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## **In the Hands of the Social An Interview with Judith Butler**

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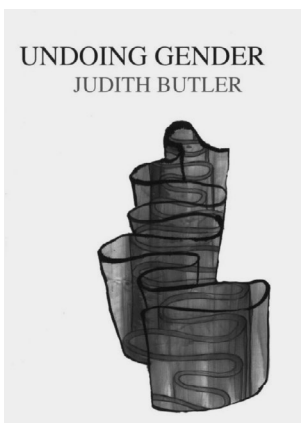
*Publication date:*  
2015

*Document version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

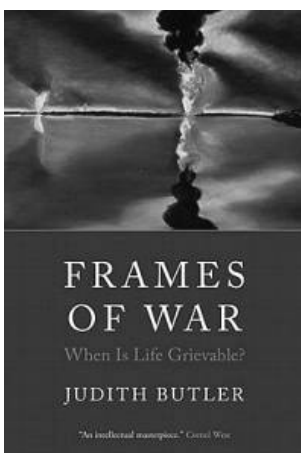
*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Danbolt, M. (2015, May). In the Hands of the Social: An Interview with Judith Butler.



*The State of Things*, eds. Marta Kuzma, Pablo Lafuente, and Peter Osborne (Oslo: OCA – Office for Contemporary Art, Norway, 2013).



1. Judith Butler, "Introduction: Acting in Concert," *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 1-16.



2. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), p. 14.

3. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999 [1990]), p. 89ff.

The Norwegian contribution at the 2011 Venice Biennial did not center on an art exhibition, but a lecture series called *The State of Things* where some of the world's leading theorists, philosophers and critics presented new work. One of the contributors was the feminist philosopher and queer theorist Judith Butler, who presented the lecture "The Politics of the Street and New Forms of Alliance" on the evening of September 7, 2011 at Fondazione Querini Stampalina. I was in Venice to lecture at the Swiss Off-Site Pavilion at the Biennial that week, and was fortunate to get a chance to interview Butler on the morning of her lecture.

Our conversation took place in a moment in time where the effervescent energy of the revolts and revolutions of the so-called Arab Spring in North Africa and the Middle East informed our discussions and desires for new modes of resistance, political activism, and change. But this was also a moment when many of us remained unsettled by the worst terror attack in Norwegian history when the white right-wing terrorist Anders Behring Breivik on July 22, 2011 killed 77, mainly children and youths, in his "crusade" against immigration and Islam. These events shaped my interest in focusing Butler's writing on precarity, bodily vulnerability, and grief within the realm of the social. The interview took its starting point in the question of how we as social beings are fundamentally dependent on others. This focus on interdependence, led us to talk about the importance of systems of support: from the pavement that support our ability to walk or move in public on the street, to forms of political support in terms of forming coalition and alliances in the fight against inequity and injustice.

The conversation addresses a number of topics that felt timely that fall in 2011, including questions of state repression, political activism, grievability, racism, and homonationalism. Yet, different circumstances prevented me from publishing the interview right away. Although the conversation now in May 2015 is almost four years old, Butler's clear and careful articulation of the importance of forming alliances when confronted with scenes of injustice remain urgent.

MD There are two phrases in some of your recent books that have stayed with me, and that I think could be an interesting starting point for our conversation. Both center on questions of how we live within the realm of the social. The first is from the start of *Undoing Gender* (2004), where you discuss how we are always "acting in concert" with others.<sup>1</sup> The other is from *Frames of War* where you emphasize the importance of considering how our survival is always dependent on a "social network of hands."<sup>2</sup> This focus on relationality and interdependence, not only calls for a rethinking how we understand subjecthood, but also concepts of political activism and alliances. Another reason I want to start here is that your work on how we live socially and within networks of interdependence often seems to have been overlooked or neglected in discussions of queer theory and politics in a Scandinavian context. Especially in recent media discussions in Norway, where questions of queer theory and gender performativity keep being misrepresented and reduced to questions of making gender a matter of "choice" – something we can "decide" to our liking as autonomous individuals. In your recent work on mourning and grievability, the questions of relationality and interdependence seems to have come more to the front in your writings. How did this come about?

