
JUDITH BUTLER is Maxine Elliot Professor of Rhetoric and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of many books, including *Giving an Account of Oneself*, *Precarious Life*, and *Gender Trouble*.

Frames of War

When Is Life Grievable?

JUDITH BUTLER



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life, and who will not. So by the time we seek to apply the norm, "thou shalt not kill," we have already lost sight of what and who is alive. Under such conditions, it becomes possible to think that ending life in the name of defending life is possible, even righteous. We fail to grasp that "life" is redoubled in such a formulation, that the one life cannot be fully dissociated from the other. And it is not as "humans" that we are bound together, but human animals whose survival depends on the workable political organization of social conditions of both unwilling proximity and interdependency. Of course, it is possible, even actual, to try to allocate death to others and reserve life for oneself, but that is to fail to understand that the life of the one is bound to the life of the other, and that certain obligations emerge from this most basic social condition. Sometimes we are able to apprehend that we are bound to each other in this way, and that precarity is one basis for claiming the equal value of lives. Such apprehension takes place at the limits of established norms of recognition, especially when those norms are in the service of war waging. Such an apprehension lets us know that precarity haunts every norm of recognition in the context of war. Such norms are articulated through media frames, through discourse, number, and image that circulate in ways that are neither static nor predictable. When the frames of war break up or break open, when the trace of lives is apprehended at the margin of what appears or as riddling its surface, then frames unwittingly establish a grievable population despite a prevalent interdiction, and there emerges the possibility of a critical outrage, war stands the chance of missing its mark.

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INTRODUCTION

Precarious Life, Grievable Life

This book consists of five essays written in response to contemporary war, focusing on cultural modes of regulating affective and ethical dispositions through a selective and differential framing of violence. In some ways the book follows on from *Precarious Life*, published by Verso in 2004, especially its suggestion that specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living. If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense.

On the one hand, I am seeking to draw attention to the epistemological problem raised by this issue of framing: the frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable) are politically saturated. They are themselves operations of power. They do not unilaterally decide the conditions of appearance but their aim is nevertheless to delimit the sphere of appearance itself. On the other hand, the problem is ontological, since the question at issue is: *What is a life?* The "being" of life is itself constituted through selective means; as a result, we cannot refer to this "being" outside of the operations of power, and we must make more precise the specific mechanisms of power through which life is produced.

Obviously, this insight has consequences for thinking about “life” in cellular biology and the neurosciences, since certain ways of framing life inform those scientific practices as well as debates about the beginning and end of life in discussions of reproductive freedom and euthanasia. Although what I have to say may have some implications for those debates, my focus here will be on war—on why and how it becomes easier, or more difficult, to wage.

To Apprehend a Life

The precarity of life imposes an obligation upon us. We have to ask about the conditions under which it becomes possible to apprehend a life or set of lives as precarious, and those that make it less possible, or indeed impossible. Of course, it does not follow that if one apprehends a life as precarious one will resolve to protect that life or secure the conditions for its persistence and flourishing. It could be, as both Hegel and Klein point out in their different ways, that the apprehension of precariousness leads to a heightening of violence, an insight into the physical vulnerability of some set of others that incites the desire to destroy them. And yet, I want to argue that if we are to make broader social and political claims about rights of protection and entitlements to persistence and flourishing, we will first have to be supported by a new bodily ontology, one that implies the rethinking of precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependency, exposure, bodily persistence, desire, work and the claims of language and social belonging.

To refer to “ontology” in this regard is not to lay claim to a description of fundamental structures of being that are distinct from any and all social and political organization. On the contrary, none of these terms exist outside of their political organization and interpretation. 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. Rather, to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form, and that is what makes the ontology of the body a social ontology. In other words, the body is exposed to socially and politically articulated forces as well as to claims of sociality—including language, work, and desire—that make possible the body’s persisting and flourishing. The more or less existential conception of “precariousness” is thus linked with a more specifically political notion of “precarity.” And it is the differential allocation of precarity that, in my view, forms the point of departure for both a rethinking of bodily ontology and for progressive or left politics in ways that continue to exceed and traverse the categories of identity.¹

The epistemological capacity to apprehend a life is partially dependent on that life being produced according to norms that qualify it as a life or, indeed, as part of life. In this way, the normative production of ontology thus produces the epistemological problem of apprehending a life, and this in turn gives rise to the ethical problem of what it is to acknowledge or, indeed, to guard against injury and violence. Of course, we are talking about different modalities of “violence” at each level of this analysis, but that does not mean that they are all equivalent or that no distinctions between them need to be made. The “frames” that work to differentiate the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot (or that produce lives across a continuum of life) not only organize visual experience but also generate specific ontologies of the subject. Subjects are constituted through norms which, in their reiteration, produce and shift the terms through which subjects are

1 For related views, see Robert Castel, *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale, une chronique du salariat*, Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1999, translated by Richard Boyd as *From Manual Workers to Wage Labourers: Transformation of the Social Question*, Edison, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005. See also Serge Paugam, *Le salariat de la précarité*, Paris: PUF, 2000; Nancy Ertlinger, “Precarity Unbound,” *Alternatives* 32 (2007), 319–40.

recognized. These normative conditions for the production of the subject produce an historically contingent ontology, such that our very capacity to discern and name the “being” of the subject is dependent on norms that facilitate that recognition. At the same time, it would be a mistake to understand the operation of norms as deterministic. Normative schemes are interrupted by one another, they emerge and fade depending on broader operations of power, and very often come up against spectral versions of what it is they claim to know: thus, there are “subjects” who are not quite recognizable as subjects, and there are “lives” that are not quite—or, indeed, are never—recognized as lives. In what sense does life, then, always exceed the normative conditions of its recognizability? To claim that it does so is not to say that “life” has as its essence a resistance to normativity, but only that each and every construction of life requires time to do its job, and that no job it does can overcome time itself. In other words, the job is never done “once and for all.” This is a limit 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.

