

Junkies and Super Models: (Mis)recognition, Vulnerability, and Social Change in Susan Musgrave's *Origami Dove*

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ABSTRACT

This essay uses Judith Butler's theories on gender and precarious and misrecognized bodies as a framework of gender and precarious and misrecognized bodies for understanding Susan Musgrave's 2011 collection of poems, *Origami Dove*. This essay primarily uses Butler's *Frames of War* (2009) in its analysis of *Origami Dove*, but also makes use of Butler's *Gender Trouble* (2006). This essay is specifically interested in how analysing *Origami Dove* through the framework of allows it to become a critique of modern society, since it exposes the ways in which society provokes and perpetuates the misrecognition or dehumanization of certain bodies. By applying Butler's theories to Musgrave's *Origami Dove*, this essay attempts to make Butler's complex ideas more accessible while also exposing Musgrave's work as thought provoking and unique in its perspective on contemporary society.

Susan Musgrave's 2011 collection of poetry, *Origami Dove*, depicts subjects whose bodies are deemed non-normative according to cultural and societal standards, and who become "misrecognized"¹ by the outside world.² Musgrave's poetry explores the ways in which society develops and maintains a normative discourse that continues to misrecognize bodies that fall outside of the dominant discourse of language, and the effects that this has on the lives of those bodies. The subjects articulated in *Origami Dove* experience a relationship with the outside world that recalls Judith Butler's interpretation of vulnerable bodies and morphological constraints, which allows for such bodies to become misrecognized or unrecognizable. Additionally, Musgrave's poetry articulates how the suffering of misrecognized bodies is perpetuated by the ways that these bodies are represented by the outside world. Through a primary analysis of three poems (the eponymous *Origami Dove* and two poems entitled *Question:*), combined with the theoretical framework of Judith Butler, this essay will explore how bodies become misrecognized,

1 To be "misrecognized" refers to the act of understanding or recognizing a human being as something other than human, as a result of societal norms.

2 In this essay, the "outside world" refers to everything that the body is exposed to that exerts an influence either directly or indirectly.

and how the outside world works to develop and enforce their misrecognition by maintaining a normative cultural discourse. Further, this essay will explore the extent to which Musgrave exposes normative frameworks as harmful in *Origami Dove* in an attempt to re-establish personhood in misrecognized bodies.

In order to locate and understand the development of vulnerable and misrecognized bodies in *Origami Dove*, it is important to understand how these concepts are explained and interpreted by Butler. In *Frames of War*, Butler writes: “In its surface and its depth, the body is a social phenomenon: it is exposed to others, vulnerable by definition,” and “in order to ‘be,’ in the sense of ‘persist,’ it (the body) must rely on what is outside itself.”³ Here, in addition to suggesting that every body is inherently vulnerable in its inevitable exposure to others, Butler is distinguishing a relationship between bodies and “what is outside” of these bodies, and suggesting that the treatment of bodies is dependent on how they are recognized by the outside world. Butler also states that “It (the body) is outside itself, in the world of others, in a space and time it does not control,”⁴ and “the body does not belong to itself.”⁵ To understand the body in this way allows the body’s existence to be created and determined only by what is “outside itself” and “not belonging” to it.

In *Origami Dove*, Musgrave’s subjects reflect Butler’s theory of vulnerable bodies, as their lives are dependent on their surroundings, and how others in their surroundings perceive them. For example, in one of her poems entitled *Question:1*,⁶ Musgrave writes: “they see a druggie, the whore, the junkie. / I’d like them to see me as their daughter, a sister, a lover, their mother.”⁷ The desire for the speaker of this poem to be seen as a “daughter” rather than a “druggie” is motivated by the desire to be recognized by the outside world as a respectable identity with the hope of being treated like a human being. The speaker’s

3 Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2009), 33.

4 Butler, “Frames,” 52.

5 *Ibid.*, 53.

6 This essay closely discusses two poems from *Origami Dove* with the same title, the title being *Question:*. For clarity, this essay will differentiate between said poems by referring to *Question:* (Musgrave 99) as *Question: 1* and *Question:* (Musgrave 95) as *Question: 2*.

