

SYLVIA WYNTER'S DECOLONIAL REJOINDER TO JUDITH BUTLER'S ETHICS OF VULNERABILITY

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Judith Butler argues for collective liberatory action grounded in ontological vulnerability. Yet descriptive social ontology alone provides neither normative ethical prescriptions nor direction for political action. I believe Butler tries to overcome this gap by appealing to equality as an ethical ideal. In this article, I reconstruct how equality operates in her transition from ontological vulnerability to prescriptive commitments. Then, turning to Sylvia Wynter, I argue Butler's uncritical use of equality constrains the radical direction of her liberatory goals—firstly because it cannot mitigate the coloniality of Being, and secondly because she figures the locus of critique as an anonymous and equally vulnerable body at the limits of the recognizably human. I conclude with Wynter's demand for liberatory critique to arise out of specific decolonial locations of rupture from our historically situated, oppressive, and overrepresented genre of being human.

Judith Butler soutient une notion d'action libératrice fondée sur la vulnérabilité ontologique. Pourtant, l'ontologie sociale descriptive ne fournit ni de prescriptions éthiques normatives ni de directives pour l'action politique. Je pense que Butler tente de surmonter cette lacune en faisant appel à l'égalité comme un idéal éthique. Dans cet article, je reconstruis la manière dont l'égalité opère dans sa transition depuis la vulnérabilité ontologique jusqu'aux engagements prescriptifs. Puis, avec Sylvia Wynter, j'affirme que Butler utilise l'égalité d'une manière qui limite la radicalité de ses objectifs libérateurs : premièrement, parce que Butler ne peut pas atténuer la colonialité de l'Être et deuxièmement, parce qu'elle désigne comme lieu de la critique un corps aussi anonyme que vulnérable aux limites de ce que l'on reconnaît comme humain. Je conclus avec la demande de Wynter selon laquelle la critique libératrice doit émerger à partir de lieux de rupture décoloniaux spécifiques à notre genre humain historiquement situé, oppressif et surreprésenté.

In her recent work, Judith Butler argues for collective liberatory action grounded in humanity's shared ontological vulnerability. Ontological descriptions of vulnerable embodiment have always been fundamental to her vision of ethics and politics. However, it is difficult to negotiate the transition from the ambiguous provocations of ontological vulnerability to the ethico-political sphere; descriptive social ontology alone provides neither normative ethical prescriptions nor concrete direction for political action. I believe Butler tries to overcome this gap by appealing to equality as an ethical ideal. In this article, I reconstruct how equality operates in her transition from ontological vulnerability to prescriptive commitments; and in so doing, I open the space for a decolonial extension of Butler's ethics and politics of vulnerability. Turning to Sylvia Wynter's work, I argue that Butler's uncritical use of equality constrains the radical direction of her liberatory goals—firstly because appealing to equality cannot mitigate the coloniality of Being, and secondly because Butler's liberatory project figures the locus of critique as an anonymous and equally vulnerable body at the limits of the recognizably human. She thereby risks occluding particular histories of oppression and resistance within those limits. To counteract this, I conclude with Wynter's demand for liberatory critique to arise out of specific decolonial locations of rupture from our historically-situated, oppressive, and overrepresented genre of being human.

1. How Equality Enables Butler's Transition from Social Ontology to Prescriptive Commitments

Butler's social ontology describes embodied vulnerability as the founding interrelatedness of all living beings.¹ There are generalized features of this ontological condition shared equally by every living being *qua* living being, such as the need to take in a source of energy. As human beings, however, our individual experiences of vulnerability are most often specified as unequal as a result of socio-cultural norms of recognition, like gender norms, regulating how we become subjects, and governing our possibilities for livability within society.² Butler insists that liberal ethics and politics be rethought against this socio-ontological background with special attention to how we conceive of ethical responsibility for the Other. On her account, we

¹ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 30–32. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PL.

² Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 41–42f.

are bound to one another before we are—indeed, as a condition of us becoming something resembling—autonomous agents. Ethical responsibility preconditions the “I” capable of giving a response to an “other” that is taken up within the political realm.³ While much of Butler’s work focuses on articulating the operation of this complex socio-ontological story about human subjectivity, Butler also thinks through how her ontological claims provide a ground for reorienting processes of subjectivation and humanization in the direction of greater freedom, rights, and equality.

From the outset, she explains that the possibilities provoked by a social ontology of vulnerability—and, paramount among them, possibilities for rethinking responsibility—are ethically ambiguous. Thinking closely with Emmanuel Lévinas, Butler argues we can best understand the obligation to respond ethically to the Other’s potential for suffering as something emerging from our shared ontological condition of vulnerability rather than resulting from an autonomous subject deciding to submit to a moral law (PL, 129–30). In other words, moral obligations issue from a person’s primary exposure to vulnerability, which pulls her to the Other without whom she could not survive or exist. Because of its derivation, responsibility becomes “[being] awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself” (*ibid.*, 134), and this induces in the Self an ambiguous provocation to kill or to shelter the vulnerable Other. For Butler, as for Lévinas, the struggle between “the fear of undergoing violence and the fear of inflicting violence” (*ibid.*, 137) lies at the heart of ethics when it is understood as emerging from our unchosen ontological condition of being vulnerable to others. While this rethinking of responsibility displaces the autonomous agent from the centre of ethical obligation, it also leaves us mired in the ambiguous provocations of ontological vulnerability.

