

Judith Butler

NOTES

TOWARD A

PERFORMATIVE

THEORY OF

ASSEMBLY



**Notes Toward
a Performative Theory
of Assembly**

JUDITH BUTLER

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that minimize precarity and establish economic political equality. Those forms of cohabitation characterized by equality and minimized precarity become the goal to be achieved by any struggle against subjugation and exploitation, but also the goal that starts to be achieved in the practices of alliances that assemble across distances to achieve that very goal. We struggle in, from, and against precarity. Thus, it is not from pervasive love for humanity or a pure desire for peace that we strive to live together. We live together because we have no choice, and though we sometimes rail against that unchosen condition, we remain obligated to struggle to affirm the ultimate value of that unchosen social world, an affirmation that is not quite a choice, a struggle that makes itself known and felt precisely when we exercise freedom in a way that is necessarily committed to the equal value of lives. We can be alive or dead to the sufferings of others—they can be dead or alive to us. But it is only when we understand that what happens there also happens here, and that “here” is already an elsewhere, and necessarily so, that we stand a chance of grasping the difficult and shifting global connections in ways that let us know the transport and the constraint of what we might still call ethics.

Chapter 4

Bodily Vulnerability, Coalitional Politics

I propose to begin this chapter by focusing on three issues: bodily vulnerability, coalitions, and street politics—but perhaps not quite to string them together in a fully obvious way. And then I would like to turn to a consideration of vulnerability as a form of activism, or as that which is in some sense mobilized in forms of resistance. As we all know, politics does not always happen on the street; politics does not always foreground vulnerability, and coalitions can be made from any number of dispositions, not necessarily a shared sense of vulnerability. Indeed, our skepticism about vulnerability is, I wager, quite enormous. Women have too long been associated with vulnerability, and there is no clear way to derive an ethics, much less a politics, from that notion. So I concede at the outset that I have a great deal of work to do by suggesting that these three ideas might usefully inform one another and lead usefully to a consideration of vulnerability.

My increasingly urgent sense about speaking in public, or writing for a public, is not that it should lead us straightway to a path for action; it is, rather, a chance to pause together and reflect

on the conditions and directions of acting, a form of reflecting that has its own value, and not merely an instrumental one. Indeed, whether or not this kind of pausing is itself part of action and activism is another question, but my considered impulse is to say, yes, it is, but not only, or not exclusively. On this occasion, I want to think about these topics in order to set aside some of the misconceptions that could easily arise. For instance, given racist mobs and violent attacks, I am certainly not saying that all bodies collected in the street are a good thing or that we should celebrate mass demonstrations, or that bodies assembled form a certain ideal of community or even a new politics worthy of praise. Though sometimes bodies assembled on the street are clearly cause for joy and even hope—and surging crowds sometimes do become the occasion for revolutionary hopefulness—let us remember that the phrase “bodies on the street” can refer equally well to right-wing demonstrations, to military soldiers assembled to quell demonstrations or seize power, to lynch mobs or anti-immigrant populist movements taking over public space. So they are neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically bad; they assume differing values depending on what they are assembled for, and how that assembly works. And yet, the idea of bodies on the street together gives leftists a bit of a thrill, as if power were being taken back, taken away, assumed and incorporated in some way that portends democracy. I understand that thrill, have even written from it, but here I will review some of my doubts, some of which I suspect are shared.

From the outset, we have to be prepared to ask: Under what conditions do we find bodies assembled on the street to be cause for celebration, or, what forms of assembly actually work in the service of realizing greater ideals of justice and equality, even the realization of democracy itself?

Minimally, we can say that those demonstrations that seek to realize justice and equality are worthy of praise. But of course, we are called upon to define our terms, since, as we know, there are conflicting views of justice, and there are surely many disparate ways of thinking about and valuing equality. Another problem immediately presents itself: in certain parts of the world, political alliances do not, or cannot, take the form of street assemblies, and there are important reasons for this. We need only consider conditions of intense police surveillance or military occupation that keep people off streets or out of markets. In those instances, crowds cannot swell on the streets without risking imprisonment, injury, or death, and so alliances are sometimes made in other forms, ones that seek to find ways to minimize bodily exposure as demands for justice are made. Hunger strikes within prisons, such as those that took place in Palestine in the spring of 2012 and continue sporadically, also constitute forms of resistance that are forcibly restricted to confined spaces, where bodies in parallel forms of isolation make demands for freedom, for due process, for the rights to move in public space and to exercise public freedoms. So let us remember that bodily exposure can take different forms: heightened bodily exposure happens when assemblies deliberately expose their bodies to police power on the street or in public domains. It is also what happens daily under conditions of occupation, when walking down the street or trying to pass through a checkpoint, making the body available to harassment, injury, detention, or death; and yet other forms of bodily exposure take place within prisons, detention camps, and refugee camps, where military and police personnel exercise both the power of surveillance and the power to arrest action, to make use of force, to enforce isolation, and to determine how and when one eats or sleeps, and under

