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**Inequality, normative violence and livable life  
Judith Butler and Peruvian Reality**

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## Inequality, normative violence and livable life

Judith Butler and Peruvian Reality

Judith Butler, Professor in the Departments of Rhetoric and Comparative Literature at Berkeley, is one of the most influential feminist theorists of contemporary times. Butler uses continental philosophers (especially Hegel, Freud, Levinas, Lacan, Habermas, and Foucault), feminists (de Beauvoir, Kristeva, Irigaray and Wittig), and postmodernists (Deleuze and Derrida) to think about gender, sex, and embodiment, language, vulnerability, and violence. Her work is controversial to some; she has been ridiculed and dismissed as 'the professor of parody' (Nussbaum 1999), and accused of obscure use of language (she won a 1998 first prize for 'bad writing'). She is also one of the most widely cited philosophers who has had a profound influence upon popular culture, queer theory, feminism, and political theory (Lloyd 2007).

There are several angles from which I could approach this article about the thought of Judith Butler and Peruvian reality. Known for her path-breaking work on gender, or rather, for 'troubling' our understanding of gender, I could discuss how gender performativity is relevant to Peru. The idea of gender performativity hinges on the notion that we enact our gender according to normative frameworks that are historically and culturally formed. In Butler's thought, thinking in terms of masculine and feminine genders reconfirms the binary order and thus heteronormative power and inequality. Her more recent work on 'livable life' extends the idea of the constraining power of normative frameworks in the context of gender, to grief and violence. In *Undoing Gender* (2004) livable life as a concept is embedded in the experience of gender and sexuality in a heteronormative society. In *Precarious Life*, published in the same year, Butler expands the question of livability to an analysis of post 9/11 warfare and grief. I will use and combine these main strands of Butler's thinking with regard to the livability of life in order to analyse normative violence in Peru. In doing so, I intend to expand Butler's understanding of grievability and livability by showing how norms that mark the embodiment of differentiated marginalities not only make physical violence possible, but are often perceived as normal. After summarizing Butler's main points in this respect, I will apply her theoretical contributions to the Peruvian context drawing on my own work on gender and violence (Boesten 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). In particular, looking at violence against women both in wartime and peacetime highlights how the concept normative violence can expand our understanding of the persistence of the intersecting inequalities that permeate Peruvian society, without discarding more conventional analyses that draw on structural violence as the root of inequality. In the conclusion I point at the undeniable political relevance of Butler's seemingly obscure theorizing and how we can use her contribution to theory to think about social transformation in Peru.

### Butler's thinking

'What, given the contemporary order of being, can I be?'  
*Undoing Gender*, p58

#### I. Gender norms and the boundaries of being

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), her most famous and groundbreaking book, Butler problematizes our understanding of gender as a result of natural sex differences. She turns the sequence around and proposes that perhaps sex difference is the result of constructed gender difference. In doing so, she does not deny physical difference, but she suggests that the interpretation of physical difference, and the social and political consequences of that interpretation, frame the lives that we can live. Thus, by holding on to sex as a male/female binary, a gender binary of masculinity and femininity is reproduced and vice versa, even if diversity in sexuality is recognised. Butler wants us to question that which we take for granted, what we think is 'truth'; namely, the existence of two different sexes that lead to gender identity, as the order of being.

The term 'gender' was popularized by early second wave feminists to distinguish between biological sex difference (male and female) and the socio-cultural meaning of gender (masculinity and femininity) (Oakley 1972). Gender helped denaturalize difference between men and women and was fundamental in unpacking social and political inequalities. While the distinction between sex and gender seems established now and it is how 'gender' is most likely to be explained to the novice, the idea that bodily differences, i.e. sex, is shaped by society and culture is not new. Ann Oakley, in her 1972 book *Sex, Gender and Society*, argued that sex is formed in interaction with society, as did Anne Fausto-Sterling in *Myths of Gender. Biological Theories about Women and Men* in 1985. Hence, Butler's 'troubling' of our understanding of sex and gender as social constructions was in itself not entirely new; however, her deconstructionist approach to the binary sex/gender helped show how we are constrained in and confined by the idea of male and female bodies. She argues that gender, sex and sexuality are performed repetitively and in doing so become naturalized. Looking at drag as an example of gender performativity (and parody), Butler argues that the binary of male/female and femininity/masculinity is thus reproduced in sexualities that do not conform to heteronormativity. Butler argues that the naturalization of sex feeds into the possibilities of gender and sexuality as proscribed by society, i.e., limiting 'what one can be' to a gender performance that society can understand. Drag, then, is not necessarily but only potentially subversive of heteronormativity (Butler 1993, chapter 8, Lloyd 2008, 68). Butler seems to suggest that the proliferation of genders helps to denaturalize heterosexuality, but 'this denaturalization is no guarantee that heteronormativity will be weakened thereby' (Lloyd 2008, p67).

While Butler's work is received jubilantly in certain sectors for her contribution to feminist and especially queer theory and is increasingly recognized for her contribution to political theory more generally (Lloyd 2008, Chambers and Carver 2008), she is also accused of too much abstraction, too little connection to the reality. This is the result of her use of complex language and her continuous reference to and grounding in a body of philosophy literature that is often difficult to keep up with. But, as Chambers and Carver (2008) note, besides Butler's Hegelian background, her work strongly builds on Foucault (see Drinot, this volume), which gives us a more tangible entry into Butler's analysis of power and the boundaries of being.

With Foucault, Butler argues that what is seen as general truth, as common knowledge, is instead naturalized through the workings of power. Whereas Foucault applied such thinking to notions of madness, crime, and sex, Butler takes it still a step further: she questions the fundamentals of social relations by questioning the naturalizing effect of the discourse and practice surrounding our bodies. She forces us to question the 'natural, the original and the inevitable' (Chambers and Carver 2008, p22). In effect Butler argues that the 'truth' about gender, and our sexed bodies, is a result of the workings of

power and the claim to knowledge. Historical and cultural processes expressed in institutions, discourse and practice have a naturalizing effect on our understanding of the order of things, including our understanding of male and female, and of heteronormativity. This means that, in Butler's view, heteronormativity, gender difference, and importantly, sex difference are not natural or authentic, but rather, are constructs that are produced and maintained through the workings of power in societies. Institutions, discourses and practices together form, reproduce and express the norms which guide our societies. In Foucaultian terms, power is not vested in a small group of leaders, but is a productive process in which we take part; hence, instead of gender being a given from nature as a result of sex difference, gender identities are acted out, or performed.

