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Review Essay

What World is This? On Judith Butler's Ethico-Politics of Breath and Touch

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It's July 2020, in the midst of a lockdown brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. I'm at home with my partner, and we're about to log in a Zoom lecture to be delivered by Judith Butler "at" the European Graduate School (EGS). I place "at" in scare quotes since it had become almost a commonplace to start Zoom sessions by reflecting on the location of the meeting. We're "here," together, yet we're all separated in our homes, offices or wherever we may be. The word "uncanny" comes to mind, as we had only been using Zoom for a few months and the experience hadn't yet been naturalised as a "new normal."

I approached this online lecture with a sense of hope to reconnect with an environment that had been lost in those first months of a global pandemic: spaces of academic gathering and sharing of thoughts. What I sought from this talk was an attempt to make some sense of what we were living through following the disruption brought about by the initial shock of the pandemic; a feeling of "*is this really happening?*" In many ways, the pandemic manifested itself as a traumatic rupture that blocks thinking, even if ample opinion pieces and analyses that politicise the pandemic were being put forward within days of this global phenomenon.¹ Colleagues who, like me, were living through the pandemic on the Mediterranean island of Malta were already writing, a few weeks into the pandemic, about how this uncanny situation was making more visible existing social and economic inequalities, or how the Maltese authorities' decision to impose a lockdown in a detention centre had racist overtones.² Incidentally, Malta features in the postscript of the book under review, in Butler's critical remarks on grievability, asking us to consider the collapse of world that forces people to flee their home and attempt to cross the Mediterranean in conditions of great risk and danger, to be met with an EU policy, reiterated by Maltese authorities, that threatens to push back

migrants to other countries, refuses to rescue boats carrying migrants, or subjects them to detention in conditions that betray international law.

I was eagerly anticipating Butler's "take" on COVID-19, their invitation to think through the pandemic and the disruptions brought with it. What followed was an hour of deep thought, reflection and pathos. Butler's thinking about the pandemic combined socio-political analysis with a consideration of the developing realities that the virus presented, while also acknowledging the affective registers of loss, sorrow and disquietude that permeated those initial pandemic months. These were some of the opening words of Butler's lecture:

However differently we register this pandemic, we doubtless understand it as global. It implicates us in a world, a world of living creatures whose capacity to affect one another can be, well, a life or death matter. I'm not sure I would say that this is a common world we share since many of the resources of the world are not precisely shared. And there are those who understand themselves to have no share of the world.³

Implication. Common world. Living creatures. To affect and be affected. Life and death. Scheler and Merleau-Ponty. Those would be some of the keywords for Butler's lecture and for their following work on the pandemic.

These lines would be reworked by Butler, first into a journal article,⁴ then into the introduction and opening chapter of the 2022 monograph, titled *What World is This? A Pandemic Phenomenology* (henceforth *WWIT*).⁵ Apart from these publications, Butler has made a number of contributions discussing the pandemic in the form of published interviews, newspaper articles, and various Zoom talks and interviews that can be freely accessed online.⁶ Butler's previous monograph, *The Force of Nonviolence* (henceforth *FN*),⁷ had just come out as the virus was marking its presence globally. So, a number of interviews with Butler about that book considered the pandemic in relation to the arguments presented in it. In fact, the pandemic presented yet another occasion to think about systemic racism and sexism, grievability and the climate crisis, all being matters that featured in *FN*. In many ways, then, *WWIT* builds on *FN* and previous books by Butler, this time reconsidered through the specific context of the pandemic.

What marks this book as different from any of Butler's other books, apart from the pandemic context, is the phenomenology angle that serves as a sort of methodological springboard for the thoughts presented in it. As indicated by its subtitle, in this book Butler elaborates a *pandemic phenomenology*. In a sense, the whole pandemic experience lends itself to phenomenological inquiry insofar as it foregrounded key phenomenological themes, not least experience itself, but also other notions such as embodiment, touching, mortality, breathlessness, isolation, anxiety and care. In these last two years and counting, one way to philosophise has become to consider

questions and lamentations such as: *what is it like to live through a pandemic? What is it like to be intubated and ventilated? What is it like to lose a loved one and be physically unable to attend their memorial service? What is it like to have to go to work knowing that that work is exposing you to the virus?*

It is perhaps for this reason that in the third chapter of *WWIT*, titled “Intertwining as Ethics and Politics,” Butler situates this book alongside the efforts of critical phenomenology, where first-person experiential accounts are seen as inseparable from socio-political and historical factors that inform the constitution of experiences. In this regard, Butler embraces the gesture of critical phenomenology, namely to “*breathe new life* into the phenomenological tradition and reveal its ethical, social and political promise.”⁸ Thus, critical phenomenology is characterised as an approach to reading phenomenological texts in such a way that reveals their latent *critical breath*; or even to release the underlying critical breath in phenomenological ideas.