Perhaps, then, as a consequence, it is necessary to consider how we might distinguish between “apprehending” and “recognizing” a life. “Recognition” is the stronger term, one that has been derived from Hegelian texts and subject to revisions and criticisms for many years.² “Apprehension”

² See, for example, Jessica Benjamin, *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995; Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the “Postsocialist” Condition*, New York: Routledge, 1997; Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, London: Verso, 2003; Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996; *Reification: A New Look At An Old Idea (The Berkeley Tanner Lectures)*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008; Pachen Markell, *Bound By Recognition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003; Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979; and Taylor and Amy Gutman, eds, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

is less precise, since it can imply marking, registering, acknowledging without full cognition. If it is a form of knowing, it is bound up with sensing and perceiving, but in ways that are not always—or not yet—conceptual forms of knowledge. What we are able to apprehend is surely facilitated by norms of recognition, but it would be a mistake to say that we are utterly limited by existing norms of recognition when we apprehend a life. We can apprehend, for instance, that something is not recognized by recognition. Indeed, that apprehension can become the basis for a critique of norms of recognition. The fact is we do not simply have recourse to single and discrete norms of recognition, but to more general conditions, historically articulated and enforced, of “recognizability.” If we ask how recognizability is constituted, we have through the very question taken up a perspective suggesting that these fields are variably and historically constituted, no matter how *a priori* their function as conditions of appearance. If recognition characterizes an act or a practice or even a scene between subjects, then “recognizability” characterizes the more general conditions that prepare or shape a subject for recognition—the general terms, conventions, and norms “act” in their own way, crafting a living being into a recognizable subject, though not without errancy or, indeed, unanticipated results. These categories, conventions, and norms that prepare or establish a subject for recognition, that induce a subject of this kind, precede and make possible the act of recognition itself. In this sense, recognizability precedes recognition.

Frames of Recognition

How then is recognizability to be understood? In the first instance, it is *not* a quality or potential of individual humans. This may seem absurd asserted in this way, but it is important to question the idea of personhood as individualism. If we claim that recognizability is a universal potential and that it belongs to all persons as persons, then,

in a way, the problem before us is already solved. We have decided that some particular notion of "personhood" will determine the scope and meaning of recognizability. Thus, we install a normative ideal as a preexisting condition of our analysis; we have, in effect, already "recognized" everything we need to know about recognition. There is no challenge that recognition poses to the form of the human that has traditionally served as the norm of recognizability, since personhood is that very norm. The point, however, will be to ask how such norms operate to produce certain subjects as "recognizable" persons and to make others decidedly more difficult to recognize. The problem is not merely how to include more people within existing norms, but to consider how existing norms allocate recognition differentially. What new norms are possible, and how are they wrought? What might be done to produce a more egalitarian set of conditions for recognizability? What might be done, in other words, to shift the very terms of recognizability in order to produce more radically democratic results?

If recognition is an act or practice undertaken by at least two subjects, and which, as the Hegelian frame would suggest, constitutes a reciprocal action, then recognizability describes those general conditions on the basis of which recognition can and does take place. It seems, then, that there are still two further terms to understand: *apprehension*, understood as a mode of knowing that is not yet recognition, or may remain irreducible to recognition; and *intelligibility*, understood as the general historical schema or schemas that establish domains of the knowable. This would constitute a dynamic field understood, at least initially, as an historical *a priori*.³ Not all acts of knowing are acts of recognition, although the inverse claim would

3 For the "historical *a priori*," see Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan, London: Tavistock Publications Ltd, 1972. See also Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York: Vintage, 1970.

not hold: a life has to be intelligible *as a life*, has to conform to certain conceptions of what life is, in order to become recognizable. So just as norms of recognizability prepare the way for recognition, so schemas of intelligibility condition and produce norms of recognizability.

Those norms draw upon shifting schemes of intelligibility, so that we can and do have, for example, histories of life and histories of death. Indeed, we have ongoing debates about whether the fetus should count as life, or a life, or a human life; we have further debates about conception and what constitutes the first moments of a living organism; we have debates also about what constitutes death, whether it is the death of the brain, or of the heart, whether it is the effect of a legal declaration or a set of medical and legal certificates. All of these debates involve contested notions of personhood and, implicitly, questions regarding the "human animal" and how that conjunctive (and chiasmic) existence is to be understood. The fact that these debates exist, and continue to exist, does not imply that life and death are direct consequences of discourse (an absurd conclusion, if taken literally). Rather, it implies that there is no life and no death without a relation to some frame. Even when life and death take place between, outside, or across the frames by which they are for the most part organized, they still *take place*, though in ways that call into question the necessity of the mechanisms through which ontological fields are constituted. 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. Indeed, every normative instance is shadowed by its own failure, and very often that failure assumes a figural form. The figure lays claim to no certain ontological status, and

though it can be apprehended as "living," it is not always recognized as a life. In fact, a living figure outside the norms of life not only becomes the problem to be managed by normativity, but seems to be that which normativity is bound to reproduce: it is living, but not a life. It 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.

As we know, "to be framed" is a complex phrase in English: a picture is framed, but so too is a criminal (by the police), or an innocent person (by someone nefarious, often the police), so that to be framed is to be set up, or to have evidence planted against one that ultimately "proves" one's guilt. When a picture is framed, any number of ways of commenting on or extending the picture may be at stake. But the frame tends to function, even in a minimalist form, as an editorial embellishment of the image, if not a self-commentary on the history of the frame itself.⁴ This sense that the frame implicitly guides the interpretation has some resonance with the idea of the frame as a false accusation. If one is "framed," then a "frame" is constructed around one's deed such that one's guilty status becomes the viewer's inevitable conclusion. Some way of organizing and presenting a deed leads to an interpretive conclusion about the deed itself. But as we know from Trinh Minh-ha, it is possible to "frame the frame" or, indeed, the "framer,"⁵ which involves exposing the ruse that produces the effect

⁴ This is, of course, more clearly the case with the caption and description, but the frame comments and editorializes in another way. My own reading of the frame here is derived from both critical and sociological sources: see especially Jacques Derrida, *The Truth of Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, 37-83. See also Erving Goffman, & Row, 1974; and Michel Callon, "An Essay on Framing and Overflowing: Economic Externalities Revisited by Sociology," in *The Laws of Markets*, Boston: Blackwell, 1998, 244-69.