In *Undoing Gender* (2004a), Butler builds on her previous work to show how norms provide the framework that guide life. Butler takes a Foucaultian biopolitical view to argue that rules, regulations, and norms set out the possibilities of physical and social life. Norms are not necessarily enabling, they also restrict the possibilities of how life can be lived. She refers to the 'norms and conventions that permit people to breathe, to desire, to love and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself. Sometimes norms function both ways at once, and sometimes they function one way for a given group and another way for another group' (p8). The norm is the implicit standard of *normalization*, i.e., of the process whereby the norm 'is acted out in social practice and re-idealized and reinstated in and through the daily social rituals of bodily life' (p48). While norms may be set in law (inheritance law, marriage, paternity etc), or in formal but not legislated rules and regulations (statutes, customary law), they do not have to be. Norms are owned, reproduced, and maintained by society, not necessarily by the state or even a bureaucratic power. Following Foucault, Butler asserts that norms are reproduced by 'regulative discourses' (Foucault 1975), and the productive power of repetitive performance.

Thus, like Joan Scott (1986), Butler argues that gender is a historical category, a construct that is in constant flux (2004a p9-10). Gender is being made and remade. Cultural differences and historical changes in gender norms testify to such dynamics. Looking closely at the workings of gender in one society shows that gender norms differ according to cultural and ethnic groupings. This does not (only) mean that gender practices may be different among, for example, the Amazonian indigenous as compared to coastal mestizos, but that society ascribes naturalized interpretations of sexed bodies to gendered (and racialised) bodies. In other words, society may attribute differentiated sexual behaviours and possibilities to certain populations based on assumptions of gender and race. These interpretations are framed by norms and conventions that are commonly understood as truthful, and in certain instances, or at certain moments in time, set in law. In general, such differentiations serve to create and maintain hierarchies; they serve political purposes.

Such an argument undermines the idea of a feminism based on 'sisterhood', since differences among women, and among men, may be just as great as between men and women. By questioning the binary male/female as the basis of power struggle, Butler allows us to look at how other identity markers such as sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class, frame gender identity and the norms according to which groups of people are allowed to live. As Chambers and Carver point out, Butler shows how foundational categories are 'productions that create the effect of the natural, the original, the inevitable, precisely because these discourses constantly figure in important strategies that both produce and deploy political power' (p36). Although Butler does not really look at race and ethnicity but at sexuality and gender, her work on

norms, normative violence, and particularly, grievability, does allow for their inclusion in a broader theory of normativity and precarity. A further look at Butler's understanding of normative violence and the grievability of life, both in the context of gender and sexuality as discussed in *Undoing Gender*, as well as in the context of post 9/11 politics, as discussed in *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009), will help to establish the framework from which we can analyse inequality and violence in Peru.

## II. Normative violence and the 'grievability' of life

The concept 'normative violence' follows from Butler's analysis of the power of norms to enable and restrict life. If norms tell us what we can and cannot do at the most personal and intimate level of life – sexuality, love, desire, and, I would add, ambitions- they produce violence upon those bodies that break the norm. Normative violence imposes what one can be, excluding those who –or, more importantly, those behaviours that- do not conform. Those who do not conform become, in Butler's words, 'unintelligible', nonexistent, unless they adapt to the norm. Her most stark example of the unintelligibility of non-conformity is the intersexed body: the politics towards intersexuality has been to adapt the body surgically in order to make sure such bodies conform to a sex norm that is intelligible according to the current gender norms with often devastating results for the individuals involved (2004a pp59-65). Intersexuality, in Butler's view, is not a medical or physical problem, but a social problem that is violently policed.

Normative violence is the violence of the norm, i.e., it is not physical violence per se. The norm produces violence by not allowing people to be what they desire to be at the most fundamental aspects of life; hence, it is violence by restriction. However, resistance to normative violence may result in actual physical violence –gay bashing being an obvious example-, violence against women, and the reasons men often give for such violence, is another example. Butler thus argues that it is normative violence which makes physical violence possible, and simultaneously invisible. Invisible violence is violence that is socially not understood as violence because of its normalization; it is tolerated and normalized because it is perpetrated in response to social transgressions.

Intuition may take the reader –and has taken critics- to assume that Butler has done away with agency in a favour of determinism (Lloyd 2008, p64-65), depicting a static world in which norms are the outcome of cultural practice. However, the contrary is true. By suggesting that norms are reproduced through performative repetition, Butler also suggests that these norms can be resisted and subverted. In that sense, her understanding of normative violence differs from understandings of structural violence in the sense that it intends to highlight the power of *processes* of normalization. Thus, structures of inequality are sustained through the active normalization of the parameters of inequality. In a somewhat roundabout way, Butler's discussion of normative violence puts the action back in to the notion of structural violence as the main cause of inequality.

The boundaries of being and the way they are imposed through social practice produce the 'parameters of personhood', they 'make persons according to abstract norms that at once condition and exceed the lives they make and break' (2004a p56). Butler judges that these boundaries of being make certain lives 'unlivable', e.g., gay lives, or divorced lives, or intersexed lives -depending on where one is and in which normative era-, because they are not recognized by society. Hence, a gay person who is not allowed to

live as gay is denied being. If one breaks out of the normative framework that imposes the boundaries of being, physical violence may be the result. Alternatively, breaking the norms may work subversive, potentially transforming notions of the naturalness of imposed boundaries of being.<sup>1</sup>

The limitation of what one can be, in Butlerian philosophical terms, creates unintelligible life, and there by, undone lives. In reality, it creates much suffering for those who cannot conform to the norms, who are excluded by recognized society, or whose bodies are violated on a daily basis. This is what Butler questions as the 'livability of life': a valid question, and, despite Butler's sometimes obscure language and her emphasis on theory, one with very practical and political applications. In her work on the post 9/11 world, Butler clearly outlines the political dimension of her work. She uses the same concepts – normative violence, subversion, livable life- to analyze public grief, a line of thought she started in *Undoing Gender*. Her point about the grievability of life is that by examining our ceremonies of public grief, and who is grieved and who is not, we can identify who is seen as included and who is not, who is deserving of a 'lived' life, implying that those who are not grieved have not lived a life that fits the normative framework. Taking this a step further, Butler asserts that those who are not grieved are subject to the cultural viable notions of the human (2004a p24): they do not deserve to be grieved, or there is no grief possible because they are inexistent as full human beings in a particular cultural context. Only full human beings can be grieved. As Moya Lloyd emphasizes, this is an active process of dehumanization, which serves political purposes (2008, p95). In *Undoing Gender*, Butler uses the lives of the thousands of killed Iraqis as an example versus the high visibility of public grief over American lives. The second example she uses are AIDS victims in Africa; they are not grieved as full, individual human beings. If anything, they are recognised as a mass of unaccounted-for poor and worthless beings summarized in statistics. Many other examples exist of course: women and children trafficked and killed in the sex industry, immigrants dying in containers, organ 'donors' in remote and poor areas of the world and so on.

