2004:25). These bodies, which we come to accept as our own, are constantly in a state of exposure, both physically and conceptually, that can lead to a troublesome conclusion for theories of individual autonomy seeking to draw a line between the public and the private spheres.

Viewing our sutured social space as one of legal or natural rights obtained by self-determining individuals excludes the subterranean phenomena of passion, grief and desire binding individuals to one another. It restricts autonomy to a legal architecture that fails to address ecstasy and the inability to give a completely self-referential account of oneself: “Although this language might well establish our legitimacy within a legal framework ensconced in liberal versions of human ontology, it fails to do justice to passion and grief, all of which [. . .] implicate us in lives that are not our own, sometimes fatally and irreversibly” (Butler 2004:20). Our bodies are constantly exposed to the *touch* and the *gaze*; they do and are done to. Butler shows that these bodies, for which we ask bodily rights, are in a way never entirely our own; they become signified through social norms via the language in which we are enmeshed yet never choose. In this way, as Magnus argues, “Every subject will only be able to explain herself *partially*,” and thus individuals will not be able to declare absolute self-constitution (2006:99). Where does this leave Butler in regard to autonomy?

A situation must be found that ensures oppressed and unintelligible lives are made liveable, which requires addressing normative standards *in combination with* partial autonomy. While recognizing vulnerability begins when individuals acknowledge their lack of absolute self-autonomy, this only addresses one side of Butler’s project, ignoring the role that violence, which was formulated in her earlier works, plays within recognition, grief and mourning. Butler herself argues that the fact “that our very survival can be determined by those we do not know and over whom there is no final control means that life is precarious, and that politics must consider what forms of social and political organisation seek best to sustain precarious lives” (2004:23). Along these lines, the violence Butler is concerned with is neither—at least not entirely—the flesh-based forms of hate crimes that rack up hospital bills nor the violence that deploys a systematic discrimination against minority groups. Rather, something much deeper and more foundational is at play in Butler’s writings, which she terms, in the introduction to the second edition of *Gender Trouble*, “normative violence,” or the violence of social norms (2010:xxi).

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler does not mention “normative violence” while discussing mourning; however, this term must be introduced in a conversation on Butlerian autonomy. There must be a honing in on the type of violence that grounds commonly perceived violence,

the cause of culturally sanctioned social norms that leads to discrimination and physical oppression and that spawns itself out of the solidification of social norms through an ontological division between public and private spheres. Butler argues that her project aims “both to counter the normative violence implied by ideal morphologies of sex and to uproot the pervasive assumptions about natural or presumptive heterosexuality that are informed by ordinary and academic discourses on sexuality” (2010:xxi). Samuel Chambers and Terrell Carver further explain that “normative violence draws our attention not to the violence done to a pre-formed subject, but to the violence done within the formation of subjectivity” (2008:78). It is not particular instances of violent acts but the violence of social norms that are sustained through the very formation of such norms. In other words, social norms have the ability to shape how we view and interact with the world, which we arguably could not do without the presence of such norms. For example, there exists the need in medical science to perform a surgical correction on children born intersex in order to make their existence compatible with the accepted social structure of biology; however, this is a highly arbitrary process, and such a necessity relies on social customs rather than a return to any inherent biological incentive (see Fausto-Sterling 2000).

In this way, Butler’s critique of autonomy should not be interpreted as an argument for the dissolution of self-determination nor, as Karen Zivi (2008) explains, for the exclusion of legal protections for self-autonomy. The problem is the normative violence that ensues whenever someone draws an ontological line between what is public and what is private; this separates what one can rightfully call their own and what is open to public scrutiny and belonging. This principle of drawing the line leads to the explicit emotional and physical violence contemporary culture has grown so accustomed to because it allows the differentiation between certain modes of life and justifies the violence that perpetuates from this difference. According to Butler, “Sometimes the very terms that confer ‘humanness’ on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than-human” (2004:2). Therefore, autonomy never concerns the individual-as-such, but it always takes into account the individual-as-social; her critique of autonomy both dismisses complete self-determination and considers the physical repercussions and normative instantiations that any theory of autonomy necessarily employs: A liveable life “depends upon an exercise of bodily autonomy and on social conditions that enable autonomy” (2004:12). What Butler is calling for is a means to hold the exercise of autonomy accountable.