Breathing is, in fact, a central notion in *WWIT*. It is a guiding thread in this book, not just as a reading or analytical strategy of breathing new life into texts, but also as a literal experience and as a concern of Butler’s thinking on ethics and politics. Multiple senses of the term “breathing” interlace in Butler’s work. There is the sense of political movements that struggle in order to make social norms more conducive for breathing. As Butler writes in *Undoing Gender*, the possibility of breathing, literal and metaphoric, has been one of the goals of a number of social movements that work to distinguish “among the norms and conventions that permit people to *breathe*, to desire, to love, and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself.”⁹ Moreover, in *FN* Butler points towards the politics of breathing in the sense that, for some individuals and groups, breathing in this world does not come easily or is made impossible through chokeholds.¹⁰ There is also the added significance that breathing takes in the context of the pandemic, where one’s breath could be the source of infection for another and where one’s need to breathe renders them vulnerable to becoming infected.

All these senses of breathing come together in *WWIT*, making the book at once a reflection on pandemic times, an analysis of major political issues of our time (systemic racism, sexism, climate crisis, etc.), as well as a phenomenological reflection that urges us to rethink subjectivity, ethics and politics. As is characteristic of several of Butler’s recent work (most notably, *FN*), *WWIT* seamlessly oscillates across different registers: from the micro (living in lockdown during the pandemic) to the macro (institutional violence and global inequalities) through the psychic (the account of gender melancholia and its links with some politicians refusing to mourn losses) towards praxis (detailing the manifesto and transversal strategies of resistance movements such as *Ni Una Menos*). This approach is instrumental to Butler’s thinking throughout *WWIT*, which insists on drawing connections between different types of oppression, inequalities and violence, within the

context of a pandemic occurring amid the destruction caused by a climate catastrophe that reinforces and is reinforced by systemic racism and sexism.

But before elaborating further on the political conclusions found in Butler's latest book, it is useful to dwell further on the role that phenomenology plays in *WWIT*. In this book's first chapter, titled "Senses of the World: Scheler and Merleau-Ponty," we find extended engagements with phenomenologists Max Scheler (on the tragic) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (on touch and the intertwining). Regarding Scheler, Butler focuses on his 1915 article, "On the Phenomenon of the Tragic," written in the midst of the first world war. There, Scheler defies Husserl's philosophy by not giving a principal role to the transcendental ego, at least when it comes to understanding the nature of the tragic. For Scheler, the tragic is "a way in which the world exhibits itself."¹¹ Butler reads Scheler as claiming that the tragic appears in the aftermath of a great loss or destruction of something or someone valuable, leaving behind it not only grief "but the shock or bewilderment that the world is such that an event like that could happen at all."¹²

Following Scheler's suggestion that the tragic marks the destruction of a positive value, Butler considers what gets destroyed in the pandemic tragedy: "One value is touch. The other is breath. Another is the complex surfaces and enclosures of the world."¹³ This identification of touch and breath as values is illuminating on various counts. Firstly, it invites us to think about how these were transformed by the pandemic. Moreover, it enables us to read touch and breath as twin notions around which Butler's ethical and political philosophy revolve. This is what I will refer to as *an ethico-politics of breath and touch* operating in Butler's recent work.

Butler writes that "under pandemic conditions, the very elements upon which we depend for life carry the potential to take life: we come to worry about touching someone, and breathing their air," and that this worry amounts to "a kind of perpetual sorrow that afflicts all the joints of sociality."¹⁴ Out of this opening reflection with Scheler, Butler elicits the two core questions that animate *WWIT*, namely: *what makes a life livable?* and *what is an inhabitable world?* Butler notes that to ask the first question – *what does it mean to live a livable life?* – is not the same as asking questions such as *what is the good life?* or *what is the meaning of life?* or even *what will make me happy?* Butler maintains that "'livability' is ultimately a modest requirement. ... One is looking, rather, to live in such a way that life itself remains bearable so that one can continue to live. In other words, one is looking for those requirements of a life that allow a life to be sustained and to persist."¹⁵ Livability amounts to having the conditions of life that make it possible for one to *desire to live*. Since, as Butler notes, "under some conditions of restriction – incarceration, occupation, detention, torture, statelessness – one may ask *is life worth living under these conditions?*"¹⁶