Nonetheless, Butler ambitiously believes that the fact of shared ontological vulnerability can inspire a rethinking of subjectivity, ethical responsibility, and agency, and also a praxical reorientation of politics toward an ethos of solidarity and non-violence. She is especially interested in how this struggle in ambiguity manifests in our ethical and political lives through norms of humanization—such as gender, sexuality, and nationality—which can be opened up to critical rearticulation. For Butler, norms and the frames of representation they operate within produce an “I” with a legible social position through the constitutive exclusion of what is “not-I,” comprised

³ Butler offers the best account of this thread in Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

of both other legible and illegible beings. Ethical responsibility for the Other then becomes a specific lived obligation to others when a “we” is circumscribed by governing norms to produce recognizable human others as the proper recipients of my ethical responsibility. Yet shared ontological vulnerability becomes manifest only through the operation of norms that can, and do, leave us no further along in taking up our ethical responsibility for *all* other living beings. Thinking from within this dilemma, she works to connect her claims about shared ontological vulnerability with specific normative commitments aimed at advancing a more radically inclusive Leftist ethics and politics. As I demonstrate below, Butler relies on an assumed connection between ontological vulnerability and egalitarianism to justify this connection.

To argue for her anti-militaristic stance post 9/11, Butler begins from the claim that experiences of vulnerability inspire two seemingly conflicting normative commitments: strengthening autonomy and building community (see PL, 24–31). The commitment to autonomy is unethical for Butler when it comes at the expense of recognizing vulnerability as a foundation for building bonds of community. It is her hope that experiences of vulnerability might instead inspire a “normative reorientation of politics” (PL, 28) away from sovereignty and self-defense and toward the search for “non-military political solutions” (*ibid.*, 29) to a nation’s or person’s potential for suffering. Rejecting the aggressive maintenance of hyper-autonomy requires building a deep sense of community beyond the current limits of norm-governed humanity. This deep sense can only develop, in Butler’s account, through an “insurrection at the level of ontology” (*ibid.*, 33)—that is, an acknowledgement of our founding interrelatedness in vulnerability, which in turn requires the resignification of exclusionary norms of humanization solely defining white, western, male, cisgender, heterosexual subjects as unquestionably worthy of ethical responsibility and political rights. Both efforts ultimately aim at “an ethos of solidarity that would affirm mutual dependency,”⁴ which Butler believes challenges xenophobic tendencies in commitments to autonomy or community, and so might usher in a more radically democratic sense of collective humanity.

Yet a radically egalitarian and democratic “normative aspiration within the field of politics” (PL, 26) is only a desired, and not necessary, outcome of Butler’s ontological claims. As Catherine Mills and

⁴ Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 21–22; see also 66–69. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as NT.

Erinn Gilson indicate, Butler treats normativity idiosyncratically. She rarely employs terms like “necessitates” or “requires” when discussing normative commitments, instead favouring less forceful language like “implies,” “compels,” or “invites.”⁵ She also claims these commitments are part of ongoing processes of critique rather than being predetermined or fixed.⁶ Her desire to move away from an ethics and politics centred on narrow commitments to autonomy or homogenous community, and toward such rooted in a collective ethos of solidarity, requires both an understanding of shared ontological vulnerability and the ongoing critical resignification of norms of humanization. In fact, these two requirements arise at once, since one cannot come to understand shared ontological vulnerability without critically engaging with the norms of recognition regulating that very understanding in advance (PL, 43ff.). Often, therefore, it can appear that Butler’s calls for a normative political reorientation are part of an unteleological critical project to resignify norms—or, in other words, for an open-ended redefinition of what it means to be recognized as human. But it is also the case that she repeatedly supplies specific goals for the work of critical resignification. While she does not require that her ontological claims about embodied vulnerability necessitate particular normative commitments, she repeatedly suggests that, in acknowledging shared ontological vulnerability, we might be compelled to take up specific political commitments to egalitarianism, democracy, and the universalization of human rights.⁷ Thus, although she employs a weak sense of normativity and insists on the open-endedness of any critical rearticulation of regulatory norms, Butler’s critical project is not entirely unteleological. Her preexisting commitments to equality and democracy shape her political critiques of unequal conditions of livability as the differential distribution of ontological vulnerability.

Butler argues that liberatory politics has at least two goals: to encourage the apprehension of shared ontological vulnerability—*i.e.*, our fundamental interrelation as embodied living beings—and to resignify the human in more egalitarian and universally democratic directions. She introduces the “specifically political notion of ‘precar-

⁵ Catherine Mills, “Undoing Ethics: Butler on Precarity, Opacity and Responsibility,” in *Butler and Ethics*, (ed.) M. Lloyd (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 48f.

