



DECENTERING HUMAN EXCEPTIONALISM: BUTLERIAN PERSPECTIVES ON PERFORMATIVITY, PRECARIITY, AND ECOLOGY

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This paper delves into the intricate relationship between Judith Butler's concept of performativity and ecological thinking, challenging prevalent criticisms of Butler's perceived anthropocentrism. Contrary to dismissive assessments, the paper asserts that Butler's extensive body of work holds untapped conceptual resources that not only align with but also have the potential to enrich contemporary ecological theorizing. The analysis centers on three pivotal concepts within Butler's oeuvre: precarity, performativity and coexistence. These concepts provide entry points to showcase the compatibility of Butler's ideas with ecological perspectives. The paper argues that engaging with Butler's work enables us to transcend the perceived divide between gender studies and ecology, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate relationships shaping our ecological landscape. In particular, the paper explores how Butler's insights contribute to a profound comprehension of ecosystems and the myriad non-human entities within our shared environment. Embracing Butler's conceptual framework allows us to view these entities as active participants and integral components in the dynamic interplay of forces that determine the possibilities and challenges of coexistence. The paper seeks to bridge the perceived gap between gender studies and ecology, advocating for a collaborative discourse that draws from both fields. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the paper aims to cultivate a more inclusive and holistic understanding to address pressing environmental concerns, emphasizing the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors in the complex web of ecological relationships.

The scope of ecology, according to Morton, extends beyond the conventional understanding of environmental interconnections. Ecology encompasses the multifaceted ways in which individuals envision and enact communal existence, underscoring the profound concept of coexistence as inherent to existence itself (Morton, 4). In this paradigm, existence is inherently entwined with coexistence, challenging the notion of isolated entities and emphasizing the intricate interplay of diverse elements. Interconnectedness and interdependence characterize not only human relationships but also extend to encompass a broader spectrum of relationships involving both human and non-human entities, encompassing objects, spaces, and more. This

perspective necessitates a nuanced understanding of the intricacies inherent in the relationships between and among these diverse actors. These relationships are not static or predetermined; rather, they are dynamic and subject to continuous negotiation and construction.

Butler's theoretical endeavors as a creative enterprise engrosses in the imaginative construction of novel modalities of coexistence that transcend the confines of anthropocentric delineations. Butler's concept of assemblies emerges as a focal point, intricately interwoven with the nexus between communication and coexistence. Assemblages, comprising both human and more-than-human entities, dynamically coalesce in contingently forged alliances, collectively endeavoring to sustain coexistence and fortify the imperative of ecological continuity. The emphasis on communication surfaces prominently, functioning as a pivotal and remarkably intricate facet. It assumes a role of critical significance, representing both a conduit and a complex arena through which novel modes of coexistence are imaginatively conceived and performatively instigated, with a particular emphasis on those modes that have yet to materialize. Human and more-than-human actors engage in synergistic efforts toward the shared goals of supporting coexistence and ensuring ecological perpetuity. The "conjoined" nature reflects the provisional nature of alliances, reflecting the fluidity and adaptability inherent in the collaborative endeavors of diverse entities. This contingent conjoining implies a reciprocity that extends beyond conventional anthropocentric boundaries, encapsulating a web of interdependencies that defines the very fabric of coexistence.

In *Precarious Life*, Butler writes: "Some lives are grievable and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of what is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?" (xiv-v) At another instance, she writes, "There is no life without the conditions of life that variably sustain life", counting "relations to the environment and to non-human forms of life, broadly considered" (Butler, *Frames of War* 19). These passages reflect that **material ecologies** manifest as a quasi-inescapable antecedent to the sustenance of human existence, an imperative stipulation deemed worthy of safeguarding and shielding precisely due to its indispensable role in bolstering human life and fostering the conditions requisite for an ethical framework underpinning human flourishing. The conceptualization of a 'livable life' for human beings is foregrounded as the primary locus of the arduous 'struggle,' with ecological endeavors positioned as a consequential, albeit supplementary, undertaking within the broader ambit of Butler's expansive ethical enterprise and its ultimate objectives. The "necessary precondition" implies an ontological interdependence, where the vitality of human existence is contingent upon the viability and sustainability of the material ecologies in which it is enmeshed. It prompts a critical inquiry into the relational dynamics between human life and the broader ecological milieu, necessitating an exploration of the ethical responsibilities that ensue from such interdependence. The idea of preserving and protecting material ecologies as a means to ensure a 'livable life' for human beings raises questions regarding the ethical imperatives governing such preservation efforts.