what conditions. So obviously the point is not to claim that bodily exposure is always a political good or even the most successful strategy for an emancipatory movement. Sometimes overcoming unwilling conditions of bodily exposure is precisely the aim of a political struggle. And sometimes deliberately exposing the body to possible harm is part of the very meaning of political resistance.

Of course, we have to consider as well that some forms of political assembly do not take place on the street or in the square, precisely because streets and squares do not exist or do not form the symbolic center of that political action. For instance, a movement may be galvanized for the purposes of establishing adequate infrastructure—we can think about the continuing shantytowns or townships of South Africa, Kenya, and Pakistan; the temporary shelters constructed along the borders of Europe; and also the barrios of Venezuela or the barracas of Portugal. Such spaces are populated by groups of people, including immigrants, squatters, and Roma, who are struggling just for running and clean water, working toilets, sometimes a closed door on public toilets, paved streets, paid work, and necessary provisions. So the street is not always a site that we can take for granted as the public ground for certain kinds of public assemblies; the street, as public space and thoroughfare, is also a public good for which people fight—an infrastructural necessity that forms one of the demands of certain forms of popular mobilization. The street is not just the basis or platform for a political demand, but an infrastructural good. And so when assemblies gather in public spaces in order to fight against the decimation of infrastructural goods, to fight against austerity measures, for instance, that would undercut public education, libraries, transit systems, and roads, we find that sometimes the fight is for the platform itself. In other words, we cannot even fight for

infrastructural goods without being able to assume them to one degree or another, so when infrastructural conditions for politics are themselves decimated, so too are the assemblies that depend upon them. At such a point, the condition of the political is one of the goods for which political assembly takes place—this might be the double meaning of the infrastructural under conditions in which public goods are increasingly dismantled by privatization.²

In effect, the demand for infrastructure is a demand for a certain kind of inhabitable ground, and its meaning and force derive precisely from that lack. This is why the demand is not for all kinds of infrastructure, since some serve the decimation of livable life (military forms of detention, imprisonment, occupation, and surveillance, for instance), and some support livable life. In some cases, the street cannot be taken for granted as the space of appearance, the Arendtian space of politics, since there is, as we know, a struggle to establish that very ground, or to take that ground back from police control.³ The possibility of doing that, however, depends upon the performative efficacy of creating a political space from existing infrastructural conditions. Arendt is at least partially right when she claims that the space of appearance comes into being at the moment of political action. A romantic thought to be sure, since it is not always so easy to do in practice. She presumes that the material conditions for gathering are separate from any particular space of appearance, but the task is actually to let the infrastructure become part of the new action, even a collaborative actor. But if politics is oriented toward the making and preserving of the conditions that allow for livability, then it seems that the space of appearance is not ever fully separable from questions of infrastructure and architecture, and that they not only condition the action, but take part in the making of the space of politics.

Of course, the street is not the only infrastructural support for political speech and action. It is also a major issue and object for political mobilization. In a sense, we already know the idea that freedom can only be exercised if there is a support for freedom, understood sometimes as a material condition that makes that exercise possible and powerful. Indeed, the body that exercises speech or moves through space, across borders, is presumed to be one that can speak and move. A body that is both supported and agentic is presumed as a necessary condition for other sorts of mobilizations. Indeed, the very term "mobilization" depends on an operative sense of mobility, itself a right, one that many people cannot take for granted. For the body to move, it must usually have a surface of some kind (unless it is swimming or flying), and it must have at its disposal whatever technical supports allow for movement to take place. So the pavement and the street are already to be understood as requirements of the body as it exercises its rights of mobility. They themselves become part of the action and not only its support.

