

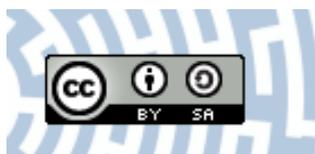


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ALEKSANDER KOPKA

Mourning and Grievability: Several Remarks on Judith Butler's Politics of Living Together

In this article, I focus on the function of the notions of precariousness, vulnerability, and grievability of life in Judith Butler's writings, and reflect upon their place in a broader context of the thought of what I call, following Jacques Derrida, "originary mourning." On the one hand, therefore, I want to reconstruct Butler's task of rethinking the possibility of creating a community based on the equal allocation of precariousness and grievability. Such a reflection allows Butler to treat grievability as an insightful and unique passageway to the problematics of safeguarding of life and equality between living beings. On the other hand, by referring to the writings of Jacques Derrida, I want to inscribe Butler's notions of precariousness and grievability in a broader framework of mourning, to show how every constitution of a social bond based on the principle of shared precariousness and vulnerability inevitably has to come up against the paradox of its genesis.

Keywords: mourning, precariousness, grievability, equality, hauntology

But at what cost do I establish the familiar as the criterion by which a human life is grievable?
(Butler 2004, 38)

Introduction

When dealing with mourning, one inevitably faces at least a few insistent questions. First of all, what do we mourn? Do we mourn someone's life or death? And if we mourn life, what does this notion of life really stand for? Going further, in whose name does one mourn, one's own, or the dead's? And finally, what does it mean to mourn (this or that life) well?

To answer some of these questions provisionally, maybe even too hastily, perhaps in mourning we respond *before* and *to* some *who*, to some other who passes for life and who – regarded as a life that passes away, sometimes before our very own eyes – allows us to think of its precariousness. Thus, could thinking of life in terms of our mournful relation to it help us pave the way for the question of responsibility and politics, or for what every politics should essentially be, namely, a politics of responsibility?

The trajectories of these insistent questions meet each other in Judith Butler's texts on grievability and precariousness, in which she endeavors to rethink politics in the light of its relation to grief and mourning. As she states in her essay "Violence, Mourning, Politics," "I propose to consider a dimension of political life that has to do with our exposure to violence, and our complicity in it, with our vulnerability to loss and the task of mourning that follows, and with finding a basis for community in these conditions" (Butler 2004, 19).

The above-mentioned essay is a part of a larger collection of pieces written by Butler in response to what happened in the United States in the aftermath of "September 11" – an event that revealed the country's unseen, or even incomprehensible, vulnerability. But, as Butler argues, rather than to reshape its foreign policy in alliance with the global community and in an effort to prevent such acts of terror, the United States engaged in a nationalistic narrative, hardening the "get out of our way" policy, and allowing auto-aggressive activities such as mass surveillance, censorship, the suspension of civil rights and liberties, or the persecution of political dissent.

Furthermore, the disclosure of vulnerability and exposure to loss and grief have inevitably been translated into mechanisms and strategies of even fiercer violence against enemies, both real and imagined. In this

context, Butler argues that the phenomenon and the domain of mourning and grievability have not been exempted from political influence. She does that by describing how politics, especially in the United States, has subjugated private and public mourning to its ends. Thus, for Butler, the fact “[t]he violence that [the United States] inflict on others is only – and always – selectively brought into public view” (Butler 2004, 39) is reflected in and strictly connected to mechanisms of state-regulated public mourning. Therefore, the latter must be “protracted and ritualized, stoking nationalist fervor, reiterating the conditions of loss and victimization that come to justify a more or less permanent war” (Butler 2004, xix). Thus, Butler starts from a critical approach to the phenomenon of mourning, treating it as a yet another domain of public life subjected to state manipulation and violence, by situating this critique in the context of the post-9/11 situation of the United States (cf. Butler 2016, 38) only to move later to the general question of grievability. For, according to Butler, the norms and framing of grievability imposed on people by the state apparatus with the compliant mass media aim, in general, to distinguish between lives that are worthy and unworthy of our grief, and therefore, worthy and unworthy of living since, as she argues, the derealization of loss leads inevitably to the dehumanization of potential victims.¹ Already in *Antigone's Claim*, Butler had brought

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1 The notion of grievability can be interpreted as an expansion of the distinction between worthy and unworthy victims of political violence. As Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky argue in *Manufacturing Consent*, “[a] propaganda system will consistently portray people abused in enemy states as *worthy* victims, whereas those treated with equal or greater severity by its own government or clients will be *unworthy*. The evidence of worth may be read from the extent and character of attention and indignation. [...] While this differential treatment occurs on a large scale, the media, intellectuals, and public are able to remain unconscious of the fact and maintain a high moral and self-righteous tone. This is evidence of an extremely effective propaganda system” (Herman, Chomsky 1994, 37, cf. Chomsky 2001, 10-11). However, Butler fails to indicate this quite obvious proximity of her diagnosis to Herman and Chomsky’s work. Nevertheless, this proximity remains quite vivid, especially when it comes to the question of “framing” singular lives, groups, and populations by the state and mass media propaganda. As Butler asserts, “[t]he distinction between populations that are worth violently defending and those that are not implies that some lives are simply considered more valuable than others” (Butler 2020, 55). This remark is tied directly to the question of grievability: “forms of racism instituted and active at the level of perception tend to produce iconic versions of populations who are eminently grievable, and others whose loss is no loss, and who remain ungrievable. The differential distribution of grievability across populations has implications for why and when we feel politically consequential affective dispositions such as horror, guilt, righteous sadism, loss, and indifference” (Butler 2016, 24).

to the fore those relations that are denied political legitimacy and as such are considered neither dead nor alive:

it is not simply that these are relations that cannot be honored, cannot be openly acknowledged, and cannot therefore be publicly grieved, but that these relations involve persons who are also restricted in the very act of grieving, who are denied the power to confer legitimacy on loss” (Butler 2000, 79).