⁶ Erinn C. Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

⁷ See PL, 40, and Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2010), 6–8, 13–15. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as FW.

ity” (FW, 3) to help define the latter goal and to better distinguish how norms of recognition and humanization operate to reveal or occlude our shared ontological condition. “Precarity,” she explains, “designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (NT, 33–34). It names the result of the production of an ethically recognizable humanity and an unrecognizable non- or subhumanity through the operation of regulatory norms. Butler believes unequal precarity can move us to act because we can learn to see it as the arbitrary normative instantiation of our equal universal condition of vulnerability producing lived conditions of subjugation and/or exploitation for some and not others (*ibid.*, 21f.). Moreover, we *can* act because the norms governing both humanization and the concrete and specific instantiation of vulnerability in unequal conditions of livability can be opened up for critical resignification.

This is not to deny Butler’s account of social ontology or the possibilities for critique she offers; however, she seems to rely uncritically on equality as an ethical ideal in their articulation—as Mills asserts, “Butler’s claim that the recognition of precariousness entails a commitment to egalitarianism and the universalization of rights appears to be without justification.”⁸ Butler repeatedly connects vulnerability with equality in order to permit further claims about specific ethical obligations to democracy and universal human rights. For example, when clarifying that her position on the obligation to enable livable lives is different from privileging some lives over others, she refers to the ostensive connection between shared ontological vulnerability and equality as illustrative:

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. (FW, 22)

⁸ Mills, “Undoing Ethics,” 48.

In short, because ontological vulnerability is a generalized condition of life, it is irrefutably connected with equality, and on this basis we should object to the unequal distribution of precarity. Butler's argument here, however, follows a curious logic. She connects the generalizability of our ontological condition, *i.e.*, that vulnerability characterizes any living and embodied being, with the injunction to think this general condition in terms of equality. For this injunction not to contradict her Lévinasian arguments above about the ambiguity of vulnerable embodiment, we must view equality as a quantitative descriptor only. While this might yield a ground for objecting to the differential allocation of precarity, it is only on the thin basis that it is quantitatively unequal and not that it is contrary to an ethos of solidarity aimed at promoting democracy and the universalization of human rights. If, however, we read equality as a value-laden ideal defining an egalitarian ethos of solidarity, then it is incumbent on Butler to justify the link she makes between generality and equality read as egalitarianism specifically. Her lack of clarity on this point makes it difficult to discern the relationship between apprehending ontological vulnerability as a generalizable condition and the critical project of norm resignification to redefine the human in more egalitarian directions. This difficulty deepens given that ontological vulnerability can only be apprehended according to cultural-historical norms that construct the scene wherein humanization is taken up and enacted. As Butler says, "[N]orms of recognition are essential to the constitution of vulnerability as the precondition of the 'human'" (PL, 43). Her leap from the fact of vulnerability as a generalizable ontological condition to the injunction for a value-laden ideal of equality thus requires further explanation; and this is particularly important because the barriers to recognizing membership within a generalized condition are precisely those oppressive norms of humanization that the injunction to equality is meant to critique.

When Butler turns directly to describe action in pursuit of a normative reorientation of politics, these difficulties emerge again. Although she does not believe a reorientation is inevitable, she thinks her ethico-ontological analysis above provides a sufficient ground to make this reorientation possible on a large scale. *NT* speaks directly to this possibility, momentarily instantiated in collective protests such as the Occupy Movement, Black Lives Matter, and the Arab Spring. In her analysis, these movements disrupt normative schemes of intelligibility that render us indifferent to differential precarity by forming microcosms of "economic political equality" wherein the coalition apprehends that "we struggle in, from, and

against precarity" (NT, 122). Butler believes these examples demonstrate the viability of her hypothesis that "avowing and showing certain forms of interdependency stand a chance of transforming the field of appearance itself.... For once life is understood as *both equally valuable and interdependent*, certain ethical formulations follow" (*ibid.*, 43; my emphasis). Although she is careful not to indicate a necessary causal relationship between the apprehension of ontological vulnerability and a normative commitment to egalitarianism, Butler does slip from vulnerable life as generalizable, and therefore an equal condition, to vulnerable life as equally valuable. This second formulation allows the apprehension of ontological vulnerability to ground ethical obligations for equal livability. It is also clear that the ethical formulations invited or implied by this apprehension are obligations to realize conditions of livability specifically in accordance with justice, human rights, and democracy.⁹ Given that ontological vulnerability is not intrinsically normative, for these normative consequences to follow, even weakly, we must assume Butler links shared ontological vulnerability with equality as an ethical and value-laden ideal without sufficiently justifying this connection.

Even if Butler were to adequately justify vulnerability's connection with equality, she does not critically interrogate equality's relation to the normative reorientation of politics she ultimately seeks, despite its crucial role in motivating this reorientation. She assumes too quickly that equality guides the way toward a liberatory future. This prompts a question: how precisely does a renewed appeal to an old ideal open up a critical resignification of norms of humanization and dehumanization in the direction of greater liberation? Addressing this question is especially important when we consider that her critical resignification aims toward greater livability¹⁰ as defined by democracy, justice, and universal human rights. Butler wants to resignify these ideals in more feminist, anti-nationalist, and queer directions, and believes this can occur when heterogeneous democratic coalitions are formed around the recognition of unequal precarity (NT, 27). The concept of equality operational in these precarious coalitions would, for instance, "use the resources of feminist theory, and activism, to rethink the meaning of the tie, the bond, the alliance, the relation, as they are imagined and

⁹ See FW, 13, 21–23, 28–29, 33; NT, 124; PL, 40.