⁵ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Framer Framed*, New York: Routledge, 1992.

of individual guilt. To frame the frame seems to involve a certain highly reflexive overlay of the visual field, but, in my view, this does not have to result in rarified forms of reflexivity. On the contrary, to call the frame into question is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable. The frame never quite determined precisely what it is we see, think, recognize, and apprehend. Something exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality; in other words, something occurs that does not conform to our established understanding of things.

A certain leakage or contamination makes this process more fallible than it might at first appear. Benjamin's argument about the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction can be adapted for the present moment.⁶ The technical conditions of reproduction and reproducibility themselves produce a critical shifting, if not a full deterioration of context, in relation to the frames deployed by dominant media sources during times of war. This means in the first instance that even if one could, in considering global media coverage, delimit a single "context" for the creation of war photography, its circulation would necessarily depart from such a context. Although the image surely lands in new contexts, it also creates new contexts by virtue of that landing, becoming a part of the very process through which new contexts are delimited and formed. In other words, the circulation of war photos, as with the dissemination of prison poetry (in the case of the Guantánamo poets considered in Chapter 1) breaks with context all the time: in effect, the poetry leaves the prison, if it does, even when the prisoner cannot; the photos circulate on the internet, even when they were not intended for that purpose. The

⁶ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. H. Arendt, trans. H. Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

photos and poetry that fail to circulate—either because they are destroyed or because they are never permitted to leave the prison cell—are incendiary as much for what they depict as for the limitations imposed on their circulation (and very often for the way those limitations register in the images and writing themselves). This very circulability is part of what is destroyed (and if that fact then “leaks” out, the report on the destructive act circulates in the place of what is destroyed). What “gets out of hand” is precisely what breaks from the context that frames the event, the image, the text of war. But if contexts are framed (there is no context without an implicit delimitation of context), and if a frame invariably breaks from itself as it moves through space and time (if it must break from itself in order to move across space and time), then the circulating frame has to break with the context in which it is formed if it is to land or arrive somewhere else. What would it mean to understand this “breaking out” and “breaking from” as part of the media phenomena at issue, as the very function of the frame?

The frame that seeks to contain, convey, and determine what is seen (and sometimes, for a stretch, succeeds in doing precisely that) depends upon the conditions of reproducibility in order to succeed. And yet, this very reproducibility entails a constant breaking from context, a constant delimitation of new context, which means that the “frame” does not quite contain what it conveys, but breaks apart every time it seeks to give definitive organization to its content. In other words, the frame does not hold anything together in one place, but itself becomes a kind of perpetual breakage, subject to a temporal logic by which it moves from place to place. As the frame constantly breaks from its context, this self-breaking becomes part of the very definition. This leads us to a different way of understanding both the frame’s efficacy and its vulnerability to reversal, to subversion, even to critical instrumentalization. What is taken for granted in one instance becomes thematized critically or even incredulously in another. This shifting temporal dimension

of the frame constitutes the possibility and trajectory of its affect as well. Thus the digital image circulates outside the confines of Abu Ghraib, or the poetry in Guantanamo is recovered by constitutional lawyers who arrange for its publication throughout the world. The conditions are set for astonishment, outrage, revulsion, admiration, and discovery, depending on how the content is framed by shifting time and place. The movement of the image or the text outside of confinement is a kind of “breaking out,” so that even though neither the image nor the poetry can free anyone from prison, or stop a bomb or, indeed, reverse the course of the war, they nevertheless do provide the conditions for breaking out of the quotidian acceptance of war and for a more generalized horror and outrage that will support and impel calls for justice and an end to violence.

Earlier we noted that one sense of “to be framed” means to be subject to a con, to a tactic by which evidence is orchestrated so to make a false accusation appear true. Some power manipulates the terms of appearance and one cannot break out of the frame; one is framed, which means one is accused, but also judged in advance, without valid evidence and without any obvious means of redress. But if the frame is understood as a certain “breaking out,” or “breaking from,” then it would seem to be more analogous to a prison break. This suggests a certain release, a loosening of the mechanism of control, and with it, a new trajectory of affect. The frame, in this sense, permits—even requires—this breaking out. This happened when the photos of Guantanamo prisoners kneeling and shackled were released to the public and outrage ensued; it happened again when the digital images from Abu Ghraib were circulated globally across the internet, facilitating a widespread visceral turn against the war. What happens at such moments? And are they merely transient moments or are they, in fact, occasions when the frame as a forcible and plausible con is exposed, resulting in a critical and exuberant release from the force of illegitimate authority?

How do we relate this discussion of frames to the problem of apprehending life in its precariousness? It may seem at first that this is a call for the production of new frames and, consequently, for new kinds of content. Do we apprehend the precariousness of life through the frames available to us, and is our task to try to install new frames that would enhance the possibility of that recognition? The production of new frames, as part of the general project of alternative media, is clearly important, but we would miss a critical dimension of this project if we restricted ourselves to this view. What happens when a frame breaks with itself is that a taken-for-granted reality is called into question, exposing the orchestrating designs of the authority who sought to control the frame. This suggests that it is not only a question of finding new content, but also of working with received renditions of reality to show how they can and do break with themselves. As a consequence, the frames that, in effect, decide which lives will be recognizable as lives and which will not, must circulate in order to establish their hegemony. This circulation brings out or, rather, is the iterable structure of the frame. As frames break from themselves in order to install themselves, other possibilities for apprehension emerge. When those frames that govern the relative and differential recognizability of lives come apart—as part of the very mechanism of their circulation—it becomes possible to apprehend something about what or who is living but has not been generally “recognized” as a life. 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 limit 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.