Thus, how public mourning is produced and managed cannot be, in Butler’s view, dissociated from the operations and mechanisms of derealization, namely, of not taking the suffering of the excluded others into account. Moreover, such a derealization achieved through prohibitions and exclusions imposed on public mourning is constitutive of the public sphere. “The public will be created on the condition that certain images do not appear in the media, certain names of the dead are not utterable, certain losses are not avowed as losses, and violence is derealized and diffused” (Butler 2004, 37-38).

Of course, for Butler, this is not a one-way street, and both grief and mourning also have the potential to challenge the order according to which some lives can be deemed unworthy or ungrievable (and their eradication can be justified). In fact, for Butler, mourning has a transformative potential – which she identifies with the “transformative effect of loss” (Butler 2004, 21)² – even at the level of international relations between nation states. If mourning becomes more hospitable, if it affirms those dead or alive who are denied legitimacy by political institutions or the public sphere, then demand for recognition and new forms of living together will follow. If the reactions and fantasies of narcissistic and nationalistic entitlement and vilification can be overcome in public mourning, then

[...] from the subsequent experience of loss and fragility [...] the possibility of making different kinds of ties emerges. Such mourning might (or could) effect a transformation in our sense of international ties that would crucially rearticulate the possibility of democratic political culture here and elsewhere. (Butler 2004, 40)

Butler uses this diagnosis as a point of departure to argue that the constitution of our communal or relational ties stems from our fundamental interdependency, which coincides intrinsically with our lives’ preca-

² On the transformative potential of grief and mourning, see also bell hooks’ *All About Love: New Visions*, pp. 200-201.

riousness and vulnerability. For Butler, it is precisely grief (or grievability)³ that has the force to push us towards the realization of this fundamental social entanglement and communal interrelationship. The following passage not only expresses this intention but can also be regarded as a guiding thread for further reading of Butler's essays gathered in *Precarious Life, Frames of War*, or in recently published *The Force of Non-Violence*.

Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility. If my fate is not originally or finally separable from yours, then the “we” is traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against; or, rather, we can argue against it, but we would be denying something fundamental about the social conditions of our very formation. (Butler 2004, 22-23)

The main presuppositions behind Butler's argument are clear: the phantasm of rugged individualism and full autonomy of the subject anterior to any social bond is questioned at its core; the fundamental interdependency between human beings, along with its ethico-political injunction, is recognized and emphasized; the vulnerability and precariousness of lives are seen as the basis for this universal interdependency; and finally, grief provides an exceptional recognition and sense of this universal and essential condition of precariousness.

From Iterability to Ontology

What therefore is this ungrivable life? In various instances, Butler answers that the ungrivable life does not count as “real” (Butler 2004, 33), “living” (Butler 2020, 68), “a life” (Butler 2020, 68-69), a life that will not be mourned or safeguarded (Butler 2020, 108). It is considered

3 I will henceforth emphasize the difference between grievability and mourning. In doing so, I will use the notion of grievability as defined by Butler. Also, I will use the notion of mourning either in a narrow sense, that is, as a social, political or psychological response to someone's death, or in a wider sense – as *originary mourning*, namely, *the condition for and of every response, referral, and consequently, every relation or bond between living (human and non-human) beings.*

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not to be a life “in any full and meaningful sense” (Butler 2016, 43), but rather “already the unburied, if not the unburi-able” (Butler 2004, 34). And finally, what seems, at least from a certain point of view,⁴ inconsistent with the previous examples, it is a life subjected to calculation (Butler 2020, 107). Furthermore, in *Frames of War*, Butler makes a distinction between something *apprehended* as “living” and *recognized* as “a life,” which is not only an epistemological but also an ontological distinction. In fact, when confronting Butler’s argument, one inevitably gets the impression of unsolvable contamination of *both* the normative and the ontological order. Still, Butler argues that there is something about “living” that does not surrender itself to this ontological and normative production:

If a life is produced according to the norms by which life is recognized, this implies neither that everything about a life is produced according to such norms nor that we must reject the idea that there is a remainder of “life” – suspended and spectral – that limns and haunts every normative instance of life. Production is partial and is, indeed, perpetually haunted by its ontologically uncertain double. (Butler 2016, 7)

Political recognition is therefore ascribed to this normative production of the ontological status of “a life,” as opposed to its spectral remainder of “life” or “living,” which is not yet recognized as “a life.” However, it is necessary to emphasize that we cannot prescribe a normative telos for this ontologico-political production, regardless of Butler’s wish to establish a “utopic horizon within which theory and description must work” (Butler 2020, 106) as “an ideal of equal grievability” (Butler 2020, 107). At the same time, Butler states that our inability to finish such work successfully stems from the fact that its limit is “internal to normative construction itself, a function of its iterability and heterogeneity, without which it cannot exercise its crafting power, and which limits the finality of any of its effects” (Butler 2016, 7). Therefore, an ideal of equal grie-

4 On the one hand, one could argue that in the process of the allocation of grievability, both grievable and un-grievable lives are subjected to political calculation. On the other, one could point out that even in the case of “incalculable value of a life,” the passage through calculation is necessary. As Derrida points out in *Rogues*, “[c]alculable measure also gives access to the incalculable and the incommensurable, an access that remains itself necessarily undecided between the calculable and the incalculable – and that is the aporia of the political [...]” (Derrida 2005c, 52). A little bit later, he reaffirms that “[o]n both sides, then, whether it is a question of singularity or universality, and each time both at once, *both* calculation *and* the incalculable *are necessary*” (Derrida 2005c, 150).

vability would be unachievable not because of its infinite deferral, but rather due to the aporetic structure of iterability.

