

# HOW TO LIVE WITH IT

Soyoung Yun

Last year, when philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler went to Brazil to organize a conference, she faced a violent protest. Butler was “called a witch and accused of trying to destroy people’s gender identities and trying to undercut the values of the country”—but Butler is all too familiar with such fierce controversy caused by her groundbreaking theories (Jaschik). In her seminal essays, Butler argues that humans perform their social identities to conform to social stereotypes that have been sustained and reproduced by previous performances. Most notably, she calls gender identity itself performative: “because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis” and such construction creates a “social fiction of its own psychological interiority” (“Performative” 522, 528). Since Butler denies the existence of a definite and original form to refer to while rethinking social identities in performativity, she interprets human society as a perilous continuum built within repetitive acts without concrete foundations.

Revealing the fabricated nature of social identities, Butler makes us confront the performances by which we repeatedly identify ourselves—the “social fiction” of norms. It is somewhat understandable that the protesters in Brazil were unnerved by Butler’s ideas, which destabilize the solidity of identities entirely. Rather than protest this destabilization, however, I would ask Butler: How do we live with this untruthfulness? Are we doomed to remain in the oppressive show in which we are unknowing, seemingly origin-less performers? Even if Butler provides us with dreadful insights that force us to question our own identities, she does not leave us to wander in dread; she instead shows us how to live transformatively and intersubjectively.

Butler recognizes the political advantages of living in a show that forces humans to perform within a set of norms. Throughout her works, Butler repeatedly claims that oppressive norms—stereotypes—serve as a political precondition of resistance and reformation. As a

lesbian, Butler contemplates how homosexual identity stems from heteronormativity: "It is important . . . to affirm that gay and lesbian identities are . . . structured in part by dominant heterosexual frames" ("Imitation" 23). She then adds that gay and lesbian identities create an important resistance toward the heteronormative frame by underscoring that "[Gay and lesbian] identities are running commentaries on those naturalized positions" ("Imitation" 23). Butler suggests that the "naturalized positions" of social norms help give rise to the unnaturalized positions of subjects who queer the heteronormative frame. Furthermore, Butler admits that lesbian, gay, and female identities help form "political solidarity" that work against the external threat of oppression or erasure ("Performative" 523). Butler recognizes the benefits of the political categorization that gives visibility to marginalized identities.

Nevertheless, she claims that identification as lesbian, gay, or female can "provide[] a false ontological promise of . . . solidarity" by "rendering visible a category which may not be representative of the concrete lives of" identified groups ("Performative" 523). Butler recognizes a tension between the political benefit of visible identities and the faults of the "ontological promise" that such visibility creates. For example, when one identifies as a member of the LGBTQ community and gains political visibility, one might partially lose their ontological singularity since the community requires a consolidated form of identity. Under the united identity of the community, one can fall into a conceptual category that does not necessarily fully address one's identity. Butler's ontological skepticism, raised in the context of political identification, becomes completely ambiguous throughout her works. Considering how "I" and "the Other" are interdependent, Butler boldly shakes the premise of the separateness of identity that one has towards the Others: "one's own separateness is a function of one's dependency on the Other . . . the difference between the Other and myself is, from the start, equivocal" ("Sexual" 160). Butler hereby deepens her question of ontological faults in political identity into the dilemma of one's existence, which cannot be clearly separated from the outside of oneself. This ontological ambiguity places humans in confusing and disturbing liminal states. According to her, we do not clearly stand either inside or outside of the border of I and the Other.

However, Butler cherishes this dilemma of uncertainty and praises possibility.

In “Ronell as Gay Scientist,” Butler explores Avital Ronell’s scientific approach as a route to possible answers rather than a goal-oriented or result-seeking process. Inspired by Ronell, who writes, “the test is structurally staked . . . Its performance . . . extends the terms of fulfillment to the future, which cannot, strictly speaking, be logically assured” (qtd. in “Ronell” 24), Butler claims that “The point is . . . to undergo an invariable and ironic dislocation of aim by virtue of the structure of testing” (29). Embracing Ronell’s idea of experimentation, Butler rejects—or denaturalizes—the static locating of oneself and thereby normalizes—or naturalizes—the dislocating of oneself from one place to another. For instance, even when one identifies as bisexual, one should not be thought of as permanently located in bisexuality but one who can “experiment” and dislocate oneself to potentially find another location of sexuality. Butler welcomes an unknown future by advocating for the experimental dislocations one makes in navigating life. Humans “ironic[ally]” but “invariab[ly]” experience uncertainty, for every life is a continuum of undirected dislocations (“Ronell” 30). Butler’s idea of ontological ambiguity, which may initially cause an existential fear of losing a solid form of oneself, swerves to a promising direction of deferring conclusions, uncertainty, and provisionality.

In “Gender as Social Temporality: Butler (and Marx),” Cinzia Arruzza helps us understand the optimistic value of uncertainty. By paralleling “Butler’s analysis of the temporality of gender reification and Marx’s understanding of the temporality of capital,” Arruzza focuses on Butler’s idea of unclear and non-static identity from a Marxist viewpoint (36). Butler notes that Marx’s material capital is “a site of temporal transformation” (qtd. in Arruzza 37). This definition coincides with Butler’s examination of gender as a performative repetition of acts and practices (“Performative”). If capital is a mutable entity that does not have a static form or pattern, economic value is thus able to emerge, vanish, and change into different forms. Thereby, in a Marxist view, capital incessantly transforms as time progresses (Arruzza 39). Arruzza reads Butler’s theory in this Marxist logic of temporal transformability. Since Butler claims that all identi-

ties are performative and there is no original static identity, humans can explore different identities in different times, and thereby become transformative (Arruzza 40). According to Arruzza, Butler equates the performative identity with temporal transformability, suggesting that the unstable nature of identity allows us to freely transform our identities over time.