The questions Butler poses in *Precarious Life* are 'Whose lives count as lives? Who counts as human? What makes for a grievable life?' (emphasis in original, p20). Her starting point is the personal experience of mourning, the realization of our own embodiment through the attachment to others –and the possibility of loss. Our physical vulnerability is constituted in 'our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure' (PL p20). Butler argues that personal loss may feel privatizing, 'that it returns us to a solitary situation' and is often seen as depoliticizing, but actually shows us the complex constitution of political community, of the 'we' in which we live our lives. Seen in such a way, grief –that is, public grief- is a political act and actively shows patterns of inclusion and exclusion, hence the question What makes life grievable? Public grief, and the denial of grief, is then a political act which purposefully produces and reproduces an 'us' and 'them'. Butler fails to mention, possibly because it is irrelevant to her argument, that private grief, either at individual, family, or community level, is still grief and being grieved, and that such 'private' forms of grief have their own political meaning in any particular setting. However, for the sake of the argument that grief serves to recognize lived lives in a post 9/11 world, grief is analysed from the point of view of the powerful: the powerful determine who to grieve and who to deny grief, thereby showing the world who they perceive as important, i.e., US soldiers yes, Iraqi civilians no.

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<sup>1</sup> Butler's use of the term subversion is ubiquitous, but little explained. A good discussion of Butler and subversion can be found in Chambers and Carver (2008) pp137-157, and Lloyd (2008), pp 49-77.

By asking which lives are publicly grieved, Butler asks us to look at which lives are not grieved. She asks us to make visible the dehumanizing effect of othering which makes violence possible, and life ungrievable. Butler seeks to highlight the gross injustice of the violence perpetrated in the name of conceptions of humanity that are not only exclusive, but that seem to legitimize a continuous violence upon certain groups of people. This continuity of violence, Butler suggests, is the result of a perception of bodies that will not die –an endless battle against a perceived other. The ungrievable life is not necessarily dead, but is undone, is made ‘unreal’ (2004b, p33). This means that violence ‘fails to injure’, and such lives must be negated again and again. The rhetoric that portrays the war on terror as an unending war does just that: it pronounces the ‘infinity of its enemy’ (p34). In this context, the result is a generalized racism that is rationalized through a discourse of threat and self-defense: the dehumanization of all lives that vaguely look Arab and Muslim.

### III. State of emergency, state of exception

In discussing the so-called War on Terror, Butler asks how power is used to make possible excesses such as those perpetrated in Guantanamo Bay.<sup>2</sup> She uses Foucault and Agamben to discuss the suspension of law and the use and abuse of sovereignty in the creation of an infinite enemy (2004c). This is relevant for the following discussion of Peruvian reality, where in the 1980s and 1990s, sovereign power and the state of emergency were used to perpetrate violence upon bodies that were actively dehumanized, denied, or, in Butler’s words, ‘undone’. The Peruvian infinite enemy was, and arguably still is, the Indian. But to make that point we first need to have a clear view of how Butler links the infinite enemy to the exercise of state power, which she does in her essay ‘Indefinite Detention’ (2004c).

Butler starts her discussion with Foucault’s understanding of governmentality in which political power manages and regulates populations (for further elaboration see Drinot, this volume). Foucault saw governmentality as characteristically late modern, in that it was clearly distinct from earlier understandings of state power, i.e., sovereignty. Butler points out that sovereignty has come back, emphasizing that it has not replaced governmentality, but that ‘sovereignty, under emergency conditions in which the rule of law is suspended, [reemerged] in the context of governmentality with the vengeance of an anachronism that refuses to die.’ Writing in the context of the discussion about Guantanamo Bay, the concentration of power in the executive branch of US government suspended the separation of powers and vested judiciary power in the President –suggesting a ‘return’ to the times when a monarch had sovereign power over its subjects. Yet, Butler asserts, decision-making about who gets a trial and who will be detained indefinitely lies with ‘managerial officials’, suggesting that they do so within a field of governmentality. Modern governmentality is bound up with contemporary sovereignty in the officials who rule via delegated power, deciding over life and death in a paralegal setting. Agamben notes that sovereignty, understood as an extra-legal authority, establishes the conditions for the exceptional suspension of law, i.e. the sovereign has the power to grant exceptional status. In doing so, the state creates a ‘para legal universe that goes by the name of law’. This does not mean that the bureaucrats who exercise power over life and death do so in a context of lawlessness, but they operate on the basis of the *exception to the law*. Such a construction of a state of emergency, suggests Butler, makes all life

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<sup>2</sup> This is based on her essay in *Precarious Life*, published in 2004. In *Frames of War* (2009) the meaning of the abuses at Abu Ghraib and the visuality of these are discussed.

vulnerable to be assigned exceptional status, i.e. to be stripped of rights in an indefinite state of emergency (Butler 2004c). This vulnerability is what Butler calls the 'precarity' of life.

It is sovereignty that makes the state of emergency, and the suspension of law, possible. As Butler asserts, 'the law is suspended in the name of the 'sovereignty' of the nation where 'sovereignty' denotes the task of any state to preserve and protect its own territoriality' (p55). Of course, the notion of nation and territory helps to set the parameters for exclusion, for defining the other. The process of imagining nation shows that the other can be internal and that a nation does not necessarily include all who live in its territory. Nevertheless, sovereign power does cover territory, and the suspension of law within its territory means that those who are not perceived as forming part of the nation enter a freefall, are suspended themselves, become vulnerable to the visions of the infinite enemy, in other words, they become a state of exception.

Butler calls upon Agamben to reflect on the meaning of the infinite enemy. According to Agamben, the state that invokes its sovereign power to declare the exception to the law, or the emergency, strips certain life from its 'ontological status as subjects' (Butler 2004c p67). Agamben distinguishes between the political being and bare life. The political being, or *bios*, is a life valued with rights, a citizen. Bare life, or *zoë*, consists of life, but not rights. It is life devoid of value, life that does not deserve to live. It is life as biological minimum (Agamben 1998). Bare life is the exception where law does not rule nor protect. Butler is interested in bare life in the context of the suspension of law in cases that fit the vision of the infinite enemy according to a sovereign state, 'animated by an aggressive nostalgia that seeks to do away with the separation of powers' (2004c p61). Bare life refers to those kept in indefinite detention: it is life, but ungrivable, unreal, irrelevant in the political context as perceived by the sovereign powers in a state of emergency.

