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# When Bodies Speak Differently: Putting Judith Butler in Conversation with Mahatma Gandhi on Nonviolent Resistance

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**Abstract:** This article puts political philosopher Judith Butler in conversation with Gandhi, on the topic of nonviolent resistance. More particularly, we compare them on a systematic philosophical level. Although we focus on Gandhi's more activist side, by delving into the ontological presuppositions that Butler and Gandhi share, we can do some justice to how his activism is firmly rooted in a faith-based understanding of the world. We discuss four themes in each of which they complement each other: namely, the ontological roots of the nonviolent imperative; their rejection of an instrumental view of violence; nonviolent resistance seen as communicative action; and nonviolence viewed as a way of life. This discussion shows that while they have very different starting points and vocabularies, and while some tensions remain, there is much scope for cooperation, solidarity and alliance between religious and nonreligious practitioners of nonviolent resistance.

**Keywords:** nonviolent resistance; Butler; Gandhi; performativity; relational ontology



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*Dedicated to the memory of Christof Heyns (10.01.1959–28.03.2021)*

## 1. Introduction

With their<sup>1</sup> 2020 book, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*, feminist political philosopher Judith Butler joins a long tradition of nonviolent resistance that includes proponents such as Leo Tolstoy, Albert Einstein, Henry David Thoreau, Te Whiti o Rongomai III, Martin Luther King Junior, Václav Havel, Alice Paul, Rosa Parks, and others, noticeably Mahatma Gandhi. Many social justice movements have been inspired by the ideal and strategy of nonviolent resistance. For example, according to one estimate, between 1966 and 1999, “nonviolent civic resistance played a critical role in fifty [out] of sixty-seven transitions from authoritarianism” (Ackerman and DuVall 2000). In addition, in their book, Chenoweth and Stephan conclude both that “historically, nonviolent resistance campaigns have been *more effective* in achieving their goals than violent resistance campaigns” (Chenoweth and Stephan 2013, p. 220; emphasis added) and that, since “civil resistance campaigns are more successful than violent campaigns at overcoming barriers to participation” (Ibid, p. 28), they produce *more stable outcomes* in the long run.

In contrast, although “violent insurgencies captured power in some cases”, the human costs in terms of casualties were very high. Moreover, “the conditions in these countries after the conflict ended have been overwhelmingly more repressive than in transitions driven by nonviolent civic pressure” (Ibid, p. 60). Typical for post-violent-conflict societies were widespread retaliatory violence, lack of respect for human rights and lack of respect for minority rights (Ibid, p. 60). Gene Sharp's influential 1973 three-volume opus, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Sharp 1973), provides a theoretical foundation for nonviolent action by linking it with a specific understanding of power. Different methods of nonviolent action that he discusses include nonviolent protest, social noncooperation, economic boycotts, strikes, political noncooperation and nonviolent intervention, and he explains that adversaries can be nonviolently affected or changed through conversion, persuasion, accommodation and coercion.

The specific contribution of Butler's book against this backdrop is to make a philosophical case for the use of nonviolent resistance toward oppressive regimes, without turning it into an absolute prohibition on violence or self-defence (Butler 2020, p. 23). Their argument is rooted in their understanding of the human subject as constituted in discursive and performative ways—an understanding they partly take from Michel Foucault, and partly develop more concretely in terms of the performative body. Butler's argument for nonviolence is therefore embedded in their earlier work on subject formation, and the in/ability to appear (and be recognised) in the social or public world as a moral and political subject—themes that run through their whole oeuvre, as we will show.

Even though Butler's book title references Gandhi's concept of *Satyagraha* (meaning love force, truth force or soul force),<sup>2</sup> and they evoke him explicitly a handful of times (Butler 2020, pp. 16, 21, 181, 201), Gandhi's own thinking does not feature much in the book. The point of this article is to go beyond the book's purview and place Butler and Gandhi in conversation on the topic of nonviolence. Although the abovementioned sources are important for addressing the common assumption that nonviolent tactics as a strategic choice are naïve, misplaced, ineffective or implausible (Chenoweth and Stephan 2013, p. 17), the focus of this article is on a more fundamental, i.e., ontological, level. In quite different yet complementary ways, Gandhi and Butler argue that the imperative for nonviolent resistance aimed at social transformation flows from a certain relational ontology, a certain perspective on the world and human co-existence. The aim of this article is to draw out the most salient implications of such a conversation for the right of public assembly and contemporary cultures of protest globally.

The ontology that Butler places at the root of nonviolence is a secular social ontology of the constituted, performative, exposed subject, coupled with a radically egalitarian imagination, as is discussed. In his turn, the vision that underlies Gandhi's nonviolence is a faith-based ontology that sees the force of love as a cosmic principle greater or more powerful than violent force. It is important to remain faithful to the very different vocabularies that these two thinkers employ; nevertheless, it is mutually illuminating and fruitful for a systematic philosophical exploration of the nature of nonviolent resistance, we claim, to place them in conversation with each other, on four central themes related to nonviolent resistance. The conversation between Gandhi and Butler is structured according to these themes: (i) the ontological roots of the nonviolent imperative; (ii) their rejection of an instrumental view of violence; (iii) nonviolent resistance seen as communicative action; and (iv) nonviolence viewed as a way of life. The discussion emphasises the continuities and complementarities between the two thinkers but also indicates where tensions remain. We conclude the article with some concrete suggestions that flow from this discussion for social protest and public assembly.

## 2. Gandhi and Butler on Nonviolent Resistance

### 2.1. *The Ontological Roots of the Nonviolent Imperative*

Butler's social ontology is best understood as being inspired by Foucault, who is a key critic of the "constituting" subject of western modernity. Against this influential view of the human subject as sovereign, as pre-existing its social conditions and as fully transparent to itself and governed by reason alone, Foucault posits a "constituted", i.e., a historically contingent subject, who is formed or moulded into a self through everyday social practices, dominant discourses and knowledge formations, and the power relations that infuse these. "Objectifying knowledge practices" and "processes of subjectivation" or of self-formation all represent a form of power that transforms human beings into the subjects required (and recognised) by the dominant, anonymous structures at work in modern societies. Thus, writes Foucault in "The Subject and Power" (Foucault 1982, p. 781), "[t]his form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him." There is therefore no presocial or prediscursive, or natural subject.

Instead, we find ourselves always already embedded in, shaped by, measured, called forth and named by a force field of norms embedded in language and in other material manifestations, ranging from singular bodies to institutions, to, nowadays, the Anthropocene planet itself. Butler largely adopts this Foucauldian understanding of the subject but focuses it on the notion of bodily performativity or the animate body. They define their key notion of performativity as “not a singular or deliberate ‘act’, but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice[s] by which discourse produces the [material] effects that it names” (Butler 1993, p. 2). Butler (2015, p. 28) in their later work noted that “performativity characterises first and foremost that characteristic of linguistic utterances that in the moment of making the utterance makes something happen or brings the phenomenon into being”.