Engaging with the second core question raised in *WWIT* – *what is an inhabitable world?* – Butler draws a distinction between the world and the earth. This suggests a broader ecological and planetary dimension that is increasingly colouring Butler’s work. The “world” is a space and time of inhabitation, whereas the “earth” persists in places uninhabited by humans. Ultimately, questions of livability and uninhabitability coincide. Phenomena such as climate destruction make the world uninhabitable while “if we live human lives with no limits on our freedom, then we enjoy our freedom at the expense of a livable life.”¹⁷ This is a provocative formulation which Butler makes with regard to libertarian understandings of freedom and the form these took in the context of the pandemic. Such understandings revolved around notions of personal liberty and unbridled agency. Of course, Butler (2022b) is not arguing against personal liberty; rather, they are pointing our attention to “another form of freedom that is sidelined by this one, and it emerges amid social life, a life that seeks a common world, a life that is free to seek a common world” (33). This other form of freedom demands the dissolution of certain notions of agency and individuality. As the title of an article by Butler (the contents of which re-appear in *WWIT*) makes clear, “Creating an Inhabitable World for Humans Means Dismantling Rigid Forms of Individuality.”¹⁸ One form that this dismantling can take, following Achille Mbembe’s suggestion, is to shake off the notion of the world in favour of the less anthropocentric notion of the planetary, a notion which also challenges national boundaries as drawn by geographical maps.¹⁹ Importantly, this rethinking of freedom and, thus, of selfhood places at the center the *porosity of the body* rather than its definitive boundaries. Butler contends that the notions of interdependency, intertwinement and porosity can help us to think anew key ethical and political concepts in view of contemporary predicaments such as the pandemic. To further elaborate this point, Butler turns to the late work of Merleau-Ponty for inspiration.

This is not the first time that Butler has drawn on Merleau-Ponty’s work, but perhaps in no earlier book-length text by Butler has he occupied such a central role, even if they rework and extend his ideas in different directions than those pursued by the French phenomenologist. Different aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy feature quite extensively in Butler’s work on, for example, gender or the role of affectivity in subject-formation. It is, however, the Merleau-Ponty that Butler draws upon in *Senses of the Subject*²⁰ – the later Merleau-Ponty – that plays an important role in *WWIT*. In the first three chapters of *WWIT* Butler refers to Merleau-Ponty’s essay, “Eye and Mind,” and especially his posthumous *The Visible and the Invisible*. Butler reworks his poetic and profound reflections on touching in order to think about ethical relationality in the context of the pandemic. Like breathing, touching is something we cannot do without, yet both were features of life that obtained a heightened sense of danger in pandemic times. In the COVID-19 era, statements like “I feel your breath on my body” or “I can feel your touch” mean potential danger, if not death. But, for Merleau-Ponty, the

intertwinement is not the site of danger, but rather of a harmonious interconnection and interrelatedness (incidentally, it is this optimism in Merleau-Ponty's account that Butler, drawing on psychoanalytic notions of rage and aggression, will object to). For Merleau-Ponty, this intertwinement forces us to rethink the "I" as necessarily interrelated. Regarding the intertwinement of touching, Butler maintains that it is not a matter of there being an "I" who goes on to touch something; rather:

this "I" is always catching up with the scene of touch that makes me possible The power of touch does not originate with me. The tangible understood as a field or a dimension of the world – a way in which the world is exhibited – is thus there as I touch something, and as I feel my own touch, or redouble my touch in touching something else. I touched that other person, but my own flesh gets in the way since at the moment of touch, I cannot evade my own touch in touching the other, although I may wish to.²¹

Contrary to Descartes' "I think, therefore I am," Butler follows Merleau-Ponty when claiming that "I cannot come into being without being touched, handled, and maintained, and I cannot touch or handle or maintain without having first been formed in the crucible of those practices."²² I've been touched, therefore I can touch; I can touch, therefore I've been touched. The notions of activity and passivity too get problematised in this account, as touching and being touched become entangled. Butler adopts this chiasmatic language from Merleau-Ponty to insist that "bodies are interlaced with one another,"²³ and "to be a body at all is to be bound up with others and with objects, with surfaces, and the elements, including the air that is breathed in and out, air that belongs to no one and everyone."²⁴ Going beyond ontological models that posit individuals as discrete and isolated has ethical and political consequences on how we think of interdependency.