Precariousness and Grievability

We read about lives lost and are often given the numbers, but these stories are repeated every day, and the repetition appears endless, irremediable. And so, we have to ask, what would it take not only to apprehend the precarious character of lives lost in war, but to have that apprehension coincide with an ethical and political opposition to the losses war entails? Among the questions that follow from this situation are: How is affect produced by this structure of the frame? And what is the relation of affect to ethical and political judgment and practice?

To say that a life is precarious requires not only that a life be apprehended as a life, but also that precariousness be an aspect of what is apprehended in what is living. Normatively construed, I am arguing that there ought to be a more inclusive and egalitarian way of recognizing precariousness, and that this should take form as concrete social policy regarding such issues as shelter, work, food, medical care, and legal status. And yet, I am also insisting, in a way that might seem initially paradoxical, that precariousness itself cannot be properly *recognized*. It can be apprehended, taken in, encountered, and it can be presupposed by certain norms of recognition just as it can be refused by such norms. Indeed, there ought to be recognition of precariousness as a shared condition of human life (indeed, as a condition that links human and non-human animals), but we ought not to think that the recognition of precariousness masters or captures or even fully cognizes what it recognizes. So although I would (and will) argue that norms of recognition ought to be based on an apprehension of precariousness, I do not think that precariousness is a function or effect of recognition, nor that recognition is the only or the best way to register precariousness.

To say that a life is injurable, for instance, or that it can be lost, destroyed, or systematically neglected to the point of death, is to underscore not only the finitude of a life

(that death is certain) but also its precariousness (that life requires various social and economic conditions to be met in order to be sustained as a life). Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all. Reciprocally, it implies being impinged upon by the exposure and dependency of others, most of whom remain anonymous. These are not necessarily relations of love or even of care, but constitute obligations toward others, most of whom we cannot name and do not know, and who may or may not bear traits of familiarity to an established sense of who "we" are. In the interest of speaking in common parlance, we could say that "we" have such obligations to "others" and presume that we know who "we" are in such an instance. The social implication of this view, however, is precisely that the "we" does not, and cannot, recognize itself, that it is riven from the start, interrupted by alterity, as Levinas has said, and the obligations "we" have are precisely those that disrupt any established notion of the "we."

Over and against an existential concept of finitude that singularizes our relation to death and to life, precariousness underscores our radical substitutability and anonymity in relation both to certain socially facilitated modes of dying and death and to other socially conditioned modes of persisting and flourishing. It is not that we are born and then later become precarious, but rather that precariousness is coextensive with birth itself (birth is, by definition, precarious), which means that it matters whether or not this infant being survives, and that its survival is dependent on what we might call a social network of hands. Precisely because a living being may die, it is necessary to care for that being so that it may live. Only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of the life appear. Thus, grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters. For the most part,

we imagine that an infant comes into the world, is sustained in and by that world through to adulthood and old age, and finally dies. We imagine that when the child is wanted, there is celebration at the beginning of life. But there can be no celebration without an implicit understanding that the life is grievable, that it would be grieved if it were lost, and that this future anterior is installed as the condition of its life. In ordinary language, grief attends the life that has already been lived, and presupposes that life as having ended. But, according to the future anterior (which is also part of ordinary language), grievability is a condition of a life's emergence and sustenance.⁷ The future anterior, "a life has been lived," is presupposed at the beginning of a life that has only begun to be lived. In other words, "this will be a life that will have been lived" is the presupposition of a grievable life, which means that this will be a life that can be regarded as a life, and be sustained by that regard. Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life. Instead, "there is a life that will never have been lived," sustained by no regard, no testimony, and unrieved when lost. The apprehension of grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of precarious life. Grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of the living being as living, exposed to non-life from the start.

Toward a Critique of the Right to Life

Of course, it is difficult for those on the Left to think about a discourse of "life," since we are used to thinking of those who favor increased reproductive freedoms as "pro-choice" and those who oppose them as "pro-life." But perhaps there

⁷ See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang, 1982; and Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, eds., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

is a way to retrieve thinking about “life” for the Left, and to make use of this framework of precarious life to sustain a strong feminist position on reproductive freedoms. One could easily see how those who take so-called “pro-life” positions might seize upon such a view to argue that the fetus is precisely this life that remains ungrieved and should be grievable, or that it is a life that is not recognized as life according to those who favor the right to abortion. Indeed, this argument could be closely linked to animal-rights claims, since one might well argue that the animal is a life that is generally not regarded as a life according to anthropocentric norms. Such debates very often turn on ontological questions, querying whether there is a significant difference between the living status of the fetus, or indeed the embryo, and that of the “person,” or whether there is an ontological difference between the animal and the “human.”

Let us acknowledge that these are all organisms that are living in one sense or another; to say this, however, is not yet to furnish any substantial arguments for one policy or another. After all, plants are living things, but vegetarians do not usually object to eating them. More generally, it can be argued that processes of life themselves require destruction and degeneration, but this does not in any way tell us which sorts of destruction are ethically salient and which are not. To determine the ontological specificity of life in such instances would lead us more generally into a discussion of biopolitics, concerning ways of apprehending, controlling, and administering life, and how these modes of power enter into the very definition of life itself. We would have to consider shifting paradigms within the life sciences—the shift, for example, from clinical to molecular modes of seeing, or the debates between those who prioritize cells and those who insist that tissue is the more primary unit of the living. These debates would have to be linked with new trends in biomedicalization and new modes for administering life, as well as new perspectives in biology that link the *bios* of

the human with that of the animal (or that take seriously the chiasmic relation implied by the phrase, “the human animal”). We would then have to situate our discussion of war within these latter fields, which would show us how “life” itself is being defined and regenerated, as it were, within new modes of knowledge/power. I am sure it is possible to follow this path to understand the biopolitics of both war and reproductive freedom, and such paths of inquiry would be necessary to situate the discourse of life within the sphere of biopolitics and of biomedicalization more specifically. There is also, as Donna Jones has recently shown, an important link between the discourse on life, the tradition of vitalism, and various doctrines of racialism. The bibliography on these important topics has grown enormously in recent years.⁸ My own contribution,