We could certainly make a list of how this idea of a body, supported and agentic, implicated in the infrastructure that makes movement possible, is at work implicitly or explicitly in any number of political movements: struggles for food and shelter, protection from injury and destruction, the right to work, affordable health care. So, on one level, we are asking about the implicit idea of the body at work in certain kinds of political demands and mobilizations; on another level, we are trying to find out how mobilizations take as their objects of political concern those requirements and supports that are indissociable from what we call the human body. My suggestion is that under conditions in which infrastructures are being decimated, the very platform for politics

becomes the object around which political mobilization rallies. And this means that demands made in the name of the body (its protection, shelter, nourishment, mobility, expression) sometimes must take place with and through the body and its technical and infrastructural dimensions. When this happens, it may seem that the body is the means and ends of politics.⁴ But the point is precisely to underscore that the body is not isolated from all those conditions, technologies, and life processes that make it possible.

When I speak in this way, it appears that I have sought recourse to an idea of the human body and perhaps its essential needs. But that is not exactly the case. Such an invariant body and its permanent needs would then become the measure by which we judge certain forms of economic and political organization to be sufficient for human flourishing, or insufficient, that is, undermining that flourishing. But if the idea of the body as a ground or measure is usually understood as a singular body (the "we" is that group of people who for the moment agree to consider such a view), even an ideal or typical body, then this runs contrary to the way that the body has to be understood, in my view, in terms of its supporting networks of relations. If we make the matter individual, we can say that every single body has a certain right to food and shelter. Although we universalize in such a statement ("every" body has this right), we also particularize, understanding the body as discrete, as an individual matter, and that individual body is itself a norm of what the body is and how it ought to be conceptualized. Of course that seems quite obviously right, but consider that the idea of this individual bodily subject of rights might fail to capture the sense of vulnerability, exposure, even dependency, that is implied by the right itself, and that corresponds, I would suggest, with an alternative view of the body. In other words, if we accept

that part of what a body is (and this is for the moment an ontological claim) is its dependency on other bodies and networks of support, then we are suggesting that it is not altogether right to conceive of individual bodies as completely distinct from one another. Of course, neither are they blended into some amorphous social body, but if we cannot readily conceptualize the political meaning of the human body without understanding those relations in which it lives and thrives, we fail to make the best possible case for the various political ends we seek to achieve. What I am suggesting is that it is not just that this or that body is bound up in a network of relations, but that the body, despite its clear boundaries, or perhaps precisely by virtue of those very boundaries, is defined by the relations that make its own life and action possible. As I hope to show, we cannot understand bodily vulnerability outside of this conception of its constitutive relations to other humans, living processes, and inorganic conditions and vehicles for living.

Before elaborating on this sense of relationality, I want to advance the idea that vulnerability is also not just a trait or an episodic disposition of a discrete body, but is, rather, a mode of relationality that time and again calls some aspect of that discreteness into question. This will matter as we try to talk about political collections or coalitions, and even when we try to talk about resistance. Bodies do not come into the world as self-motoring agents; motor control is established through time: the body is entered into social life first and foremost under conditions of dependency, as a dependent being, which means that even the first moments or vocalization and movement are responding to a changing set of conditions for survival. Those conditions include people somewhere, but not necessarily one other embodied person who, by the way, only

has the means and capacity to feed and shelter if that person is supported as well. This is why caretakers do not only provide support for others, but require their own conditions of support (which means livable conditions of work and rest, of compensation, housing, and health care). The conditions of support for the most vulnerable moments of life are themselves vulnerable, and these conditions are in part infrastructural, in part human, and in part technical. Even if we concede that this may well be true for infants, but maintain some skepticism about the human adult, I want to suggest that no one, however old, ever grows out of this particular condition, characterized as dependent and susceptible. This seems to me to be borne out by the claim that primary ways of organizing care are linked to broader social and political forms of labor and entitlement. That said, are we speaking only about human bodies, and simply continuing a line of thinking that has conventionally linked psychoanalysis to Marxism? I want to say yes and not quite, and for reasons that perhaps Donna Haraway has already explained at length. If we cannot really speak about bodies at all without the environments, the machines, and the complex systems of social interdependency upon which they rely, then all of these nonhuman dimensions of bodily life prove to be constitutive dimensions of human survival and flourishing. Despite the centuries of claims about *Homo erectus*, the human does not stand alone.⁵ Obviously there are examples of people of any age who are dependent on machines, and most of us find ourselves dependent on machines or technology at one point or another. Something similar might be said about the noncontingent relation between humans and animals. Human bodies are not distinguished in any absolute way from animal bodies, even though we can easily concede some differences. It will, however, not do to say that the

bodily dimension of the human should be regarded as the animal dimension, as a lamentably long tradition in philosophy has been prone to do. The human creature is, after all, already in relation to the animal, and not in the sense that the animal is the "Other" to the human, but because the human is already an animal, even though not exactly like all other animals (indeed, no kind of animal is exactly like all other kinds, and the category of the animal, by definition, allows for that internal variation). Moreover, a large set of life processes cross the human and the animal and maintain a rather steadfast indifference to the distinction between the two. One of Haraway's points is that the forms of dependency between human and animal suggest that in part they are constituted by and through one another. If we take that dependency to be central, then the difference between animal and human becomes secondary (they are both dependent, and they are dependent on each other, depending on each other to be the kinds of beings they are). In this sense, the ontological distinctions among them emerge from the relations that hold among them. So the analytic distinctions we tend to make between machine, human, and animal all rely on a certain covering over of blended or dependent relations.⁶