¹⁰ Livability implies "positive obligations to provide those basic supports that seek to minimize precariousness in egalitarian ways: food, shelter, work, medical care, education, rights of mobility and expression, protection against injury and oppression" (FW, 21).

lived in the horizon of a counterimperialist egalitarianism” (PL, 41–42). While this project is not squarely within the purview of Liberalist reforms (given Butler’s fundamental rethinking of subjectivity, responsibility, and agency), it nonetheless resists a potentially more radical notion of liberatory existence. Specifically, her desire to maintain a commitment to equality and egalitarianism, now rooted (however problematically) in ontological vulnerability, only implicitly suggests the need for a critical lens beyond counterimperialism, anti-militarism, and radical democratic ideology. Butler is certainly open to the possibility that multiple processes of critical resignification in coalition would produce future subjectivities beyond the narrow scope of her normative commitments, yet she does not seem to question the role these commitments have in getting us there. Moreover, although she recognizes that some subjects, like “women,” have invaluable experience in “negotiating a sudden and unprecedented vulnerability” and developing “long-term strategies” (PL, 42) for both critique and forming lives under unlivable conditions, she frequently falls back on her formal and discursive philosophical framework to describe where and how a critical resistance grounded in vulnerability might arise. For this reason, it is necessary to augment Butler’s critical aspirations with the work of Sylvia Wynter. Wynter’s decolonial critiques of the regulatory production of humanization and dehumanization open up spaces for rethinking liberatory existence beyond Butler’s scope. Moreover, her unique approach to critical social ontology as, in her terms, hybridly phylo-ontogenic and sociogenic, helps mitigate the potential for neocolonial manifestations of equality in Butler’s account.

2. Wynter and Situating “Equality” within a Decolonial Genealogy of the Human

Wynter’s expansive critical genealogical project explores the effects of racist colonial history on our modern conception of humanity—what she calls an overrepresentative genre of being or *homo oeconomicus*—while attending to the regulatory power nexus formed by what Butler names governing norms.¹¹ Her ongoing concern, as distilled by Katherine McKittrick, is to reveal “the ways in which the

¹¹ Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337, here 309–19. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as UC.

figure of the human is tied to epistemological histories that presently value a genre of the human that reifies Western bourgeois tenets."¹² Like Butler, Wynter's work describes a socio-cultural conception of humanity; but unlike Butler, Wynter has a specific historical point of emergence with the advent of European colonialism. Wynter defines the "being" of "being human" as a culturally and historically situated *praxis* and not a static ontological condition. She details how humans come-to-be through the hybrid operation of *genesis* or *bios* and *poiesis* or *logoi/mythoi*, accepting, "as Fanon says, [that] phylogeny, ontogeny, and sociogeny, together, define what it is to be human" (US, 16).¹³ Her genealogical work specifically reconstructs the hybrid emergence of *homo oeconomicus* to demonstrate that it required (and continues to require) a consolidation of the figure of the racialized Other as symbolic death. This consolidation was initially the task of colonialism, which figured the newly racialized native as slave, subhuman, and ethically exploitable (UC, 264). Wynter, like other decolonial theorists, maintains that the so-called formal end of colonialism did not bring about the end of coloniality,¹⁴ and that racialization remains one of the most obvious aspects of its continued effects. In analyses too extensive to summarize here, she makes the case that, although the sociogenic principle¹⁵ defining genre-specific binaries (informing processes of humanization and dehumanization) differs over historical periods post-1492, their underlying coloniality remains unchanged.¹⁶ For example, she claims our

¹² I would add material histories to McKittrick's analysis here. Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to give humanness a different future: conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, (ed.) K. McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 9. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as US.

¹³ See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (tr.) R. Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), xiv-xv.

¹⁴ See Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being," *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 240-70, here 243f.

¹⁵ Wynter takes Fanon's sociogenesis to signify the socio-cultural production of a dehumanized (non)subject as revealed in the lived experience of the racialized Other. Wynter's retooling of sociogenesis in the term "sociogenic principle" is meant "to both relate it to be and contrast it with, the genomic principle defining of the species-identity of purely organic life." Sylvia Wynter, "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, The Puzzle of Conscious Experience, of 'Identity' and What it's Like to be 'Black,'" in *National Identity and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America*, (ed.) M. Duran-Cogan and A. Gomez-Moriana (New York: Routledge, 2001), 30.

¹⁶ See Sylvia Wynter, "1492: A New Worldview," in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, (ed.) V. L. Hyatt and R. Nettleford

present genre of being human is grounded in a Darwinian-neo-Malthusian biocosmology of symbolic life/death operating according to the binaries of selection/dysselection and eugenic/dysgenic (US, 37). These binaries encode our recent narratives defining the human as akin to a natural organism and continue to produce “asymmetrical naturalized racial-sexual human groupings that are specific to time, place, and personhood yet signal the processes through which the empirical and experiential lives of *all* humans are increasingly subordinated to a figure that thrives on accumulation” (*ibid.*, 10). We see the same regulatory norms that have produced dehumanization during colonial expansion—race, gender, sexuality, and class—now operational in defining a global poor as unworthy of the conditions for a livable life, and thus as expendable for the sake of securing the livability of those who figuratively embody *homo oeconomicus*, who are thereby misrepresented as representative of humanity-itself.¹⁷ For Wynter, any efforts by the symbolically dead to secure conditions of livability are resistances to the racist coloniality of Being¹⁸ as the world-defining “struggle of our times” (UC, 262).