JB I think that there were many issues that led me to rethink some of my earlier positions. But the truth of the matter is that I'm always rethinking my positions. I don't have a single position that I try to lay out in a consistent way because I feel that I'm always starting again, and that something from the world prompts me to rethink what I've been doing. In regard to your question on relationality, even in *Gender Trouble* (1990) I talked a little bit about gender melancholy and what it meant for people to deny that they had ever had a gay or lesbian attachment, or that they'd ever undergone the loss of someone they loved of the same gender.<sup>3</sup> And it occurred to me after 9/11 certainly, but even before, that one could

extended that analysis to talk about forms of loss that are not generally acknowledged in a culture. So I was less interested in melancholia as an individual psychological problem, but more interested in considering how melancholia gets culturally instituted and reproduced. It became very clear after 9/11 that in the US we were very loudly and dramatically mourning the people who had died in those attacks in New York and Washington, but that we showed very little grief, if any at all, for the people who we regularly attack and who we subsequently attacked after 9/11. This led me to a broader consideration of, in a US context, which populations are grievable and which are not.

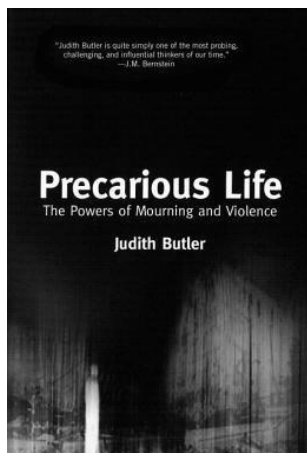
That has been an issue in the US too regarding questions of HIV/AIDS – and it still is. There are certain populations who don't get named or acknowledged adequately. Throughout Africa as well there are struggles still to try to make HIV/AIDS known and to retaliate its losses. It has shown difficult to acknowledge those losses if the people who are suffering them are, for instance, poor, or undocumented immigrants, or sex workers, or intravenous drugs users, or lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. This opens a broader question of the politics of grievability. We can't grieve every individual. That's not my point. But is it possible to establish a kind of global politics in which populations are treated as equally grievable, which is to say, that lives are equally valuable? That has led me to think more about interdependency. It's not just: "Oh, there are populations over there, and we need to acknowledge the loss of those populations." It's rather that we already live in interdependent networks. We see that very clearly in the case of violence. We can't do violence toward part of the globe without suffering some response. We have obligations that extend to the organization of food and the organization of shelter and the allocations of rights that involve us in global ways of thinking. So I suppose I've been led to think more about global interdependency, which is not the same as globalization as an economic process, but maybe the inverse side of that.

**MD** In Shannon Jackson's recent book *Social Works: Performing Arts, Supporting Publics* (2011), she notes that the two of you have been teaching a course at Berkeley on questions of "support" recently.<sup>4</sup>

4. Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Arts, Supporting Publics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), p. 8.

**JB** Yeah, that's true.

**MD** I'm interested in this focus on systems of support. The question of support is surely central to your writings on precarity and injurability in *Precarious Life* (2006), but lately you also seem to relate these questions to forms of political support. The title of the lecture you are giving tonight – "The Politics of the Street and New Forms of Alliance" – seems to touch upon these issues in relation to alliances, coalitions, and solidarity work.<sup>5</sup> Could you elaborate on the relationship between systems of support and the formation of alliances?



5. The lecture was subsequently published as Judith Butler, "Bodily Vulnerability, Coalitions and Street Politics," *The State of Things*, eds. Marta Kuzma, Pablo Lafuente, and Peter Osborne (Oslo: OCA – Office for Contemporary Art, Norway, 2013).

**JB** Let me start by going back just a little bit and say the following: when I was part of the elaboration of queer politics in the early 1990s – quite a long time ago – the most important thing to us was to form alliances that had really clear objects. In other words, we were fighting for education on HIV and AIDS, we were fighting for drug research, we were fighting against homophobia. It didn't matter what our identities were, it just mattered that we would ally on these issues. My own work has been, I think, pretty committed to the idea that the most powerful alliances are those that are not formed on the basis of identity but actually call upon a wide range of people who share certain kinds of analyses, and who identify what the object of struggle is. So an alliance is more often than not an alliance across gender, race, class, geo-political situations. And it's important to me that it be not only non-identitarian, but non-communitarian.