I began with the claim that we might rethink the relation between bodies, coalitions, and street politics, and I've suggested that some of the nonhuman and infrastructural conditions for human action end up being the very aims of political mobilization, and that this seems to be especially true under conditions in which infrastructural goods are being decimated broadly and quickly. I've suggested as well that bodies are implicated in these kinds of struggles in at least two ways: as both the ground and the aim of politics. Further, I've suggested that we rethink the relationship be-

tween the human body and infrastructure so that we might call into question the discreteness and self-sufficiency of the human body imagined in a singular form, but I've also suggested a way of thinking about the human body as a certain kind of dependency on infrastructure, understood complexly as environment, social relations, and networks of support and sustenance that cross the human, animal, and technical divides. After all, even if we come to understand and enumerate the requirements of the body in the name of which people enter into political struggle, are we claiming that political struggle achieves its aims when those requirements are met? Or do we struggle as well for bodies to thrive, for lives to become livable? I'm using one word after the other, searching for a set of related terms as a way of approaching a problem that resists a technical nomenclature; no single word can adequately describe the character and the aim of this human striving, this striving in concert or this striving together that seems to form one meaning of political movement or mobilization.

It seems important to keep all this in play precisely because there are two argumentative trends that are sometimes hard to think in relation to one another. One argument is that bodies should have what they need to survive, for survival is surely a precondition for realizing the broader political aims of life, ones that are distinctly different from survival itself (this was sometimes the view of Hannah Arendt). The other is that there is no political aim that is separable from the just and equitable reproduction of the conditions of life itself, which includes the exercise of freedom. Can we say that we survive precisely in order to live, and so separate survival and life in that way? Or is it rather the case that survival must always be more than survival in order to be livable?⁷ After all, some people do survive certain kinds of traumas, but that does not mean

that they are living in a full sense. And though I don't know how to distinguish between living in a full and not so full sense, I take it that there is some importance attached to such a distinction. Can we conclude that the demand for survival is bound up with the demand for a livable life? If we are asked what constitutes the conditions of livable life, we have to be able to answer without positing a single or uniform ideal for that life. It is not a matter, in my view, of finding out what "the human" really is or even what a "human life" should be. In fact, it seems to me that the creaturely dimension of human existence holds us back at this moment. After all, to say that humans are animals, too, is not to embrace bestialization as a demeaned or degraded condition, but to rethink the organic and inorganic interrelationships within which anyone recognizably human emerges; in other words, the human animal lets us rethink the very conditions of livability. We do not need any more ideal forms of the human that always imply lesser forms of the same, or that erase from view modes of life that cannot be translated into that norm, making them surely less livable rather than more. But precisely because "the human" continues to be so politically charged, and for those very reasons, it seems we have to rethink its smaller place within a set of relations, so that we can ask after the conditions in which the "human" is differentially recognized.⁸ When I say "we" have to think through the category, I am perhaps engaging a humanist conceit of discourse to show that the category still has us in its grip even as we try to shake ourselves loose from its hold.

At the outset, I confessed that I experience a certain thrill, dating back to my adolescent years, when bodies get together in the street, and yet I am quite suspicious of those political views that hold, for instance, that democracy has to be understood as the event of the