8 Donna Jones, *The Promise of European Decline: Vitalism, Aesthetic Politics and Race in the Inter-War Years*, Columbia University Press, forthcoming. See also: Angela Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture*, New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prisons*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Pantheon, 1978; *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, New York: Pantheon, 1980; *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*, New York: Picador, 2003; *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008; Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury, and Jackie Stacey, *Global Nature, Global Culture*, London: Sage, 2000; Mariam Fraser, Sarah Kember, and Celia Lury, “Inventive Life: Approaches to the New Vitalism,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 22: 1 (2005), 1–14; Hannah Landecker, “Cellular Features,” *Critical Inquiry* 31 (2005), 903–37; Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Others*, Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003, Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan@Meats_Oncomouse; New York: Routledge, 1997; Nicholas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twentieth-Century*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007; Rose and Peter Miller, *Governing the Present: Administering Economic, Social and Personal Life*, Cambridge: Polity, 2008; Paul Rabinow, *Making PCR: A Story of Biotechnology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996; *French DNA: Trouble in Purgatory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002; Chant Thompson, *Making Parents: The Ontological Choreography of Reproductive Technology*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005; *Stem Cell Nations: Innovation, Ethics, and Difference in a Globalizing World*, forthcoming.

however, is not to the genealogy of the concepts of life or death, but to thinking about precariousness as something both presupposed and managed by such discourse, while never being fully resolved by any discourse.

In my view, it is not possible to base arguments for reproductive freedom, which include rights to abortion, on a conception of what is living and what is not. Stem cells are living cells, even precarious, but that does not immediately imply what policy decision ought to be made regarding the conditions under which they should be destroyed or in which they can be used. Not everything included under the rubric of “precarious life” is thus, *a priori*, worthy of protection from destruction. But these arguments become difficult precisely here, since if some living tissues or cells are worthy of protection from destruction, and others not, could this not lead to the conclusion that, under conditions of war, some human lives are worthy of protection while others are not? To see why this is a fallacious inference, we have to consider a few basic postulates of our analysis, and to see how a certain anthropocentrism conditions several questionable forms of argumentation.

The first postulate is that there is a vast domain of life not subject to human regulation and decision, and that to imagine otherwise is to reinstall an unacceptable anthropocentrism at the heart of the life sciences.

The second point is obvious, but worth restating: within that vast domain of organic life, degeneration and destruction are part of the very process of life, which means that not all degeneration can be stopped without stopping, as it were, the life processes themselves. Ironically, to rule out death for life is the death of life.

Hence, in reference to anything living, it is not possible to say in advance that there is *a right to life*, since no right can ward off all processes of degeneration and death; that pretension is the function of an omnipotent fantasy of anthropocentrism (one that seeks to deny the finitude of the *anthropos* as well).

In the same way, it does not ultimately make sense to claim, for instance, that we have to focus on what is distinctive about human life, since if it is the “life” of human life that concerns us, that is precisely where there is no firm way to distinguish in absolute terms the *bios* of the animal from the *bios* of the human animal. Any such distinction would be tenuous and would, once again, fail to see that, by definition, the human animal is itself an animal. This is not an assertion concerning the type or species of animal the human is, but an avowal that animality is a precondition of the human, and there is no human who is not a human animal.

Those who seek a basis for deciding, for instance whether or when abortion might be justified often have recourse to a moral conception of “personhood” to determine when a fetus might reasonably be called a person. Persons would then be understood as subjects of rights, entitled to protection against harm and destruction, whereas non-persons—or pre-persons, as it were—would not. Such efforts seek to settle the ethical and political questions by recourse to an ontology of personhood that relies on an account of biological individuation. Here the idea of the “person” is defined ontogenetically, by which I mean that the postulated internal development of a certain moral status or capacity of the individual becomes the salient measure by which personhood is gauged. The debate restricts itself not only to a moral domain, but to an ontology of individualism that fails to recognize that life, understood as precarious life, implies a social ontology which calls that form of individualism into question. There is no life without the conditions of life that variably sustain life, and those conditions are pervasively social, establishing not the discrete ontology of the person, but rather the interdependency of persons, involving reproducible and sustaining social relations, and relations to the environment and to non-human forms of life, broadly considered. This mode of social ontology

(for which no absolute distinction between social and ecological exists) has concrete implications for how we re-approach the issues of reproductive freedom and anti-war politics. The question is not whether a given being is living or not, nor whether the being in question has the status of a "person"; it is, rather, whether the social conditions of persistence and flourishing are or are not possible. Only with this latter question can we avoid the anthropocentric and liberal individualist presumptions that have derailed such discussions.

Of course, these arguments do not yet directly address the question of under what conditions precarious life acquires a right to protection, and under what conditions it does not. One conventional way of putting this problem within moral philosophy is: Who decides, and on what basis is the decision made? But perhaps there is a more fundamental set of questions to pose: at which point does "decision" emerge as a relevant, appropriate or obligatory act? There is the question of the "who" who decides, and of the standards according to which a decision is made; but there is also the "decision" about the appropriate scope of decision-making itself. Decisions to extend life *for* humans or animals and decisions to curtail life are both notoriously controversial precisely because there is no consensus on when and where decision should enter the scene. To what extent, and with what effort and cost, can we extend livable life to the elderly or the terminally ill? Alongside religious arguments claiming that it is "not within human power" to make decisions, there are positions driven by cost-benefit analysis arguing that there are financial limits on our ability to extend life, much less livable life. But note that when we start to consider such scenarios, we imagine a group of people who are making decisions, and the decisions themselves are made in relation to an environment, broadly construed, that either will or will not make life livable. It is not simply a policy question concerning whether or not to support a life or to provide the conditions for a livable life,

for implicit in our reflections is an assumption about the ontology of life itself. Simply put, life requires support and enabling conditions in order to be livable life.