I've been working more recently on the Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There I find that it's especially important to be able to think outside of the particular kind of nationalist frameworks that tend to dominate those discussions and figure out what it means to cohabit with people who are fundamentally different, or who speak another language, or whose history is extremely different from ones own. I recently gave a talk at the Nobel Museum in Stockholm about cohabitation, which is a different part of this particular project on alliances.<sup>6</sup>

6. Judith Butler, "Precarious Life and the Obligations of Cohabitation," lecture held at the Nobel Museum, Svenska Akademiens Börssal, May 24, 2011.

Support is really crucial here, because if we think about even gathering on the street together, there has to be a street. There has to be a pavement. And people who work in disability studies, for instance, have made really clear that there is no mobility without a pavement, and certain kinds of pavements allow some of us to move and don't allow others to move. So there is a curb ramp and you can move your wheelchair up onto that sidewalk or get

from one street to the other. But if there isn't one, then you have to wait for some other kind of support to come along. Similarly, if disabled persons want to go swimming it may be that there has to be a mechanical lift that will help them into the water. Once into the water, they can swim. But without that mechanical support something as simple as swimming is not possible. One of the things that disability studies shows us is that we are all fundamentally dependent on not only material structures, but the social and economic organization of our political life that keeps a road paved or that keeps certain kinds of machinery working. I think we need to rethink human action – both individual action and collective action – as not only requiring support, but as being organized around the idea of support.

We see a lot of demonstrations against globalization and the production of precarious populations these days, where demonstrators claim that people should be able to have a livelihood, money, employment, and the education they need in order to live a life that is not constantly threatened by destitution or impoverishment. So we could say we need there to be support for action, but a lot of the actions we're seeing are also demands for support. This kind of movement goes against forms of individualism that assume that we are all individuals who propel ourselves or whose ability to act comes out of some individual will that we have, and that is radically unconditioned or unsupported. If one takes really seriously the idea that embodied agency requires social support, that means there are props for action, there are pavements that need to be in place, there are structures that need to be there. But also, there needs to be social networks of interdependency that make any of our actions possible.

**MD** This also speaks to the critique of the sovereign or self-governing subject, as it pushes us to consider the conditions that inform our ways of being in the world – the way we act and are also always acted upon.

**JB** It's true. You know, in certain ways we are of course self-governing. It's not like I would say we are not self-governing *at all*. But I think that if I were to ask myself what makes it possible for me to govern my conduct, then there is a lot that goes into that! Including my formation, including the language that's available to me to understand what self-governance is. This very *self* is socially formed, so if I act, then I am also acting in a certain degree as a social creature. I am not able to totally separate myself as an individual from my formation.

**MD** This brings us back to the notion of interdependency. If we return to disability activism, this way of thinking about support changes the discussion about dependency and independency as it shows us how dependent we are on each other in different ways, and also in the support structures of the social welfare state, for those of us who live in one. I'm interested in how these questions relate to the frequent anti-institutional and anti-state rhetoric that fuels certain queer activist and queer anarchist debates in Europe. I guess I'm wondering about how we navigate between criticizing and disidentifying from state structures that might be problematic, but that we are also highly dependent upon – some of us more than others.

Recently you gave a lecture on queer anarchism that I found really interesting in relation to this, as it addressed some of the challenges involved when our modes of resistance risk colluding with political formations that we do not necessarily want to support.<sup>7</sup> I'm wondering if you can talk about the “double-binds” we risk facing when thinking about interdependence, and how this might call for other ways to frame or reframe notions of activism and politics.

**JB** Well, there are a couple of points and values in contemporary anarchism that I think are very important, and one of them is that anarchists are interested in producing certain forms of community and sociability that are not completely driven and structured by the state. And I think that is important for people who want to make a civil society argument about social change, but also who want to make alternative forms of community.

This evening I'll talk a little bit about what happened at Tahrir Square, for instance, when communities formed on the pavements there against the state. There was no law that was governing that particular form of assembly. Sometimes there are forms of assembly that happen that are either against the law or outside the law in certain ways. They may be a passage to a new state or they may stay at a distance from the state, but I think that those are really important moments, and they tend to create forms of community that resist a full regulation by state power.