surging multitude. I don't think so. It seems to me that we have to ask what it is that holds such a group together, what demand is being shared, or what felt sense of injustice and unlivability, what intimation of the possibility of change heightens the collective sense of things. For all that to be democratic, there has to be an opposition to existing and expanding inequalities, to ever-increasing conditions of precarity for many populations both locally and globally, and to forms of authoritarian and securitarian control that seek to suppress democratic processes and movements. Although we sometimes do imagine that political deliberation and action take place in the form of an assembly, there are other ways of conferring and acting that do not presuppose the occupation of the same ground. There are bodies that assemble on the street or online or through other less visible networks of solidarity, especially for prisoners whose political claims are made through forms of solidarity that may or may not appear directly in any one public space, and whose solidarity, when it emerges, rests on a common and forcible exclusion from public space, and a forcible isolation in cells monitored by police or security personnel. This raises the question of what form the freedom of assembly takes when it is explicitly denied as a right. If we say there is no freedom of assembly in prison, or that it is limited, then we certainly acknowledge that those in prison have been forcibly deprived of that freedom, and we can then debate the justice or injustice of having been deprived of that quite essential dimension of citizenship. I am all for that. At the same time, however, I want to suggest that future and sometimes effective ways of exercising freedom of assembly do happen in prison, and that we won't be able to conceptualize that form of resistance without conceding that point. The forms of solidarity and action that do emerge within prisons, including

hunger strikes, also constitute a form of freedom of assembly, or a form of solidarity implied by such a freedom, and that also needs to be acknowledged as an active form of resistance. So already we see that the street and the square are not the only platforms for political resistance, and that where there is no freedom to enter the square or take to the street, grounds for resistance certainly exist. Can the four walls of the prison cell also turn out to be a platform, analogous perhaps to the overturned tank that suddenly becomes a platform on which people stand to voice their public opposition to the military, as happened in Cairo in 2009? The confined body does not always have the freedom to move, but can it still make use of its confinement to express resistance? At such moments, the public square is not the support for such action (though people gathered there, supporting those in prison, surely can be support, and can make use of that spatial support and its symbolic power), but support assumes yet another meaning, on the inside and the outside, in modes of solidarity, through ways that the body can exercise the refusal to eat and to work, to devise modes of communication, and to refuse to be a functional prisoner, intervening to thwart the reproduction of the institution of the prison. Prisons depend upon the successful regulation of human acts and movements, the reproduction of the body of the prisoner, and when that regulatory power fails, as it does, for instance, in the hunger strike, so too does the prison lose its capacity to function. Moreover, this failure to function is also linked to the imperiling or the killing of the prisoner itself. One might remember in Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" that the apparatus of punishment destroys the prisoner precisely when it goes out of control. This going out of control is perhaps induced by the hunger striker, but really, what is wanted is to expose the killing machine

that the prison has always been, even when it works efficiently. For if the effective reproduction of the prisoner takes place in tandem with the decimation of the condition of livability for the prisoner, then death-bound movement is already happening prior to any hunger strike. The hunger strike exposes the death-dealing already at work in the prison. In this sense, the hunger strike is a bodily enactment, following its own protocols of performativity; it enacts what it seeks to show, and to resist.

Of course, each of these situations has to be considered in context. The recent assemblies on the street or in public squares, whether those of the Occupy movements or los Indignados in Spain, were concerned to provide provisional support for those assembled at the same time that they sought to facilitate broader demand for forms of enduring support under conditions in which more and more people were losing work, suffering salary cuts, and losing housing and public benefits. So the assembly does not exactly mirror the broader structure of the economic world. But certain principles get elaborated in those smaller assemblies that can nevertheless produce—or renew—ideals of equality and interdependency that may well be transposed onto larger national and global contexts. What the assembly does and what it says are linked together, though they are not always the same; the political demand is at once enacted and made, exemplified and communicated. All this means is that there is an invariably performative dimension to the kinds of demands that are made, where performativity functions as a chiasmic relation between body and language. It is not, then, exclusively or primarily as subjects bearing abstract rights that we take to the streets. We take to the streets because we need to walk or move there; we need streets to be built so that, whether or not we are in a wheelchair, for instance, we

can move there, and we can pass through that space without obstruction, harassment, administrative detention, or fear of injury or death. If we are on the streets, it is because we are bodies that require public forms of support to stand and move, and to live a life that matters (I take it that this broad claim from disability studies—that all bodies require support to move—has implications for thinking about what supports public mobilizations and, in particular, what supports mobilizations for public funding of infrastructural support). This vulnerability shows, whether or not we feel particularly vulnerable at the moment. Mobility is itself a right of the body, but it is also a precondition for the exercise of other rights, including the right to walk, including the important are mobilizing around the right to walk, including the important Slut Walks that began to happen throughout the world as a way of embodying and refusing a label, and claiming the streets as a site that should be free of harassment and rape. Sometimes it is a perilous act to walk—to walk alone at night if you are a woman or trans—or to gather, even though police violence may be waiting. People are mobilizing around the rights of women to walk the street in religious garb, of trans women to walk to work or to march in acts of solidarity with other trans women or for broader social struggles. The right to walk on the street if you are black and it is night without someone assuming you are a criminal. The right of the disabled to walk, to have pavements and machines that make it possible. The right of a Palestinian to walk any street in Hebron, where apartheid rules prevail. Such rights should be common and unremarkable, and sometimes they are. But sometimes to walk the street, to exercise that small freedom, poses a challenge to a certain regime, a minor performative disruption enacted by a kind of

motion that is at once a movement in that double sense, bodily and political.