7 Susan Musgrave, *Origami Dove* (Toronto, Ontario: McClelland and Stewart, 2011), 99.

body, however, has already been marked as non-normative according to cultural expectations and, because the speaker's body is contingent on her relationship to the outside world, her identity is in a constant state of misrecognition. Further, the speaker here is being misrecognized as simply a “junkie,” and various other additional identities such as mother or daughter become ignored. This simplification of the body, as being “just a junkie,” allows the complexity of the speaker to be lost, thus dehumanizing her.

Origami Dove also examines how the appearance of our bodies becomes a determinant in how we are recognized by society, if at all. In another poem entitled *Question: 2*,⁸ Musgrave parallels the life of a female drug addict to the life of a female super model:

The runway, the alleyway, it's all
The same. Sex, drugs, money- the same.
It's got the same look, the same hook,
the same old same.⁹

Here, Musgrave compares two lifestyles that are perceived as polar opposites by the outside world. Modeling is associated with glamour and beauty and being a junkie is associated with disease, poverty, and unhappiness. Musgrave however blurs the line between these two lifestyles, suggesting that they incorporate the same elements (drugs, sex, and money). There remains a distinct differentiation between being a “cover girl” and being a drug addict, however, this is entirely determined by the appearance of their respective bodies. The speaker of this poem states:

I was a cover girl
once, a fashion model; for a while
I thought I'd died and gone to my next life,
but then I got high, started losing
weight, I got too skinny for what they wanted
me to be. The last shots they took
I'm wearing gloves up to my elbows
to hide the tracks.¹⁰

⁸ This essay closely discusses two poems from *Origami Dove* with the same title, the title being *Question*. For clarity, this essay will differentiate between said poems by referring to *Question*: (Musgrave 99) as *Question: 1* and *Question*: (Musgrave 95) as *Question: 2*.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

The appearance of the speaker comes to determine how she is perceived by the outside world, and forces her to move from being a model, where she would be constantly observed, idolized, and recognized by the outside world, to a drug addict, where she becomes useless to the modeling industry. The drug addict continues to be observed, but is misrecognized by the outside world as being only a junkie.

In “Torture and the Ethics of Photography”, Butler proposes, “to consider the way in which suffering is presented to us, and how that presentation affects our responsiveness.”¹¹ Here, Butler primarily focuses her theories on presentations of suffering in photography. Nonetheless, this chapter is useful in exploring how suffering is presented to us through language in Musgrave’s *Origami Dove*. Butler seeks “to understand how the *frames* that allocate the recognisability of certain figures of the human are themselves linked with the broader *norms* that determine what will and will not be a grievable life.”¹² Further, Butler suggests that such norms produce “the nearly impossible paradox of the human who is non human or of the human who effaces the human as it is otherwise known.”¹³ Similarly, in *Origami Dove*, Musgrave portrays the suffering of bodies as being a product of misrecognition, perpetuated by normative frameworks, which, in turn, enforce exclusion of certain bodies by presenting them as “ungrievable”.

In the aforementioned poem Question: 1, Musgrave articulates how normative frameworks perpetuate the suffering of bodies by recognizing the outside world as just that, a series of normative frameworks which work to misrecognize and thus dehumanize certain bodies.¹⁴ This dehumanization of bodies by normative frameworks enforces the paradox that exists within the human who does not “qualify as human.”¹⁵ Musgrave articulates interpretive frameworks in the poem Question: 1 by her use of pronouns, which enforce the “us and them” dichotomy that

11 Butler, “Frames,” 63.

12 Ibid., 63-64.

13 Ibid., 76.

14 “Normative framework” may refer to any system, person, institution or aspect of social media such as certain newspapers, police offices, teachers, political figures, television programs, etc., which work to perpetuate or enforce a specific perspective as being dominant and normal.