Against this background, a liberatory project must directly contend with the coloniality of Being and its discursive-material effects on the production of human life. If, as Wynter claims, the continued reproduction of *homo oeconomicus* requires forgetting the historical and cultural contingency of its symbolic life/death codes, then her genealogical uncovering of this genre’s arrival promotes forms of critique commensurate with the full acknowledgement of the hereditary and material transmission of this forgetting via the sociogenic

(Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1995), 5–57; and Sylvia Wynter, “The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism,” *boundary 2*, vol. 12/13 (1984): 19–70, here 37–57.

¹⁷ See Sylvia Wynter, “The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overturn, Its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition,” in *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology*, (ed.) J. R. Ambrose and S. Broeck (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 216f.; and Sylvia Wynter, “Afterword: ‘Beyond Miranda’s Meanings: Un/silencing the ‘Demonic Ground’ of Caliban’s ‘Woman,’” in *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*, (ed.) C. B. Davies and E. S. Fido (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990), 365f.

¹⁸ According to Maldonado-Torres, the coloniality of Being describes a sub-ontological difference between Being and what is negatively marked as below Being, that is, dispensable for the sake of Being. This sub-ontological difference defines the lived experience of those inhabiting racialized bodies marked as expendable and expropriable through the ongoing normalization of conditions of war, *e.g.*, violence, rape, slavery, and incarceration. Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality,” 254–56.

and phylo-ontogenic codes currently defining humanity (US, 31f.). For Wynter, liberatory critique therefore aims specifically to decolonize the *praxis* of being human by rupturing the “master code of symbolic life and death” that justifies the colonial and racialized production, expropriation, and displacement of dehumanized bodies and lives (UC, 300f.). Her decolonial framing of the project to critically resignify our genres of being human helps draw into question the efficacy of equality in Butler’s work as an ideal motivating a political reorientation. Whereas Wynter demonstrates the need for a decolonial delinking from *praxes* of being human that continue to reproduce conditions of livability exclusively for *homo oeconomicus*, Butler’s loosely defined generalizable and counterimperialist egalitarianism does not seem an adequate means to this end. Admittedly, Butler implicitly gestures toward this inadequacy in her insistence on the critical resignification of norms governing gender, sexuality, and race (to a lesser extent), and in her attention to lives lived in dehumanized frames of recognition. Nonetheless, her advocacy for equality—as expressed in democracy, the universalization of human rights, and more inclusive material and institutional conditions of livability—does little to explicitly refuse its colonial inheritances. Radical refusal is an integral component of decolonial theory, as Walter D. Mignolo explains: “The decolonial option does not simply protest the contents of imperial coloniality; it demands a delinking of oneself from the knowledge systems we take for granted (and can profit from) and practicing epistemic disobedience.”¹⁹ While Butler’s ontology of shared vulnerability might intimate such a refusal, her uncritical use of equality and standards of egalitarian livability curtail the more radical directions this ontology opens up.

For Wynter, epistemic, affective, and embodied disobedience are needed to resist the regulatory practices of genre-coherence—that is, to resist inhabiting the narratives that uphold our secular origin myths about who we are and where we belong. These efforts, she argues, must specifically attempt to get outside of what W. E. B. Du Bois names “double consciousness,”²⁰ wherein oppressed peoples can be compelled by “auto-genocidal mimeticism” (US, 53)—that is, a compulsion “not only to desire *against myself* but also to work against the emancipatory interest of the world-systemic subordinat-

¹⁹ Walter D. Mignolo, “Sylvia Wynter: What Does it Mean to be Human?” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, (ed.) K. McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 107.

²⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994), 2f.

ed and inferiorized Negro population to which I belong” (US, 49). The desire to uphold the coloniality of Being infects all of our autobiographical stories as well as our embodied lived experience; this can be seen in how racialization manifests epidermally (following Fanon)²¹ and, in Wynter’s arguments, neurochemically in our brain’s opioid reward activation systems (UC, 328–31).²² Wynter thus calls for radical rupture in order to resist reproducing our colonial selves, which for dehumanized subjects “means, by implication, getting rid of the structure of the humanly invented Western world-systemic society whose status quo...[is] the cause of their black skins (at the level of ontogeny) having, at the level of sociogeny, to mimetically desire to adopt *white masks*” (US, 53). Wynter reads Du Bois and Fanon’s efforts to reveal the historical and cultural roots of auto-genocidal desire as a “far-reaching mutational leap” (*ibid.*, 46) in human existence and sees her own critical genealogical work as part of its continued development. This particular critical mutation opens a rupture in the iteration of colonial symbolic codes of life/death, codes which reproduce dehumanized subjectivities and bodies that carry these codes and their mutational variants within their hybrid existence, *viz.*, in their *bios* and *mythoi/logoi*.²³ She, as we will see in section 3, locates such mutational ruptures in what she calls “demonic grounds”: spaces for the decolonial remaking of genres of being human.