Indeed, when decisions are made about providing life-extending machine support to patients, or extended nursing care to the elderly, they are made, at some level, by considering the quality and conditions of life. To say that life is precarious is to say that the possibility of being sustained relies fundamentally on social and political conditions, and not only on a postulated internal drive to live. Indeed, every drive has to be propped,⁹ supported by what is outside itself, which is why there can be no persistence in life without at least some conditions that make a life livable. And this is as true for the "deciding individual" as it is for any other, including the individual who "decides" what to do about embryos, fetuses, stem cells, or random sperm. Indeed, the one who decides or asserts rights of protection does so in the context of social and political norms that frame the decision-making process, and in presumptive contexts in which the assertion of rights can be recognized. In other words, decisions are social practices, and the assertion of rights emerges precisely where conditions of interlocution can be presupposed or, minimally, invoked and incited when they are not yet institutionalized.

Perhaps most importantly, however, we would have to rethink the "right to life" where there is no final protection against destruction, and where affirmative and necessary social bonds compel us to secure the conditions for livable lives, and to do so on egalitarian grounds. This would imply positive obligations to provide those basic supports that seek to minimize precariousness in egalitarian ways:

⁹ See Freud's considerations of "Anlehnung" (anaclysis) in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), trans. James Strachey, Standard Edition, 7: 123–246, London: Hogarth Press, 1953; and "On Narcissism: An Introduction" (1914), trans. James Strachey, Standard Edition, 14: 67–102, London: Hogarth Press, 1957.

food, shelter, work, medical care, education, rights of mobility and expression, protection against injury and oppression. Precariousness grounds such positive social obligations (paradoxically because precariousness is a kind of “ungrounding” that constitutes a generalized condition for the human animal) at the same time that the aim of such obligations is to minimize precariousness and its unequal distribution. In this light, then, we can understand those modes of justifying stem-cell research when it is clear that the use of living cells may increase the possibilities for livable life. Similarly, the decision to abort a fetus may well be grounded in the insight that the forms of social and economic support needed to make that life livable are lacking. In this sense, we can see that arguments against certain forms of war depend on the assertion that arbitrary modes of maximizing precariousness for some and minimizing precariousness for others both violate basic egalitarian norms and fail to recognize that precariousness imposes certain kinds of ethical obligations on and among the living.

One could object, of course, and say that the idea of a “livable life” could give ground to those who want to distinguish between lives worth living and lives worth destroying—precisely the rationale that supports a certain kind of war effort to distinguish between valuable and grievable lives on the one hand, and devalued and ungrievable lives on the other. But such a conclusion neglects the important qualification that egalitarian standards impose on the consideration of what is a livable life. 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. And the injunction to think precariousness in terms of equality emerges precisely from the irrefutable generalizability of this condition. On this basis, one objects to the differential allocation of precariousness and grievability. Further, the very idea of precariousness

implies dependency on social networks and conditions, suggesting that there is no “life itself” at issue here, but always and only conditions of life, life as something that requires conditions in order to become livable life and, indeed, in order to become grievable.

Thus, the conclusion is not that everything that can die or is subject to destruction (i.e., all life processes) imposes an obligation to preserve life. But an obligation does emerge from the fact that we are, as it were, social beings from the start, dependent on what is outside ourselves, on others, on institutions, and on sustained and sustainable environments, and so are, in this sense, precarious. To sustain life as sustainable requires putting those conditions in place and militating for their renewal and strengthening. Where a life stands no chance of flourishing, there one must attend to ameliorating the negative conditions of life. Precarious life implies life as a conditioned process, and not as the internal feature of a monadic individual or any other anthropocentric conceit. Our obligations are precisely to the conditions that make life possible, not to “life itself,” or rather, our obligations emerge from the insight that there can be no sustained life without those sustaining conditions, and that those conditions are both our political responsibility and the matter of our most vexed ethical decisions.

Political Formations

Although precarious life is a generalized condition, it is, paradoxically, the condition of being conditioned. In other words, we can say of all life that it is precarious, which is to say that life always emerges and is sustained within conditions of life. The earlier discussion of frames and norms sought to shed light on one dimension of those conditions. We cannot easily recognize life outside the frames in which it is given, and those frames not only structure how we come to know and identify life but constitute sustaining

conditions for those very lives. Conditions have to be sustained, which means that they exist not as static entities, but as reproducible social institutions and relations. We would not have a responsibility to maintain conditions of life if those conditions did not require renewal. Similarly, frames are subject to an iterable structure—they can only circulate by virtue of their reproducibility, and that very reproducibility introduces a structural risk for the identity of the frame itself. The frame breaks with itself in order to reproduce itself, and its reproduction becomes the site where a politically consequential break is possible. Thus, the frame functions normatively, but it can, depending on the specific mode of circulation, call certain fields of normativity into question. Such frames structure modes of recognition, especially during times of war, but their limits and their contingency become subject to exposure and critical intervention as well.

Such frames are operative in imprisonment and torture, but also in the politics of immigration, according to which certain lives are perceived as lives while others, though apparently living, fail to assume perceptual form as such. 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 sadness, loss, and indifference. Why, in particular, has there been within the US a righteous response to certain forms of violence inflicted at the same time that violence suffered by the US is either loudly mourned (the iconography of the dead from 9/11) or considered inassimilable (the assertion of masculine impermeability within state rhetoric)? If we take the precariousness of life as a point of departure, then there is no life without the need for shelter and food, no life without dependency on wider networks of sociality and

labor, no life that transcends injurability and mortality.¹⁰ We might then analyze some of the cultural tributaries of military power during these times as attempting to maximize precariousness for others while minimizing precariousness for the power in question. This differential distribution of precarity is at once a material and a perceptual issue, since those whose lives are not “regarded” as potentially grievable, and hence valuable, are made to bear the burden of starvation, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement, and differential exposure to violence and death.¹¹ It would be difficult, if not impossible, to decide whether the “regard”—or the failure of “regard”—leads to the “material reality” or whether the material reality leads to the failure of regard, since it would seem that both happen at once and that such perceptual categories are essential to the crafting of material reality (which does not mean that all materiality is reducible to perception, but only that perception carries its material effects).