Butler's conception of human intricately intertwines with the agency of more-than-human entities and forces, thereby engendering a complex network that resists facile resolutions of the inherent paradox. Butler accommodates the coexistence of the not-human and not-not-human elements, allowing them to concurrently and disconcertingly shape the contours of what is signified when invoking 'the human.' This method of engagement serves as a form of theoretical contemplation that refrains from premature resolutions, inviting a sustained reflection on the intricate interplay between humanity and its more-than-human counterparts. She contends that the constitution of the human is intricately entwined with more-than-human creatures and forces, a proposition that underscores the inexorable interdependence between the human and the broader ecological fabric. The assertion that 'animality is a precondition of the human, and there is no human who is not a human animal' underscores the foundational significance of animality to the human condition. The logical sequencing accentuates that being human fundamentally involves being an animal, reinforcing a radical reconfiguration of the conventional anthropocentric hierarchy (Butler, *Frames of War* 19). Butler avoids a reciprocal logic, asserting that animals do not invariably share in the category of the human. This differential attribution positions animality as a primordial condition for humanity, with implications for the understanding of shared animality and its manifestation in embodied existence. The emphasis on embodiment as contingent upon dependence upon others introduces a relational dimension that is not exclusive to the human sphere but extends to encompass the broader more-than-human world. Drawing from Haraway's concept of multispecies becomings-with, Butler explains the profound interdependence inherent in the human condition. The acknowledgment that humans are not autonomously self-sufficient but intricately dependent on a myriad of more-than-human creatures for bodily form and sustenance disrupts traditional notions of autonomy and self-sufficiency (Haraway 20). The framing of this dependence challenges the conventional demarcation between 'social' and 'ecological,' recognizing the interconnectedness of these dimensions. The assertion that 'no absolute distinction between social and ecological exists' underscores the inseparability of human and more-than-human realms, thereby dismantling artificial boundaries that often underpin conventional disciplinary categorizations.

Butler's "theory of performativity" finds itself undergoing a transformative process engaging with notions of intra-activity or 'ecology'. It embraces and sustains not as an unassailable doctrine but rather as a dialogical interlocutor (Morton 4). This assimilation unfolds not as a wholesale adoption, but rather as an intentional positioning of performativity as a conversational companion or as a foundational springboard for the formulation of a more intricately nuanced theoretical framework. The choice to sustain performativity as a "conversation partner" (Barad 2007) with ecology highlights a nuanced approach to recognize both the merits and limitations of Butler's theory. By positioning performativity as a dialogue partner, its value can generate an ecological discourse, while simultaneously signaling a departure from any inclination towards dogmatism or uncritical acceptance of human interaction with ecology. This strategic positioning invites a critical engagement that incorporates diverse perspectives and insights, fostering a more robust and adaptive theoretical discourse. The idea of performativity serves as a "point of departure" for the construction of a "differently nuanced theory" underscores a dynamic intellectual process (Butler, 2016, 18). It

recognizes the need for theoretical evolution to address contemporary inquiries and challenges, particularly those arising within the ecological and intra-active domains. This process of capturing, sustaining, and departing from performativity signifies a collective effort to enrich and diversify the theoretical landscape, offering a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between human agency, language, and ecological phenomena.