What should seem troubling in this account is the lack of ownership individuals can come to have over what they take to be their own bodies. If gender, for example, is never *my* gender but derived from social norms, then one can only ever partially own their gender. However, if one's gender is not recognised or it is recognised in a way one has little to no influence over, how much ownership can one be said to have? While we cannot choose our language or culture, Butler argues that the need to continuously repeat social norms allows for the capacity to "misrepeat" them over time. However, what if even this subversive repetition reiterates those norms in such a way that one becomes unrecognised in the equation? What if appropriate repetition sexualises one's body in a negative way, but subversive repetition does not positively change it yet merely transfers the negativity? For instance, if a woman is too relaxed, she can often be interpreted as "easy" or flirtatious; if a woman is more ambitious, she is interpreted as "bossy" or "frigid." These assertions are often grounded in more than simple discrimination; they rely on an ontological worldview of the "nature" of women. Furthermore, what if not only gender or sex but also race contributes to one's unrecognizability, to the extent that it publically constitutes one's body, and one's private body becomes nullified? Not only nullified, but oppressed? If the institutions meant to protect private spheres by separating them from public spheres not only fail but are the foundations of oppression, how can this line be redrawn? In the following section, I will address some of these questions by showing how Black women in the USA have not only been oppressed due to their vulnerability to social norms, but their bodies have come to be sacrificed to the public sphere, largely removing them from the private realm.

3. Public Bodies, Private Oppression

"They's forgotten about, you understand what I'm saying? So that's why—you know, I went from okay to not being there."— Carmen, aged 23 (qtd. in Windsor et al. 2010:22)

On the night of May 16, 2010, a Black girl named Aiyana Stanley-Jones, aged seven, was asleep at home when police officers charged her door and fatally shot her with an MP5 submachine gun; the officer who shot her, Joseph Weekley, was later acquitted of any wrongdoing. The incident was all caught on video by a reality television show featuring the exploits of police officers in Detroit, MI (Abbey-Lambertz 2014a, 2014b). It could be argued that this event was merely an act of physical violence occurring in a particular and debatably accidental situation. Weekley did in fact claim the firing of his gun was an accident, blaming Stanley-Jones' grandmother for interfering in the raid; thus, the grandmother, if she did interfere, was quickly portrayed as neglectful, regardless of the fact that her action would

have actually been protective (Abbey-Lambertz 2014b). However, this is to focus on the details of the event and not the social background; it is to overlook the social, political and economic relations, which is what I explore in this section. This tragic incident is a representation of the traumatic consequences of drawing ontological lines between public and private spheres (as well as bodies) and the normative violence that ensues. By displaying how Black women in the USA are submitted to normative violence, which is just one instantiation of this phenomenon that could be substituted by a spectrum of identities, we can beg the question of how their bodies are constructed in the public space and what this entails, including in terms of their private bodies. If, as Butler argues, bodies are vulnerable to social norms due to their dependency on these very norms, how much ownership or control can these women claim over the signification of their own skin?

Among the areas where this sort of signification occurs, the workplace is a space that is commonly associated with the public sphere. Based on Title VII from the US Civil Rights Act of 1964, racial discrimination is based on an individual's "subjective interpretation of their experience and their knowledge of the law" (Hirsch and Lyons 2010:272). While this law was meant to protect American citizens from racial discrimination, it is still the case that Black persons are 897 times more likely to report discrimination in the workplace, and Hispanic persons 447 times more likely (Hirsch and Lyons 2010:284); meanwhile, racial income-inequality has grown substantially from the enactment of the Civil Rights Act to the new millennium (Schiele 2005:810). The difference between the explicit racism of the pre-Civil Rights era and today is that contemporary discrimination involves more minute, day-to-day practices that tend to go unnoticed by the perpetrator (often referred to as "micro-aggressions"). It also makes discrimination in the workplace a private matter, with companies processing many discrimination claims through human resource offices that function on an individual and not an institutional basis. This has meant that recurring discriminatory practices, which could in fact improve the lives of individuals, have been systemically foreclosed from the public realm, meaning the chance to reclaim some autonomous control over work conditions, which individuals face in private, is suppressed due to systemic practices that publically evolve into social norms, as the statistics illustrate; thus, institutional biases go unnoticed or unacknowledged. Alongside this, the systemic, concentrated force of poverty has perpetuated itself, causing the physically forced racial residential segregation of the past to now be economically forced due to inabilities to counteract employment and career advancement discrimination. This entails that private bodies are constantly made public through civil rights laws, exposure to physical as well as emotional discrimination and

harassment in the workplace and a public sphere that has a significant amount of control over individuals' capacity to perform in their private lives.