Considered in this way, clean water, breathable air, proper shelter, adequate clothing and access to health care start to be seen as basic requirements for a livable life. Everyone has these requirements because no life is self-sufficient. As Butler writes in *WWIT*, "I am not fully sealed as a bounded creature but emit breath into a shared world where I take in air that has been circulating through the lungs of others."²⁵ Parts of me end up in you, and parts of you end up in me, in this situation that is sometimes wondrous and other times painful. I need to breathe in air; and I need to let you breathe in air too. To paraphrase Cornel West, we are like "a cracked vessel."²⁶ And we leak, we over-flow; the other spills over into us. There is an ethical impulse implied here, but also a political commitment that aspires for a social configuration in which infrastructures of support – shelter, health care, safety from violence – are secured for everyone. It is in this seamless way that Butler's pandemic phenomenology intertwines with a renewal and reanimation of socialist ideals.²⁷

The relational ontology presented by Butler is also a critique of prevailing frameworks that define humans as separate individuals motivated to behave only in terms of self-interest. For Butler, this way of thinking “is a liberal conceit that underwrites a great deal of moral philosophy.”²⁸ Individuality is, at best, a tenuous achievement and an imagined status, argues Butler, and not the starting point of deliberation. In fact, when thinking about ethics and politics the primary helplessness and dependency of the infant is a more helpful reality than the presumed uprightness of the adult.²⁹ The denial or disavowal of the ethico-political implications of intertwinement is what results in the prevailing notion of unbridled liberty, which turned out to be deadly in the context of the pandemic. This is also the same logic that contributes to the destruction brought about by climate change.

In the second chapter of *WWIT*, titled “Powers in the Pandemic: Reflections on Restricted Life,” Butler expands further on how global responses to the pandemic fell short of acknowledging the interconnected character of lives and the corresponding obligation to organise the world according to principles of radical equality. Butler argues that it is market and neoliberal values that underpinned the predominant global response to the pandemic, ultimately amounting to “a necropolitical plan – exemplifying perhaps in a remarkably vivid way the death drive thriving at the heart of the capitalist machine.”³⁰ An example of this killing machinery that Butler reflects on is the discursive construction of “reasonableness” with regard to “the right number of deaths, the right extension of the horizontal line, the level that establishes the number of deaths we are willing to live with in order to keep markets open.”³¹ Throughout *WWIT* Butler takes issue with this approach to lives and deaths, critiquing the statistical systems of representation, metaphors of health and illness, graphs, “curves” and calculations of morbidity, “usually posed by those who do not consider themselves a possible factor in the equation.”³²

In the context of this discussion, Butler evokes Derrida’s notion of the incalculable value of life and inquires into the significance that such a notion can have in light of how some lives – particularly workers’ – were deemed to be dispensable during pandemic times. Butler powerfully links this discussion with a consideration of Marx’s identification of a contradiction underpinning capitalism. Marx had argued that capitalism forces the worker to work in order to secure a wage, yet unsustainable working conditions can mean that the worker gets ill or injured and becomes unable to work and earn a subsistence. This deadly contradiction was apparent throughout the pandemic as workers were, quite literally, working themselves to death. Not just in the sense of being over-worked, but also in the way that work made certain workers more exposed to infection, illness and death. Furthermore, Butler notes that, more cruelly, many of these people – often Black or brown, migrants, or poor – belonged to social groups that even before the pandemic did not have adequate access to quality health care. For this reason, the term

“preexisting conditions,” a term used to explain why someone was more susceptible to die of the virus, came to stand in as a euphemism that names a structural inequality rather than a “biological condition.” So, in the same way that the “reasonableness” of death counts was constructed through the neoliberal governmental rationality, so too were “preexisting conditions.” As Butler puts it: “for populations that never had access to health care or who were disadvantaged by racism, illnesses that once could have been treated become ‘preexisting conditions’.”³³ Butler contests the “crass utilitarianism”³⁴ of this calculating logic that determines who and how many people get their health and life sacrificed in the name of “health of the economy.” From this, Butler draws a connection between an inaccessible health care system, the disproportionate number of deaths in certain communities, and the social groups that were more negatively impacted by the pandemic. Questioning Foucault’s distinction between “killing” and “letting die,” Butler notes that “it is systemic racism that links the two.”³⁵