Their notion of performativity thus equally inverts the modernist logic where action proceeds from a unified, pre-existing, rational and free mind. Performativity instead posits that people become subjects, e.g., gendered subjects, through the performance of desires, acts, speech and gestures that cite or reiterate the dominant (heterosexual) gendered and gendering norms (see their *Gender Trouble*, Butler 1990). An important point that Butler takes over from Foucault (1982, p. 778) is that we become subjects partly by objectifying ourselves as objects of knowledge and power; we are at once object and subject of these ongoing processes. It is by inserting ourselves through bodily gestures, expressions, motilities and so forth into the force field of norms that constitutes or moulds recognisable (gendered) subjects, and thus by “passing”, that we come to recognise ourselves and be recognised by others, as properly gendered subjects. Our actions are themselves attuned to, or aligned with, discursive meanings. When this attuning translates into bodily habits, then discursive norms have been successfully materialised in the world. This understanding of performativity moreover extends far beyond gendering processes to encompass the subject as a whole. Butler’s social ontology therefore entails that we are constituted as subjects in an inescapably relational, social and discursive manner. We only appear as legible persons or subjects to the extent that we align our sense of self and our behaviour (speech and action) with the social scripts and norms that shape personhood. Dominant norms and social recognition thus work together to give shape, form and content to individual subjects.

However, and this is key, Butler’s social ontology does not lead them to an understanding of the self as fully socially or externally determined (as they explain in detail in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler 2005). Key here is that abstract norms as deposited in language, are not only pervasive and powerful, but at the same time are unstable and ephemeral, and fully dependent for their endurance upon the ongoing, largely habitual obedience or docility of bodies that reiterate, repeat and re-cite them. Since it is obedient or imitative, citational actions and habits bring selves and other social realities into being and sustain them and make them matter and materialise in the human world; therefore, action is also the key to resistance against oppression. When bodies perform or act *differently*, by transgressing or otherwise challenging, disrupting, misquoting, parodying or queering the norms, then they can over time change, or subvert, the norms themselves. Furthermore, new sets of norms can shape radically different selves and institutions into being over time.

Butler’s social ontology does not lead to a deterministic view of the self, as we have seen, but neither does it allow for change to be driven from somewhere beyond the social world. There is no self, and there are no hermeneutic resources on the radical outside of (or beyond) the discursive force field which has constituted us as subjects. Butler’s commitment to nonviolence as preferred change strategy thus stems from their understanding of the deeply relational, communicative nature of the self. We only come into being as subjects or persons through our constant exposure to the norms embedded in discourse, action and institutions, and to others, who (we) need to recognise us as such.

Exposure to norms and others is a prerequisite for being shaped or moulded into a person; at the same time, it renders us vulnerable. This is because of what Butler calls “normative violence”, or the violence of the norm (Butler 2004b): dominant norms are always embedded in, and serving, dominant power relations. On a basic level, Butler’s

social ontology implies that every person is in principle, constitutively, equally vulnerable because of the pervasive ways in which we are all exposed to, and dependent upon, social recognition in conjunction with dominant norms. On another level, however, vulnerability is differentially distributed, and the distinction between our shared ontological vulnerability (precariousness) and politically wrought vulnerability (precarity) is important here (Butler 2009). The potential for violence lies in the precise way in which norms distribute the terms and conditions of subject-formation. Simply put, where heterosexism, patriarchy and racism are dominant norms embedded in discourse and institutions, and in practices of recognition and knowledge production, and thus in self-understandings, there, bodies marked as gender nonconforming, female and/or black, are likely to struggle to appear as “proper” subjects and citizens, both to themselves and to others.

This is precisely the kind of situation where Butler would evoke the force of non-violent resistance, which is exerted where and when “a social and political practice [is] undertaken in concert, culminating in a form of resistance to systemic forms of destruction coupled with a commitment to world building that honours global interdependency . . . and equality” (Butler 2020, p. 21). We want to draw attention to a number of elements in this quote. First, note the element of collective action<sup>3</sup> (“undertaken in concert”) in which shared resistance is expressed towards a situation that is read as systemically destructive. Moreover, this collective resistance is performed against the normative violence exerted by the dominant social system, which prevents some human beings from appearing as subjects and citizens in public spaces. For Butler, then, wherever there is performative resistance against oppression, one can discern a struggle against socially induced precarity or the destructive unequal distribution of the chance of becoming (social) subjects. Butler (2020, p. 10) therefore argues that “nonviolence requires a critique of egological ethics as well as of the political legacy of individualism in order to open up *the idea of selfhood as a fraught field of social relationality*” (emphasis added). Nonviolent resistance illuminates not only the direct suffering or grief carried by groups and individuals that struggle to appear as social subjects but also shows how social mechanisms operate in order to pre-emptively “disappear” that suffering as suffering, to render those lives publicly “ungrievable”.<sup>4</sup> As Ruti (2017, p. 97) points out, Butler “defly demonstrates [that] one of the ruses of power is to delimit the domain of grievability so that—under normal circumstances—we are prevented from mourning the suffering (or death) of those deemed different from, or inferior to ourselves”. Grievability therefore does not only play a role at the end of a life: whether the loss of any particular life would register socially and publicly as a loss or not is already inscribed in the multiple ways in which people’s lives are either materially and symbolically supported or not (Butler 2020, p. 59).

Note also from the quote above that the destruction (violence) identified in the system is opposed in nonviolent resistance not by yet another form of destruction but rather by a force of a different nature—by the power that springs from “a commitment to world building that honours interdependency and equality”. The commitment to world building and respect for interdependency is rooted in Butler’s social ontology, which is wary of processes of individualisation that turn the oppressed into the main cause of their own oppression and thereby obliterate or erase the largescale social complicity that is always needed for systemic oppression, as discussed. They relate equality with interdependence as follows: “Equality is . . . a feature of social relations that depends for its articulation on an increasingly avowed interdependency—letting go of the body as a ‘unit’ in order to understand one’s boundaries as relational and social predicaments: including sources of joy, susceptibility to violence, sensitivity to heat and cold, and tentacular yearnings for food, sociality, and sexuality” (Butler 2020, p. 45). This quote helps us to understand why Butler proposes that a radically egalitarian imagination must inform nonviolent resistance and provides much of its countervailing force or impetus. For Butler (2020, p. 16), this radically egalitarian vision lies on the level of the social imaginary and springs from the understanding that each person is dependent, “or formed and sustained in relations of depending upon, and being depended upon”. Thus, “social interdependency characterizes

life, and . . . violence [is] an attack on that interdependency". Therefore, the infliction of harm (violence) requires a forgetfulness of interdependency, and the egalitarian imagination by contrast increasingly avows and reckons with it, also or especially, in how it performs its demands for social inclusion and change. The shape or nature of performative resistance must be compatible with the affirmation of equal grievability.

Active, collective resistance to destructive (bond-denying and -defying) norms must therefore take the form of bond-affirming ("world-building") yet transgressive action; the performance must be at once relational and resistant, resisting *through* relations. Put differently, in our activist attempts to change socially embedded norms, we must remain ever mindful of their very nature. Recall that norms only have power over us because and insofar as we repeat and uphold them in our everyday actions. In that sense, every norm that holds sway does so through a pervasive yet often silent social pact. This is why all lasting and effective change in the shared world depends upon new ways of acting, in concert, combined with a respect for fundamental equality. In addition, why those very ways of acting must be respectful of the ontological sociality or interdependence, or the very worldliness, of all meaning making, including subject-formation. The *force* of nonviolence as conceived by Butler lies in the fact that as collective transgressive action, it remains steadfastly social, communicative, relational and committed to "living and sustainable [and sustaining] bonds" (Butler 2020, p. 15). Concerted transgressive action therefore demonstrates and reveals at once the social nature and power of existing norms and their dependence upon obedient repetition, as well as their fundamental changeability.