The notion of bare life is powerful as it invokes processes of dehumanization and the possibility of horrendous violence perpetrated upon bodies. However, bare life is a philosophical notion that describes a state of ontological suspension; it does not allow for subtleties that may keep people at the margins of the polis, in the permanent uncertainty of becoming subject to such extreme exception. Agamben himself, in his discussion of crimes against humanity in general, and the holocaust in particular, urges that 'instead of asking the hypocritical question of how crimes of such atrocity could be committed against humans we must investigate carefully the juridical procedures and deployments of power by which human beings could be so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any longer as a crime' (1998 p 171). A careful questioning of the normative truths that guide and restrict life help visibilise violence otherwise tolerated, normalized, and in some cases, legitimized. This, in turn, is the starting point to investigate the deployments of power which make abuse possible, for example in Peru.

## **Butler in Peru**

### IV. Intersecting inequalities and violence against women

In order to arrive at an analysis of the extremes of marginalization and the political conclusions Butler would possibly draw from such an analysis, I take a step back to look at the relevance of thinking in

terms of normative violence in the case of Peru. Peru's economic, social and political inequality is structured along intersecting lines of race, gender, and class (Boesten 2010c). This inequality is often analysed in terms of structural violence, referring to the institutionalization of inequalities that excludes people from meeting basic needs, and the violence that emerges from that inequality (Galtung 1969, TRC 2003). As far as I know, Butler has never addressed the concept of structural violence and how her understanding of normative violence compares. One way in which to approach these terms is by suggesting that structural violence refers to institutionalised inequality, while normative violence refers to the process of naturalizing this same inequality. Hence, the notion of normative violence adds a subtle, but no less effective, layer to the analysis of intersecting inequalities and violence in Peru. Analysing the violence of norms in the Peruvian context shows how moral codes perceived as true, natural and obvious, put people into boxes that are not only about controlling social behaviour, but about constraints put on the body in terms of race, class and gender.

The norms that guide understandings of sex, and performance of gender, and which outline the contours of what one can be –and thus also what one cannot be– are profoundly differential in Peru. The Peruvian case shows that sex and gender are not singularly about sex or gender, but also about race and class. The question of gender, given the contemporary 'order of being', is not necessarily a question of masculinity or femininity, as perceptions of gender differ according to the group in which one is born and raised. As Butler argues, one lives when intelligible by others, when recognized by wider society; we exist in a relational capacity. The relationality of life is the basis of any normative framework through which the parameters within which our life becomes intelligible are defined.

But there is not one normative framework that frames all: rather, there are different norms for different people according to the nature of the relationship of interdependence. Hence, the norms that guide gender identity within indigenous rural communities, or within the educated criollo middle classes can differ substantially. For example, anthropologists have long studied the idea of complementary gender relations in Andean society, in which roles are different but equal, i.e., not based on a differentiation in power or value (e.g. Harris 1978). Although the suggestion of equality within gender complementarity has been widely criticized (e.g. De la Cadena 1991, Barrig 2001), the discussion itself indicates that gender roles are differentiated by different cultural settings. Hence, the gendered normative framework for women and men in the Andean highlands differ from those in middle class Lima, poor urban settings, or the Amazon. Minor or major differences may occur between communities, ethnic groups, geographical areas, religious groups and or moments in time.

But norms that guide gender roles are not only differentiated by, or evolve within groups. They are differentiated within and evolve between groups according to other hierarchies based on race, ethnicity and class. As Marisol de la Cadena shows (1991, 2000), meanings of gender and ethnicity are differentiated by the relational and situational interplay between them. This means that one's status and role depends on context: an indigenous man may be of high status in his own community, but of low status in an urban mestizo setting and so on. While these contextual understandings of hierarchical relations based on class are relatively easy to identify, the finer nuances of gender, and how they intersect with race and class, are less obvious. These finer differences make it difficult, if not impossible, to speak of a gender binary guided by one –or even various– set(s) of norms.

Butler's question, 'What, given the contemporary order of being, can I be?' is therefore useful. We can use this question as a way to help us unpack the contemporary and situated normative frameworks that set the boundaries of being. As I suggested above, this is not only a normative framework situated in place and time, but it is *relational*. Hence, 'what one can be' depends on the relational context. The normative framework for such an understanding of gender is a racialised sexuality. As I argued elsewhere (Boesten 2008, 2009), the sexualisation of race and the racialisation of sex can be exemplified by the meaning and use of the label 'chola'.

According to Marisol De la Cadena, who examined Peruvian discourses with regard to the *chola*, early twentieth century Cusqueño intellectuals placed the *chola* in between the ideal types of the 'shy and virgin' Indian woman and the 'decent and enclosed' *criolla* (white, of European descent) woman (De la Cadena 2000). The *chola* represented the sexualized image of trespassing ethnic groups. She was depicted as promiscuous, lazy, and dirty. By stepping out of the relatively enclosed domain of the indigenous community and transgressing into the commercialised public space of the city, she became an 'available' woman. De la Cadena, like anthropologists working on Bolivia (Stephenson 1999) and Ecuador (Weismantel 2001), analyses the meaning of the concept *chola* as the symbol of an in-between; not culturally or ethnically 'pure', a trespasser and a traitor to her 'own' people as well as to whiter-skinned elites. The *chola* is the woman who defies the female task of bearing and reproducing tradition and ethnicity in favour of more personal autonomy, economic progress and modernity, therefore she is not accepted into a *criollo/mestizo* category of identification: she has trespassed both indigenous as well as *criollo/mestizo* cultural (and ethnic) borders. In this respect, then, the term *chola* serves to evoke female activities that transgress known codes of race and gender but with a vocabulary filled with racialized and sexualized perceptions.

Returning to Butler's question, a Peruvian woman can only be that what is acceptable within the relational framework of race and class –what her personal background is and the background of her interpreters at any particular moment. I will return to this in the context of the state of emergency.