That action, I would suggest, has to be supported through solidarity, to be sure, but also by infrastructural conditions, by law, and by the absence of violent or coercive efforts to thwart the way. The struggles I mentioned above presume that bodies have been constrained and are at risk of constraint, that they can be without work and without mobility, that they can suffer violence and forms of coercion. Am I trying to say that bodies are not active, but vulnerable? Or that even vulnerable bodies can act? My argument, in fact, is that it would be as mistaken to think of the body as primarily or definitionally active as it would be to think of the body as primarily and definitionally vulnerable and inactive. If we have to have a definition, it will depend, rather, on being able to think vulnerability and agency together. I am especially aware of how counterproductive it can be to understand women's bodies as particularly vulnerable. We immediately enter into uncertain terrain, given the long and lamentable gender politics that allocates the distinction between passive and active to women and men, respectively. Yet, if we say that certain groups are differentially vulnerable, we are only saying that under certain regimes of power, some groups are targeted more readily than others, some suffer poverty more than others, some are exposed to police violence more than others. We are making a sociological observation that would have to be backed up in one way or another. And yet, that sociological claim can very easily become a new norm of description, at which point women become defined by their vulnerability. At such a point, the very problem that the description is meant to address becomes reproduced and ratified by the very description.

This is one reason we have to pay attention to what it means to mobilize vulnerability, and what it means, more specifically, to mobilize vulnerability in concert. For many of us, that is, for many people, the moment of actively appearing on the street involves a deliberate risk of exposure. Perhaps the word "exposure" helps us think vulnerability outside the trap of ontology and foundationalism. This is especially true for those who, exposed, appear on the street without permits, who are opposing the police or the military or other security forces without weapons. Although one is shorn of protection, to be sure, one is not reduced to some sort of "bare life." There is no sovereign power jettisoning the subject outside the domain of the political as such; on the contrary, there is a more varied and diffuse operation of power and force that de-tains and encroaches on bodies in the street or in the cell or on the periphery of towns and borders—and this is a specifically political form of destitution.

Of course, feminist theorists have for a long time argued that women suffer social vulnerability disproportionately.⁹ And though there is always a risk in claiming that women are especially vulnerable—given how many other groups are entitled to make the same claim, and given that the category of women is intersected by class, race, age, and a number of other vectors of power and sites of potential discrimination and injury—there is still something important to be taken from this tradition. The claim can sometimes be taken to mean that women have an unchanging and defining vulnerability, and that kind of argument makes the case for paternalistic provisions of protection. If women are regarded as especially vulnerable and seek protected status, it becomes the responsibility of the state or other paternal powers to provide that

Does vulnerability require protection?

protection. According to that model, feminist activism not only petitions paternal authority for special dispensations and protections, but affirms that inequality of power that situates women in a powerless position and, by implication, men in a more powerful one. And where it does not simply or exclusively put "men" in the position of providing protection, it invests state structures with the paternalistic obligation to facilitate the achievement of feminist goals. Such a view is very different from one that claims, for instance, that women are at once vulnerable and capable of resistance, and that vulnerability and resistance can, and do, and even must happen at the same time, as we see in certain forms of feminist self-defense and institutions (battered women's shelters, for example) that seek to provide protection without enlarging paternalistic powers, and as happens through networks that support trans women in Turkey or anywhere the expanded and expandable category of women suffers harassment or injury by virtue of appearing as it does.

Of course, there are good reasons to argue for the differential vulnerability of women; they suffer disproportionately from poverty and illiteracy, two very important dimensions of any global analysis of women's conditions (and two reasons why none of us will be "postfeminist" until such time as these conditions are fully overcome). But many of the feminists who have made the turn to vulnerability, as it were, have done so in order to increase the protected standing of women in human rights organizations and international courts. This juridification of the feminist project seeks to prioritize the language needed to strengthen such an appeal to the courts. As important as such appeals may be, they provide a limited language for understanding feminist forms of resistance

that are popular and extralegal, the dynamics of mass movements, civil society initiatives, and forms of political resistance informed and mobilized by vulnerability.