On the other hand you have other important demonstrations right now, like the ones on the right to education which are happening in Chile. They are making an appeal to the government to take the profits from the copper industry and to channel them into public

7. Judith Butler, “Queer Anarchism and Anarchists Against the Wall,” lecture at The New School for Social Research, May 5, 2011.



Tahrir Square, July 15, 2011.  
Photo: WikiCommons.

education. They want there to be a legal and recognized right to public education that the state is obligated to fund. And it's a way of actually asking – or demanding – a redistribution of wealth so that education gets established as an obligation of the state. That seems to be a really important thing.

I live in a country that continues to produce greater numbers of people who are living in poverty or in precarious situations. It seems to me that the state is becoming increasingly privatized and giving over many of its traditional obligations to private industry. I worry that what we are actually seeing is a kind of unleashing of new forms of capitalism that will increase the prevalence of precarity and produce greater numbers of disposable populations. People whose work is unprotected, and since labor unions are being destroyed, these people are being abandoned when their work is up. So, I don't have an anti-statist position, although I understand that times of great social change and even revolutionary change demand forms of social action and assembly that are not regulated by the state. I accept that not all radical action can be reducible to state reform.

**MD** In relation to these thoughts on the Tahrir Square, you have also recently been working on the role of the media and how they frame events, for instance in *Frames of War* (2009).

**JB** Yes, I think the media is very interesting right now. On one hand, you know, we have found ourselves in the position of applauding some Google executive for having effectively resisted the censorship of social network systems that were helping to organize the resistance and revolution in Egypt. On the other hand, we should be very careful about elevating someone like a Google executive to the new figure of heroic leftism. Of course, the corporate control of so much new social media is tricky; it can work in a lot of different ways. If those corporate powers decide to capture state power, that's one thing. If they decide to implement censorship, that's another. It's not a popular democratic medium, at least not now, and although there could be some modes of making it more popular and more democratic, my guess is that they will come increasingly under surveillance. We saw how David Cameron in the UK suggested that the smartphone company BlackBerry be held responsible for the recent riots in London, and seeking to impose limits on the use of certain kinds of messaging capacities. And his argument was very much like Mubarak's. They were very, very similar.

**MD** Which is striking.

**JB** It is striking. On the other hand, it seems to me that a lot of these revolutionary scenes or these scenes of extreme protest do depend on media in order for the event to get constituted as both local and as global. You know, one thing is that even for an event to be known to be a local event – let's say a local event in Syria, a local event in Libya, or a local event in Cairo – the local is established through the global. In other words, it's got to be reported in order for it to be grasped as local. Otherwise, if you're just in it, you're not in the local. The local only emerges to us through its opposite, or through some idea of what the non-local is. So those events have to be constituted both in their very specific localities but also they have to be transportable, and they have to convey globally in order to be the events and even to have the power that they have. So the media is in a very complex and powerful position which is all the more reason we need neither to celebrate it as a pure liberty, a kind of libertarian fantasy, nor understand it as a pure surveillance system – a place where corporate power now controls our lives. I think that there's a struggle about whether media can be a function of certain kinds of freedoms, what its internal modes of censorship are, and what the emerging laws will be. Especially given the Wikileaks scandal, what laws will we be seeing to govern that field? And in what ways will it remain ungovernable? I'm very interested in understanding how it can continue to be ungovernable.

**MD** The link you made between Cameron's and Mubarak's rhetoric also says something about the framing of these kinds of events as "riots" in the media. On the one hand, riots in different Middle Eastern countries have in certain contexts been framed as revolutions, while the riots in London, for instance, were immediately dismissed as to be the work of thugs. Beside all the differences in these incidents, I guess it remains interesting to analyze the effects of the framing of an event in how it shapes their legibility within the sphere of "politics."

**JB** Yes, Gaddafi to this day understands the resistance movement against him to be nothing other than thugs and rioters, looters and mercenaries. It's a rhetoric that gets used

and, of course, and there are some analyses that are out there about what has happened in London and in the surrounding areas that are similar. Even if there weren't overt political claims that emerged out of those riots in London, I think that we can certainly understand those riots as a political articulation of a certain kind by people who understand themselves to be outside of the functioning economy, or who understand themselves to be outside of the established boundaries of democratic participation. So whether or not there were clear political agendas and spoken claims about what the politics of what that might have been, it sure matters that people broke into stores to steal cell phones, right?