“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” (Butler, *Frames of War* 14). The inherent quality of precariousness serves as a linchpin for unraveling Butler's interconnection with ecological thought. While she underscores the universal reality that every human being is thrust into conditions of exposure, encapsulating the inherent precarity of human existence, a critical examination beckons us to resist the facile oversight of the manifold ways in which ecological exposure intricately and inevitably shapes this proposition. Central to this understanding is the recognition that human reproduction, across its multifaceted dimensions, is fundamentally and intimately entwined with ecological processes. This insight extends beyond the mere acknowledgment that the capacity for reproduction is subject to ecological circumstances beyond individual control; it delves into the complex web of factors that influence the viability of life conditions both postnatally and during the crucial stages of in utero development. The assertion that human reproduction is "intimately ecological at all levels" prompts an incisive scrutiny of the intricate relationships between human biology and ecological dynamics. The emphasis on ecological circumstances regulating reproductive capacity necessitates a nuanced exploration of the multifaceted interplay between human agency and environmental conditions. This perspective challenges reductionist views of reproduction and underscores the profound implications of ecological contingencies on the very essence of human life. The acknowledgment that the chances of sustaining life, both postnatally and in utero, are subject to the influence of more-than-human forces. The explicit reference to the presence or absence of certain toxins exemplifies the intricate ways in which ecological factors, often beyond human governance, impinge upon the delicate balance of conditions necessary for life. By invoking concrete examples, such as toxins, the narrative extends beyond abstraction, grounding the discussion in tangible ecological realities and emphasizing the urgency of recognizing the ecological intricacies inherent in the precarious nature of human existence. Butler's invocation of a 'social network of hands' as vital for 'survival' carries profound ecological implications. The term 'social' must be construed expansively to transcend anthropocentrism and encompass the broader ecological context. The mention of 'hands' should not be narrowly construed as solely human appendages; rather, it symbolically encapsulates the intricate interdependence with an entire ecosystem. The deliberate use of the term 'teeming ecosystem' amplifies the ecological dimension, emphasizing that the reliance for survival extends beyond a simplistic anthropocentric perspective to encompass a complex and interconnected web of entities within an ecological framework.

Butler's conceptualization of exposure serves as a gateway to an ecological understanding of coexistence, wherein it is not construed as a harmonious relational equilibrium but, rather, as

an impure yet indispensable practice of cohabitation (Butler, *Frames of War* 3). This extends beyond human-centric considerations, encompassing both human and more-than-human entities navigating the complexities of shared existence within a given set of conditions. Nevertheless, the potency of Butler's concept of exposure is notably constrained by a persistent reversion to the human-centric perspective. The recurrent reaffirmation of a human-centered locus within Butler's discourse inadvertently obscures the broader reality that ecosystems, along with their intricate networks of non-human inhabitants, are also exposed. This oversight overlooks the reciprocal nature of exposure, implicating human beings not solely as passive victims but also as active perpetrators of ecological harms. The significance of Butler's conceptualization of exposure lies in its capacity to transcend simplistic notions of coexistence as harmonious unity. By characterizing coexistence as an "impure yet necessary practice," Butler captures the inherent messiness and complexity embedded in the interactions between human and more-than-human elements within specific environmental contexts. This nuanced understanding challenges idyllic visions of relational harmony, recognizing that coexistence involves negotiation, conflict, and adaptation among diverse entities sharing a common ecological space (Butler, *Frames of War* 20). However, a critical appraisal of Butler's concept of exposure reveals its limitations arising from a consistent reorientation toward the human as the central focal point. The recurring return to a human-centered perspective inadvertently undermines the potential for a fully ecological understanding. It perpetuates an anthropocentric bias that obscures the broader ecological context, downplaying the interconnectedness of ecosystems and the myriad non-human entities that inhabit them. This oversight is crucial, as it neglects the reciprocal exposure of ecosystems and their inhabitants, fostering a limited understanding that fails to capture the comprehensive dynamics of coexistence. The critique emphasizes the need to recognize human beings not only as recipients of ecological vulnerabilities but also as active contributors to environmental degradation. By constantly reaffirming the human center, Butler's conceptualization risks neglecting the agency of human actors in perpetrating harms within ecosystems. The failure to acknowledge humans as both victims and perpetrators in the context of exposure obscures the complex ethical dimensions inherent in ecological relationships. This critique calls for a more balanced and inclusive perspective that situates humans within the broader framework of reciprocal vulnerability and responsibility.