Gandhi's ontological orientation takes another, yet comparable, route to nonviolent resistance. Butler (2020, p. 181) comments on what Gandhi calls "the law of love", which he views as "a higher law than that of destruction". True to Butler's social ontology, they state that his stance "may not rest upon a discoverable law" but rather function only rhetorically. However, Gandhi does not intend for the law of love to be a mere rhetorical device. In *Hind Swaraj* (CWMG (The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi 1958) vol. 10, p. 84), Gandhi explains that the [human] universe would disappear without "the force of love and pity<sup>5</sup> [which] is infinitely greater than the force of arms". He writes, "[h]istory is really a record of every *interruption* of the *even* working of the force of love or of the soul . . . History, then, is a record of an interruption in the course of nature. Soul-force, being natural, is not noted in history" (CWMG 10, p. 90; emphases added). He gives the example of two brothers who overcome their mutual animosity as a story that would not go down in history. Soul-force or love force (*Satyagraha*) works evenly, constantly and unnoticed in the background, *building the world*, which is why the world as such is based "not on the force of arms but on the force of truth or love". Similar to Butler, then, Gandhi also derives his nonviolent imperative from a vision of the human world as consisting of a fabric of social bonds, woven, built and continuously sustained through the force and labour of love and pity or empathy.<sup>6</sup> In contrast with Butler for whom the force of nonviolence derives purely from social bonds, Gandhi's ontology is however a religious one: truth force or soul force is an "indefinable mysterious power that underlies everything"; it is also called "God", by Gandhi.<sup>7</sup> He sees love force, truth force, or God, as "purely benevolent", for "in the midst of death, life persists, in the midst of untruth, truth persists, in the midst of darkness, light persists". Therefore, if one aligns oneself with love force, one sides with and taps into the stronger force in the universe. For Gandhi, then, there is a force in the world, in the cosmos and in nature, that is a force for good and that exists independently of the human world but which underpins and sustains also the social bonds in the human world. This is why he claims, "as long as there is even a handful of men true to their pledge [of *Satyagraha*], there can be only one end to the struggle and that is victory" (Gandhi 1928, p. 116). Drawing from this quotation, and because Gandhi understands nonviolence as tapping into a divine source, one might deduce that Gandhi is more optimistic about the effectiveness of nonviolence than the secular Butler. However, later in his life, Gandhi also experienced many setbacks and failures of his nonviolent tactics, most spectacularly with conflicts between Hindus and Muslims in India. He was thus finally not naïve about the

limits of nonviolence and conceded cases in which the force of violence was needed (see Note 10). However, we think the larger point which he shares with Butler is to draw our attention to the *limits of violence* as an instrument for decisive and lasting social change, and to open up more strategic space for nonviolent tactics.<sup>8</sup>

Gandhi's nonviolence therefore comes from a different place than that of Butler but ends up being very similar in its practical implications.<sup>9</sup> Because *Satyagraha* is attuned with the love force, which is God, it aims for "the conquest of the adversary" purely through persuasion, since it cannot be reconciled with causing him harm. For Gandhi, his faith position implies that "hatred is a positive breach of the ruling principle" of *Satyagraha*, and therefore, it has no place within nonviolent resistance—it would oppose and thereby dilute or completely thwart this alternative force. Moreover, because love force or God is an ontological force, it (or He) is also latently present in one's adversary—there is always the chance that the opponent can (learn to) tap into their own capacity for love and pity.<sup>10</sup> The adversary or opponent is never the enemy whom one is allowed to hate—this is very similar to Butler's idea that nobody should be socially construed as finally ungrievable. The temptation to construe another person as ungrievable and therefore violable is particularly strong within the frame of self-defence, as we see below. For Gandhi, for the *Satyagrahi* to indulge in having enemies would be a failure of faith in the force of love. Instead of aiming to harm the adversary, therefore, *Satyagraha* aims for and "postulates the conquest of the adversary by suffering in one's own person" (Gandhi 1928, p. 124). Where hatred and violence attempt to either eliminate the opponent altogether or to coerce them into obedience, through the infliction of harm or threat of harm, love force instead aims for the opponent to change their own perspective, to learn something and to connect with their own capacity for love and empathy. With their notions of vulnerability, precarity and grievability, we have seen how Butler positions suffering as a central element that is evoked and activated through collective resistance. Similarly, yet differently, Gandhi sees "the potency of suffering" as "key to *Satyagraha*" (Ibid, p. 18). At first glance, their attitudes towards suffering as a key element of nonviolent resistance may appear quite different, as Butler sees hidden suffering as being brought to light and simultaneously resisted through collective nonviolent action, whereas Gandhi sees the collective nonviolent action or *Satyagraha* itself as necessarily entailing bodily suffering. We show why we regard their positions on this point as complementary rather than contradictory, under theme (iii) below.

For Gandhi, based on his faith-based ontology, nonviolence cannot be treated as a mere instrument that might be discarded and replaced with violence as a supposedly more efficient means. Hatred and harm cannot be a viable alternative to love and truth. This leaves us with the interesting implication that Gandhi's nonviolence is not in the first place or only a moral demand but fundamentally ontological and strategic.<sup>11</sup> In order to "see" the force of love as stronger than the force of violence and hatred, as Gandhi does, one needs a kind of countercultural imagination.<sup>12</sup> At least in many scholarly circles in the west, violence is viewed as ingrained and inevitable, an inherent part of agonistic politics, and the ideal of nonviolence is viewed as naïve and utopian. Nevertheless, Gandhi might be described as sharing with Butler their alternative, "egalitarian imaginary" (Butler 2020, p. 24), which insists upon foregrounding the human capacity for love and pity and which foregrounds a similar relational ontology. In addition, similar to Butler's understanding of the social construction of subjects, Gandhi has a keen insight into how everybody's understanding is a finite function of their time, their social group and their upbringing. A vivid example is when he decided not to hold then President of the Transvaal Republic, Paul Kruger's, blatant racism against him, seeing that Kruger had only ever read the Old Testament and regarded Indians as the "descendants of Esau" (Gandhi 1928, pp. 56–57). Long before scholars such as Chenoweth and Stephan (2013) did the research to back up the empirical claim, Gandhi's faith position led him to reject violent resistance as a relatively ineffectual short-cut (CWMG 25, p. 424) to social change, rooted in a lack of faith. This critical view of violence, which shares many elements with that of Butler, is discussed next.