**MD** Yes, because it also highlights the question of the privilege of accessibility and participation. This also makes me think of your discussion of "cultural translation" in *Undoing Gender* (2004), as this term seems to speak to the question of how we can recognize and form alliances.<sup>8</sup> The question of cultural translation seems not only to address questions of language, but also the issue of how we are to listen and respond to demands from others that might be expressed or take shape in forms that are difficult to grasp.

8. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 38.

**JB** I have tried to develop – following Gayatri Spivak mainly – an idea of cultural translation that seems to be an alternative to forms of cultural imperialism.<sup>9</sup> For instance, in France I went to a couple of meetings where some of the more established feminists were debating whether or not to ban the veil. Many of them said, "Well, the veil just means only one thing: it means the subordination of women. And since we are a democracy that believes in the equality of women we should ban this." But they didn't really bother to find out, who wears the veil and why. Or what the cultural meanings of various veils are. I mean there are obviously differences between certain kinds of headscarves, and the burqa, or the niqab. What was really clear was that they had a lexicon that they thought was sufficient for understanding, judging, and even prescribing that particular behavior, without seeing that they were actually legislating what an appropriate dress is, and that a certain kind of attire apparently is supposed to symbolize equality or freedom. Now, for a queer person, you know, attire is very complicated! Which attire would symbolize freedom? We know that in places like Ankara, Turkey, transgender women who walk on the street are regularly arrested for the attire they're wearing, like that's not the right attire. And it's understood as criminal, unhealthy, or pathological. What world are we living in when we say that people must dress a certain way in order to be signifying freedom, liberty and equality? One should think that anybody who comes from the queer movement, anyone who really has appreciated the struggle to appear in public as trans, as genderqueer, as openly gay, as a masculine dyke, or as a cross dresser, would understand this. I thought the whole point was that we were supposed to claim the streets, to wear what we needed to wear, and when we do wear those clothes we are also signifying modes of belonging to the communities that we're part of. I think that's also true of people who wear religious apparel of various kinds. It is a form of belonging. So if you suddenly can't wear what signifies your belonging because someone else finds it offensive, your own cultural life is being crushed or decimated. You are being told that you must conform to a single cultural ideal. That's a failure of cultural translation.

If we were to start with the questions: What forms does belonging take? Which forms of belonging are important to people? They're going to be diverse, and sometimes they are going to be very opposite, and sometimes they are just going to be a great variation. Think of Cairo, for instance, and of all the ways in which the headscarf can be worn! There's a lot of variation! I think it's very arrogant to think from the outside that one knows that to wear such clothing is to be subordinated to the will of a man or to indicate your inequality.

**MD** I think that is a great example of what forms of belonging get recognized as a belonging, and how other kinds of belonging gets recognized as always already problematic. In relation to that, I have been interested in your recent public interventions that have brought attention to the challenges of belonging to political communities. I'm thinking of the way you have used your role as a critic and intellectual to support groups or respond to different events pertaining for instance the Israeli occupation of Palestine, including writing letters of support to the Palestinian Queers for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions, and other groups.

**JB** Well, it's hard isn't it? There are parts of the world that I don't know very much about, and where I haven't felt capable of making a statement even when I was asked. But it seems to me that if I have an investment in an issue, or if I'm part of that struggle already, then I can respond. For instance, I think there is a general crisis right now in gay and lesbian

9. See for instance Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Politics of Translation," *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York and London: Routledge 1993), pp. 179-200.



Poster by *Palestinian Queers for Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions*, 2011.

politics in Europe about what positions to take in relationship to new migrant communities or to anti-racist struggles. And I think as well that there is a big problem when the state of Israel comes out and says, "Look! Gays and lesbians have more freedom here than they have in any other Middle Eastern city!" Which I'm not sure is true. And when Israel uses the gay and lesbian "card," as it were, to suggest that Palestine is homophobic, or doesn't support sexual freedom in the same way that Israel does. In fact, I think that it is a very kind of nefarious instrumentalization of an uneven gay and lesbian rights record in Israel, since there are right-wing Israelis who not only do violence to gays and lesbians, but for whom gay and lesbian sexuality remains a religious interdiction. And the ways in which sexuality is lived in Palestine, among Palestinians, is perhaps not quite the same as it is in certain kinds of standard human rights models, where coming out or mobilizing for certain forms of rights become the paradigmatic political act. There are other forms of community support, sociability, that are a bit under the radar and where people would have to learn a little bit about how things actually function before any of us could come up with that kind of general comparisons between Israel and Palestine.