Jacques Derrida introduces the notion of iterability in his essay “Signature Event Context.” Now, iterability, in the broadest sense, is a structural possibility of repetition through alteration. Thereby, that the mark, as a unit of iterability, can only be repeated in the movement of its own erasure. It may also retain its signifying function in the absence of its referent or signified. Moreover, the possibility of the disappearance of the referent or the signified is necessarily implied in iterability, which makes the mark a grapheme, to wit, “the nonpresent remaining of a differential mark cut off from its alleged ‘production’ or origin” (Derrida 1984, 318). Consequently, there can be no fixed meaning attached to and salvaged by the mark.

While iterability consists in an ever-changing address to a nonpresent other, Derrida emphasizes that “[...] this absence is not a continuous modification of presence; it is a break in presence, ‘death,’ or the possibility of the ‘death’ of the addressee, inscribed in the structure of the mark...” (Derrida 1984, 315). From the political point of view, iterability, as the general structure of experience, would be the structural condition of simultaneously producing and undoing any social bond. Furthermore, the question of mortality would be inherent to the production of a social bond. Thus, rather than treat social bonds as essentially given, iterability requires us to promise and depend on an act of faith to maintain them. As Butler points out in her text on Derrida:

The promise must repeat, even mechanically, in order to hold firm as a bond of any kind. [...] The bond must be temporally renewable to qualify as a bond at all. [...] For Derrida, the promise, when given, becomes part of the structure of a covenant, and this social bond has no structural or necessary existence outside the memory that is reinvoked and the future that is opened up through its iteration. (Butler 2009, 302-303)

Now, since for Butler the notion of iterability is crucial for explaining the normative production of ontology (Butler 2016, 168), which, as an effect of iterability, cannot exhaust or fully explain what “living” *could be* about, then she cannot ascribe to such an ontology a fundamental character. And because in Butler’s argument the ultimate point of reference is the body, then iterability must condition the recognizability of the latter’s “life” or “being.” But, in trying to avoid the metaphysical entrapment of thinking about the experience of life in terms of what Derrida calls “the experience of Being: so-called presence” (Derrida

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2005a, 317), Butler takes some necessary precautions by pointing out that the “being” of the body is always already inscribed – and can only be encountered – within political contexts which, according to the logic of iterability, means: “without any center of absolute anchoring” (Derrida 1984, 320). Therefore, as already exposed to forces of appropriation, interpretation, and framing, the body becomes, from the outset, a subject matter for social – but not fundamental – ontology.

The “being” of the body to which this ontology refers is one that is always given over to others, to norms, to social and political organizations that have developed historically in order to maximize precariousness for some and minimize precariousness for others. It is not possible first to define the ontology of the body and then to refer to the social significations the body assumes. (Butler 2016, 2-3)

Normative production, therefore, faces an insoluble problem with ontologically elusive “living.” Before any recognition can be made, we respond to living, which “falls outside the frame furnished by the norm, but only as a relentless double whose ontology cannot be secured, but whose living status is open to apprehension” (Butler 2016, 8). Thus, living exceeds the ontological frame through which we try to capture and explain it. The fact that something breaks outside of the frame, that the frame is never able to contain this living, disturbs our understanding of the world. Moreover, this problem is reproduced through the process of iterability, which, in turn, allows Butler to reject the structuralist concept of form and “to affirm something about the continuing life of poststructuralism, a preoccupation with notions such as *living on, carrying on, carrying over, continuing*, that form the temporal tasks of the body” (Butler 2016, 169). However, we have to be very careful how we interpret this “continuation” because what guarantees the sense of temporal continuity is precisely the form, which itself is subjected to the work of iterability. Consequently, the body as an iterable mark cannot be understood in terms of temporal continuity (as previously stated by Derrida, the possibility of the mark implies the rupture of presence, and therefore, the interruption of temporal continuity). Living on, surviving, carrying on after someone’s death – all this involves a structural break with the dominant role of presence.

Otherwise, Butler would have to introduce a general form of temporality (like the phenomenological form of the living present) under the aegis of which one could synthesize and reassemble the bodily marks. She would therefore resort to fundamental ontology. In order to avoid

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this ontological absorption, we ought to think of the mark (used here synonymously with the “trace”) in terms of *différance* as an originary movement of deferring and differing, the spatialization of time, finally, as “the relation to an impossible presence, as expenditure without reserve, as the irreparable loss of presence” (Derrida 1984, 19). *Différance* therefore

[...] maintains our relationship with that which we necessarily misconstrue, and which exceeds the alternative of presence and absence. A certain alterity [...] is definitively exempt from every process of presentation by means of which we would call upon it to show itself in person. (Derrida 1984, 20)

Consequently, for the bodily mark to exceed any, even the most fundamental, form, it has to be conceived as the dis-appearing trace:

The trace (of that) which can never be presented, the trace which itself can never be presented: that is, appear and manifest itself, as such, in its phenomenon. [...] Always differing and deferring, the trace is never as it is in the presentation of itself. It erases itself in presenting itself, muffles itself in resonating, [...] (Derrida 1984, 23)

Since the structure or movement of the mark (i.e., the trace), as pointed out before, necessarily coincides with the possibility of the death of the addressee (here, following Butler’s vocabulary, I am addressing the other as formally undetermined, as far as their resistance to ontological production goes, “life” or “living”), then our response or our experience regarding this addressee is already entangled in mourning. Now, what that means is that death does not happen to us by accident, but rather has its crucial stake in the production of the mark: without the possibility of disappearance of the addressee, and therefore, of surviving the addressee by the mark, the latter would not be able to function within the movement of iterability, and therefore, it would lose its signifying ability. Thereby, the surviving of the instant, the possibility of being repeated, has to attest to mortality (cf. Derrida 2005a, 158). As Michael Naas explains:

In the beginning, then, there is mourning – an originary mourning or melancholy that is not nostalgia for some lost presence but an affirmation that the testamentary trace and a mourning for the other is the unchanging form of our lives. [...] More originary than death or being-towards-death, mourning for the other, or at least the structural possibility of such mourning, begins not at death but already at the beginning of life, already with the first trace. (Naas 2015, 117)

From Mourning to Grievability

Thus, by connecting the question of mourning to the notions of iterability and the mark, on which Butler grounds her idea of social ontology and interconnection between precarious lives, I do not want to consider mourning as a mere characteristic attributed to life. Rather, I argue that life has to be thought in terms of *originary mourning*, which as the very condition of life's emergence extends its scope to every living (on).⁵

Similarly, Butler argues that her notion of grievability is a universal condition and can be applied not only to those who are dead but to every living being or every single body, as the “body implies mortality” (Butler 2004, 26). Thereby, grievability relies primarily on the inevitability of death: “[a] life has value in relation to mortality” (Butler 2020, 75). Consequently, she ties the notion of grievability to the validation of life and an injunction for equality between living beings. As such, “grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters” (Butler 2016, 14):

[...] grievability is already operative in life, and that it is a characteristic attributed to living creatures, marking their value within a differential scheme of values and bearing directly on the question of whether or not they are treated equally and in a just way. To be grievable is to be interpellated in such a way that you know your life matters; that the loss of your life would matter; that your body is treated as one that should be able to live and thrive, whose precarity should be minimized, for which provisions for flourishing should be available. (Butler 2020, 59)

For Butler, therefore, life acquires its value on the condition that it is worthy of being grieved. However, we are left here with certain ambiguity about the precedence of grievability over the ontological production of a life. Is grievability (or its opposite) attributed to an already ontologically determined life? And thereby, does it require at least some ontological founding or recognition? Is grievability a ontological condition, or is the question of grievability determined only at the level of

5 Butler's mention of living on could be treated as a reference to Derrida's notion of “living on” as synonymous with surviving. In *The Politics of Friendship*, Derrida states: “Surviving – that is the other name of a mourning whose possibility is never to be awaited. For one does not survive without mourning” (Derrida 2005b, 13). Living as living on is therefore *originarily structured* by the necessity that someone has to die first, and someone else will have to continue to live: living on is living through death and after death insofar as one does not live on post mortem. It is living in the mode of mourning.

political (or biopolitical) decision-making? Perhaps, by introducing the notion of grievability, Butler wants to offer an alternative to a normative recognition of life based on radical exclusion as a result of which those “dying from a lack of recognition,” those whose ontological status is suspended constitute “the ‘shadowy realm,’ which haunts the public sphere, which is precluded from the public institution of the human” (Butler 2000, 81). However, while Butler explicitly affirms that “grievability is a condition of a life’s emergence and sustenance” and that “[w]ithout grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something *living* [my emphasis – A.K.] that is other than life,” on the very same page she states that “[g]rievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of the living being as *living* [my emphasis – A.K.], exposed to non-life from the start” (Butler 2016, 15). Such inconsistencies make it more difficult to capture what grievability really means and when or where it begins, especially given that what can be apprehended as living is not necessarily recognized as a life (Butler 2016, 8).

Nevertheless, assuming its broadest meaning according to which grievability conditions apprehension of something as living (while apprehension “can imply marking, registering, acknowledging, without full cognition” [Butler 2016, 5], it is nevertheless “facilitated” by norms of recognition), one could still enquire as to where it begins and where it ends. It seems that this question is thoroughly political and strictly connected to the authority of the sovereign (i.e., the decision-maker). As Butler explains, “grievability is a characteristic attributed to a group of people [...] by some group or community, or within the terms of a discourse, or within the terms of a policy or institution” (Butler 2020, 105). It begins therefore neither with a referral to someone or something, nor with an assumption of their mortality, but rather with attributing a value to their loss, to wit, with authorization of the loss: “people can be grieved or bear the attribute of grievability only to the extent that loss can be acknowledged” (Butler 2020, 105). As such, “grievability governs the way in which living creatures are managed, and it proves to be an integral dimension of biopolitics and of ways of thinking about equality among the living” (Butler 2020, 56). Therefore, I argue that grievability, as a political perspective and a decision of the sovereign, could only emerge from a more originary field of mourning, which is already set in motion with the referral.

First of all, as I have already mentioned, every referral, every address to the other (whether we are speaking about “a life” or “something living that is other than life”), since it is structured by the trace, is already ancillary to the “logic” of mourning. Mourning begins not with appre-

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hension, decision, or even a question about grievability but with the trace. Thus, it begins before any question about grievability can even be posed. Consequently, every “yes” that we express with regard to any form of living is already a response *of mourning* and *in mourning*.

[The “yes” of responsibility] echoes, always, like the response to a spectral injunction: the order comes down from a place that can be identified neither as a *living present* nor as the pure and simple *absence of someone dead*.

This amounts to saying that the responsibility for this response has already quit the terrain of *philosophy as ontology*, or of ontology as a discourse about the effectivity of a *present-being (on)* [...] (Derrida 2008, 213-214)

Furthermore, originary mourning installs an irreducible aporia within our “epistemological capacity to apprehend life” (Butler 2016, 3), and ultimately, it keeps grievability failing: in a certain sense, every form of living, contingent upon the originary mourning, poses an unbearable challenge to anyone who tries to apprehend something or someone as grievable. That is also why one can object to the threat of mourning and protest in the words of Derrida reading Jean-François Lyotard: “there shall be no mourning.”