Racialised sexuality has been reproduced on a daily basis via Peru's formal institutions, including legislation. Colonial regulations about marriage and kinship helped delineate the boundaries of being in gendered, sexual, and racial terms (Socolow 2000). During the republican era, especially during the last quarter of the twentieth century, legislation that discriminated on the basis of race and gender was gradually abolished. However, as Butler clearly indicates, while rules and regulations about the boundaries of being may be set in law, they do not have to be. She emphasizes norms as the main framework for delineating life, as norms are owned, reproduced and maintained by society on a daily basis. The norm is the standard of normalization, the norm makes us believe in a natural order between human beings, and hence, natural boundaries of sex, gender, race and even class and ethnicity. While laws can be changed –under the influence of activism and changing political paradigms- changing the norms that guide daily life proves harder. Thus, while it is a now legally a crime to beat or rape a wife, in practice, such activities are still largely accepted as the norm. The treatment of domestic workers is another example: the restrictions that were recently placed on the movement of female domestic personnel in the beach resort Asia is a good example.<sup>3</sup> The case shows how social norms provide a 'truth'

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<sup>3</sup> In 2006 it became clear that holidaying upper middle classes in a luxurious beach resort south of Lima called Asia had introduced by-laws which established that servants had to dress in uniforms and that they could not swim or otherwise use the beach leisurely during the hours that their employers were using it (Victor Vich 2006). Such rules are especially directed

about people's behaviour that is largely based on assumptions about race and sexuality ending in the physical restriction of one particular social group.

In light of the prevalence of postcolonial patriarchal gender relations grounded in a closely policed form of racialised heteronormativity, subverting the gender norms in Peru is not easy, if not impossible. People who live their gender and or sexuality outside of the binary of male/female encounter multiple problems that often result in violence. A study by Campuzano shows that while homosexuality, crossdressing and sex work are not illegal in Peru, travesty sex workers are regularly harassed by police. Campuzano (2008a: 101) claims that 'on the basis of an article that proscribes 10-30 days of community service for those who 'make immoral or indecent proposals to a third party in public spaces', travesty sex workers are often illegally harassed and injured'. Campuzano's research shows that living outside the boundaries of existing gender norms is almost impossible for Peruvians, and those who do enact their gender and sexuality according to their own preferences are closely policed and often harassed. A small group of exceptions to the norm perform a highly visible homosexuality that arguably reproduces the idea of heteronormativity in the public eye –or they may contribute to the denaturalization of heteronormativity. Whichever it is, the fact that these highly visible performances of subversion are part of a small and privileged group of public actors does not necessarily weaken heteronormativity for the majority of non-privileged Peruvians. A majority of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, travesty, and intersex are invisible, because their existence is made impossible by the social boundaries imposed upon gender and sexuality.

This restriction to what one can be and desire to be, and how and whom one can love, is what Butler calls normative violence, or the violence of the norm. Butler clearly views the restriction itself as violent, i.e., it is violent to force people into a restricted body that obeys a normative framework 'shaped by political forces with strategic interests in keeping that body bounded and constituted by the markers of sex' (1999 [1990] p164). But Butler also argues that normative violence sets the conditions for actual violence, for 'ordinary' violence, invisible, everyday violence perpetrated upon those bodies that are perceived as breaking the norms. In Butler's argument, violence against women is a result of normative violence embedded in the imposition of gender and is thus more than a product of men's subordination of women. With Katherine Franke, Butler (2004a 54-55) argues that basing sexual harassment codes on a view in which violence against women is solely a product of male sexual domination over women reproduces the gender binary which the violence supposedly tries to impose. In such a view, 'the sexual harassment codes become themselves the instrument by which gender is thus reproduced' (p54). Butler does not suggest, of course, that we should not combat male violence against women, but that we should combat violence, normative and physical, against all those that are perceived as not conforming to the norm. As Franke suggests, the 'men dominate women' paradigm, as advocated by Catherine MacKinnon and many others, is a simplification of an ideology 'that creates gendered bodies –feminine women and masculine men' (cited in Butler 2004a p55). Physical and sexual harassment of people who do not fit the gender binary is not considered in conventional sexual harassment codes, and is certainly not recognized in Peruvian legislation and policy against intimate violence. The racial dimension embedded in gender norms in Peru, and the resulting differentiated marginalization of women, cannot be combated by sticking to a 'men dominate women' logic either. While a reconceptualization of sexual harassment codes

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at women working in these households, often referred to as *cholas*, as they are the ones most likely to be on the beaches tending children of their patrons. These extraordinary rules have, of course, strong sexual and racial connotations as they emphasise the potential contaminating nature of female servants' bodies.

that reach beyond the logic of male dominance will perhaps not generate much enthusiasm from practitioners who deal with cases of violence against women on a day-to-day basis, the inclusion of a more complex understanding of intimate violence –by including issues of race, class, and sexuality, and arguably age- would be an important start.

In a study I carried out of domestic violence in Lima and Ayacucho, most women explained the conflicts in their homes as revolving around their freedom of movement and decision-making. Transgression from norms that implied women's subordinate position in all things big and small (e.g., from freedom of movement to having a particular meal ready at a particular time) could provoke a violent response from male partners. Women who did not conform to the explicit or implicit rules of engagement –the norms that set both male and female roles at household level- were punished for their transgression. In Butler's terms, the violence of the norm –the restrictions put on women's emotional, sexual and physical freedom- turned into physical violence as soon as women broke the norm. Of course, domestic violence does not only occur as a result of women's transgressions. For example, interviewed women said some husbands beat when the men were having affairs, or after excessive use of alcohol. The ubiquity of violence against women, the lack of public outcry and corresponding interventions, suggest that physical violence against women in intimate relations is itself normalized. Perhaps not the violence of the norm but the normalization of violence is the real problem. Most women also found it hard to break out of such relationships as they were part of the same normative framework in which violence is seen as normal. Recognising that such norms are not set by a conspiratory meeting of men –as MacKinnon would like us to believe- but by the workings of power and knowledge that reinforce a division of gender, may help explain why it is so difficult to instigate change. Butler is not suggesting that women are either complicit to violence perpetrated upon them, or that they have no agency at all. As Butler explains in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), subjection works through the internalization of norms, i.e., repetition. This means that resistance is possible, albeit from within the constraining normative framework.

At the same time, rejecting an analysis that solely recognizes male power over women in the analysis of violence allows us to examine the differing and relational meaning of gender in light of race and class.

In a study of battered migrant women in Lima, Cristina Alcalde (forthcoming) shows that inequalities based on race and class are often reproduced within intimate relations, and through the use of violence. This means that even in the physical violence between spouses, perceptions of gender are embedded in understandings of race and class, undermining the idea that violence against women is 'solely' based on the oppression of women.