## 2.2. Their Rejection of the Instrumental View of Violence

Neither Butler nor Gandhi believes that violence (understood as the wilful infliction of harm or threat of harm) can be successfully contained and limited to a mere means.<sup>13</sup> For Gandhi, this view is firstly derived from his understanding of the relation between means and ends more generally. He offers a simile, saying, “The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree; and there is just the same inviolable . . . connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree . . . We reap exactly as we sow” (CWMG 10, p. 81). Different means thus bring about totally different results and ultimately, “only fair means can provide fair results” (CWMG 10, p. 289). Gandhi accordingly denies that violence can be used purely instrumentally without affecting and infusing, even shaping, the ends. However, he gives a further argument which applies specifically to violence as the means and social change as the aim. If one tries to forcibly change the world through harming others, it means that one tries to fight destructive injustice with its own means—one becomes destructively unjust in one’s own right, thereby in turn morally justifying a violent retaliation by the opponent. In *Hind Swaraj* (CWMG 10, pp. 92–93), Gandhi explains: “To use brute force, to use gunpowder . . . means that we want our opponent to do by force that which we desire but he does not. And, if such a use of force is justifiable, surely he is entitled to do likewise by us. And so we should never come to an agreement.”

Violent means can therefore never mediate or facilitate a qualitatively transformed, yet stable or peaceful society—they are more likely to inaugurate more violence and coercion and less fundamental social change; recall Chenoweth and Stephan’s telling findings in this regard. Such a situation, where violence or brute force is resisted with brute force, inevitably represents for Gandhi an impasse in strategic terms. He likens it to a blind horse forever moving in a circle around a mill, under the delusion that it is moving ahead and making progress (CWMG 10, p. 93). As we have seen, he sees love force and brute force as completely different kinds, where the former “completely opposes and rejects brute force and the use of arms” and constitutes “a danger neither to person nor to property” (Gandhi 1928, p. 121). The core point here is that violent resistance repeats or doubles (mirrors) the oppressive violence it professes to oppose, leading to escalation without a logical end in sight.<sup>14</sup> This impasse is therefore related to the idea that fearful people are less open to changing their views of the world in accordance with the views of those they fear. The only way out of a cycle of mutually inflicted violence driven by both fear and hatred and the only way in which to cultivate an effective counter force are if the field of contestation is disrupted using a completely different logic such as that of *Satyagraha* or love force. This entails a force that is intent upon fundamental change brought about without harm to others: through persuasion and cooperation. This is the way in which Gandhi translates or transfers his spiritual ontology into strategic action for transformation. He draws our attention to both the limitations and the potential dangers of derailment inherent in the use of violent force, challenging the widespread belief in violence as the most effective means of change and in so doing, opens up a larger scope for nonviolent techniques of resistance. Gandhi further illuminates the relative impotence of violent coercion, as follows: when facing soldiers of peace, “the commands of the rulers [oppressors] do not go beyond the point of their swords, for true men disregard unjust commands” (Gandhi 1928, p. 94). This means that he understands the point of Butler about how docile obedience is necessary for the maintenance of any oppressive social order.

For their part, Butler (2020, pp. 13–14) explicitly thematises the same question: “Can violence remain a mere instrument or means for taking down violence—its structures, its regime—without becoming an end in itself?”. They are doubtful whether violence can be contained and controlled as a pure instrument or *technē*, ready at hand, in the manner envisioned by many proponents of violent change, because they suggest that it is “precisely the kind of phenomenon that is constantly ‘getting out of hand’”. Resonating with Gandhi’s understanding of the integral connection between means and ends, Butler (2020, p. 19) argues that “the tool is already part of the practice, presupposing a

world conducive to its use; that the use of the tool builds or rebuilds a specific kind of world, activating a sedimented legacy of use". Thus, what might be regarded as a mere *technē* to be taken up or discarded once the goal is achieved, instead "turns out to be a *praxis*: a means that . . . presupposes and enacts the end in the course of its actualization" (Ibid, p. 20). Violence better understood as *praxis* (rather than *technē*) can thereby be seen to inaugurate a more violent world: "the actualization of violence as means can inadvertently become its own end, producing new violence, producing violence anew, reiterating the license, and licensing further violence" (Ibid, p. 20). Read together, Butler and Gandhi draw our attention to how acts "speak", i.e., how they are always embedded in discursive systems and participate in them. Part of the way in which violent acts in particular speak is in legitimising wilful harm and thereby calling forth counterviolence springing from injury, fear and hatred. However, as Gandhi also argues, they are blunt instruments that can at most attempt to put fear in others; as speech acts, violent acts are therefore meaning-poor and fairly ineffectual in conveying new meaning in a persuasive way.

Butler further complicates the picture of violence as a speech act by pointing to the inherent ambiguity in the meaning/s of any action—an insight that springs from their understanding of performativity as repetition, which sometimes means to repeat differently or to parody a norm. At the same time, they offer a further argument against the instrumental justification of violence. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's essay "Critique of Violence", they ask whether "we can know violence outside of the justificatory schemes by which it is approached", especially those schemes that frame and justify state violence, and "the coercion at the heart of legal regimes", in instrumental ways (Butler 2020, pp. 122–23). Butler is concerned with how "states and legal powers" justify "their own violence as legitimate coercion" and cast all forms of opposition or resistance to existing norms—even peaceful or nonviolent ones—as unacceptable violence. Their discussion raises the broader philosophical question about the relation between an act and its meanings, i.e., the politics of naming violence (cf. also Thaler 2018). Butler shows how modern states tend to frame their own coercive strategies as legitimate, necessary, instrumental violence (or even as nonviolence, as merely "the maintenance of law and order"), and all forms of opposition, protest, resistance and criticism against state coercion as illegitimate violence (even if no harm is either enacted or threatened).<sup>15</sup> Butler thereby alerts us to the field of contestation and unequal power relations within which acts get labelled as either violent or nonviolent, "where the power to attribute violence to the opposition itself becomes an instrument by which to enhance state power" (Butler 2020, p. 5). This insight is similar to their understanding of how lives are socially and politically framed as grievable or not.

Linked with this problematic is the pervasive use of the plea of self-defence to legitimate all kinds of nationalist, imperialist and other aggressive and violent agendas. Butler questions how the "self" to be defended is construed and delineated in each instance, and to what extent that construction allows for whomever is thereby implicated as the enemy, to be turned into a nonsubject, ungrievable, and beyond the pale of moral consideration. Because most overt deployments of violence are justified using the language of self-defence, the discourse of self-defence needs to be interrogated further. Butler's main point in this regard is that we should rethink the identification and demarcation of the "self" who is in need of defence in any instance where self-defence is deployed rhetorically. Because of the way in which they describe the self or subject as thoroughly socially constituted, they can claim "[t]here is a sense in which violence done to another is at once a violence done to the self, but only if a relation between them defines them both quite fundamentally". Again, we see that one has to grasp how selves emerge from other selves and social conditions in order to be able to realise the extent to which violence enacted on another is violence also enacted on the self. This ontology is crucial for understanding and practicing nonviolent resistance as a kind of ongoing conversation between selves caught up on different sides of the same, mutually constituting web of interdependences.<sup>16</sup> To this extent, "violence assaults the living interdependency that is, or should be, our social world" (Butler 2020, p. 25). For Butler, the one who practices nonviolence is inextricably implicated with the one



who acts from a position of violence and vice versa. Part of the force of nonviolence therefore relates to its ability to expose a pre-existing, mutually interdependent, relationship (however fraught or destructive it might be), and explicitly activating it in transformative yet world-building ways. Nonviolence lies at the heart of a vision that understands the inescapability of having to live together, even with those human beings that one has most successfully disqualified from moral consideration.