When individuals are held accountable for their private lives and actions, but some private lives are highly-determined in the public sphere, the autonomous lifestyle, as conceptualized by Butler, seems out of the hands of some individuals. By 1980, ten major USA cities had concentrated Black populations above the 80% threshold, meaning that people who lived in those cities lived in neighborhoods consisting of more than 80% Black residents (a situation that has only worsened) (Massey and Denton 2001:160). Caucasian counterparts have had more flexibility with residential choices due to an influx of educational and career choices; their lives are also allowed to retain a degree of privateness, and while civil rights apply to all American citizens, the driving force behind the implementation of such rights has largely been to protect minorities. In this respect, their bodies tend to remain beyond the gaze of the law, even though they could cite civil rights laws if necessary. However, the situation becomes more troublesome for ethnic minority females, who not only are the targets of more discrimination than their Caucasian counterparts in the workplace, but are less likely to report discrimination if they have a child living in their care, most likely not to risk job security (Hirsh and Lyons 2010:284). This entitlement to motherhood for ethnic minority women, moreover, becomes highly problematic for the repetition of these social norms since the potential negative repercussions—in this case, the possibility of being fired—affect someone else as well, thus making it more than an individual choice.

The Harlem Birth Right Project conducted research on the low birth-weight of Black infants compared to that of Caucasian infants. Their conclusions show that Black women are exposed to extra stressors in their daily life, which have an impact on their health and lead to a low birth-weight (Mulling 2002). In this way, many Black infants are exposed—from birth—to economic woes as well as cultural oppression; their bodies are quickly exposed to racial vulnerability, wherein poor “housing and neighborhood[s] [which have higher drug and crime rates] have also been connected to racial segregation, which leads to worse living conditions among African Americans, especially those living in poverty” (Windsor et al. 2010:27). Even in more wealthy Black families, a potential divide between the norms presented within the family and the social norms encountered outside of it can cause an internalized tension; as Anahí Viladrich and Sana Loue’s explain, “This perspective belies the reality of minority group members who may confront reminders of differentness on a daily basis” (2009:12). This has also affected the education received in urban schools where there is a highly concentrated population of ethnic minorities. Urban areas in the USA have developed

a complex and rich dialect often associated with “Black Culture”; however, this dialect, resulting from centuries of segregation, has been entirely omitted from public schools. This makes it increasingly difficult for Black individuals to adjust to an educational curriculum taught in a different dialect, but it also restricts them from employment opportunities: “Black educational progress is hampered not only because segregation concentrates poverty within ghetto schools but also because segregation confines blacks to an isolated linguistic community” (Massey and Denton 2001:164). The public language in which textbooks are written, laws are enforced and employers seek employees excludes the private language of many Black individuals from these neighbourhoods, forcing them to interact within these social norms and to classify their private spheres as wrong or aberrant, a crisis not shared by most Caucasians whose private language is not only protected but ensured with this public-private distinction. Nonetheless, language and poverty are not the only roadblocks; social, sexual and familial expectations cause life not only to be difficult for Black women but also to be traumatic.

Liliane Windsor, Ellen Benoit and Eloise Dunlap (2010) performed an analysis on Black women in New York City who were oppressed on a scale that was not personal but systemic. This begins with the expectations required from the education system which, in order for students to succeed, requires being “able to purchase appropriate clothing, belonging to a family in which parents were involved and available to participate in their children’s education, and have their basic needs of food and shelter met by their parents” (Windsor et al. 2010:25). In communities of poverty and rampant drug abuse, typically with a concentrated population of ethnic minorities, these requirements become improbable if not impossible, especially if parents are required to work multiple jobs to meet living requirements. While education has its problems, so do Black women’s relationships with men, which can often involve domestic abuse and rape; Windsor et al. explain that “significantly fewer rapists of Black women are convicted than rapists of White women,” and the women in their own study “reported not telling anyone about rape and abuse because they felt responsible and were scared and ashamed” (2010:27). The issue is further complicated by the inability to cooperate or resort to correctional or police institutions due to an ambiguity on behalf of public institutions: “The police often work to protect society from impoverished African Americans rather than viewing impoverished African Americans as members of the society the correctional facility must serve” (Windsor et al. 2010:26). On top of this, these women are subjected to social norms derived from affluent, middle-to-upper-income Caucasian families and their responsibilities, which in turn become internalised by these women while at the