The need to establish a politics that avoids the retrenchment of paternalism seems clear. At the same time, if this resistance to paternalism objects to all state and economic institutions that provide social welfare, then the demand for infrastructural support becomes illegible within its terms, even self-defeating. Hence, this task is made all the more difficult under conditions of increasing precarity in which ever greater numbers of people are exposed to homelessness, unemployment, illiteracy, and inadequate health care. The struggle, in my view, is how to make the feminist claim effectively that such institutions are crucial to sustaining lives at the same time that feminists resist modes of paternalism that reify state and naturalize relations of inequality.

So though the value of vulnerability has been important to feminist theory and politics, this does not mean that vulnerability serves as a defining characteristic of women as a group. I would oppose this effort to install a new norm for the category of women that rests on a foundational notion of vulnerability. Indeed, the very debate about who belongs to the group called "women" marks a distinct zone of vulnerability, namely, those who are non-gender conforming, and whose exposure to discrimination, harassment, and violence is clearly heightened on those grounds. So some provisionally bound group called "women" is neither more vulnerable than a provisionally bound group called "men" nor is it particularly useful or true to try to demonstrate that women value vulnerability more than men do. Rather, certain kinds of gender-defining attributes, like vulnerability and invulnerability, are distributed unequally under certain regimes of power, and precisely

for the purpose of shoring up certain regimes of power that disenfranchise women. We think about goods as distributed unequally under capitalism as well as natural resources, especially water, but we should also surely consider that one way of managing populations is to distribute vulnerability unequally such that "vulnerable populations" are established within discourse and policy. More recently, we note that social movements and policy analysts refer to precarious populations, and that political strategies are accordingly devised to think about ameliorating conditions of precarity.¹⁰ But this same demand is also made through broad popular struggles that both expose and mobilize precarity, showing, as it were, the possibilities of performative political action that emerge in the midst of precarity. It seems clear that if the designation of vulnerability or precarity effaces this form of political demand, it further entrenches the very condition from which it seeks alleviation.

So we see the risk of using the term "vulnerability" at all. But is there also a risk in shying away from the term? Does precarity give vulnerability a specifically political valence, and are we better off with one term or another? I am not sure we resolve the issue by changing terms, since both of them run certain kinds of risks.

There is of course an even more sinister way of wielding both categories of precarity and of vulnerability. Within the terms of both military and economic policy, certain populations are effectively targeted as injurable (with impunity) or disposable (living on in a disposable condition or no longer living, quite literally disposed of, a distinction that constitutes an interval in the time-space of social death). This kind of explicit or implicit marking is used to justify the infliction of injury upon such populations (as we see in times of war, or in state violence against undocumented

citizens). So “vulnerability” can be a way of targeting a population for decimation. This has produced a paradox within neoliberalism and its notion of “responsibilization” that designates such populations as accountable for their own precarious position, or their accelerated experience of precaritization. As a counter to this nefarious form of moralizing, human rights advocates have defended the idea of vulnerability as they insist on the need for legal and institutional protection for such groups. The notion of vulnerability here works in two ways, to target a population or to protect it, which means that the term has been used to establish a restrictive political logic according to which being targeted and being protected are the only two alternatives. We can see that the term, so deployed, effectively effaces both popular movements (if not forms of popular sovereignty) and active struggles for resistance and social and political transformation. We may think that these two ways of using the notion of vulnerability are antithetical, and they are, but only within the terms of a problematic logic, one that displaces some other forms of political rationality and practice that are arguably more pressing and more promising.

So targeting and protecting are practices that belong to the same rationale of power. If precarious populations have produced their own situation, then they are not situated within a regime of power that reproduces precarity in systemic ways. Their own actions, or their own failures, are the cause of their precarious situations. If they are seen as in need of protection, and if paternalistic forms of power (which sometimes do include philanthropy and humanitarian NGOs) seek to install themselves in permanent positions of power to represent the powerless, then those very populations are excluded from democratic processes and mobilizations. The answer to this dilemma is neither to position precarious popula-

tions as hyperresponsible on a moral model nor, conversely, to position them as suffering populations in need of “care” by good Christians (as the social democratic discourse in France, with its implicit affiliation with Christian values, currently maintains).