For these reasons, Butler (2020, p. 63) argues that “there is no way to practice nonviolence without first interpreting violence and nonviolence, especially in a world in which violence is increasingly justified [as self-defence] in the name of security, nationalism, and neo-fascism”. It is precisely in such a world we need to renew our understanding of what violence does when it attacks living bonds. In contrast, we should aim to extend the claims and reach of nonviolent transformation, which takes the form of “a physical assertion of the claims of life, a living assertion, a claim that is made by speech, gesture, and action, through networks, encampments, and assemblies; all of these seek to recast the living as worthy of value, as potentially grievable, precisely under conditions in which they are either erased from view or cast into irreversible forms of precarity” (Butler 2020, p. 24). Thus, the differential distribution of precarity cannot be ignored in these so-called claims to self-defence. What is at stake when the “selves” who are being violently defended all belong to the same religion, nation, neighbourhood, racial grouping or community? What if, for example, “the selves” that you are “justifiably” defending yourself against are perceived as ungrievable to the extent where defending yourself against them assumes that their lives do not matter (equally or even at all)? When your actions performed under the label of “self-defence” are themselves so pre-emptive and excessive that they can no longer be meaningfully distinguished from pure aggression? It is in this sense that we understand also Gandhi’s claim that he has no enemies. If the nonviolent resister’s actions are rooted in the kind of relational ontology that Butler and Gandhi propose, then the “luxury” of having enemies, i.e., of framing some (groups of) people as sacrificable and disposable in the name of social justice, is no longer available. With this problematisation of the meaning of actions, including their naming or labelling as either violent or nonviolent, legitimate or illegitimate, we now turn to the theme of nonviolence understood as meaningful action.

### 2.3. Nonviolent Resistance Seen as Communicative Action

We have already seen how Butler uses the idea of performativity to describe how subjects are constituted through the citational practices in which they partake. Applying this lens to Gandhi’s *Satyagraha*, they claim that “[t]he ‘soul force’ that Gandhi had in mind was never fully separable from an embodied stance,<sup>17</sup> a way of living in the body and of persisting, precisely under conditions that attack the very condition of persistence” (Butler 2020, p. 201). One could thus try to flesh out what nonviolent resistance means for both Butler and Gandhi at a very concrete level: how do they see bodies act differently, i.e., in resistance to destructive norms, without availing themselves of violence? What exactly does nonviolent resistance look like concretely, and how does it communicate relationality (an existing social bond) and resistance at the same time? The first idea that the two thinkers share is that nonviolent resistance is neither passivity nor inaction; it is not submission or acquiescence or obedience; instead, it is calculated action. Indeed, when Gandhi first felt called upon to define or describe the “new principle” that had come into being through the collective Indian resistance to the Black Act in the Transvaal (passed in 1906), it was in order to distinguish it more clearly from “passive resistance” and from being viewed as “a weapon of the weak” (Gandhi 1928, p. 121). Gandhi again and again contrasts *Satyagraha* with submission or acquiescence, which results from fear and cowardice.

Secondly, Butler (2020, pp. 21–22) draws upon Gandhi to insist that nonviolence need not be divorced from rage, indignation, or aggression.<sup>18</sup> Nonviolence may well be rooted in these types of emotions and might even be “aggressively” pursued, not too dissimilar from Albert Einstein’s description of himself as a “militant pacifist”. Moreover, Gandhi says it is a force or strength “that arms the votary with matchless power” (Butler 2020,

p. 21). *Satyagraha* is “manly”, he insists, because more courage and strength of character is required for its practice<sup>19</sup> even than for the practice of violent resistance (CWMG 10, p. 93). Notable is that both Butler and Gandhi agree that this “soul force” must be distinguished from the kind of physical strength which aims to coerce through inflicting harm, but that on the other hand, it remains an embodied manifestation (and performance) of strength and of power. Butler (2020, p. 22) describes this physical force as follows: nonviolent resistance presents “a force against force”; it is “an ethical stylization of embodiment, replete with gestures and modes of nonaction, ways of becoming an obstacle, of using the solidity of the body and its proprioceptive object field to block or derail a further exercise of violence”. The power of nonviolence crucially does not lie in its ability to induce fear in the adversary nor to harm them. The performance must thus include a reinforcement of the pre-existing social bonds that bind even resister and oppressor to one another.

At the same time, however, the performance must demonstrate steadfast resistance to, and transgression of, the violent rules and norms that structure the relationship between the two parties, thereby also insisting upon change in the name of radical equality. The *Satyagrahis* use their bodies to enter a field of violence and to simultaneously expose, block, divert and neutralise that violence. Instead of threatening harm, nonviolent resistance aims to transform relationships and the norms that structure them. This is why the body that performs resistance in a nonviolent way must also be understood as engaging in a kind of speech act whereby it communicates a rich set of meanings to a wider world, inclusive of the adversary. Butler (2020, pp. 195–96) provides the example of the “standing man” demonstration in Taksim Square, Istanbul, in 2013, where the demonstrators illuminated the ban on public assembly and free speech, by bizarrely performing it perfectly, thereby simultaneously opposing it. In this manner, nonviolent resistance always forms a key part of a larger conversation and takes it further; it is dialectic at heart. Butler’s key notion of performativity helps to draw out more clearly some of the implications of the power that Gandhi also discerns in the implementation of *Satyagraha*.

Both Butler and Gandhi understand that oppressive systems can only be inaugurated and sustained through the continued cooperation of the oppressed. We have already discussed how Butler sees performativity as the reiterative and citational practices of action, speech and bodily comportment that materialise norms in the world. Gandhi holds a similar view couched in an alternative vocabulary, when he says for example, “Whether there is or there is not any law in force, the Government [of Transvaal] cannot exercise control over us without our cooperation” (Gandhi 1928, p. 172). He thus, based on the traditional Indian practice of *dhurna*, urges the oppressed to withdraw their support and cooperation from the rulers: ‘We cease to play the ruled’ (CWMG 10, p. 114). In addition, in *Satyagraha in South Africa*, Gandhi (1928, p. 144) quotes Kachhalia’s speech, again emphasising the inherent limitations of (normative) violence:

We know how powerful the Transvaal Government is. *But it cannot do anything more than* enact such a law [Black Act]. It will cast us into prison, confiscate our property, deport us or hang us. All this we will bear cheerfully, but we cannot simply put up with this law (emphasis added).