same time establishing a welfare system that expects impoverished Black women to live by a “Eurocentric, patriarchic, heterosexual model” (Windsor et al.:27). However, the image of the lazy, sex-driven welfare queen who will put considerable effort into unashamedly stealing taxpayers’ hard-earned dollars has been circulated throughout American culture to such an extent—especially in the wake of the Trump administration—that it is projected onto these women, leaving them excruciatingly susceptible to a system that continuously puts mechanisms in place not to recognise their existence.

While social norms themselves did not bust down a door and shoot Stanley-Jones, the poor girl from the beginning of this section, dead in her private residence, they set the scene. She was born into an impoverished community, meaning she was likely exposed or close to being exposed to violence frequently. It also provided a police force that had systematically come to be protected from prosecution for violence against innocent Black victims (Gray and Parker, 2018), viewing these victims as people whom normal individuals need to be protected *against*. Social norms have created an atmosphere where the fact that the victim was Black and the officer was Caucasian is not insignificant, but rather derives effects from the violence these norms allow. If, as Nadine Ehlers argues, “race functions as a component in the broader workings of discipline as a *practice* that *produces the very bodies and subjects that it controls*,” then a continuous repetition of racial norms would need to be occurring (2008:335). The fact that this event was captured by a reality television show exploring the exploits of police officers is problematic because it repeats the image of lazy, impoverished and law-breaking ethnic minorities that runs rampant through media outlets; it repeats the image of mothers who allow their children to be exposed to violence instead of explaining their inability to do otherwise; it portrays Black women as the enemies of the state who are thus constantly being subjected to undue process. If bodies are in fact vulnerable to social norms and one cannot be said to own their gender or their race, then it becomes urgent to find ways to incorporate a sense of privacy back onto their bodies; it is of the utmost importance to promote strategies that proliferate and reinforce the ability for self-determination and to remove these individuals and their bodies, as much as possible, from the determinations of public concern.

4. Conclusion: Away from Public Bodies

To return to the topic of normative violence and vulnerability, while autonomy must draw a line between public and private spheres, whereby all bodies are public to an extent, this drawing leaves some individuals suffering disproportionately from the publicness of their

bodies, and the public sphere enforces a certain identity onto them with little-to-no self-determination on how that identity is shaped. It forecloses the ability to mourn because it forecloses the ownership of loss; their lives are made unliveable by the same system that is supposed to grant them the ability to live. In the case of Stanley-Jones, her body could most likely not be privately mourned because it was made public in a certain way (even more so as a political corpse). Public services, such as the police and education, have the capacity to blur the lines between public and private if not kept in check, and private lives (e.g., language, reporting rape, welfare) can quickly become enmeshed in a web of public signification; bodies, both physically and emotionally, can very quickly come to depend on a system that fails to recognise them by turning their private lives into public affairs in certain ways; when these lines between public and private solidify into ontological lines, they become dangerous. While recognition of such inequalities is an important first step, it must lead to various strategies, be they political activism, policy enforcement or a revision of social standards, in order to be of any use.

Butler does not give a new method to distinguish between public and private spheres, nor does she try to dispel the drawing of this line; instead, she falls somewhere in the middle, both addressing the line's flaws and its necessity. However, what must be further investigated is what one does when one no longer owns one's own body; what can those whose bodies are sacrificially given up to the public domain to be tossed, turned, abused and signified do to gain more ownership? New modes of resistance are required within the Butlerian framework to supplement the fruitful inquiry Butler has performed and the conclusions she has drawn out. In the end, the line between public and private spheres must cease to be viewed politically and come to be viewed ontologically as a line with oppressive and dangerous results that utilise social norms to suture identities, some more than others. We must address the situation where "a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very 'taking up' is enabled by the tool lying there," is met with individuals who are confronted with the same results no matter how they use these tools (Butler 2010:199). The question becomes how to draw this line in such a way that can minimise unliveable lives and how to continuously draw this line based on the constantly shifting power relations within any social system. What is required, then, is a Butlerian interpretation of the art of line drawing between the public and the private.

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