Over me, the phrase says, or at least the phrasing of the phrase says, you will not go into mourning. You will especially not organize mourning, and even less what is called the work of mourning. And of course the “no mourning,” left to itself, can mean the perpetual impossibility of mourning, an inconsolability or irreparability that no work of mourning shall ever come to mend.

But the “no mourning” can also, by the same token, oppose testimony, attestation, protestation, or contestation, to the very idea of a testament, to the hypothesis of a mourning that always has, unfortunately, as we know, a negative side, at once laborious, guilt ridden and narcissistic, reactive and turned toward melancholy, if not envy. And when it borders on celebration, or *wake*, one risks the worst. (Derrida 2001b, 221)

Finally, I believe that grievability still occurs at the level of the subject’s authority (or what Levinas would call the imperialism of the same). It would mean that since grievability relies on the subject’s perception of other forms of living (even if it leads to the realization of certain kinship or bonding), it has to presuppose some kind of violence toward those others. As Levinas notices, “[i]f one could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be other. Possessing, knowing, and grasping are

synonyms of power” (Levinas 1987, 90).⁶ Since grievability relies essentially on the power of the sovereign to approach other living beings and the hegemony in attributing a value to them, then it has to involve this imperialistic violence.

In any case, violence seems irreducible, at least according to Derrida, for whom the only possible way to engage oneself with the other is through the iterable movement of the trace (which, in the context of the opposition between speech and writing, structures arche-writing).

To think the unique *within* the system, to inscribe it there, such is the gesture of the arche-writing: arche-violence, loss of the proper, of absolute proximity, of self-presence, in truth the loss of what has never taken place, of a self-presence which has never been given but only dreamed of and always already split, repeated, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance. (Derrida 2016, 121)

Let us parse this sentence out while keeping the question of originary mourning and grievability in mind. The inscription of the other within the structure/movement of iterability is necessary to establish any kind of relationship with the other. This, of course, just like any effort of appropriation, apprehension, or recognition of the other, must involve violence. Moreover, the structure of trace (implied in arche-writing) has to, as I showed before, assume at least the possibility of the other's and my own disappearance (which would be “the loss of what has never taken place”), and by the same token, it embodies the originary of mourning after the loss of what (or who) has never taken place within this imperial scope. Concurrently, since the condition of the trace's appearance is its disappearance, it has to signal a certain renunciation

6 Derrida refers to the same passage from *Time and the Other* in his essay “Violence and Metaphysics.” He describes there the violence and dominance which unavoidably coincides with bringing the alterity of the other to the light of phenomenology and ontology: “The ancient clandestine friendship between light and power, the ancient complicity between theoretical objectivity and technico-political possession” (Derrida 2009, 113). In the following passage from *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas develops his description of the other who “is other with an alterity that is not formal, is not the simple reverse of identity, and is not formed out of resistance to the same, but is prior to every initiative, to all imperialism of the same. It is other with an alterity constitutive of the very content of the other. Other with an alterity that does not limit the same, for in limiting the same the other would not be rigorously other: *by virtue of the common frontier the other, within the system, would yet be the same* [my emphasis – A.K.]” (Levinas 1979, 38-39).

of power or mastery. As Derrida points out in his eulogy for Louis Martin, “[d]eath, or rather mourning, the mourning of the absolute of force: that is the name, or one of the names, of this affect that unites force to the without-force [...]” (Derrida 2001a, 147). To approach the other in a responsible manner should then perhaps lead to the affirmation of weakness, which “implies a certain disarming quality in one’s relation to the other” (Derrida, Ferrari 2001, 63). It means perhaps that in mourning one would have to surrender their ambition to master the other, and therefore, one would have to disturb the absolute power by means of which a universal understanding and a law of equal grievability could be established and enacted. Consequently, it would mean that the injunction of equal grievability would lead to the following paradox or a *double bind*: on the one hand, it would aim at weakening of the power of the sovereign over the decision as to which lives are grievable and which are ungrievable, but on the other, it would have to rely on some sort of sovereign power to establish and protect the universal law of equal grievability.

From Grievability to Equality

Now, every effort to establish the essence of life or bond between living beings must succumb to this inevitable logic of “the trace” and originary mourning, which, in turn, would mean that its validity is relative and its emergence outside of the structure of iterability is merely a metaphysical illusion. Butler’s view expressed in *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* seems to fit this framework. As she points out, “understanding something about the conditions of achieving singularity within a given field of intelligibility [...] is the question of the normative preconditions for achieving grievability. We are perhaps back to the conundrum of structure and instance” (Butler, Athanasiou 2013, 134).

This conundrum boils down to the aporia of inscribing absolute singularity into the regime of possibility, and it conforms to the “law” of spectral contamination expressed in the above passage from *Of Grammatology*, where the possible is given a chance but only at the price of giving up on its alleged purity. This aporia “installs the haunting” (Derrida 1993: 20) within the ontological precisely by what the latter’s unfolding tries to leave behind. Moreover, hauntology would harbor within itself any ontology, eschatology, teleology, or archeology as provisional places or effects (Derrida 2011, 10). The haunting would give voice to what ontology leaves outside its brackets, forcing the latter to reformu-

late its approach *ad infinitum*. This would mean that politics should not only be aware of haunting but affirm it. In fact, without hauntology, there would be no reason for politics whatsoever, as Ernesto Laclau rightly notices: “[w]ithout the constitutive dislocation that inhabits all hauntology – and that ontology tries to conceal – there would be no politics, just a programed, predetermined reduction of the other to the same” (Laclau 2007, 67). The political injunction would therefore urge us to take specters into account and not to exorcise them. It would thus send us into