We know that with its beginnings in the Transvaal, *Satyagraha* entailed that participants first refused to obtain passes that would regulate their movement, courting arrest. After promises made by the government, they registered voluntarily for passes and in a third movement publicly gathered to burn their passes as a way of registering their disobedience to the oppressive norms contained in the Black Act (Gandhi 1928, p. 144). Even though the actions might seem to be contradictory, Gandhi explains in his narrative how they are part of an ongoing conversation between the Indian population and the Transvaal Government and how the different actions all correspond with essentially the same message of nonviolent noncooperation with the hate-filled spirit of the Black Act. Different expressions of that noncooperation were needed at different points in the dialogue. Typically, we become docile and obedient bodies out of fear of the hidden (or not so hidden) violence (used for punishing, shaming, ostracizing, or otherwise injuring or killing) that undergirds the

dominant norms. This is why it is imperative that in their public actions, *Satyagrahis* first and foremost display and communicate the absence of fear—this courage in an important way starts to shift relations of domination. This is because, as Gandhi understood, if one forces another to do something against their will, only through violence or threat of violence, then “what is granted under [such] fear, can be retained only so long as the fear lasts” (CWMG 10, p. 78). In contrast, nonviolent resistance aims to change the will of the opponent itself.

Both thinkers therefore conceive of nonviolent resistance as meaningful, communicative action, which plays out in a kind of dialectic that enters into conversation with violent oppression, even as it disrupts and deflates (indicates the inherent limits of) the latter’s logic. Neither underestimates the salience of structural or normative violence that denies subject status to some groups of people. One could perhaps say that nonviolent resistance triggers the latent self-defence mechanisms of instituted norms and their guardians and thereby reveals the physical violence that lies coiled just underneath the surface of structural violence, parading as peace. Often, the open performance of disobedience reveals, through activating, the hidden yet pervasive violence required for the sustenance of the *status quo*. Another way of putting this point might be to say that nonviolent resistance brings privately suffered dehumanisation into the public domain and insists upon its political, thus shared, social, importance. It has a way of transforming or translating often indirect, mutely and passively borne violation, humiliation and suffering in the form of debilitating injustices, into a public spectacle of overt violence.<sup>20</sup> It thereby makes systemic, invisible injuries visible for a wider audience and calls everyone as a witness. As Butler (2020, p. 22) describes the bodily act of nonviolent resistance, it “exposes the body to police power” and it “enters the field of violence” and “exercises an adamant and embodied form of political agency”. It thus seems that when bodies “speak differently” in this specific sense, they do the work of translating injustice into complaint, victims into political agents, the everyday into spectacle, and nonsubjects into subjects. They do this performatively, by bringing to light violence and suffering that had been designed to be invisible or at least normalised socially.

Thousands of “everyday”, dispersed humiliations or degradations suffered by a whole community get telescoped, gathered together, in the body of the one who publicly performs the disobedience, who “gives his or her body” in this way, in an attempt to force the system to change. In order to shed light simultaneously on the dignity of the oppressed and on the indignity of their treatment by the system, these nonviolent resisters must often face the direct violence that their disobedient or queering actions tend to unleash. Gandhi understood very well that this type of action is likely to bring harm upon the resister, and he sees “the potency of suffering” as lying at the heart of *Satyagraha*. Because *Satyagraha* aims for “the conquest of the adversary” purely through persuasion, it cannot be reconciled with causing him harm. By suffering in one’s own person (Gandhi 1928, p. 124), one performatively works to “transform both oneself and social reality”, writes Butler (2020, p. 22).

With the help of Butler’s lens of performativity, one can therefore see Gandhi’s *Satyagraha* also as a kind of public performance furthering an ongoing conversation. It was important for him that *Satyagraha* must manifest as open, collective transgression enacted in public. He made sure the authorities were informed about their plans and about what exactly they meant to convey by their actions.<sup>21</sup> Truth and transparency were an indispensable part of the movement, and this is because a type of communication, a dialectic, characterises the actions of the *Satyagrahis*. When Gandhi looks back upon the confrontation between the Indian and White communities in Durban in 1896, he is convinced that “our firm stance proved [to the Europeans] that the Indians, poor as they were, were no cowards, and . . . were prepared to fight for their self-respect and for their country regardless of loss” (Gandhi 1928, p. 67). Foreshadowing the notion of *Satyagraha* as dialectic and resonating with Butler, Gandhi shows that the event not only communicated their resistance to their opponents but also to themselves: “The [Indian] community [in Natal] had an opportunity of measuring their own strength and their self-confidence increased in

consequence. I had a most valuable experience, and whenever I think of that day, I feel that God was preparing me for the practice of *Satyagraha*" (Gandhi 1928, p. 67). Recall that the first task of the nonviolent resister is to perform fearlessness, because fear of normative violence is what upholds any unjust system. By performing the self-respect, dignity and courage that manifest in active disobedience, the *Satyagrahi* galvanise love force within their own ranks and community and trigger the imagination of the oppressed as much as the oppressors and bystanders and of the larger world. Another organisation of the world starts to appear as possible and even desirable: it is the social imaginary that is activated.

These descriptions show clearly how the bodily performance of steadfast yet non-violent resistance by the Indians in Natal and Transvaal acted at once communicatively (as relational) and transformatively (as resistance). It led to a re-evaluation of themselves and their relations with others in all of the affected parties, and even beyond them, in the larger national and international worlds. For the *Satyagrahis* to bodily perform their disobedience is to demonstrate that they have lost the fear that is needed to keep them docile, and in this manner, the "spell" that normative violence holds over a community is broken. When its rules are broken in such an open and collective way, everybody realises that the norms are dependent upon large-scale buy-in, upon a tacit social contract, and accompanying bodily habits, and that the social contract may have to be renegotiated.<sup>22</sup> This is the way in which *Satyagraha* as bodily performance has the power to change social realities. As a form of communication, it respects the social bonds that hold together the human world, but as a form of contestation, it insists that the way those bonds are organised is violent and destructive to some and therefore has to be, and can be, changed. By staging a different performance, highlighting the violent clash between the dignity of the lives of the oppressed and the destructive structures of oppression, it urges and supports the community as a whole to imagine a different social world, more respectful of everybody's becoming-subject. By forcing into the open a hidden clash or contradiction, *Satyagraha* tries to force some form of metaphoric resolution beyond the status quo: how should the social world and its embedded norms be transformed in order for the dignity of the oppressed to be accommodated within them? It should by now be clear why for both Butler and Gandhi, nonviolence cannot simply be one strategy amongst others (including violent ones)—just like violence, it cannot be reduced to *technē* but is properly understood as a *praxis*, a kind of virtue. This topic is taken further in the fourth and final theme.

#### 2.4. Nonviolence Viewed as a Way of Life

It is noteworthy that a crucial moment at the start of the *Satyagraha* movement in Transvaal was the taking of an oath by the Indian community, on 11 September 1906. At the meeting that was held to decide how to respond to the proposed Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance (also called the Black Act), Seth Haji Habib proposed they should all "solemnly" declare "in the name of God that [they] would never submit to that law" (Gandhi 1928, p. 112). Gandhi, who was "taken aback" by Habib's proposal, because of its solemnity, then spoke at length to the meeting about the individual responsibility that goes with swearing such an oath. He stated, "Everyone must only search his own heart, and if the inner voice assures him that he has the requisite strength to carry him through, then only should he pledge himself and then only will his pledge bear fruit" (Gandhi 1928, p. 115). He laid before the meeting the likely harm they will suffer if they stayed on this path of nonsubmission, including imprisonment, insult, hunger, hard labour, flogging, fines, loss of property, illness, deportation, and even death. Recall that Gandhi understood suffering to be integral to the practice of *Satyagraha*. He also understood that what was required for its success was a steadfastness in the face of suffering, great personal strength. When it came to *Satyagraha*, there was no hiding in the mob: "Although we are going to take the pledge in a body, no one should imagine that default on the part of one or many can absolve the rest from their obligation" (Gandhi 1928, pp. 116–17). This understanding of the nonviolent resister as an internally disciplined individual, who holds firmly onto both love and truth at the same time, runs through all of Gandhi's writings.