Assemblies function as agents of collective agency, giving rise to collective demands that emanate not from individual bodies but from vibrant alliances of bodies united within the public sphere. In this collective endeavor, calls for transformative change and the envisioning of alternative worlds are, according to Butler, often realized through performative acts. Building on her commitment to performative politics, Butler explicates how public assemblies transcend mere articulation of demands for policy alterations or infrastructural shifts; rather, they embody a performative dimension where the very world they aspire to establish is actively enacted (Butler, *Notes* 130). This emphasis on performative politics underscores Butler's contention that certain forms of assembly possess the capacity to transcend verbal expression and actively bring into existence the alternative realities they seek to manifest. The performative nature of these assemblies extends beyond rhetorical declarations and enters the realm of embodiment, where the choreography of bodies becomes a medium for the production

of transformed social landscapes. Butler argues that these assemblies not only articulate desires for change but also, through their orchestrated physicality, contribute to the construction of systems and structures that embody and project the envisioned world. However, amidst the acknowledgment of the transformative potential of assemblies, a critical lens must be applied to Butler's emphasis on the performative nature of these gatherings. The extent to which assemblies can genuinely effect change and construct alternative social realities warrants scrutiny, as the line between symbolic enactment and substantive transformation may be tenuous. Moreover, the efficacy of performative politics in instigating lasting structural changes raises questions about the enduring impact of these acts beyond the immediate temporality of the assembly (Haraway 3).

The notion that assemblies "exceed simple calls" implies a nuanced understanding of their agency. Butler contends that assemblies surpass mere appeals or requests directed at external entities by actively orchestrating bodies in ways that generate altered social realities. However, the potential limitations of this transformative agency need to be acknowledged, particularly in contexts where systemic power structures may resist or co-opt the performative aspects of assembly politics. Critical analysis should probe the extent to which these embodied enactments translate into tangible societal shifts, addressing the complexities of institutional resistance and the durability of social transformations. Butler's assertion posits a transformative potential in communication, contending that alternative worlds and modes of relationality become conceivable when communication transcends the confines of representational modes and engages in a performative register (Butler, *Frames* 7). The essence of earthly coexistence, as she proposes, elicits communication not merely in idealized forms of dialogue or deliberation but as a complex interplay of forces facilitating the capacity to influence and be influenced by others. In this paradigm, all conceivable modes of response emerge, shaping a dynamic communicative landscape. For those invested in ecological thinking, the imperative lies in conceptualizing, innovating, and enacting communicative practices that not only draw attention to the precariousness of human life but also extend this conceptual framework and its ethical implications to entities that may not articulate themselves in ways immediately discernible to human audiences.

Butler's stance on performativity and precarity unveils the challenge of navigating the intersection between human-centric modes of communication and the often non-discursive expressions of more-than-human cohabitants. The ethical task at hand involves cultivating an awareness of the more-than-human embedded within the human experience. However, Butler aptly underscores that this awareness does not invariably necessitate translating human-centric modes of care and intervention to the more-than-human realm. The imperative is to resist the temptation to universalize anthropocentric care, acknowledging that the right course of action may not always involve human intervention. This nuanced stance recognizes the agency of non-human entities and underscores the need for restraint in order to facilitate the flourishing of ecosystems, sometimes through non-interference rather than an automatic presumption of human benevolence. The shift from assemblies to assemblages, as articulated by Butler, becomes a crucial theoretical move in acknowledging the interplay between the human and the more-than-human. By decentering the human subject, this shift invites an exploration of the

intricate ways in which the more-than-human world influences and is influenced by contingent compositions. This is particularly significant as it challenges the prevailing anthropocentric worldview that positions humans as central managers of a world waiting to be controlled. The recognition of ecological forces should transcend anthropocentric paternalism, paving the way for a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationships that define the ecological realm. Butler's invocation of 'the conditions under which vulnerability and interdependency become livable' underscores a crucial ethical dimension. This entails a departure from conventional anthropocentric ethics and politics, urging the creation of conditions that foster the livability of vulnerability and interdependency within a broader ecological framework. This ethical vision refrains from reasserting human dominance and instead strives for a more equitable coexistence that embraces the intricate web of relations within the more-than-human world.

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