Precariousness and precarity are intersecting concepts. Lives are by definition precarious: they can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed. In some sense, this is a feature of all life, and there is no thinking of life that is not precarious—except, of course, in fantasy, and in military fantasies in particular. Political orders, including economic and social institutions, are designed to address those very needs without which the risk of mortality is heightened. Precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. Such populations are at heightened risk of disease,

10 See especially the discussion of injurability throughout Jay Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. This remains, in my view, the most trenchant analysis of injurability and ethics in contemporary philosophy.

11 Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15: 1 (2003), 11–40.

poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection. Precarity also characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized precariousness for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence who often have no other option than to appeal to the very state from which they need protection. In other words, they appeal to the state for protection, but the state is precisely that from which they require protection. To be protected from violence by the nation-state is to be exposed to the violence wielded by the nation-state, so to rely on the nation-state for protection *from* violence is precisely to exchange one potential violence for another. There may, indeed, be few other choices. Of course, not all violence issues from the nation-state, but it would be rare to find contemporary instances of violence that bear no relation to that political form.

This book considers the “frames” of war—the ways of selectively carving up experience as essential to the conduct of war. Such frames do not merely reflect on the material conditions of war, but are essential to the perpetually crafted *animus* of that material reality. There are several frames at issue here: the frame of the photograph, the framing of the decision to go to war, the framing of immigration issues as a “war at home,” and the framing of sexual and feminist politics in the service of the war effort. I argue that even as the war is framed in certain ways to control and heighten affect in relation to the differential grievability of lives, so war has come to frame ways of thinking multiculturalism and debates on sexual freedom, issues largely considered separate from “foreign affairs.” Sexually progressive conceptions of feminist rights or sexual freedoms have been mobilized not only to rationalize wars against predominantly Muslim populations, but also to argue for limits to immigration to Europe from predominantly Muslim countries. In the US, this has led to illegal detentions and imprisonment of those who “appear” to belong to suspect ethnic groups,

although legal efforts to fight these measures have proven increasingly successful in recent years.¹² For instance, those who accept an “impasse” between sexual rights and immigration rights, especially in Europe, have failed to take into account how ongoing war has structured and fissured the subject of social movements. Understanding the cultural stakes of a war “against Islam” as it assumes a new form in coercive immigration politics challenges the Left to think beyond the established frameworks of multiculturalism and to contextualize its recent divisions in light of state violence, the exercise of war, and the heightening of “legal violence” at the border.

In recent years, the positions associated with sexual progressive politics have been pitted against claims for new immigrant rights and new cultural changes in the US and Europe. These formulations of contradiction and impasse seem to rely on a framework that fails to think critically about how the terms of domestic politics have been disturbed and deployed by the wider aims of war. A refocusing of contemporary politics on the illegitimate and arbitrary effects of state violence, including coercive means of enforcing and defying legality, may well reorient the Left beyond the liberal antinomies on which

¹² See, for example: Center for Constitutional Rights, “Illegal Detentions and Guantánamo,” <http://ccrjustice.org/illegal-detentions-and-guantanamo>; “Illegal Detentions in Iraq by US Pose Great Challenge: Amman” (Reuters), <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines05/0609-04.htm>; Amnesty International USA, “Guantánamo and Illegal U.S. Detentions,” <http://www.amnestyusa.org/war-on-terror/Guantanamo/page.do?id=1351079>; Jerry Markon, “Memo Proves Detention Is Illegal, Attorneys Say,” *Washington Post*, April 9, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/08/AR2008040803080.html>; Giovanni Claudio Fava, “Transportation and illegal detention of prisoners by CIA,” European Parliament, February 14, 2007, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/eplive/expert/shortlist_page/20070214SHL03138/default_en.htm; Hina Shamsi, “CIA Coverups and American Injustice,” *Salon.com*, December 11, 2007, <http://www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2007/12/11/Guantanamo/index.html>

it currently founders. A coalition of those who oppose illegitimate coercion and violence, and who oppose racism of all kinds (non-differentially), would certainly also imply a sexual politics that adamantly refuses to be appropriated as a spurious rationale for the current wars. The frameworks through which we think the Left need to be reformulated in light of new forms of state violence—especially those that seek to suspend legal constraints in the name of sovereignty, or which fabricate quasi-legal systems in the name of national security. Very often, we do not see that the ostensibly “domestic” issues are inflected by the foreign policy issues, and that a similar “frame” grounds our orientation in both domains. Nor do we always call into question this way of framing divisions between domestic and foreign issues. If such frames were brought into critical contact with one another, what kind of politics would result? It would perhaps give us a way to militate against the mobilization of “progressive” domestic agendas (feminism, sexual freedom) for war and anti-immigration politics, even for rationales for sexual torture. It would mean thinking sexual politics together with immigration politics in new ways, and considering how populations are differentially exposed to conditions that jeopardize the possibility of persisting and flourishing.

This work seeks to reorient politics on the Left toward a consideration of precarity as an existing and promising site for coalitional exchange. For populations to become grievable does not require that we come to know the singularity of every person who is at risk or who has, indeed, already been risked. Rather, it means that policy needs to understand precariousness as a shared condition, and precarity as the politically induced condition that would deny equal exposure through the radically unequal distribution of wealth and the differential ways of exposing certain populations, racially and nationally conceptualized, to greater violence. The recognition of shared precariousness introduces strong normative

commitments of equality and invites a more robust universalizing of rights that seeks to address basic human needs for food, shelter, and other conditions for persisting and flourishing. We might be tempted to call these “material needs”—and that they surely are. But once we acknowledge that the “frames” through which such needs are affirmed or denied make possible the practices of war, we have to conclude that the frames of war are part of what makes the materiality of war. Just as the “matter” of bodies cannot appear without a shaping and animating form, neither can the “matter” of war appear without a conditioning and facilitating form or frame. The operation of cameras, not only in the recording and distribution of images of torture, but as part of the very apparatus of bombing, make it clear that media representations have already become modes of military conduct.¹³ So there is no way to separate, under present historical conditions, the material reality of war from those representational regimes through which it operates and which rationalize its own operation. The perceptual realities produced through such frames do not precisely lead to war policy, and neither do such policies unilaterally create frames of perception. Perception and policy are but two modalities of the same process whereby the ontological status of a targeted population is compromised and suspended. This is not the same as “Bare life,” since the lives in question are not cast outside the polis in a state of radical exposure, but bound and constrained by power relations in a situation of forcible exposure. It is not the withdrawal or absence of law that produces precariousness, but the very effects of illegitimate legal coercion itself, or the exercise of state power freed from the constraints of all law.