The process of breaking out of violent cycles of subordination is perhaps even more confirmative of how normalized boundaries of being are grounded in gender, race and class. Those women who, for various reasons which I discuss elsewhere (Boesten 2006), found the courage to take action against the invisibility of the violence perpetrated upon them, encountered multiple obstacles along the way. While there is a law against domestic violence since 1993, and special police stations for battered women exist since the late 1980s, the conviction rate of perpetrators is low to zero. A lack of shelters for women, and no other means to find protection against violent men, means that there are very few alternatives for battered women other than to endure. The reason why conviction rates are low to nil and protection is unavailable is because norms and institutional structures are more difficult to change than legislation. Many of the representatives of the state, the police officers, doctors, and judges who decide over a woman's denunciation of domestic violence, believe that women are culpable of their misery, and should

be expected to endure a certain amount of violence from men (Boesten 2006). Just as Alcalde's research shows how intersecting inequalities are reproduced in intimate relationships, so they are reproduced in the institutions designed and set up to combat violence against women. Women of indigenous decent have a harder time seeking justice in Peru's institutions than criollo women, and their abuse often continues in the state facilities in which they seek refuge (Boesten 2006, 2010).

Hence, violence is not only normal but also expected and this expectation is, once again, equally grounded in race and class as in gender. The perception that racial and class hierarchies are natural and therefore just, plus the forceful policing of a heteronormative gender binary, makes the boundaries of being relatively clearcut, despite the apparent fuzziness of intersecting and relational inequalities. Peruvians know what they can be and do in a given context. They also know, and to a certain extent, expect, normative and physical violence when boundaries are crossed. This perception and general knowledge of gender, race and class normalizes violence in many instances and curtails resistance (but does not erase it or make resistance impossible). Of course, normalized violence (e.g. 'light' battering, gay bashing, sexual abuse of sex workers or spouses and of those perceived as provoking it) is in general not perceived as violence; it is inexistent, invisible. While the formal criminalization of such violence is a positive step forward in bringing it to light, the majority of cases remain invisible. Research shows that those most likely to be punished for the transgression of gender boundaries, i.e., young people, women, lesbians, gay men, bisexual, transgender, travesty, and intersex, are less likely to be heard in Peru's institutions, and are also less likely to be 'seen' in Butlerian terms.<sup>4</sup>

## V. Eternal exception and the absence of grief

While successive Peruvian governments have come to the conclusion that violence against women is an issue that needs addressing, and has acted accordingly in law and policy, in practice there is an informal system of exception in place. Considering the low conviction rate and the high rate of deaths among battered women, the exception to the rule of law in cases of violence is virtually everyone involved in cases of intimate violence. Whereas intimate violence is an issue that supersedes class and race, and should equally be highlighted in other countries than Peru (see the high levels of domestic violence and low conviction rates for rape in the UK), the contemporary history of political violence provides the Peruvian case an extra layer of interpretation that cannot be ignored. The discussion of political violence and ungrievability in Peru below shows that, while the war presented the country with exceptional circumstances and violence, the characterization of victimization resonates in peacetime, suggesting the existence of more than a temporary 'state of emergency', but rather, an eternal exception.

In *Precarious Life* Butler describes the war against terror as an unending war with an infinite enemy; the infinite enemy in this war is the Muslim who exists either within or outside of sovereign borders. In Peru, the political violence that started in 1980, and ended in the mid-1990s, played out along lines of existing inequalities of race, class and gender. The Peruvian state did not need to invent an enemy as he was easily identified as 'the Indian'; an amorphous notion of indigenous rural and peri-urban people since long the enemy of a 'civilized' and prosperous Peru. Despite the fact that the actual enemy, Shining Path, was led by educated mestizos, the war was largely fought through the bodies of indigenous, Quechua-

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<sup>4</sup> On young people, gender and violence, see the extensive work of Carlos Caceres and his research team, eg., Caceres 2005, on LGTBI, see Bracamonte ed. 2001, on travesti see Campuzano 2009, on women, see Boesten 2006, 2009.

speaking men and women.<sup>5</sup> As Jean Franco (2007) and others (eg Theidon 2000) have pointed out, deeply ingrained racism naturalized the Indian as enemy. The Indian was portrayed as *naturally* violent (and unredeemable), hence, he came to represent an enemy with infinite end.

Despite multiple attempts to further inclusion of the Indian population in the Peruvian polity since the late nineteenth century, institutionalised racism, a history of marginalisation, and lack of integration facilitated and fed into the destructive Shining Path insurgency, and the response to it. Initially reluctant to take the assault of Shining Path seriously, the state declared a state of emergency in 1982. As the 'natural' threat coming from the Indian population had never really subsided despite inclusionary state projects during the 1970s, it was relatively easy to place Andean territory under emergency rule without protest from the powerful classes in Lima. In practice, this meant that large areas were placed under military rule without a political-military strategy being implemented, as Carlos Ivan Degregori points out (1999). This lack of strategy placed the population in the areas of emergency under general suspicion. In Butler's terminology, we might say that the Andean population of Ayacucho, Huancavelica, and Apurimac entered a zone of suspension, of exception to a state of law.

In 1980s South Central Andes, sovereignty was vested in a democratically elected but elitist (i.e. exclusionary) government in Lima, but the actual power of governance, the power to decide over life and death in the area, was in the hands of the military. Military personnel acted according to their own prejudices, grounded in a complex dynamic of relational understandings of race, class and gender, to guide them in deciding who was to be detained indefinitely –or who was to be killed. As Butler asserts in 'Indefinite Detention', '[T]he 'deeming' of someone as dangerous is sufficient to make that person dangerous and to justify his indefinite detention. [The] decision, the power they [government officials] wield to 'deem' someone dangerous and constitute them effectively as such, is a sovereign power, a ghostly and forceful resurgence of sovereignty in the midst of governmentality' (58-9). Thus, a discriminate form of sovereignty imposes a state of exception on individuals belonging to a group historically perceived as surplus to the Peruvian nation; a population in need of biopolitical governance, that, if not transformed into a desirable (read: non-Indian) population (Drinot, this volume), can be killed unpunished. In theoretical terms, we may want to ask if the Peruvian Indian is restricted to what Agamben calls bare life. To what extent did the state of emergency make the Indian redundant to the Peruvian nation or did the war only facilitate a further stripping of rights in an already precarious situation? Is the Peruvian Indian perhaps always an exception, always to be violated and killed?