So I do worry that certain gay and lesbian rights – and I do say gay and lesbian, here rather than, bi-, queer, trans or intersex – are being used by states to argue against new immigrant communities, or to defend states that are highly militaristic, or to defend forms of nationalism that are highly racist. It's not just that the states are instrumentalizing gay and lesbian movements, but there are huge splits within those movements, as some people are only interested in a very narrow idea of sexual freedom that involve the ability to exercise one's personal liberty and to exist politically as an individual – people who believe in individualism and all the implications that has for capitalism and even for certain ideas of masculinity.

I think it's a time for gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, intersex, and questioning people to come together on very very strong issues of equality, very very strong anti-racist principles, very strong issues of alliance that would make it impossible for gay and lesbian rights to be used for racist purposes or to justify nationalism or militarism. If we actually get to the point where we allow our movement to be used for those purposes, I think we've lost. Then we will have lost our emancipatory potential and that deep sense of alliance that I believe was really part of the queer movement as it came together to think about, for instance, HIV/AIDS. The point then was just not to save gay men, but it was to extend the analysis to sex-workers, to people who were using intravenous drugs, to people who had blood transfusions, to people who couldn't afford drugs or didn't have education. So there was a very complex demographic, and it still is regarding HIV/AIDS, especially in Africa. That issue established the necessity of a really broad range of coalitions and ideas of equality: equality to education, equality to health care, you know, that equal grievability of lives, the equal value of lives that we need to hold on to and continue to transpose into these contemporary situations so we don't find ourselves as a movement signing on to war militarism or racism.



10. Judith Butler, "I Must Distance Myself from this Complicity with Racism, Including Anti-Muslim Racism: Civil Courage Prize' Refusal Speech," Christopher Street Day, Berlin, June 19, 2010.

11. See for instance, Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), and Jin Haritaworn, Tamsila Tauqir, and Esra Erdem. "Gay Imperialism: Gender and Sexuality Discourse in the 'War on Terror,'" *Out of Place: Interrogating Silences in Queerness/Raciality*, eds. Esperanza Miyake and Adi Kunstman (York: Raw Nerve Books, 2008), pp. 71–94.

**MD** These questions also came up during your talk last summer in Berlin when you gave a speech rejecting the prize you were supposed to receive at the Christopher Street Parade.<sup>10</sup> A gesture that engendered a lot of discussions, while also giving due attention to several anti-racist queer groups in Germany who have worked with and developed important critiques from different queer of color perspectives. It also initiated new debates on the relationship between sexual politics and anti-racist politics in queer circles in Denmark and Norway, in line with the important criticism of the ascendancy of whiteness in the work by critics such as Jasbir Puar, Jin Haritaworn, and others.<sup>11</sup> Saying "no" in this way has seemed to inspire other people to say no in other contexts as well. How did you experience this debate?

**JB** It was very hard, for different reasons. Many things were confusing to me there, as I didn't understand the internal politics well enough in advance. When I came to Berlin I expected to accept the prize, and it was only once I got there that I received lots of requests both from people in and outside Germany to decline it. When I looked into it, I saw that some of the leadership of the Christopher Day Street pride event had said some quite offensive things about Turks, North Africans, and people from the Middle East. That was that problem. But what was upsetting as well was that there were so many groups of queer Turkish, and queer North African, and queer Palestinian – all these groups – in Berlin, and still there was this discourse as if you had gay people over here, and new immigrant communities over there. And many of those who think they belong to Northern Europe acted as if they are the saviors and the most progressive people who are going to help their black and brown sisters and brothers. As if there wasn't a very active queer life in the Middle East or in North Africa. As if

there aren't already networks and grassroots organization in place that have been struggling for a really long time, and that's especially true in Africa. That's another place where I think we need to be struggling for a greater sense of alliance. I really appreciate that Jasbir Puar has done such a huge amount to bring attention to homonationalism and how that's functioning in this context. And I guess those of us from the US or Northern Europe need to rethink our own cultural conceits about how progressive we are.

