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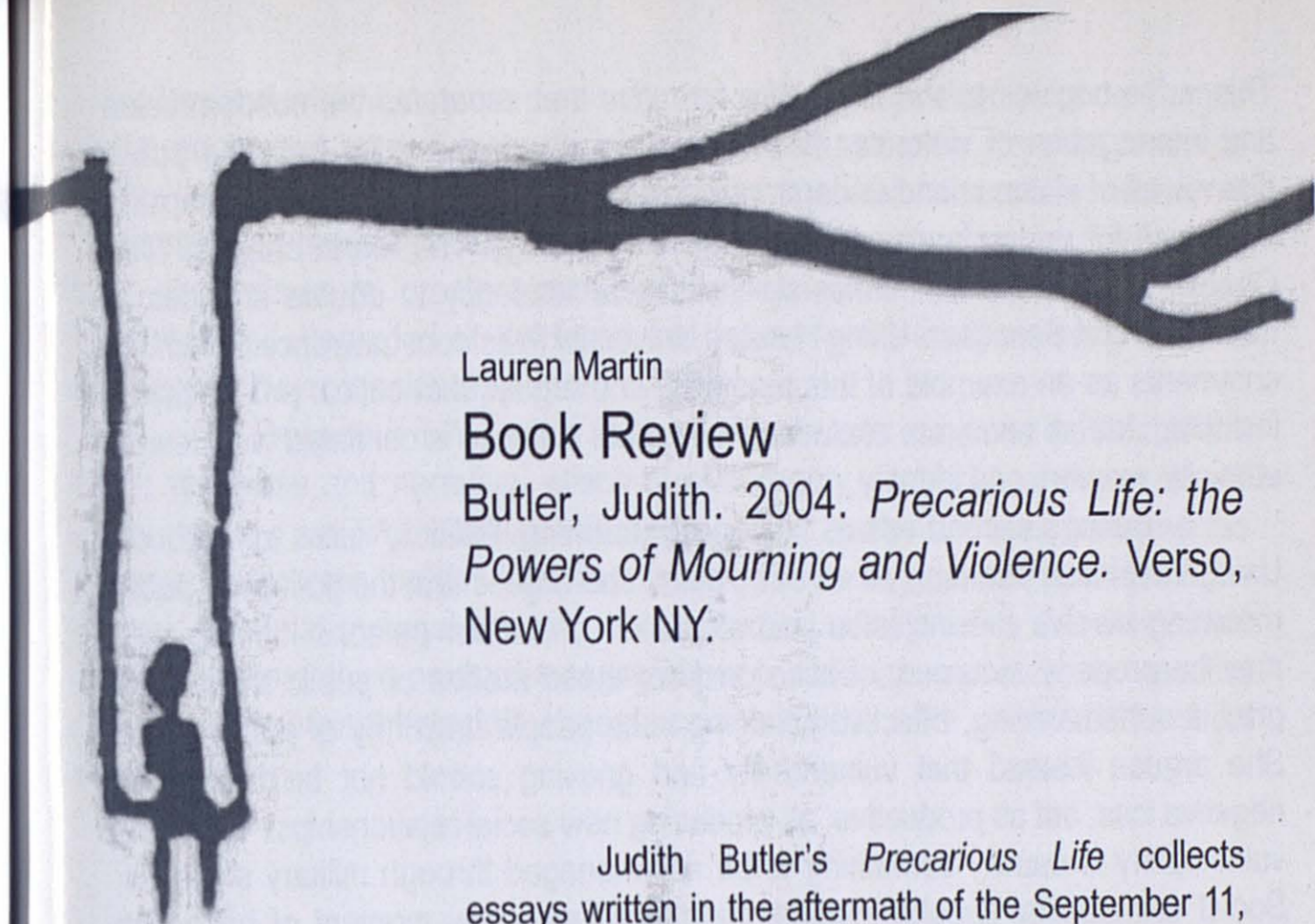
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Book Review

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Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* collects essays written in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. Read a few years on, these essays evoke the initial urgency of that national tragedy and recall the confusion, the jockeying for discursive and moral positions, and the eery silence of repressed public dissent. Grappling with politics 'post-9/11,' Butler explores the politics of the obituary, indefinite detention, the terms of political discourse, the ability to criticize Israel, and the role of media images in de/humanizing Others. These essays formulate a creative and sensate leftist ethic, demonstrating the possibilities of using critical theory in public political discourse.