Butler remarks on how at the beginning of the pandemic, there were some who thought that, “even for a brief duration, that the pandemic could function as a great leveler, that it would be the occasion for imagining a more substantial equality and a more radical form of justice.”³⁶ After all, everyone was susceptible to getting the virus, everyone breathes air that might be carrying the virus, everyone touches surfaces that might contain the virus. Yet, the pandemic exacerbated and brought to the fore the vast disparities and inequalities that plague the world. Regarding the utopian way of thinking (and I confess that I was one of these naïve utopians), Butler maintains that “we were not exactly wrong, but neither were we well prepared to bring about the world we imagined.”³⁷ It suffices to consider the huge inequalities surrounding the global distribution of vaccines in order to see the fundamental failure of the world to recognise the extent of global interdependency. The ethical implications of this interdependency are noticed by Butler in a statement by a WHO director who at one point argued that: “None of us can accept a world in which some people are protected while others are not.”³⁸ Ultimately, Butler concludes, the ethical and political outlook that must follow from awareness of this interdependency is one that takes “the world” as its measure since, after all, “only a global commitment can honor global interdependency.”³⁹

Another destroyed value, besides touching and breathing, that Butler points towards is the equal value of lives as an ideal. Following Scheler’s characterisation of the tragic, Butler notes how in pandemic times and beyond, it is the value of life, “a value that only makes sense in light of the claim that *all* lives are equal or should be treated equally,”⁴⁰ that risks being destroyed when lives are left to descend into the populated pits of unlivability. In the face of this intolerable reality, Butler invokes the anguished exclamation that guides the book – *what world is this?* – as a contestation or indictment of the world, and as an “urgent call to animate or

renew a different sense of world governed by another set of collective values."⁴¹

One such value that Butler posits in the fourth chapter of *WWIT* is that of *equal grievability*. Butler's thinking on grievability has developed throughout several books, namely *Precarious Life* (henceforth *PL*)⁴² and *Frames of War* (henceforth *FW*),⁴³ and once again it receives a systematic discussion in *FN*. Indeed, one can consider those three books as a trilogy of sorts that develops a philosophical vocabulary (rather than a unitary theoretical framework) revolving around notions of precariousness, vulnerability, relationality, interdependency, grievability, equality and nonviolence.⁴⁴ It could be said that such conceptual architecture has been developed through a spiral return by Butler to this constellation of concepts in their various works, each time introducing a new emphasis which further extends the remit and domain of the theorising. In *WWIT*, Butler reflects on how in *FN* they had argued that whether a life is deemed grievable or not is linked with the meaning of socio-economic inequalities and is an expression of violence. Thus, in Butler's thinking, grievability-equality-nonviolence form a conceptual cluster. Importantly, as reflected in the fourth chapter's title, "Grievability for the Living," although grief may be associated with death – specifically the grief experienced by those who survive the loss of another – Butler insists that grievability is actually a trait that is applicable to the living: "to say of a living person that they are grievable is to say that they would be grieved were they to be lost. It is also to say that the world is, or should be, organized to sustain that life."⁴⁵ Butler continues that recognising that one's life is ungrivable is to live with "a somatic sense of dispensability" and "a lived conviction"⁴⁶ that the world is such that some lives do not matter and will not be safeguarded.

Butler concludes the chapter on grievability in *WWIT* with a moving reflection on, to echo the subtitle of *PL*, the powers of mourning. They refer to the forms that mourning took under conditions of pandemic: from the difficulty of Zoom memorials to the pain of being unable to be close to a dying person in hospital, and the impossibility of gathering to communally mark a loss of life. This leads Butler to poignantly ask: "A purely private form of mourning is possible, but can it release or assuage the open cry, the stories, the songs that petition the world to bear witness to this loss in its singularity within a social fabric of interwoven lives?"⁴⁷ Moreover, such reflections on mass mourning force us to move beyond the association of mourning with proximity and familiarity, as Butler reminds us that one need not know the deceased person before one can mourn them, before one can be undone while becoming animated by that loss. On this matter, Butler's poetic lines on grief, oozing ache and tenderness, must be quoted at length:

Whatever the age, the value of that person is now carried in the lives of others, a form of acknowledgement that becomes an incorporation, a living echo, an animated wound or trace that transforms those who live on. Just because someone else suffers in a way that I have not suffered does not mean that the other's suffering is unthinkable to me. Our bonds are forged from echoes, translation, and resonances, rhythms, and repetitions, as if the musicality of mourning makes its way past borders by virtue of its acoustic powers. The loss that the stranger endures echoes with the personal loss one feels, even as it is not the same. Because it is not the same, it echoes. An interval becomes a link. Strangers in grief nevertheless have formed a kind of collectivity.⁴⁸