15 Ibid.

exists between misrecognized bodies and the outside world. The speaker constantly refers to herself as “I,” while anyone else is referred to as “them” or “they:” “When *they* cruise the street, / stop for a red light at the corner / where / stand waiting in the rain / *they* see scabs on my face, festering / sores, scars, rotting teeth.”¹⁶ The use of pronouns in Question: 1 articulates the separation between misrecognized bodies and the outside world and in doing so demonstrates how normative frameworks allow some humans to be recognized and some to be misrecognized. While the “them” in this poem may “stop for a red light,”¹⁷ “they” will eventually “rev their engine”¹⁸ and “crank / up the heat.”¹⁹ In contrast, the “I” is left to “stand waiting in the rain.”²⁰ The freedom of “them” located within the car humanizes their existence, which contrasts with the speaker’s existence, whose mobility is portrayed as limited; almost non-existent. This paradox reflects Butler’s statement that “some humans qualify as human; some humans do not.”²¹ Further, this poem suggests that those bodies that are misrecognized, such as the speaker of this poem, do not suffer because of their “scabs,” “sores,” “scars” or “rotting teeth.”²² Instead, misrecognized bodies suffer from the awareness of their own dehumanization by the outside world. The speaker of this poem, for instance, admits not only that she has “the desire / to make the best of it,”²³ but that she wants the outside world, or “*them*” to “*see*” that “*desire*.”²⁴

In the poem Question: 1, Musgrave epitomizes Butler’s assertion of the paradoxical existence²⁵ a body experiences if recognized as “not human.”²⁶ Butler states:

16 Musgrave, “Origami,” 99. Emphasis added.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 100.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 99.

21 Butler, “Frames,” 76.

22 Musgrave, “Origami,” 99.

23 Ibid., 100.

24 Ibid. Emphasis added.

25 Though the dehumanized or misrecognized human is physically human, they are perceived as non human by the outside world. Thus, “paradoxical existence” refers to the experience by the dehumanized/misrecognized being who is at once both human and non human.

26 Butler, “Frames,” 76.

Wherever there is the human, there is the inhuman; when we now proclaim as human some group of beings who have previously not been considered to be, in fact, human, we admit that the claim to “humanness” is a shifting prerogative. Some humans take their humanness for granted, while others struggle to gain access to it.²⁷

Here, Butler suggests there is a tension between the human and the inhuman, while also asserting that “humanness” is a privilege in that it can be lost or gained. In *Question: 1*, Musgrave explores this tension by portraying the speaker as a body who has moved out of the sphere that is considered “human” and into an “inhuman” sphere. The speaker recollects her “human” past: “What I wanted to be? There’s a / question. I was a cover girl / once, a fashion model; for a while,”²⁸ and her transition from being “human” to being “inhuman:” “but then I got high, started losing / weight, I got too skinny for what they wanted / me to be.”²⁹ Returning to this latter quotation allows us to realize the speaker’s understanding of her position in the world as a misrecognized being, and thus inhuman. The transition from human to inhuman depicted in *Question: 2* reflects “humanness” as a privilege, in that it is not accessible to everyone. Further, *Question: 2* suggests that if a body gains recognition as “human” such recognition is not necessarily permanent. This strengthens Butler’s assertion that all bodies are precarious, which implies that in the social world, “one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other.”³⁰ Additionally, as with *Question: 2*, the subject in *Question: 1* comprehends her own intelligibility as a human according to how she understands herself to be perceived by the outside world. While the speaker’s appearance began to change, she became useless to “them” (the outside world), and this uselessness has rendered the subject unintelligible, or inhuman.³¹

Musgrave structures each poem entitled *Question:* in a manner that is conducive to the development of the reader’s understanding of how the outside world normalizes frameworks as a means for creating and maintaining the dehumanization of misrecognized bodies. The poem *Question: 1* begins with a question: “What do they think about you, /