Wynter’s decolonial lens opens a straightforward critique of equality in liberal humanist discourse.²⁴ Yet, this critique cannot be easily leveled against Butler because her ontology of vulnerability

²¹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 92–96.

²² See also Wynter, “The Ceremony Found,” 211–18, and “Towards the Sociogenic Principle,” 24–28.

²³ The role of mutation and *autopoiesis* in Wynter’s account points to a significant divergence with Butler’s notion of embodiment and critique, which this paper only begins to draw out. For further reading on mutation, *autopoiesis*, and critique in Wynter, see US, 25–33; Wynter, “Towards the Sociogenic Principle,” 9–23; and David Scott, “The Re-enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter,” *Small Axe*, no. 8 (2000): 119–207, here 196–207.

²⁴ See, for example, US, 38–39. Similarly, Fanon offers arguments connecting racism with “the bourgeois ideology that proclaims all men to be essentially equal” in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (tr.) R. Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 109–11. Chapter Six of Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* offers a similar critique of equality and other ideals of liberal humanism and their surreptitious role in preventing Black emancipation in the U.S.A. See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 164–206.

undercuts the Subject at the core of liberal humanism and the kind of equality, and even democracy, it espouses (FW, 31f.). Nonetheless, Wynter's revelation of the central role played by processes of racialization in upholding the coloniality of Being makes it clear that these processes continue to be barriers to achieving the egalitarian social conditions of livability that Butler imagines. Butler's normative reorientation of politics toward an ethos of solidarity—*i.e.*, the universalization of human rights, democracy, and more inclusive material conditions of livability—needs a strategy for responding to the historical-material embodiment of race, and in particular Blackness, as symbolic death, written onto hereditary and physiognomic differences. Put differently, Wynter argues that nothing short of dismantling the current symbolic codes of life/death that uphold *homo oeconomicus* will effectively open possibilities for liberation. The goal, then, is an epochal shift in how humanity comes to be, similar in stature to Columbus's colonial remaking of the New World: the challenge he presented to the then-dominant symbolic theological order of Being completely reinvented the dominant genre of being human. Thus Wynter's task is to take up a similarly radical position to dethrone the coloniality of Being by inhabiting critical locations that specifically rupture this post-1492 worldview, not to put another hegemonic genre in its place, but to open up space for genres of being human as *praxes* of liberation.

3. From Anonymous Bodies to Demonic Grounds: Shifting the Loci of Critique

Wynter reveals the depth of the colonial project to construct the human. The project's history must be considered alongside Butler's hope that we might "link interdependency to the principle of equal value, and to do this in a way that opposes those powers that differentially allocate recognizability, or that disrupts its taken-for-granted operation" (NT, 43). Butler suggests that precarity can be the unifying point around which coalitions form, such that precarity can be collectively opposed by appealing to a prior equality in vulnerability.²⁵ Wynter likewise suggests that critical opposition emerges from the spaces and lives of the most precarious. Indeed, both thinkers use the social body of the vulnerable as the point of departure for a critical remaking of humanity. In this final section, I argue for the need to replace Butler's conception of the locus of

²⁵ See, for example, FW, 28–29.

critique as an anonymized vulnerable body at the limits of recognizable humanity with Wynter's vision of a mutational rupture in the sociogenically defined codes of life/death issuing from specific and racialized peoples and hereditary spaces.²⁶

Criticality, for Butler, exists at the margins of normative humanization. These liminal spaces house spectral, unbounded, derealized beings somewhere between a norm and its failures.²⁷ Hence, she remarks, "one cannot get there through a thought experiment, an *epoché*, an act of will. One gets there, as it were, through suffering the dehiscence, the breakup, of the ground itself."²⁸ This is often the level at which Butler suggests critique should operate; she attributes possibilities for resignification of regulatory norms to a Derridean structure of both iterability and its inevitable failure—a failure which is inevitable because a critical outside is always already haunting the norm, disrupting its circulation, and threatening to contaminate the inside. Beginning from the social body of the vulnerable, then, criticality means dwelling in the undoing of one's own subjectivity—which, as Butler describes in *NT*, can even take the form of a bodily enactment of shared vulnerability as a form of resistance. She uses the example of a prisoner on a hunger strike. In denying food, the prisoner wrests his body, even minimally, away from the regulatory mechanisms the prison environment forces upon him (*NT*, 136–38). The hunger strike exposes the ways in which the reproduction of the prisoner *qua* prisoner already forecloses subjectivity and livability. The end goals of the hunger strike and the prison are the same: to render life unlivable. By starving he is calling attention to his spectral existence as the constitutive outside of normal and free humanity. Moreover, he highlights the generalizability of his vulnerable embodiment, and thereby that we are all co-implicated with other bodies, lives, machines, organic and inorganic processes, and all manner of infrastructure upon which life is supported.

For Butler, the critical benefit of recognizing shared ontological vulnerability derives from its basis in Lévinasian substitution. Substitution provides an alternative to arguments for ethical responsibility that are based in the postulation of a self-grounding, individualized agent. This alternative instead posits a pre-personal, ahistori-

²⁶ For more on Wynter, Blackness, and resistant geographies, see Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

²⁷ See, for example, *FW*, 12, and *PL*, 33–34.