Whereas such a line of argument theoretically holds ground, politically it is less useful. The Peruvian case shows that whereas societies may indeed perceive some groups as 'eternal enemies', and in doing so, provide the social underpinning of marginalization and even abuse in peacetime as well as war, there are subtle but important stratifications in the exceptions. The dynamics of intersecting inequalities means that life is intelligible in some contexts and not in others, that abuse is normalized in one relational context, but not the other. Hierarchies of 'rape-ability' in a context of war show some of the subtleties of marginalization. As I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Boesten 2010a and b, 2009, 2008), soldiers had a license to rape women during the war, either as war strategy or as part of the male 'right' to the consumption of sex. Testimonies gathered by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission referring to sexual violence, given by both soldiers and female survivors, show that race, ethnicity and class shaped

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<sup>5</sup> With 80% of victims being of poor, rural and Quechua speaking background, see TRC Informe Final.

decisively the perpetration of sexual violence. Rape was productive in establishing or affirming racial and class hierarchies between soldiers (who may rape whom and using what privileges), it affirmed a racial hierarchy that established 'rape-ability' of women based on class and race, and it provided an opportunity to act out aggressive and sexualized masculinities (Boesten 2010b). Such a hierarchy of rape suggests that there is a hierarchy within the exception, or perhaps what Primo Levi has called a gray zone of death and survival (Levi [1986] 1989, see also Agamben [1999] 2002, pp87-135). Analytically (and, as Levi and others have extensively discussed, at a personal level) this is a very uncomfortable notion as it blurs understandings of guilt and innocence. Understanding such stratifications politically is very important, as it is a window into the workings of violence and marginalisation.

In 'Analysing Rape Regimes' (2010), I argue that despite the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's efforts, only a few survivors of rape in the Peruvian conflict clearly fall into accepted notions of innocence, and can thus be recognized as victims of violence. A majority of cases seem to hover on the social and legal boundaries of coercion and consent to sex, independently of how women may feel about their experience. For example, a woman who was raped by a soldier, but later had consented sex with the same soldier because of a promise of marriage –still a way to escape punishment in Peruvian legislation until 1997- would have great difficulty to make a case of sexual violence. Women who were forced into prostitution under the generalized threat of violence would have equal difficulty claiming victimhood.<sup>6</sup> Looking more closely at the workings of race, class and gender in such cases shows clearly how differentiated marginality is reproduced through sexual violence. In the testimonies of soldiers this differentiated marginality is expressed in a language of common sense, of obviousness. For example, one soldier speaks about the women who were available to be raped to the troops, and those women who would first go to the captain. The hierarchy between women is described by reference to height, colour of eyes, education, and place of origin. These factors are clearly markers of race and class in Peruvian society. The hierarchy between soldiers, on the contrary, is referred to by rank.<sup>7</sup> The violence to which many women were subjected is invisibilised through the normalizing effect of perceptions of race, class and gender. Soldiers often gang raped and killed women perceived as worthless –young women without identity papers, of dark complexion, short of stature and from rural communities (TRC 2003, Henriquez 2006, Boesten 2009).

Butler suggests in *Prekarious Life*, and she further develops this idea in *Frames of War*, that stratifications of who is seen as human, who is perceived as 'real', can also be examined by looking at public expressions of grief. The Peruvian case provides several powerful examples underpinning her point: first, whereas the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2003 came to the conclusion that 69,280 people had been killed during the period 1980-2000, initial estimates stood at half that number. As the president of the TRC stated at the presentation of the final report, this means that 'integrated' society (his words) had willfully dismissed the existence of some 35 thousand citizens:<sup>8</sup> 'we Peruvians used to say to each

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<sup>6</sup> These forms of sexual violence were certainly recognised as such by the research team who investigated the gendered aspects of violence for the TRC. However, interviews with women conducted by TRC investigators show the difficulty of claiming individual victimhood according to the legal standards of rape used by the TRC. See Boesten 2007 and 2010a.

<sup>7</sup> The idea that the army 'whitens' men is important here as many soldiers will have been of indigenous origin (Gonzalez 2000). Nevertheless, their racial or class background is not used to reinforce hierarchy between soldiers, but the racial and class differences between raped women is.

<sup>8</sup> 'En efecto, los peruanos solíamos decir, en nuestra peores previsiones, que la violencia había dejado 35 mil vidas perdidas. ¿Qué cabe decir de nuestra comunidad política, ahora que sabemos que faltaban 35 mil más de nuestros hermanos sin que nadie los echara de menos? (Lerner 28-08-03). [http://www.cverdad.org.pe/informacion/discursos/en\\_ceremonias05.php](http://www.cverdad.org.pe/informacion/discursos/en_ceremonias05.php)

other that, in our worst estimates, the violence would have led to 35 thousand lost lives. What can we say of our political community now that we know that there were another 35 thousand of our brothers missing without anyone noticing?' While the TRC made a point of highlighting this incongruity in numbers in order to make a broader point about the systemic neglect of large parts of the population, certain sectors of 'integrated society' still refuse to acknowledge the death of these 35,000 people.<sup>9</sup> Even in death half of those who died in the conflict, which disproportionately affected the Indigenous population, do not deserve to be grieved, because, according to some, they never existed.

Second, returning to the issue of violence against women in Peru, and its manifestations during war as well as in peacetime, shows a similarly shocking window into the 'undoing' of life through the willful denial of grief. There are two aspects to the denial of grief in cases of violence against women: one is that physical violence (including sexual violence) is normalized in most circumstances, which makes violence itself unintelligible. Hence, women are denied personal grief over experiences of violence, as these experiences are not recognized as such: the denial of injury makes it ungrievable. The TRCs hesitation in addressing gender-based violence as part of its investigation is evidence of the normalization of violence against women, even in wartime. Only because of the insistent campaigning of influential feminist scholars close to the TRC, issues of gender including sexual violence against women were finally investigated. Although the TRC has hardly been able to address individual cases of violence against women, it has made an important effort to recognize the general trend of the use of sexual violence in warfare.

Secondly, as violence against women in practice is not really acknowledged to be a social and political problem, death resulting from such violence is ungrievable. Just as suicide is ungrievable in cultural spaces where it is seen as a politically shameful act, so is femicide ungrievable if it is not recognized to exist. The Peruvian organization DEMUS (Estudio para la Defensa de los Derechos de la Mujer) keeps records of women killed by intimate male violence, and comes to an average of nine killings a month. The number, however, is the result of counting reported cases in printed media, i.e., newspapers. It is very likely that the actual numbers are far higher, considering that Peru is among the countries with high levels of domestic violence (WHO 2005). While it is difficult to compare statistics of domestic violence, it does seem probable that a country with a high level of domestic violence as reported in surveys, will also have a higher level of femicide, especially knowing that in Peru life is precarious for many, and in particular for women. It is likely that nine casualties per month is only the tip of a large iceberg. While the few reports of women killed by intimate partners or ex partners are a recognition of the violent ending of that life, the lack of political and social outcry over the phenomenon of femicide suggests these lives are not grieved.