[...] the instability of an anxiety belonging to any possibilization. This would submit to being haunted by the specter of its impossibility, by mourning itself: the mourning of itself borne in itself, but which also gives it its life or its survival, its very possibility. For this *im*-possibility opens its possibility, it leaves a trace, both a chance and a threat, *in* what it makes possible. (Derrida 2005a, 88)

Consequently, life’s emergence has to rely on this originary haunting that corrupts any ontological category or norm. It means that life has to attest to its profound contamination by death, which conditions the constitution of any individual presence any social bond. What it also means is that we cannot simply exclude specters from the domain of politics (of responsibility) or treat them as an unwelcome or undesired residue of normative production. While in her texts on grievability and precariousness Butler expresses awareness at least of the irreducibility of the spectral and of what remains after a life emerges within the political domain, in “Finishing, Starting,” dedicated to Derrida’s thought, she emphasizes that “[t]he question of politics resides [...] in the encounter with what troubles the norm of sameness” (Butler 2009, 298).⁷

By the same logic, what undoes (but also conditions) any framing is the haunting by what is not identifiable as a life, namely, by an ungrievable living “that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all” (Butler 2016, 38). Butler speaks here about those “others whose loss is no loss, and who remain ungrievable” (Butler 2016, 24), to wit, “effectively, socially dead” (Butler 2020, 59). But, as Derrida points out in *Specters of Marx*, “[t]his non-presence of the specter demands that one take its times and its history into consi-

The haunting would give voice to what ontology leaves outside its brackets, forcing the latter to reformulate its approach *ad infinitum*. This would mean that politics should not only be aware of haunting but affirm it.

7 In the same text, Butler states that we are never quite free of “specters, ghosts, traces” when freedom, as a display of autonomy and auto-mobility of a subject, is at stake. Freedom can emerge only on the condition that it is already compromised, “disavowing the sites from which it does emerge, only to have those sites reemerge as the haunted grounds of its own possibility” (Butler 2009, 298).

deration, the singularity of its temporality or of its historicity” (Derrida 2011, 126). So, once again, we return to the aporia of inscribing the singularity in the realms of possibility and subjecting the other to the hegemonic perspective of the sovereign same. But, since specters are inherently elusive to appropriation, “[t]he subject that haunts is not identifiable, one cannot see, localize, fix any form, one cannot decide between hallucination and perception, there are only displacements; one feels oneself looked at by what one cannot see” (Derrida 2011, 169-170), by someone or something that belongs neither to the essence of life nor death (Derrida 2011, 62).

While, on the one hand, in Butler’s view, the frame prohibits from mourning those who do not count as lives – “there is no destruction, and there is no loss” (Butler 2016, xiii) – on the other, what Butler fails to mention is that the return of the specter also interrupts the work of mourning encompassed by the frame which attests to “the ratified version of reality” (Butler 2016, xiii). However, one could still infer this second conclusion, for example, from the following passage:

What is this specter that gnaws at the norms of recognition, an intensified figure vacillating as its inside and its outside? As inside, it must be expelled to purify the norm; as outside, it threatens to undo the boundaries that limn the self. In either case, it figures the collapsibility of the norm; in other words, it is a sign that the norm functions precisely by way of managing the prospect of its undoing, an undoing that inheres in its doings. (Butler 2016, 12)

Nevertheless, I argue that the frame must fail in its functioning by virtue of the spectral interruption of the work of mourning to which, after all, Butler attests (Butler 2016, 7). Furthermore, it seems that the normative differentiation between grievable and un-grievable lives is violently imposed on the originary violence of iterability. On the one hand, we are facing the derealization of the other, who, thereby, is “neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral” (Butler 2004, 33-34). On the other, we have those who fit the frames of life worthy of our grief. That is where Butler sets normative ontological production against the realm of spectrality. Since “[t]hese normative frameworks establish in advance what kind of life will be a life worth living, what life will be a life worth preserving, and what life will become worthy of being mourned” (Butler 2016, 53), then according to Butler, the exclusion to the realm of spectrality leads to violence that “leaves a mark that is no

mark” (Butler 2004, 36)⁸ or “barely a trace” (Butler 2020, 75), and results in fatal political consequences:

If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). They cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never “were,” and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness. (Butler 2004, 33)

However, Butler seems to disregard the threats which might stem from reactive, organized, and successful mourning. Yet, the question of who counts as a worthy life is strictly connected to forces that organize mourning. Such mourning would mean that those who count as lives worth living are nevertheless subjected to ontological violence and treated as ancillary to politically determined norms and categories. The work of mourning may also result in turning any bereaved and worthy life into a monument which in extreme cases might serve as a justification for the violence inflicted upon those who are unworthy of being mourned.⁹

Haunting by a specter of the other would unsettle those totalizing processes, but at the same time, it would make mourning possible – however, only as a failure of successful mourning. In a similar vein, Butler admits that “mourning would be maintained by its enigmatic dimension, by the experience of not knowing incited by losing what we cannot fully fathom” (Butler 2004, 22), namely, by the impossibility of turning the other into the same, whether we are speaking about a monument, an image, a subject, or a frame. In any case, precisely in order to overcome the violence that stems from the differentiation between grievable and ungrievable lives, Butler proposes to establish a presumption of equal grievability as “a principle that organizes the social organization of health, food, shelter, employment, sexual life, and civic life” (Butler 2020, 59), which would be a response to tendencies to intensify “the

8 However, this can be true only in a situation when ontology is opposed to hauntology.

9 Regarding the problem of monumentalization, I would like to evoke a so-called “controversy” around a remark of Chris Hayes (a political commentator for MSNBC) about Memorial Day in the USA. He stated: “I feel uncomfortable about the word ‘hero’ because it seems to me that it is so rhetorically proximate to justifications for more war. And I obviously don’t want to desecrate or disrespect the memory of anyone that’s fallen” (The Nation’s Editors 2012). Eventually, and sadly, under the pressure of American public opinion, he apologized for this valid and still rather restrained remark, given the history of American imperialism.

difference among the value accorded to lives and their very grievability” (Butler 2020, 143).