27 Ibid.

28 Musgrave, “Origami,” 95.

29 Ibid.

30 Butler, “Frames,” 14.

31 Ibid., 76.

the people who pass you on the street? / What would you like them to see?,"³² and is then answered by the speaker: "They see the druggie, the whore, the junkie."³³ Question: 2 also begins with a question: "Did you have dreams? / What did you want to be?"³⁴ By structuring the poems entitled Question: in this way, Musgrave suggests that this communication between misrecognized bodies and the outside world contributes to the humanization of the speaker's body, because she is given a sense of purpose and the opportunity to speak and be heard. Additionally, the question imposed on the speakers of these poems allows for the speakers to be both heard and understood, exposing the reader to a perspective within normative frameworks that is generally ignored. By creating a conversation in Question: 1 and Question: 2 between the outside world and the misrecognized speaker, Musgrave is re-establishing personhood within the speaker and by doing so is arguably insinuating a position in support of social and political change.

In "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," from *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes: "For feminist theory, the development of a language that fully or adequately represents women has seemed necessary to foster the political visibility of women."³⁵ This statement becomes essential in exploring the ways in which cultural norms are represented through media and language. It shows how representations of what is considered to be "normal" perpetuate the misrecognition of bodies outside of such normative ideals. Butler suggests that there is a need for language to represent women in ways that foster their visibility, which implies that, outside of feminist theory, this language does not exist. Musgrave explores the limitations of normative language, and examines how the failure of such a language to adequately represent women serves to create and maintain the misrecognition of specific female bodies by the outside world.

Not only do Musgrave's poems articulate the difficulty of existing as a misrecognized subject in society, they also examine the ways in which the outside world maintains the misrecognition of bodies by

32 Musgrave, "Origami," 99.

33 Ibid.

34 Musgrave, "Origami," 95.

35 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2006), page.

imposing upon them a set of what Butler terms “ideal morphological constraints.”³⁶³⁷ Butler goes as far in suggesting that those subjects “who fail to approximate the norm” of such “ideal morphological constraints” may become so misrecognized by the outside world that they are “condemned to a death within life.”³⁸ Musgrave’s poem entitled *Origami Dove* examines the methods the outside world uses through language and media that both create and maintain the misrecognition of bodies who fail to exhibit their bodies in an “ideal” form. She writes: “One gunshot wound to the head is all it takes / to assure your allotted space in today’s / *News of the World* beside the Bangladeshi woman / caned 101 times for having an abortion.”³⁹ This passage indicates that the “*News of the World*”⁴⁰ is the only space in society where violence can be recognized and discussed. This is problematic, since the spaces allotted in the “*News of the World*” are forgotten on a daily basis, allowing the suffering of misrecognized bodies to go unnoticed. Later in the poem, Musgrave writes: “There are 101 words / for *freedom*, not one from the kind of pain / the woman must have suffered after 101 / lashes with a cane.”⁴¹ The dominant language of society, which fails to incorporate words that are able to express the suffering imposed upon her, further misrecognizes the Bangladeshi woman, whose body deems her misrecognizable for having an abortion. The language of the outside world’s ability to articulate “freedom,” however, suggests that language deems words associated with happiness, movement and progression as being more important than those that represent suffering and sadness imposed upon women. Further, “101 words / for *freedom*”⁴² allows any recognition of suffering amongst women to become hidden, perpetuating the misrecognition of women who suffer.

Musgrave’s application of the “*News of the World*” in *Origami Dove* allows her to critique the media for its representations of human

36 “Ideal morphological constraints” refers to how the concept of an “ideal” way to live, look or act imposed upon bodies by society creates limitations for human beings whose bodies do not necessarily fit into is considered to be an “ideal” form.

37 *Ibid.*, xxi.

38 *Ibid.*

39 Musgrave, “*Origami*,” 14.

40 This essay understands Musgrave’s application of the “*News of the World*” in “*Origami Doves*” as a reference to the popular British tabloid newspaper.