The lack of public grief for the injury and death of women and men who suffer and die at the hands of more powerful compatriots tells us something about the politics of inclusion and exclusion in Peru. Peruvians are trapped in a hierarchy grounded in race, class and gender that normalizes violence, naturalizes exclusion, and denies grief. This is reflected in the lack of interest that subsequent governments show for those precarious lives. There is so little interest in the lives of the marginalized that the President who presided over some of the worst human rights violations perpetrated by the counterinsurgency forces between 1985 and 1990, Alan García, was re-elected in 2006. Currently,

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<sup>9</sup> For example, Aldo Mariategui, director of the national newspaper *Correo*, refuses to support the statistical findings of the TRC.

President García is championing international mining concessions in a manner that generates much opposition from communities that farm the land García is conceding. Despite violent confrontations between police and comuneros in North West and Amazonian Peru, concessions are still handed out, security is increasingly privatized –which certainly does not help to protect those who oppose the concessions- and the freedom of human rights advocates and NGOs that support communities is increasingly curtailed. In addition, South-Central Peru, the Apurimac and Ene River Valley (VRAE), is again in a militarized state of emergency, as fear for pockets of violent insurgency and drug trade has made the region uncontrollable from a Limeño perspective.<sup>10</sup> These are worrying developments that point to an uncertain future. Continuing intersecting inequalities and, as we have seen, the normative violence which maintains and underpins these inequalities, feed into the physical violence perpetrated upon the bodies of those perceived as undeserving. Lack of (political) recognition of these events make them invisible, unreal, and non-existent, further allowing violence to escalate, an issue that is certainly of great concern in contemporary Peru.

### **Conclusion: Livable lives and the politics of transformation**

Judith Butler has been accused of provincialism and of not being political enough to be a feminist, but instead, in the words of Martha Nussbaum, having resorted to a ‘type of verbal and symbolic politics that makes only the flimsiest of connections with the real situation of real women’ (2000). Although it is disputable that Butler was not referring to the ‘real lives of real women’ in the work she published during the 1990s, she certainly proved Nussbaum wrong in her later work. As Moya Lloyd observes, Butler’s work is more about politics than ethics in that she takes power as a starting point for critical analysis (Lloyd 2008). Chambers and Carver see political theory as central to Butler’s work, and not only in troubling notions of gender. Butler’s theoretical work and her conceptual journey ties together in her politics, as most clearly discussed in *Frames of War* (2009). Her politics seek to minimize the precariousness of life, the always lingering possibility of the subjection to suspension, or undoing, of life. For Butler, all life is subject to this precariousness, we are all vulnerable to become targets of a politics of exception, or of repressive normative frameworks. Therefore, her politics are not directed at Iraqis or transgenders, HIV/AIDS victims or battered wives, rather, Butler questions the organization of power in contemporary society in order to help us unpack and analyse the ‘truths’ about the order of things. In the end, as I discuss below, this leads her to a politics of the right to life.

Whereas Butler makes clear that we are all vulnerable to the undoing of life, it is pertinent to make the point that certain groups in certain societies are particularly vulnerable. As I have demonstrated in this paper, the history of exclusion in Peru is a violent history leading to the often unrecognized deaths of many women and men of indigenous and mixed decent. Hierarchies based on gender, race, and class, determined by markers such as rural/urban, educational level, colour of skin, language, occupation, and sexuality, and the differentiated marginalization these markers cause, means that a large part of the Peruvian population lives in a continuous precariousness. There is perhaps certain infinity to the exceptional status of the Indian population, just as there seems to be an indestructible perception of the natural promiscuity of the chola. There is continuity in the violence perpetrated upon those groups seen as marginal to the Peruvian nation. It is this continuity of violence, erupting into physical violence with

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<sup>10</sup> Kristina Aiello, The Militarization of the Peruvian Countryside , Mar 22 2010, NACLA. <https://nacla.org/node/6482>

certain regularity that may be framed as normative violence. While the term structural violence is more familiar in this context, the notion of the violence of norms allows us to unpack the process of the institutionalization of racism, sexism and class prejudice through discourse and practice that, by sheer repetition, normalizes violence.

The case of violence against women in war and peace is an example of how norms with regard to gender, sexuality, race, and class determine how much violence women are expected to endure. Even after an event of rape, norms imposed on women's sexuality determine if women can claim innocence or if they are seen as complicit to their own pain. A racialised heteronormative sexual organization draws boundaries around people's bodies and desires, and makes abuse possible. Thus, the answer to Butler's question, 'What, given the contemporary order of being, can I be?' depends on who is asking, and depends on the racial, gender, and class background of both 'I' and the interpreter. What one can be, in terms of desire and ambition, is so limited for many Peruvian women, that the question of what a livable life is becomes very relevant.

So Butler's politics are about the right to a livable life. She takes time to explain that she does not mean to question what physical life is and she does not mean to discuss reproductive technologies, abortion or euthanasia, however important these issues are (2009, p 21-22). For Butler, the livability of life is not a medical or even biological issue, but a social and political one, and that means that life needs to be protected against ever looming precariousness. According to Butler, the recognition of the shared problem of precarity, even if it is clear that not all are equally exposed, could be the new politics of the Left (2009, p28). To make precarity politically relevant, Butler asserts, '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' (2009, p28). Butler seeks not to do away with norms, as some may understand her work, but she seeks a 'normative commitment to equality', and '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'. Considering the differentiated marginalization of Peruvians and the normative and physical violence that underpins and reproduces such marginalization in daily life, a *normative* commitment to equality –instead of a rhetorical commitment– would be revolutionary for a majority of Peruvians.

In her essay 'The Question of Social Transformation' (2004a), Butler emphasizes that norms not only constrain, but also enable living; hence, we need not to replace one set of norms with another, potentially creating a new set of exclusions, but to expand to a normative framework that is inclusionary and nonviolent. That means, in Butler's view, that we need norms without normalizations, as normalization would not allow for openness and flexibility. According to Butler, critique of gender norms should be grounded 'within the context of lives as they are lived and [...] guided by the question of what maximizes the possibilities for a livable life, what minimizes the possibility of unbearable life, or indeed, social or literal death' (2004a p8). Reaching beyond gender into contemporary politics of othering, Butler allows her critique of gender and sex to form a useful basis for analyzing any set of norms that may be or cause violence anywhere. *How* to transform Peruvian society in such a way that a normative commitment to equality and nonviolence would become reality is still another question. However, a continuous critical analysis of the norms, grounded in notions of gender, race, and class that constrain and differentiate

would be a good starting point for the transformation of Peru towards a more equal, just and nonviolent society.

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