



HUMANITIES RESEARCH CENTRE  
in the RESEARCH SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES

WORK-IN-PROGRESS SEMINAR SERIES

## *Ungrievable Lives*

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**Tuesday, 3 April, 2007  
at 4.00pm**

**Theatrette, Old Canberra House, ANU**

The idea of the 'ungrievable life' is used by Judith Butler in several of her works to capture the absence of any great mourning or public outcry that met deaths from AIDS amongst a largely homosexual population in the US in the 80s and 90s. Through her work on gender she links heterosexuality's status as a norm to the 'de-realization' of lives viewed as deviant. Thus those who lost partners, lovers and friends from AIDS, suffered losses which could not count properly either privately or publicly, since according to the dominant cultural norms legitimating heterosexuality, relations of homosexual attachment do not bear the value of kin or indeed of 'real' love. Butler has extended her thought on these issues to consider, for instance, the massive differential in value attributed to the lives of those who died in the terrorist attacks of 9/11 as opposed to those who became mere 'collateral damage' in the war on Afghanistan, pointing to the ways in which stark dichotomies of public grievability and ungrievability, enter into the work of nation-building. The public distribution of the grievability of lives can be traced, Butler suggests, in the obituary, which both confers recognition of a note-worthy life and offers a kind of humanization in the narrative it constructs. It is telling, then, that as she remarks, there are 'no obituaries for the war casualties that the United States inflicts and *there cannot be*' (emphases mine, *Precarious Life*, 2004, 34).

But what is the status and force of that '*cannot be*' in the life that is ungrievable? This paper explores how Butler's core questions - 'whose life counts as life? whose loss counts as loss?' - arise out of reflection upon the multiple ways in which counting *as* something or *for* something is structured by modes of power that link reality or intelligibility to 'mattering' (connoting both materiality and significance). If ungrievable lives haunt the borders of the liberal-democratic public domain, then what strategies can we imagine that would be appropriate to countering or undoing the violence perpetrated in the de-realization that makes a life not count as life or a death not count as death?

Fiona Jenkins is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the Australian National University. She has published many essays on contemporary issues and events from a philosophical perspective in journals including *The Australian Journal of Human Rights*, *Practical Philosophy*, *Angelaki*, *Constellations*, and *borderlands*. The research project being pursued at the HRC is organized around the theme of 'ungrievable lives'. Broadly the research is concerned with thinking philosophically about how some lives are socially constituted as mattering more than others even in contexts where there is formal equality; and with how a critical understanding of such differential construction should inflect ethical and political reflection. Of particular interest here is the way in which media representations of lives and deaths can be critically evaluated.

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