The power of text such as the above quotation seems to have been felt by the three writers who, in their endorsement of *WWIT*, all remarked on the texture of Butler's prose. Lewis R. Gordon referred to it as "a stunningly poignant book;" Lisa Guenther as "a thoughtful meditation;" and Jacqueline Rose as a "remarkable meditation." *WWIT* is a text that doesn't just work on an intellectual level (if a text ever works on just that level), but affectively too. This is perhaps what led respondents to a series of lectures Butler delivered at the University of Girona in October 2020 – where essentially the entire draft of *WWIT* was delivered by Butler in the form of four lectures, followed by responses from a number of scholars – to describe the lectures as "very moving" or "touching." In a sense, I feel that *WWIT* offers an account of a kind of godless morality or a meditative reflection that follows the death of god (and so many other human and ecological deaths). To evoke an image they often use to describe grief, Butler's text touches the reader as if "one is hit by waves."⁴⁹ The text moves and flows; it seduces and soothes. It is a style of writing and an ethos of thinking that is otherwise than the – often phallogocentric – gesture of argumentation. It is a tone that echoes Butler's account of ecstasy in *PL*. There, Butler writes that "to be ec-static means, literally, to be outside oneself, ... to be transported beyond oneself by a passion, but also to be *beside oneself* with rage or grief."⁵⁰ Going on to address their readers directly, Butler continues: "I am speaking to those of us who are living in certain ways *beside ourselves*, whether in sexual passion, or emotional grief, or political rage."⁵¹ And, before proceeding with their discussion, notes, "I am arguing, if I am 'arguing' at all,"⁵² suggesting that rather than premises and arguments, philosophy may have more to do with the body, affect, rage and grief. In this sense, one can speak of the *poetics* of Butler's philosophy, or perhaps its *autopoietic* or even *ethopoietic* quality.⁵³ Perhaps it is a quality that is related to the ethico-politics of touch and breath; Butler's philosophy can touch the reader, making them breathe the hastened breath of passion, the sombre air of grief, the winds of rage, or the exhilaration of ecstasy.

The ethos of Butler's work can also be seen embodied in the way they approach and read texts. Deconstructively, certainly, but in their own words, it seeks to present "an aspirational reading."⁵⁴ The way Butler describes this

way of reading recalls their description (on its own terms) of critical phenomenology as seeking to “breathe new life into the phenomenological tradition.”⁵⁵ A few pages later, Butler reflects on the rhetoric gesture adopted in *WWIT*, namely that of invoking a “we”; an aspirational “we” that, like an aspirational reading, attempts to breathe life. Let us not forget that, as Butler observes, aspiration and breathing share an etymological concern: “looking for a space in which to breathe is not the highest ethical aspiration, but it is there, etymologically embedded in aspiration itself, and does seem to constitute something of a precondition for any viable, that is, livable, ethical reflection.”⁵⁶ An aspirational reading breathes new life into a text to dislodge it from fixed readings; while Butler’s aspirational rhetoric is “a way of hoping for ‘we’ that does not yet exist.”⁵⁷ The tenor of Butler’s work, ultimately, invites us to see anew and reimagine ourselves and the world – a phenomenological motif if there ever was one.

It is this urgent critical reimagining that Butler pursues in the postscript of *WWIT*, titled “Transformations,” through a considered reflection on the political actions of the Movement for Black Lives and *Ni Una Menos* (Not One Less). In this chapter, Butler focuses also on *The Feminist International*,⁵⁸ a book by a leader of the latter Latin American grassroots feminist movement, Verónica Gago. Butler notes that this social movement has a complex agenda; although its initial mobilisation was opposition to violence against women, its political vision gradually expanded: “it opposes dictatorship, contemporary forms of revisionism, wage inequalities for women, femicide and rape, capitalist exploitation, and extractivism, and it also promotes radical democracy.”⁵⁹ Butler refers to the group’s practices, from taking to the street, to taking *over* the steets, open parliaments and assemblies, to – especially during the pandemic – extending its cross-regional and online solidarities, publications, and online gatherings. Moreover, Butler reflects on the significance of the feminist strike which Gago, following Rosa Luxemburg, understands “both as an event and an ongoing collective process. ... [T]he strike always exceeds the act or the event, marking a vector of temporalities from which a new temporal horizon emerges or can emerge.”⁶⁰ Inspired by this movement, as well as other movements such as Black Lives Matter, Butler argues that effective resistance in contemporary times takes the form of transregional and transversal action, keeping “the relationship between affect and action alive,”⁶¹ transforming outrage into collectivity, and not giving up on revolutionary promise.