²⁸ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 107–108.

cal "susceptibility"²⁹ to alterity as the "anarchic"³⁰ foundation for all critical resistance to differential precarity. Butler's social ontology of the vulnerable body argues that I am ethically responsible for the Other because "the pre-emergent 'I' that I am is nothing more...than a radical susceptibility subject to impingement by the Other."³¹ The radically vulnerable pre-emergent "I" is "not only persecuted but besieged" by the Other, such that the Other substitutes for the "I" before it can even emerge.³² This unwilling address and occupation by the Other "constitutes the prehistory of the subject," by which she means it constitutes what will become the ego prior to its self-possession in consciousness.³³ This address of the Other is a synchronic and non-narrativizable form of "prehistory";³⁴ a history before history with no ties to the heredity of Wynter's hybrid phylo-ontogenic and sociogenic humanity. As Butler states, "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" (FW, 14). She wants to reimagine the locus of critique as emerging from a reconsidered ontological story, where the (non)ground of criticality is an anonymous, pre-individual, ahistorical, vulnerable existence.

In her political work, Butler argues that generalizable experiences of precarity produce critical coalitions unified by the generalizable ontological (non)ground described above. She believes that "precarity...might operate, or is operating, as a site of alliance among groups of people who do not otherwise find much in common" (NT, 27). Alliances form in the breakdown of autonomous subjectivity and the recognition that "other lives, understood as part of life that exceeds me, are a condition of who I am, [so] my life can make no exclusive claim on life" (*ibid.*, 43). She allows that a critical and coalitional movement allied around precarity and underlying vulnerability would be "sheltering certain kinds of ongoing antagonisms among its participants," but is confident this evinces "the sign and substance of a radical democratic politics" (FW, 32). I would argue that there is a risk, both in the underlying structure of radical and anonymizing substitutability and in the use of precarity as a generalizable rallying

²⁹ Emmanuel Lévinas, "Substitution," in *Emmanuel Lévinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, (ed.) A. Peperzak, S. Critchley, and R. Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 93.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 89; see also 93–94f.

³¹ Butler, "Giving an Account," 89.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

point capable of democratically sheltering antagonisms, of occluding and leveling particular histories and lives under oppression. When Butler proposes, “[P]erhaps there is some other way to live such that one becomes neither affectively dead nor mimetically violent” (PL, 42), she is broaching the very dilemma Wynter, and many others, have revealed at the heart of decolonial struggles for reimagining human life. This concern defines the decolonial subject. There are texts and histories and lives to explore here in more direct ways than in an imagined, radically democratic coalitional space. Butler’s account of criticality only goes part of the way there; Wynter reaches further.

Wynter’s strategy for critical resistance is to look to where symbolic death paradoxically *lives*. As McKittrick notes, the limits of the hegemonic genre of being are “palpitating with life,”³⁵ and are, according to Édouard Glissant, “the ‘real but long unnoticed’ places of interhuman exchanges: cultural sharings, new poetics, new ways of being, ‘a new world view,’ human struggle.”³⁶ These spaces of mutational life on the colonial margins are what Wynter names “demonic grounds.”³⁷ She borrows the term from physicists’ demonic models, which are fabricated observers of mundane processes from a perspective outside of space/time as we understand it. A demonic perspective on the reproduction of *homo oeconomicus* can only be achieved from the manufactured *terra nullius* of the colonial Other or sub-Being—that is, from places of symbolic death or “from the hitherto ‘silenced’ vantage point of the obliterated ‘experiences of most of the world’s peoples.’”³⁸ This space, from the perspective of the hegemon, is empty, expropriable, or dead. From Butler’s critical perspective, it is spectral and liminal. For Wynter, however, it is “palpitating with life” and history, and thus narrating different genres of being human within demonic grounds helps to delink and disrupt—and to de-code—the well-functioning systems of life/death that secure the well-being of colonial humanity. Hence, Wynter wants to reveal and inhabit the places that have already birthed and sustained different genres of being human in order to wrest life and the figuration of the human from the grips of the coloniality of Being.

³⁵ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 133.

³⁶ Édouard Glissant, “Creolization and the Making of the Americas,” in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, (ed.) V. L. Hyatt and R. Nettleford (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 268.

³⁷ Wynter, “Afterword,” 364.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 359.

Wynter sees resistant potential in the forms of life persisting despite *homo oeconomicus's* hegemonic grip on being human. What offers resistance here is the specific demonic monstrosity of genres of being that are deadly to the hegemon; it is the many and varied forms of life that are inseparable from bodies, histories, and lives symbolically marked as dead. Wynter suggests a theory of resistance akin to what Katie Oliviero calls a “theor[y] in the flesh...[that] more strongly emphasizes the role of different, rather than similar or misrecognized, vulnerabilities as an ethical basis for intersocial responsibility.”³⁹ Resistant critique for Wynter begins with the ability to give content to new grammars of resistance specific to our hybrid existence from the perspective of demonic grounds. These grammars parse situated and subjective experiences of liminality as objective content for revealing and dismantling the operation of coloniality. As such, we do not need to posit a generalizable and equally shared form of life—like ontological vulnerability—in order to ground criticality. This pushes back against Butler in two ways. First, one does not have to become anonymous to call forth a future we-in-the-making; this demonic ground of criticality, resistance, and becoming-other is, and has been, part of the “we” of humanity. Black life, Alexander Weheliye tells us, is “the ether that holds together the world of Man while at the same time forming the condition of possibility for this world’s demise.”⁴⁰ The imperative point being that the production of deprived and depraved humanity—symbolic death—is essential to the fiction of *homo oeconomicus*. Second, the resistance offered from demonic grounds remains situated in lived experience at the same time as it opens possibilities for transcending current concepts of subjectivity and embodiment. The possibilities for resistance Wynter describes do not issue from a synchronic, ahistorical, non-narrativizable (non)ground of human life, but are historicized and hereditary.