These reflections have implications for thinking through the body as well, since there are no conditions that can

¹³ See my essay “The Imperialist Subject,” *Journal of Urban and Cultural Studies* 2: 1 (1991), 73–8.

fully “solve” the problem of human precariousness. Bodies come into being and cease to be: as physically persistent organisms, they are subject to incursions and to illnesses that jeopardize the possibility of persisting at all. These are necessary features of bodies—they cannot “be” thought without their finitude, and they depend on what is “outside themselves” to be sustained—features that pertain to the phenomenological structure of bodily life. To live is always to live a life that is at risk from the outset and can be put at risk or expunged quite suddenly from the outside and for reasons that are not always under one’s control.

Whereas most positions derived from Spinozistic accounts of bodily persistence emphasize the body’s productive desire,¹⁴ have we yet encountered a Spinozistic account of bodily vulnerability or considered its political implications?¹⁵ The *conatus* can be and is undercut by any number of sources: we are bound to others not only through networks of libidinal connection, but also through modes of unwilling dependency and proximity that may well entail ambivalent psychic consequences, including binds of aggression and desire (Klein).¹⁶ Moreover, this generalized condition of precariousness and dependency is exploited and disavowed in particular political formations. No amount of will or wealth can eliminate the possibilities of illness or accident for a living body, although both can be mobilized in the service of such an illusion. These risks are built into the very conception of bodily life considered both finite and precarious, implying that the body is

14 Benedict de Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994. See also Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin, New York: Zone Books, 1992.

15 Deleuze clearly approaches this with his discussion of “what can a body do?” in *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*.

16 Melanie Klein, “A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States,” *Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. Juliet Mitchell, London: Penguin, 1986, 115–46.

always given over to modes of sociality and environment that limit its individual autonomy. The shared condition of precariousness implies that the body is constitutively social and interdependent—a view clearly confirmed in different ways by both Hobbes and Hegel. Yet, precisely because each body finds itself potentially threatened by others who are, by definition, precarious as well, forms of domination follow. This standard Hegelian point takes on specific meanings under contemporary conditions of war: the shared condition of precariousness leads not to reciprocal recognition, but to a specific exploitation of targeted populations, of lives that are not quite lives, cast as “destructible” and “ungrievable.” Such populations are “lose-able,” or can be forfeited, precisely because they are framed as being already lost or forfeited; they are cast as threats to human life as we know it rather than as living populations in need of protection from illegitimate state violence, famine, or pandemics. Consequently, when such lives are lost they are not grievable, since, in the twisted logic that rationalizes their death, the loss of such populations is deemed necessary to protect the lives of “the living.”

This consideration of the differential distribution of precariousness and grievability constitutes an alternative to those models of multiculturalism that presuppose the nation-state as the exclusive frame of reference, and pluralism as an adequate way of thinking about heterogeneous social subjects. Although certain liberal principles remain crucial to this analysis, including equality and universality, it remains clear that liberal norms presupposing an ontology of discrete identity cannot yield the kinds of analytic vocabularies we need for thinking about global interdependency and the interlocking networks of power and position in contemporary life. Part of the very problem of contemporary political life is that not everyone counts as a subject. Multiculturalism tends to presuppose already constituted communities, already

established subjects, when what is at stake are communities not quite recognized as such, subjects who are living, but not yet regarded as “lives.” Further, the problem is not simply one of co-existence, but of how the politics of differential subject formation within contemporary maps of power seek (a) to mobilize sexual progressives against new immigrants in the name of a spurious conception of freedom, and (b) to deploy gender and sexual minorities in the rationalization of recent and current wars.

Left politics in this regard would aim first to refocus and expand the political critique of state violence, including both war and those forms of legalized violence by which populations are differentially deprived of the basic resources needed to minimize precariousness. This seems urgently necessary in the context of crumbling welfare states and those in which social safety nets have been torn asunder or denied the chance to emerge. Second, the focus would be less on identity politics, or the kinds of interests and beliefs formulated on the basis of identity claims, and more on new coalitions might be formed capable of overcoming the sorts of liberal impasses mentioned above. Precarity cuts across identity categories as well as multicultural maps, thus forming the basis for an alliance focused on opposition to state violence and its capacity to produce, exploit, and distribute precarity for the purposes of profit and territorial defense. Such an alliance would not require agreement on all questions of desire or belief or self-identification. It would be a movement sheltering certain kinds of ongoing antagonisms among its participants, valuing such persistent and animating differences as the sign and substance of a radical democratic politics.

Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect

The postulation of a generalized precariousness that calls into question the ontology of individualism implies, although does not directly entail, certain normative consequences. It does not suffice to say that since life is precarious, therefore it must be preserved. At stake are the conditions that render life sustainable, and thus moral disagreements invariably center on how or whether these conditions of life can be improved and precarity ameliorated. But if such a view entails a critique of individualism, how do we begin to think about ways to assume responsibility for the minimization of precarity? If the ontology of the body serves as a point of departure for such a rethinking of responsibility, it is precisely because, in its surface and its depth, the body is a social phenomenon: it is exposed to others, vulnerable by definition. Its very persistence depends upon social conditions and institutions, which means that in order to “be,” in the sense of “persist,” it must rely on what is outside itself. How can responsibility be thought on the basis of this socially ecstatic structure of the body? As something that, by definition, yields to social crafting and force, the body is vulnerable. It is not, however, a mere surface upon which social meanings are inscribed, but that which suffers, enjoys, and responds to