As a response to the possibility that a life may be lost and that this loss would be mourned, grievability has to imply that such a life is not only mortal but also vulnerable. Therefore, according to Butler, grievability has to presuppose and expose precariousness as an elementary condition of such a life. Now, if this life is deemed worthy of mourning, and if our ability to value life, in general, relies on “an ongoing sense of its grievability” (Butler 2020, 76), then we also have to acknowledge that this life needs to be safeguarded (Butler 2020, 94), namely, that it requires social and economic conditions which would prevent its damage and in which such a life could be livable. This leads, according to Butler, to a recognition of life’s dependency on others: “Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other” (Butler 2016, 14). On the basis of this assumption, Butler argues that

[...] the unequal distribution of grievability might be one framework for understanding the differential production of humans and other creatures within a structure of inequality, or, indeed, within a structure of violent disavowal. (Butler 2020, 58)

Following the presupposition of the general character of precariousness, Butler proposes a shared horizon of equality as a politico-ethical challenge that consists in establishing an imperative that every life should be grievable, and thus, worthy of protection.

Such a realization could provide an alternative to popular liberal approaches, which, in an effort to address the issue of inequalities, disregard the interdependency between lives in favor of what Butler calls “an ontology of discrete identity” (Butler 2016, 31). However, in order to safeguard every life from exploitation and violence, precariousness “has to be grasped not simply as a feature of this or that life, but as a generalized condition whose very generality can be denied only by denying precariousness itself” (Butler 2016, 22). Therefore, the generalized condition of precariousness has to function on a par with “the radically egalitarian character of grievability” (Butler 2016, 183). Following the presupposition of the general character of precariousness, Butler proposes a shared horizon of equality as a politico-ethical challenge that consists in establishing an imperative that every life should be grievable, and thus, worthy of protection.

Conversely, since there is no effective interdiction of violence against those who do not meet the threshold of grievability, violence perpetrated against lives or populations would directly result from an unequal allocation of grievability. Thus, the egalitarian injunction that Butler proclaims has to coincide with the call for nonviolence and a radical

critique of inequality. Furthermore, at the heart of what she calls the politics of equality we must pose a demand according to which to insist “that every life be grievable is another way of saying that all lives ought to be able to persist in their living without being subject to violence, systemic abandonment, or military obliteration” (Butler 2020, 202). This normative principle or aspiration should lead us to a “more radical and effective form of egalitarianism” (Butler 2016, xxii) which would, in turn, address the issue of economic inequalities and the unequal distribution of precariousness in a more comprehensive manner than the existing political models.

Mourning as Living (On) Together

This call for egalitarianism finds its support in shared precariousness and the interdependency of lives. Butler argues that mutual reliance and common vulnerability stem from the exposure of our lives, as bodily lives, to others. This, in turn, allows her to put the very question of survival in the context of our constitutive sociality. According to her, “we are already tied together in a social bond that precedes and makes possible both of our lives. My life is not altogether separable from the other life” (Butler 2020, 93). While she emphasizes the carnality or physicality of our lives as the domain of precariousness, Butler also mentions that the emergence of a subject depends “on the ones whose definition of me gives me form” (Butler 2020, 101), which amounts to the possibility of inheriting our identity through language. Therefore, the constitution of a social bond should be based not solely on corporeality but on the emergence of the social body as a site of contamination of corporeality by the process of ideation which “gives birth to me as a social creature” (Butler 2020, 101). The sense of social responsibility paves the way for the acknowledgment of our collective responsibility. While “[I] oss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (Butler 2004, 20), Butler also warns of immunization against vulnerability, which would lead to the eradication of “one of the most important resources from which we must take our bearings and find our way” (Butler 2004, 30). In fact, eradication like that would stand in contradiction to what constitutes us as social beings, namely, to an address to the other or rather an address that is already a response, which Derrida calls a counter-signature (an echoing *yes*, a response to the spectral injunction) carried

by the movement of iterability: “we are constituted by virtue of the address, a need and desire for the Other that takes place in language in the broadest sense” (Butler 2004, 44); the subject can be sustained only “through the formation of a capacity to sustain an address to another” (Butler 2016, 176).

However, I wonder if Butler takes all the consequences of such a radical – without a doubt necessarily radical – approach into account. If this constitutive address to the other is carried out as iterable, if it is already a response to a loss of presence, then:

(1) It cannot be based on a general conviction of shared grievability and originality of the social bond since all those ties are, in a way, already troubled and undone by the loss of the other. This social bonding, already inscribed in the movement of iterability, takes place without taking place, to wit, “[w]ithout any possible gathering together” (Derrida 2011, 2). Therefore, Butler seems right to admit that “we may need other language to approach the issue that concerns us, a way of thinking about how we are not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them as well” (Butler 2004, 24). But this urgent need for a new language, a new political discourse also stems from the spectral character of every social link, which, as such, requires constant reevaluation and reformulation, if not reinvention.¹⁰

Because haunting becomes the exact condition of the politics of equality, social bonds, on which Butler’s discourse on equality relies, cannot be exempted from mourning. Just like we mourn others, we mourn the elusive and fragile ties that have been keeping us together. To think of equality in the context of originary mourning would perhaps