In relation to these social movements, Butler sympathetically refers to the work of The Care Collective, the group of scholars and activists behind *The Care Manifesto*.⁶² This is significant since, in the past, Butler has always tended to avoid embracing the discourse of care in relation to ethics and politics, particularly because of some of its proponents’ moralistic failure to capture the aggression underpinning relationality, as well as its essentialising association of care with maternity.⁶³ Yet Butler embraces the work of The

Care Collective, who politicise care, highlight its psychoanalytic complexities, and acknowledge its etymological associations with “concern, anxiety, sorrow, grief, and trouble.”⁶⁴ Consequently, Butler reads their efforts as being in line with those of the other social movements discussed in this postscript, who all in their different ways insist that morality only takes substantial form when connected with a wider critique of inequality and exploitation. In this regard, *WWIT* is a masterclass in showing how individual experiences are constituted within socio-political realities, and also in explicating how today’s major political concerns can and must be thought together if we are to hope for effective political change.

Butler concludes *WWIT* by insisting that the porosity of our being means that we cannot exist without each other. This implies going outside of the bounded self and *opening toward the world*. It is “the world” that Arendt wrote about when she wrote about the human condition of being born into a condition of cohabitation which we do not choose. Common existence is an ambivalent predicament we cannot do without; to actively quench this unchosen bond is a genocidal impulse, as Arendt charged Eichmann.⁶⁵ It is a situation mired with heterogeneity and plurality, with love and care, with community and beyond nation, with tension and unease, with kin and strangers, with humans and non-humans. It is a world we all live in relation to, and persisting in it demands sustaining. As Butler’s final words in *WWIT* make clear, our survival in this world depends on a particular political vision; one that can be called an ethico-politics of breath and touch, that is:

A politics that is committed to a world in which we can all breathe without fear of contagion, fear of pollution, or fear of the police chokehold, where our breath is intermingled with the world’s breath, where that exchange of breath, syncopated and free, becomes what is shared.⁶⁶

- ¹ A number of early responses by philosophers and writers to the pandemic include Fernando Castrillón and Thomas Marchevsky (eds.), *Coronavirus, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy: Conversations on Pandemics, Politics, and Society* (London: Routledge, 2021), Brad Evans, “The Quarantine Files: Thinkers in Self-Isolation,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 14, 2020, lareviewofbooks.org/article/quarantine-files-thinkers-self-isolation/, and Hank Scotch (ed), “Posts from the Pandemic,” *Critical Inquiry* 47, no. S2 (2021): S1-S142. Other philosophers have even compiled their different pieces on the pandemic in book form, such as Giorgio Agamben, *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics*, trans. Valeria Dani (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York: OR Books, 2020), and Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic! 2: Chronicles of a Time Lost* (New York: OR Books, 2020).
- ² For political analyses of the pandemic situation in Malta, see Kathrin Schödel, “Give Yourself a Break. Stop Making Sense of a Virus!” *Isles of the Left*, March 22, 2020, www.islesoftheleft.org/give-yourself-a-break-stop-making-sense-of-a-virus/, and Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone and Daniel Vella, “Treating the ‘Other’ as Disease: Hal Far Open Centre as a Zone of Contagion,” *Isles of the Left*, April 29, 2020, www.islesoftheleft.org/treating-the-other-as-disease-hal-far-open-centre-as-a-zone-of-contagion/.
- ³ This lecture, titled “Losing Touch: Fragments on the Inhabitable World,” was delivered on July 15, 2020, and can be accessed here: vimeo.com/ondemand/judithbutler/454511431.
- ⁴ Judith Butler, “A Livable Life? An Inhabitable World? Scheler on the Tragic,” *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology* 5, no. 2 (2022): 8-27.
- ⁵ Judith Butler, *What World is This? A Pandemic Phenomenology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).
- ⁶ Videos of Butler speaking on the pandemic that are freely available online include conversations with Florence Dore and Andrew Perrin (May 2020), Amia Srinivasan (July 2020), Mel Y. Chen (September 2021), Simon Critchley, Cornel West and Glenn Greenwald (December 2021) and Jacques Rancière (April 2022). Moreover, published interviews and other articles on the pandemic include Judith Butler, “Capitalism Has its Limits,” *Verso*, March 30, 2020, www.versobooks.com/blogs/4603-capitalism-has-its-limits, and George Yancy, “Judith Butler: Mourning Is a Political Act Amid the Pandemic and Its Disparities,” *Truthout*, April 30, 2020, truthout.org/articles/judith-butler-mourning-is-a-political-act-amid-the-pandemic-and-its-disparities/.
- ⁷ Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (New York: Verso, 2020).
- ⁸ Butler, *What World is This?*, 74 [emphasis added]. Butler’s quotation is taken from the back cover blurb of Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salamon (eds.), *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020).
- ⁹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8 [emphasis added].
- ¹⁰ Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 116-17.
- ¹¹ Butler, *What World is This?*, 21.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.
- ¹⁷ Butler, *What World is This?*, 32-33.
- ¹⁸ Judith Butler, "Creating an Inhabitable World for Humans Means Dismantling Rigid Forms of Individuality," *TIME*, April 21, 2021, time.com/5953396/judith-butler-safe-world-individuality.
- ¹⁹ Sindre Bangstad and Torbjørn Tumyr Nilsen, "Thoughts on the Planetary: An Interview with Achille Mbembe," *New Frame*, September 5, 2019, www.newframe.com/thoughts-on-the-planetary-an-interview-with-achille-mbembe/. Interestingly, in a short article from April 13, 2020, Mbembe frames his discussion of the pandemic in terms of a notion of a *universal right to breathe*. See Achille Mbembe, "The Universal Right to Breathe," trans. Carolyn Shread, *Critical Inquiry* 47, no. S2 (2021): S58-S62.
- ²⁰ Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).
- ²¹ Butler, *What World is This?*, 36.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 44.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 37.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 37-38.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.
- ²⁶ Cornel West (with David Ritz), *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud, A Memoir* (California: SmileyBooks, 2009), 251.
- ²⁷ Butler, *What World is This?*, 27, 48.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ²⁹ For a wonderful critique of rectitude, see Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*, trans. Amanda Minervini and Adam Sitze (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016) [2014].
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 85.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 49.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 84.