As Arruzza claims, Butler connects the instability of identity with a transformative possibility: “unstable and asystematic operation of [identity] categories must have a transformative effect on the norm itself, such that gender and race never get to be same again” (“Appearances” 62). Butler liquefies gender to suggest how transformative identities can be. In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” Butler asserts, “the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition” (520). Butler mentions drag as an example of such subversive repetition: “[drag’s] subversive possibilities ought to be played and replayed to make the ‘sex’ of gender into a site of insistent political play” (“Imitation” 29). As drag appropriates “gender [norms] proper to one sex rather than another” to prove there is “no ‘proper’ gender,” Butler argues that drag creates a possibility of gender transformation derived from an arbitrariness of gender identities (“Imitation” 21). Butler further argues that socially normalized identities do not stay as a reification of social oppression but rather display the “performative variations” that “locate strategies of subversive repetition . . . and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them” (Arruzza, Butler qtd. in Arruzza 46).

As Butler finds value in mutability beyond performativity, she introduces the new value of intersubjectivity beyond ontological ambiguity and the interdependence of I and the Other. Butler sees the living intersubjectivity while contemplating the concept of love. In “To Sense What is Living in the Other,” Butler interprets Hegel’s idea of love as a “living union” (95). She suggests that love is only understood through a gathering of “various shifts” of different subjective perspectives (“To Sense” 102). Since love is an interactive relationship between different people with different subjectivities, Butler claims that love is, in nature, not a single subjective experience. Butler

calls these “various shifts” a type of “displacement,” or a “dispossession” of subjectivity (“To Sense” 94, 100). She thus reaches an understanding of the “operation of life”: “love involves a displacement of the purely subjective point of view—some dispossession of the self takes place in love. . . . love is an operation of life that exceeds and disorients the perspective of the individual” (“To Sense” 100). Love, according to Butler, requires us to undo our idea of oneness and to open ourselves to the life that works beyond individual subjectivity.

Suggesting the expansion of selfhood from oneness to intersubjectivity, Butler reaches the idea of sensing “livingness” in others through intersubjective exchanges within love: “love is not an absolute overcoming of difference. . . . The couple does not dissolve into life itself without dying, since each would have to relinquish its determinate living form. And yet as separate and persisting forms, each is understood to sense what is living in the other” (Undoing 12, “To Sense” 101). Without defining “what is living in the other,” Butler concludes that love is a sense of aliveness in each other. As we love others, we become intersubjective beings who subjectively interact with others and who are subjectively understood by others. Even if we do not sense our livingness by ourselves and remain ontologically ambiguous, the intersubjective nature of love enables each one of us to feel livingness in each other and become living within others’ understandings of us. In her interpretation of Hegel’s idea of living love, Butler reminds us that humans become living beings through intersubjectivity—mutual recognition and sensing. Butler, who once left us in a disturbing ontological ambiguity, saves us with the idea that each of us is recognized and sensed through intersubjective human connections.

Butler’s theory of performativity not only destabilizes our understanding of identities and society but also makes us acknowledge our transformative possibility, coming from the destabilized nature of ourselves. Butler’s idea of ontological ambiguity disturbs our understanding of the self and leads us to realize our intersubjective livingness that others sense through us. Once disturbingly destabilizing, Butler’s ideas become optimistically and fruitfully destabilizing. But not all critics see this optimistic fruitfulness. Noela Davis, in her critique of Butler’s idea of performativity, reads Butler’s description of

social identities—sufficing and reproducing the oppressive norms—as “a compulsion, an appropriation of guilt, and a reprimand [that] carries the implication of an external power forcibly acting on the subject-to-be” (Davis 889). Interpreting Butler’s idea as a “grim” and “overly pessimistic picture of humanity,” Davis criticizes Butler for leading us to permanent subjugation (Mills qtd. in Davis 889). However, what Butler tries to prove—and what Davis overlooks—is how unstable one’s existence and identification are and how that instability contributes to the numerous possibilities for transformation. Butler’s interpretation of identity may sound like subjugation, but her interpretation of transformative identities aims at liberation. Butler argues: “The desire for change and the desire to be are not precisely oppositional but locked in a complicated, if sometimes nasty, embrace” (“Ronell” 27). The desire to recognize one’s own existence and the desire for transformation run together. Being means constantly changing and dislocating oneself, and being means existing intersubjectively. By dissolving the absoluteness and definiteness of society, Butler opens a transformative and intersubjective possibility to each one of us.

Butler certainly never bargains. She does not hesitate to make us think that we are always a part of a show whose director is unknown to us. She brings up an existential dilemma that we cannot even separate ourselves from others. She ruthlessly destabilizes our understanding of society and drags us to the realm of ontological emptiness where we cannot say that ‘I am me, not you.’ Nevertheless, Butler hints at how to live with, or even embrace, this destabilized view of the world and frightening existential revelation. With this hint, we can find a way out: as we do not have an absolute form to imitate, we can always transform; as we do not clearly stand by ourselves, our intersubjective understandings of one another make us truly living beings. The indignation of the protesters in Brazil and others who denounce Butler comes from their ignorance of the important insights that she offers us. When we read Butler in depth, we can learn to live with the instability, the ambiguity, the desire to be, and the desire to change. Surely, we can discover how to live with it.

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