**MD** Another important aspect of Jasbir Puar's work that has started to gather attention in our communities is her criticism of the effects of understanding queer politics and queer activism as transgressive and always against norms, and therefore fundamentally "anti-normative."<sup>12</sup> I have never understood your work as an attempt to define queerness as "against" norms in general, as that would imply that we could get to a place without normative structures. But in a lot of the queer activist circles I'm part of, and at many of the queer activist festivals in Europe I have participated in, there seem to be a kind of refrain that circulates that suggests that queerness is about being "against norms" and about creating "free spaces"...

12. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, p. 22ff.

**JB** I know, but if we talk about a free space, we are evoking an idea of freedom. And freedom has this kind of normative dimension, in the sense that we understand it as good, as something we want. I think there is a little confusion about what we mean when we say normative. Sometimes, it describes something people aspire to. And there are other times that normative means *normalizing*. I think that confusion got produced a little bit in the work of Michael Warner and some other people that helped create a sense of queer as presumptively anti-normative.<sup>13</sup> It is true that it is anti-prescriptive at a sexual level. No one is going to tell you how to make love. Or, no one is going to ask that you conform to an idea of what a gay person is. You know, I'm anti-normative on those issues, right? No one tells you how to make love. No one tells you the right way to be gay.

13. See for instance Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

But we do have norms. Anti-racism is a norm. Freedom is a norm. Equality is a norm. So we don't give up on that sense of normativity. I think it's a very different one. And look, we struggle against conventions, you know, of masculinity and femininity. Even if we don't conform to them sometimes our non-conformity to them is also in relation to them. We've not just transcended them but we've reworked them in some way. So I guess I see norms as a little bit more pliable than some of the anti-normative discourse.

**MD** We have been talking about belonging and the ambivalent relationship towards nation states and frames of recognitions. And here we are in Venice under the auspice of participating in different forms of state representation at the Biennial. You for Norway, and I for Switzerland...

**JB** It's quite comic.

**MD** I have been thinking about the question of national representation in relation to the terror attack that took place in Norway this summer. After Anders Behring Breivik's attack, some of us queer-inspired critics in the area returned to your work on injurability and vulnerability when we tried to follow the affective economies that have been in play in the aftermath of this horrible event. These reactions have taken different forms, for sure, but it has been striking to see how love has been one of the main figures of mobilization – something the Norwegian prime minister has also put forth with great force. Some of us have been worried about what gets lost when love ends up being used to bring the nation back on track.

Some of us have been so angry and frustrated about this, for this political attack didn't come out of nowhere. I have been thinking a lot about Audre Lorde's discussion on using anger as a spotlight that can lead to growth and corrective surgery, not guilt and feeling sorry for ourselves.<sup>14</sup>

14. Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 124-133.

**JB** The real question is also what people do with their aggression, right? Because what if we assume that there is going to be lots of aggression, if that's part of what it means to become an increasingly racially, religiously, and ethnically mixed population. Then the question is, what are our ethical relations to aggression? How do we curb it? How do we overcome it? How do we work it out? How do we struggle with it so that we don't simply feel entitled to act on it in the most destructive ways? I think it's a moment to reflect on destructiveness, and think about ethical ways of handling destructiveness in forms of agonism. You know, the ways in which we are obligated to live with others we don't know and



we may not even love. Do we still have obligations to live with those we do not love and may never love? I'm not sure about that love-discourse...

**MD** Yes, this insistence on love has been quite uncomfortable, especially as there have been many well-meaning figures claiming that after the terror attack, “we” need to tell our “Muslim population” that we love them and that they are welcome, and that this white supremacist didn’t get the last say. But who is this “we” who gets entitled to take the role of showing that we love “the other,” who after all should have been part of this “we” in the first place?

**JB** It also seems like a very intensely Christian moment. When the government’s responses to the killings in Norway comes out in the favor of love, sounds like a reconsolidation of Christianity. Which might be just another way of refusing immigration.

**MD** The invocation of love seems to reconstitute Norway as an exceptional country that remains loving and caring. And it’s something so uncomfortable about the proximity here between this notion of exceptionality, and the terrorist’s conception of Norway as an exceptional country that he wanted to defend...

**JB** Yes... Maybe we should all become “ordinary”?