41 Musgrave, “*Origami*,” 14.

42 *Ibid.*

suffering which only serve to perpetuate such suffering. Butler states that “in framing reality, the photograph has already determined what will count within the frame- and this act of delimitation is surely interpretive.”⁴³ When applying this statement to the “News of the World,” the newspaper can be understood as an interpretive framework itself, which also places a frame around human suffering. The frame, or the “allotted space”⁴⁴ the *News of the World* holds for human suffering, is presented to its readers by the same framework which enforces such suffering, but more importantly, the existence of the paper itself comes to represent the human suffering that is happening and will continue to happen in the future. In regards to the photographs depicting the torture imposed upon victims at the Abu Ghraib prison, Butler states, “what we are left with are photos of people who are for the most part faceless and nameless.”⁴⁵ Since the photographs “had to be deliberately obscured to protect the privacy of the victims [...] their occlusion and erasure becomes the continuing sign of their suffering and of their humanity.”⁴⁶ Similarly, Musgrave insinuates that the *News of the World* inappropriately frames human suffering in a manner that is both dehumanizing and immoral. The “News of the World,” like the Abu Ghraib photographs, becomes a “continuing sign”⁴⁷ of the human suffering which neither provokes change nor accurately recognizes the life of the Bangladeshi woman. Similar to the photographs of Abu Ghraib, Musgrave’s imagery of the “allotted space” depicting the Bangladeshi women “may numb viewers, but not necessarily motivate its viewers to change their point of view.”⁴⁸

Musgrave further critiques the “News of the World” by exposing it as a form of media that both creates and enforces a separation between misrecognized bodies and the outside world. This separation enforces the dehumanization of misrecognized bodies. In regards to the inevitable interpretive frame that exists within photography, Butler states:

43 Butler, “Frames,” 67.

44 Musgrave, “Origami,” 14.

45 Butler, “Frames,” 94.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid., 68.

the critique of the frame is, of course, beset by the problem that the presumptive viewer is “outside” the frame, over “here” in a first-world context, and those who are depicted remain nameless and unknown.⁴⁹

This critique can also be applied to the Bangladeshi woman depicted in the “News of the World.” Not only does the “News of the World” perpetuate an “us and them” dichotomy that may exist between certain countries (such as “News of the World” home of the UK and Bangladesh), but by doing so, it continues the dehumanization of “them,” who are also the subjects that fill the “slots” of the newspaper. Further, the indifferent representation of the caning of the Bangladeshi woman in the “News of the World”⁵⁰ contributes to the woman’s misrecognition by the outside world and portrays the woman as someone who, like the subjects in the Abu Ghraib photographs, is for the most part left “nameless and unknown.”⁵¹

Butler’s assertions that all bodies are vulnerable, that the body is “outside itself”⁵² and that “the body does not belong to itself”⁵³ become an appropriate lens through which Musgrave’s subjects can be analyzed, as they articulate the body as being a vulnerable, fictive entity whose existence is created and affected by what is outside of it. Further, Butler creates a separation between bodies and the outside world that, when applied to *Origami Dove*, allows us to examine the relationship between them. In the poem *Origami Dove* and both poems entitled *Question:*, Musgrave depicts the separation that exists between misrecognizable bodies and the outside world. This separation between the outside world and misrecognized bodies only further misrecognizes such bodies, and further perpetuates their lives as “non-normative” and thus “inhuman.” By choosing to depict subjects that have been rendered misrecognizable by the outside world, Musgrave has allowed *Origami Dove* to become a space where the relationship between misrecognized bodies and the outside world can become examined. This examination has allowed Musgrave to force the reader to recognize not only the

49 Ibid., 93.

50 Musgrave, “Origami,” 14.

51 Butler, “Frames,” 93.

52 Ibid., 52.

53 Ibid., 53.

misrecognized bodies she has portrayed, but also recognize aspects and frameworks of the social world as being problematic constructs that perpetuate the harm and misrecognition of any bodies of who fail to construct to social norms. Further, Musgrave forces the reader to question what such norms and frameworks are, why they exist, and whom they benefit. Thus, by forcing her reader to recognize and question how interpretive frameworks work in the social world, and through her depiction of misrecognized bodies, Musgrave motivates and opens up a possibility for social change.

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