When the Indians first read the Ordinance and saw that even women might be required to produce passes, one of them responded with anger, saying that if his wife were to be confronted in this manner, “[he] would shoot [the officer] on that spot and take the consequences”. To this, Gandhi responded that the Ordinance is indeed “designed to strike at the very root of [Indian] existence in South Africa”, but at the same time, “[i]t will not do to be hasty, impatient or angry. That cannot save us from this onslaught. But God will come to our help, if we calmly think out and carry out in time measures of resistance, presenting a united front and bearing the hardship, which such resistance brings in its train” (Gandhi 1928, p. 110). Clearly, then, he recognises the legitimacy of their anger, but implies that to act purely out of emotion renders the action ineffectual. Acting from emotions of hurt weakens us; instead, the *Satyagrahis* must act out of strength, and thus the cultivation of inner strength and especially courage is a constant task of nonviolent resisters. This is why we do not fully agree with Butler (2020, p. 21) when they enlist Gandhi to argue that nonviolence might be “an expression of rage, indignation, and aggression” and “does not necessarily emerge from a . . . calm part of the soul”. While resistance surely emerges from an emotional part of the soul, a place of righteous indignation, for Gandhi, *Satyagraha* as a collective movement must mediate and transform those emotions from (understandable) feelings of rage, helplessness, humiliation and so on, into the kind of strength and determination that accompany calculated and strategic action. Maybe above all, anger must be transmuted into the kind of self-discipline and willingness to self-sacrifice that the movement requires.

He speaks of *Satyagraha* as a type of warfare and *Satyagrahis* as “soldiers of peace” (CWMG 69, p. 274), who have to be similarly self-disciplined as soldiers of war, even much more so. Just as nonviolent resistance does not stand alone as a mere instrument or strategy but is rooted in a complete ontology (as explained in Section (i)), its practice should ideally be rooted in nonviolence as a virtuous way of life that is cultivated over time. Gandhi proposed various practices of what might be described (following Foucault) as “care of the self”, including a vegetarian diet, physical exercise, physical labour, meditation, fasting, and so on. Because *Satyagraha* is a kind of virtue ethics, we have to acknowledge that it takes time to be cultivated, and Gandhi’s own struggles have moreover shown that it often takes a long time to achieve the desired effect. The struggle in Transvaal lasted eight years (from 1906 to 1914). A large part of the *Satyagrahis*’ steadfastness relates to their ability to keep at the struggle in the face of setbacks, even if it lasts years.

Although Butler does not engage directly with the self-discipline and self-sacrifice that Gandhi sees as required from the *Satyagrahis*, their lengthy engagement with the constant potential for relations of interdependency to “become a scene of aggression, conflict and violence” (Butler 2020, p. 50), because the human condition of interdependency is “intolerable” at times (Butler 2020, p. 96), resonates well with Gandhi’s concern described above. Butler’s understanding of nonviolence as a way of life is also embedded in their ethical praxis. In fact, Butler urges us to “embed our ethical reflections within an egalitarian imaginary” because “the imaginary life turns out to be an important part of this reflection, even a condition for the practice of nonviolence” (Butler 2020, p. 77). Part of practicing these ethical reflections, which Butler (2020, p. 64) views as a “relational obligation”, also include continuously subverting and resisting individualised modes of subjectivity through collective, performative action.

Further, their social ontology and deep insight into our constitutive relationality are not a romantic picture; instead, our implicatedness in one another is “lived out as an ambivalent social bond, one that constantly poses the ethical demand to negotiate aggression” (Butler 2020, p. 69). With the help of Freud and Klein, Butler tries “to think aggression as part of any social bond” and to consider the ways in which we construct rationales for “acting aggressively against an aggression that is [supposedly] coming from the outside” (Butler 2020, p. 80). These rationales (of self-defence) usually occlude our own capacity for and involvement in, violence enacted upon others. Thus, for Butler, there is no pure love force, absolutely separable from hatred, as there is for Gandhi. Instead,

“hatred for the ones upon whom one is intolerably dependent is surely part of what is signified by the destructiveness that invariably surges forth in relations of love” (Butler 2020, p. 98). In fact, (western) “phantasies of sovereign self-sufficiency” are infantile remnants of this unbearable dependency, a dependency that can nevertheless never be eradicated (Butler 2020, p. 99). What we see them nevertheless share with Gandhi is the understanding that the capacity for violence exists in every one of us, not in spite, but because of our fundamental and ineradicable sociality, and that therefore, self-examination and vigilance about one’s own capacity, even lust, for violence must form a constant companion to the ideal of nonviolence. Even more clearly than Gandhi, Butler sees how violence and nonviolence are intermingled, not only in the politicised nature of their respective naming, but also in the very act of resistance itself. This is why they remind us of everybody’s capacity for violence, and to be mindful of “the tipping point, the site where the force of resistance can become the violent act or practice that commits a fresh injustice” (Butler 2020, p. 23). In this different emphasis, we detect a similar vigilance to Gandhi’s concern about the purity of soul and steadfastness that we described as a kind of individual-focused virtue ethics in his thinking, but one might say that Butler’s focus is more on the collective. They are namely concerned about the ever-present possibility that collective resistance may turn violent and become indistinguishable from the violence that it professes to oppose, thereby losing the force that is unique to a nonviolent stance.

### 3. Concluding Remarks

The need to reimagine and practice nonviolent resistance continues as violent institutions and systems prevail within the global and South African contexts, and as people attempt to oppose this violence through violence of their own.<sup>23</sup> These conditions, we expect, will only worsen in the near future, under the impact of global communicative diseases and other challenges related to the climate crisis that deepen and starkly illuminate growing inequalities. Social and economic change is as urgent as economic and technological changes, and thus questions about the best means for change will only intensify. In considering the option of nonviolent resistance, we should be encouraged and empowered by the Guidelines for the Right of Peaceful Assembly<sup>24</sup> adopted by the United Nations in July 2020 that strongly reinforce the right to nonviolent assembly and protest as an integral aspect of promoting and strengthening democracy.

We propose that the nonviolent option of social transformation that both Gandhi and Butler put forward is a valuable option, even if it requires patience, hard work, and endurance. It might even seem unfair to expect these virtues, together with self-discipline and self-care, from those who remain precarious and ungrieveable. However, from our righteous anger about the layers of oppression carried by the worst off, all citizens should draw inspiration for this struggle and build alliances with and between marginalized groups and communities. In this respect, social movements should think about building and training “armies of peace” drawn from different sectors of society. Crucially, if we cultivate the social imaginary that Butler and Gandhi both endorse, then both religiously and nonreligiously motivated citizens can together acknowledge the inescapability of our interdependency and on that basis form alliances around radical equality and world-building. Although the struggle is unlikely to be either quick or easy, their proposal of nonviolence shows how thousands of smaller struggles might be envisioned as joining up and taking on a whole new, collaborative character, inspiring all of us (including the authorities) at the level of the social imagination, leading to more lasting and more inclusive social transformation.