10 From this point of view, politics, as Jacques Rancière argues, would have no *arche* – it would be anarchical (which would coincide with the anarchistic aspiration of deconstruction to challenge any claim of ultimate political authority or foundation). Consequently, equality could be confirmed not by resorting to some principle of kinship but through its enactment by means of polemical verification. Therefore, social equality would be “a way of living out the relation between equality and inequality, of living it and at the same time displacing it in a positive way” (Rancière 2006, 48). This labor of conflictual verification would involve an infinite task of constructing subjectivity as “the formation of a one that is not a self but is the relation of a self to an other” (Rancière 1992, 60). It would mean that “the logic of political subjectivization, of emancipation, is a heterology, a logic of the other” (Rancière 1992, 62). Since for Rancière anarchism has to be presupposed in democracy, the latter would have to be engaged with “the continual renewal of the actors and of the forms of their actions, the ever-open possibility of the fresh emergence of the fleeting subject. The test of democracy must be in democracy’s own image: versatile, sporadic – and founded on trust” (Rancière 2006, 61).

mean to approach an irresolvable aporia: “But it may be that I cannot give the measure of equality its true sense unless I maintain the absence of common measure that is my relation to *autrui*. An equality of what is nevertheless radically unequal” (Blanchot 2003, 64). Thus, we would be facing the impossibility of translating an irreducible difference between us and the other into a shared condition of equality. Entangled in the double bind, the chance to access “the *whoever* or the *no matter who* of singularity” (Derrida 2005c, 52) by means of calculable measure, sometimes against hegemonic powers and dominating political interests, would emerge as “an autoimmune threat. For calculating technique obviously destroys or neutralizes the incommensurable singularity to which it gives effective access” (Derrida 2005c, 53).

(2) As a response to an already lost presence, the address remains, from the outset, engrossed in mourning. In this context, I would like to touch on a sparse appearance of the notion of demography in *The Force of Non-Violence*. Butler argues there that while demography is concerned with discursive representation of lives and populations, and consequently, it is involved in the process of evaluation which lives are worth preserving and which are not, she also poses a question which undeniably takes the form of a political accusation: “By what graphic means would we distinguish between the grievable and the ungrievable?” (Butler 2020, 104). This question/accusation may be considered disarmed by Butler a few pages earlier where she argues that the principle of equal grievability could be posed as “the demographic precondition” (Butler 2020, 56) for ethics to come. Here, I would like to deepen this question and to think of *graphos* (in the sense of iterable arche-writing) as the possibility of emergence of any *demos*, and simultaneously, any apprehension of grievability. Would that not mean that what is written or traced is already in (originary) mourning? And what would the living (on) together of a *demos* inscribed in the movement of the trace or iterability, and thus already seized by mourning, possibly mean? Perhaps, in Jacques Rancière’s words, the *demos* could then be “at the same time the name of a community and the name for its division, for the handling of a wrong” (Rancière 1992, 59), perceived however not as an evolutionary or teleologic project, but closer to Derrida’s intention, as a disjuncture always threatened by the evil “against which there is no calculable insurance” (Derrida 2011, 32).

Mourning encapsulates or stands for living together, that is, also, living together with the dead, which “is not an accident, a miracle, or an extraordinary story. It is rather an essential possibility of existence. It reminds us that in ‘living together’ the idea of life is neither simple

In living together, we challenge the existing norms and social bonds, cohesiveness or coherence of a *socius*, and at the same time, the phantasm of symbiotic or fusional life, the very concept of life, and the ontological arrest of being-together.

nor dominant even if it remains irreducible” (Derrida 2013, 20). In living together, we challenge the existing norms and social bonds, cohesiveness or coherence of a *socius*, and at the same time, the phantasm of symbiotic or fusional life, the very concept of life, and the ontological arrest of being-together. Because of its structural discordance with totalization, such a living together would be reducible “neither to organic symbiosis nor to the juridico-political contract. Neither to ‘life’ according to nature or birth, blood or soil, nor to life according to convention, contract, or institution” (Derrida 2013, 27).

Therefore, it comes down to imperious necessity to contest the authority of the whole as the ultimate foundation of all living together. Only then can we think of living together in terms of iterability, to wit, as conditioned by *différance* that, as Butler explains, at the same time “rifts the ‘we’ and proves its impossibility as a unity without difference [...] and there is no way around this double bind” (Butler 2009, 297).

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Tytuł: Żałoba i opłakiwalność: Kilka uwag na temat polityki życia razem Judith Butler

Abstrakt: W swoim artykule skupiam się na funkcji pojęć kruchości i opłakiwalności życia w pismach Judith Butler i rozpatruję ich miejsce w szerszym kontekście myśli o tym, co za Jacques'em Derridą nazywam „źródłową żałobą”. Z jednej strony zatem chcę zrekonstruować stawiane przez Butler wyzwanie, polegające na przemyśleniu możliwości stworzenia wspólnoty bazującej na równym przydziale kruchości i opłakiwalności życia, który pozwala Butler na potraktowanie opłakiwalności jako przenikliwej i wyjątkowej ścieżki do problematyki ochrony żywych istot i równości między nimi. Z drugiej strony, odnosząc się do pism Derridy, wpisuję zaproponowane przez Butler pojęcia kruchości i opłakiwalności w szerszą strukturę żałoby, aby pokazać, jak wszelkie formowanie więzi społecznych zasadzające się na wspólnej kruchości i podatności na zranienie musi nieustannie konfrontować się z paradoksem własnej genezy.

Słowa kluczowe: żałoba, kruchość, opłakiwalność, równość, widmontologia