In the first essay, "Explanation and Exoneration, or What We Can Hear," Butler examines the woefully limited public debate about terrorism. She begins by analyzing the narrative structure of the justification for military attacks on Afghanistan. In order for public debate to be recuperated, arguments over causes and effects, blame and restitution, must be nuanced. Charging readers to examine how their lives are implicated in the lives others, she argues that US foreign policy is less a *cause* of the 9/11 attacks, and better seen as a *necessary condition* for them.

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This is the beginning, she says, of a narrative that separates the condemnation and interrogation of violence. This separation allows space for both the public disavowal of violence and understanding of its motivations, instead of collapsing every call for understanding into collusion or apology. The fourth chapter, "The Charge of Anti-Semitism" takes up the similar tendency to equate critiques of Israel with anti-Semitism. Using Harvard University President Lawrence Summers' comments as an example of this tendency, she argues that critical perspectives, including Jewish ones, are excluded when state violence is conflated with Jewish ethnicity, religion, and identity.

Butler's second essay, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," turns to the body. Using the obituary column as an entry point, she argues that the politics of public mourning involve the inclusion and exclusion of certain persons, limiting who may be properly mourned. Exclusion from these modes of public tribute and grief is dehumanizing, effectively judging such people unworthy of public value. She argues instead that vulnerability and grieving should not be treated as negative loss, but as productive, as producing new social relationships. In the US vulnerability is usually something to be risk-managed through military solutions. Social vulnerability should, instead, be viewed as a key moment of becoming social beings. Violence should be viewed in terms of our mutual interdependence, in terms of our capacity to feel the loss of others. Recognizing this, vulnerability is humanizing, rather than threatening. For Butler, this forms the basis of a post-9/11 politics that recognizes the presence of our bodies in the world: "For if I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you" (49).

"Indefinite Detention," the third essay, contributes a key argument to current scholarly debates about sovereignty and governmentality. Inspired by Giorgio Agamben, Butler revisits sovereignty as the ability to decide the exception, or the ability to suspend the rule of law, in the context of Guantanamo Bay's new role as a detention center. She argues, against Michel Foucault, that sovereignty was *not* eclipsed by the rise of governmentalized, or bureaucratic and administrative, state power. Butler argues, "procedures of governmentality. . . are involved to extend and fortify forms of sovereignty that are equally irreducible to law" (55). Sovereign state power, as the power to suspend the law, is diffused through military protocol and operates through multiple positions. The practice of naming prisoners within and through the law decides their status as citizens and humans. Thus, Bush Administration's continual reformulation of human rights law reconfigures the relationship between the human being and the law. "Official speech" has, for Butler, critical material implications for all of us.

In the final essay, Butler contemplates a new "Jewish ethic of non-violence" through Levinas' concept of 'the face,' read as "that for which no words really work. . . the extreme precariousness of the other" (131,134). She attempts

to understand what it is, more precisely, that we're *doing* when we show images of the people we commit violence upon. In this chapter, the physical presence of the body, the super-linguistic presence of physical vulnerability, is key to understanding the magnitude of an ethic of non-violence. It is for this reason that she calls us to "create a sense of the public in which oppositional voices are not feared, degraded or dismissed, but valued for the *instigation to a sensate democracy they occasionally perform*" (151).

In *Precarious Life* Judith Butler deftly weaves a careful politics of the body, discourse and narrative, ethics of relationality, and political theory in our contemporary war-time context. Through careful analysis, Butler performs the sensate democratic politics she espouses by following theoretical trajectories to their personal material effects. This collection wholly belies the notion that academia has nothing productive to say about contemporary politics, and sets the reader on an ethical trajectory towards continuing the work of post-9/11 ethical transformation.

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