While this is close to what a Butlerian ethics and politics of vulnerability advocates, there is an important difference from Wynter’s account. Wynter insists that the material and historical specificities of dehumanized life under the coloniality of Being provide the only possible sites from which to read grammars of resistance to colonial-

³⁹ Katie E. Oliviero, “Vulnerability’s Ambivalent Political Life: Trayvon Martin and the Racialized and Gendered Politics of Protection,” *Feminist Formations*, vol. 28, no. 1, (2016): 1–32, here 6.

⁴⁰ Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 40.

ity's hegemonic hold on human life. Critique, then, proceeds in auto-poetic narration of forms of life, as they have been lived and are lived, in order to rupture the imposition of symbolic death. Indeed, Wynter gives a name to the potential outcome of a new species mutation liberating us from *homo oeconomicus*—*homo narrans*—which marks the event of humanity becoming an autopoietic *praxis*.⁴¹ In other words, *homo narrans* names humanity as that being which is defined by its being hybrid phylo-ontogenic and sociogenic; and this liberatory point of existence can only be reached via the disobedient or heretical revelation of sociogenic codes of life/death in the specific and heterogeneous bodies, lives, and geographies of dehumanized peoples. This stands in contrast to the way Butler explains the potential for resistance written onto the vulnerable body of David Reimer in *Undoing Gender*. In a reading of his life and testimony,⁴² Butler comments,

[David] positions himself, knowingly, in relation to the norm, but he does not comply with its requirements. He risks a certain “de-subjugation” *This does not mean that David becomes unintelligible and, therefore, without value to politics*; rather, he emerges at the limits of intelligibility, offering a perspective on the variable ways in which norms circumscribe the human. It is precisely because we understand, without quite grasping, that he has another reason, that he *is*, as it were, another reason, that we see the limits to the discourse of intelligibility that would decide his fate. David does not precisely occupy a new world, since he is still, even within the syntax which brings about his “I,” still positioned somewhere between the norm and its failure. And he is, finally, neither one; *he is the human in its anonymity*, as that which we do not yet know how to name or that which sets a limits [sic] on all naming. And in that sense, *he is the anonymous—and critical—condition of the human as it speaks itself at the limits of what we think we know*.⁴³

Butler moves from David's specific body and testimony, to his political value for humanity—a value ultimately derived by looking un-

⁴¹ See Wynter, “The Ceremony Found,” 193–99, and US, 25–33.

⁴² David was subjected to horrific psychological and physiological manipulation by teams of doctors throughout his life. He endured involuntary sex selection surgery as a young child meant to render him female. He voluntarily transitioned to male in his adolescence. He also engaged in self-reporting and self-observation, submitted to interviews, and left a record of his experiences.

⁴³ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 74; my emphasis.

derneath his specificity and reading his body as an anonymous site of resistance for us all. David is the substitutable vulnerable body grounding the critical remaking of a collective and coalitional "we" to come. It is my contention that Wynter's demonic ground intercedes to stop Butler from moving from David to the anonymous spectral human-at-its-limits, to argue for other grammars of resistance. These grammars try to articulate resistance within the same topography of normative constitution Butler describes, and yet they insist on always maintaining the specificity of someone like David or of any lives and bodies that are sites of symbolic and embodied vulnerability and resistance to the order of colonial Being.

Both Butler and Wynter are concerned with how we can intervene in the social formation of the subject in order to critique the unthinking reproduction of oppressive norms that govern what we recognize as human and thus worthy of life. They both agree that these processes of socio-ontological formation are not present to us as fields of knowledge, and also that the subject cannot know itself outside of preexisting terms that define, always in advance, what one can be. Butler seeks out points of critical intervention in the socio-ontological production of the human through her articulation of a formal account of performative citationality, which she reads into political projects with intermittent success. Wynter offers a genealogical critique informed by decolonial theories of racialized minoritarian lives and discourses. I see in these thinkers mostly complementary approaches to "insurrection at the level of ontology" aimed at a liberatory future (PL, 33); however, as I have argued, Wynter offers Butler two critical augments to open a more radical direction for possible liberation. First, Butler's uncritical reliance on equality and egalitarianism requires a decolonial critique; and second, her figuring of the locus of critique as an anonymous and vulnerable spectre risks occluding particular histories of oppression and resistance within those limits. Wynter instead points to the specific, situated, historical bodies and lives living in the wake of 1492, and already materially inhabiting histories of coloniality, as the very spaces of possible decolonial resistance.

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