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## Notes

- 1 Judith Butler identifies as nonbinary. We therefore make use of the they/them pronouns throughout this article. Our sincere thanks go to the two anonymous reviewers for *Religions*, for their very helpful suggestions, this being one of them.
- 2 *Satya* means truth or love; and *agraha* means force.
- 3 Foucault (1982, p. 781) formulates a similar criticism of individualism, saying our resistance must “attack everything which separates the individual, breaks his links with others, splits up community life, forces the individual back on himself, and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way”.
- 4 Like vulnerability, grievability is also differentially distributed, says Butler (2009, p. 37). Their primary example is the ways in which the US citizens were individually mourned after 9/11, contrasted with the anonymity and subjectlessness of the thousands of Afghani citizens who were killed by the US military in retaliation (in *Precarious Life*, Butler 2004a). This idea of ungrievability resonates with Rob Nixon’s discussion of slow violence. He writes, “By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.” One of his examples is when toxins are dumped in Africa as an “out of sight” continent (Nixon 2011, p. 2).
- 5 Gandhi’s idea that empathy is a force active in the world is a precursor the work of Damasio (2000) on neuroscience, human cognition and the role of the emotions.
- 6 With their shared emphasis on the work and force of love and social bonds, Gandhi and Butler may be said to share a feminist imaginary, although it remains problematic that Gandhi equates love force with nature and thereby might be accused of erasing typical women’s work as labour.
- 7 See his famous Kingsley Hall speech of 1931 (Gandhi 1931), available at Mohandas Gandhi—Address at Kingsley Hall—Online Speech Bank ([americanrhetoric.com](http://americanrhetoric.com) (accessed on 4 July 2021)).
- 8 Butler and Gandhi are equally sceptical about the justification of violence as a more effective means to bring about social transformation, as we discuss in the next section. For example, Butler (2020, p. 13) writes: “One of the strongest arguments for the use of violence on the left is that it is tactically necessary in order to defeat structural and systemic violence, or to dismantle a violent regime, such as apartheid, dictatorship, or totalitarianism. That may well be right, and I don’t dispute it. But for that argument to work, we would need to know what distinguishes the violence of the regime from the violence that seeks to take it down”.
- 9 This difference in their ontological basis (spiritual versus social) reflects the difference in the vocabularies that they use to describe our shared impetus for nonviolent resistance.
- 10 There is some debate about this, but it would seem that Gandhi’s principle of nonviolence is in the end not an absolute principle. He concedes that circumstances may arise where violent force is needed. See his discussion of some examples in *Hind Swaraj*, p. 80, a child rushing into a fire and a thief breaking into one’s house. The point is that for Gandhi, such instances are exceedingly rare, and because nonviolence is better in every respect than violence, the former should receive much more scope and consideration from social activists. Similarly, Butler (2020, p. 56) writes, “nonviolence is not an absolute principle, but an open-ended struggle with violence and its countervailing forces”.
- 11 I (Louise du Toit) am grateful to the late Christof Heyns for bringing this point home to me in a discussion at STIAS during March 2021.
- 12 In setting out his opposition to violence, Gandhi argues that his creed of nonviolence compels him to associate with “all those who believe in violence”, but only in order to wean them away from their error. Tellingly, and somewhat tempering of his strong belief in nonviolence and love force, he adds, “Even if my belief [in nonviolence] is a fond delusion, it will be admitted that it is a fascinating delusion” (CWMG 25, p. 424). His “fond delusion” we argue, is a counter-cultural, or radically egalitarian, way of viewing the world.
- 13 Of course, the rejection of an instrumental view of violence is shared by numerous advocates of nonviolence and not just Gandhi and Butler specifically. Hannah Arendt, for one, likewise cautions that violence tends to exceed the limits of instrumental logic, i.e., it has “an overwhelming and generative character . . . which, abandoned to its own logic, loses the distinction between means and aims” (Varela Manograsso 2017).
- 14 This may be read as a kind of Girardian insight into mimetic desire which leads to an escalation of violence that eventually gets separated from the original source of desire and turns into a mirroring desire for violence as such (cf. Palaver 2013).
- 15 An example is the frequency with which critics of repressive regimes are charged with “incitement to violence”, whatever form their opposition takes. Butler (2020, p. 5) gives an example from Turkey, 2016.
- 16 It is illuminating to refer here to the decolonising work done by Stein et al. (2021, p. 50). They describe “the house modernity built” (or modern coloniality) as founded upon the “illusion of separation”, as if some people can be definitively and successfully separated from others, and humans from the natural world that sustains us.
- 17 Gandhi held a dualist view of body and mind/soul (see, e.g., CWMG 52, p. 258), yet we agree with Butler who sees no inconsistency in asking how Gandhi’s notion of “soul force” manifests in particular bodily behaviours, and one could add, in a variety of self-disciplining rituals such as fasting, prayer and handicraft.

- 18 We later show that Gandhi's understanding of the emotions is more complicated than Butler implies here.
- 19 An earlier footnote already commented on the problematic ways in which Gandhi genders *Satyagraha*. When it is linked with the cosmic love force, he seems to erase typical women's work of patient yet invisible world-building. However, he gives many examples of women's nonviolent resistance such as the Boer women and the Suffragettes that inspired him (Gandhi 1928). In other places in his work, he emphasises *Satyagraha* as a manly virtue, thereby equating women with cowardice. As with many other 'experiments with truth', he seems to have shifted his position over time, towards greater inclusion of women as practitioners of *Satyagraha*.
- 20 An excellent example is the peaceful civil rights marches that took place in Selma, Alabama, in the USA, in March 1965. They were met with considerable state violence, e.g., on "Bloody Sunday". In organising these protests, Martin Luther King Jr was greatly inspired by Gandhi (see Gandhi, Mohandas K. | The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute ([stanford.edu](http://stanford.edu) (accessed on 5 July 2021))).
- 21 An example was the public burning of the passes in the Transvaal (Gandhi 1928, p. 312).
- 22 We are reminded of Abraham Joshua Heschel's insight that in a free society, if there is oppression and violence, only some are guilty, but all are responsible (see the documentary "Spiritual Audacity: The Abraham Joshua Heschel Story", MPT Presents | Spiritual Audacity: The Abraham Joshua Heschel Story | PBS)).
- 23 South Africa specifically witnessed recent protest following a court judgement that sentenced former-President Jacob Zuma to 15 months in prison. The provinces of Kwazulu-Natal and Gauteng (coincidentally where Gandhi also lived in South Africa) experienced civil disorder, including wide-spread acts of looting and violence (such as burning of trucks and looting of grocery stores). The events led to a death toll of over 300 people and thousands of arrests were made by the police (Thamm 2021). While it is beyond the scope of this paper, we believe that Gandhi and Butler read together offer an enriching perspective with which to analyse these events and consider the legacy of nonviolence for contemporary South Africa.
- 24 Christof Heyns headed up the committee that developed these guidelines.

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