⁴¹ Ibid., 85.

⁴² Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004).

⁴³ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009).

⁴⁴ An early synopsis from the publisher, in fact, suggested a continuity between these three books, as it described *The Force of Nonviolence* as being geared “[t]owards a form of aggressive non-violence - following on from Butler’s *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*.”

Available at: www.giffordlectures.org/news/books/force-non-violence-ethico-political-bind.

Another commonality between the three books is their publisher, *Verso*.

⁴⁵ Butler, *What World is This?*, 92.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 95.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 96.

⁴⁹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 21.

⁵⁰ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 24.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ I borrow this term from Foucault, when in the context of a discussion of Plutarch, he defines it accordingly: “*Ēthopoiein* means making *ēthos*, producing *ēthos*, changing, transforming *ēthos*, the individual’s way of being, his mode of existence. *Ēthopoisos* is something that possesses the quality of transforming an individual’s mode of being.” See Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005 [2001]), 237.

⁵⁴ Butler, *What World is This?*, 80.

⁵⁵ Butler, *What World is This?*, 74. One wonders whether what Butler calls “aspirational reading” could be compared with Sedgwick’s idea of reparative reading, as opposed to paranoid reading. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-51. However, interestingly, when referring to aspirational reading, the source that Butler cites is actually Fred Moten’s essay, “The Blur and Breathe Books,” from the book *Black and Blur*, which is the first part of his trilogy *Consent Not to Be a Single Being*. See Fred Moten, *Consent Not to Be a Single Being: Black and Blur* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 245-69.

⁵⁶ Judith Butler, “Ethical Ambivalence,” in *Nietzsche and Levinas: “After the Death of a Certain God,”* eds. Jill Stauffer and Bettina Bergo (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 70.

⁵⁷ Butler, *What World is This?*, 80. For more on the aspirational character of the “we,” see Judith Butler, “‘We the People’ - Thoughts on Freedom and Assembly,” in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 154-92.

⁵⁸ Verónica Gago, *Feminist International: How to Change Everything*, trans. Liz Mason-Deese (New York: Verso, 2020 [2019]).

⁵⁹ Butler, *What World is This?*, 103-04.

⁶⁰ Butler, *What World is This?*, 104.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁶² The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (New York: Verso, 2020).

⁶³ Butler's wariness on "the ethics of care," and indeed on "the ethics of vulnerability," can be seen in statements such as: "There are those who worry that vulnerability, even if it becomes a theme or a problem for thinking, will be asserted as a primary existential condition, ontological and constitutive, and that this sort of foundationalism will founder on the same rocky shores as have others, such as the ethics of care or maternal thinking." See Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, eds. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 22.

⁶⁴ Butler, *What World is This?*, 106 [emphasis in original].

⁶⁵ Judith Butler, "Quandaries of the Plural: Cohabitation and Sovereignty in Arendt," in *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 151-80.

⁶⁶ Butler, *What World is This?*, 109.