This approach takes vulnerability and invulnerability as political effects, unequally distributed effects of a field of power that acts on and through bodies; these swift inversions show that vulnerability and invulnerability are not essential features of men or women, but, rather, processes of gender formation, the effects of modes of power that have as one of their aims the production of gender differences along lines of inequality. We can see evidence of this rationale when, for instance, masculinity is said to be “attacked” by feminism—in which case it is masculinity in the “vulnerable” position—or when the general public is said to be “attacked” by sexual and gender minorities of various kinds, or when the state of California is now understood to be “under attack” because it has lost its white majority, or when the state of Arizona is said to be “under attack” by its Latino population, and so trying to establish an ever more impermeable border to the south. Various European nationalities are now said to be “under attack” by new immigrant communities, at which point dominant groups and their racist representatives are construed as occupying a vulnerable condition.

This strategic use of vulnerability runs contrary to the kind of analysis derived from psychoanalytic feminism that goes something like this: the masculine position, construed in such a way, is effectively built through a denial of its own constitutive vulnerability. I believe we all probably know one version of this argument or another.¹¹ This denial or disavowal requires the political institution of denial, projection, and displacement. It gathers round the

sign of the feminine. But that analysis has to confront an inversion of its formulation. After all, the production of a hypervulnerability (of the nation, of masculinity) sometimes establishes a rationale for the containment of both women and minorities. The one who achieves this impermeability erases—that is, expunges and externalizes—all trace of a memory of vulnerability, effectively seeking to control contemporary feelings of unmanageable vulnerability. The person who considers himself, by definition, to be invulnerable effectively says, “I was never vulnerable, and if I was, it wasn’t true, and I have no memory of that condition, and it certainly is not true now”—the discourse attests to what it denies. An ever proliferating set of statements is belied by the bodily condition of their very enunciation, showing something of the political syntax of disavowal. Yet, it also tells us something about how histories can be told in order to support an ideal of the self one wishes were true; such histories depend on disavowal for their coherence, a coherence that is especially brittle.

Although psychoanalytic perspectives such as these are important as a way of gaining insight into this particular way that vulnerability is distributed along gender lines, they only go part of the way toward the kind of analysis needed here, since if we say that some person or some group denies vulnerability, we are assuming not only that the vulnerability was already there, but also that it is in some sense undeniable. Denial is always an effort to deflect from what is obstinately the case, so the potential refutation of denial is part of its very definition. In this sense, although the denial of vulnerability is impossible, it happens all the time. Of course, one cannot make an easy analogy between individual and group formations, and yet modes of denial or disavowal can be seen to traverse them both. For instance, to certain defenders

of the military rationale for the destruction of targeted groups or populations, we might say, “you act as if you yourself were not vulnerable to the kind of destruction you cause.” Or to defenders of certain forms of neoliberal economics, “you act as if you yourself could never belong to a population whose work and life are precarious, who can suddenly be deprived of basic rights or access to housing or health care, or who lives with anxiety about how and whether work will ever arrive.” In this way, then, we assume that those who seek to expose others to a vulnerable position—or to install them there—as well as those who seek to posit and maintain a position of invulnerability for themselves all seek to deny a vulnerability by virtue of which they are obstinately, if not unbearably, bound to the others they seek to subjugate. If one is tied to another against one’s will, even when, precisely when, a contract is the means of subjugation, the tie can be quite literally maddening, a form of unacceptably enforced dependency, as happens in slave labor and other forms of coercive contract. The problem is not dependency as such, but its tactical exploitation. And this then opens up the question of what it would mean to separate dependency from exploitation, so that the one does not immediately mean the other. Forms of political resistance that champion forms of autonomy freed of all dependency perhaps make this mistake of understanding dependency as exploitation. Of course, as Albert Memmi pointed out in his important text, *Dependence*, the term has been used to rationalize forms of colonial power, suggesting that some populations are more dependent than others, that they require colonial rule, that that is the only way to bring them, or some of them, into modernity and civilization.¹² But shall we then let that term remain tainted in that way, and is there another way to mobilize that term, even forcing a certain break with its legacy?

→ *Self-sabotage*

How else would we understand the general claim that bodies invariably depend on enduring social relations and institutions for their survival and flourishing? If we make such a claim, are we not precisely saying what bodies finally are, or offering a general ontology of the body? And attributing a general primacy to vulnerability? On the contrary: precisely because bodies are formed and sustained in relation to infrastructural supports (or their absence) and social and technological networks or webs of relation, we cannot extract the body from its constituting relations—and those relations are always economically and historically specific. So if we say that the body is vulnerable, we are saying that the body is vulnerable to economics and to history. This means that vulnerability always takes an object, is always formed and lived in relation to a set of conditions that are outside, yet part of, the body itself. We could say that the body exists then in an ecstatic relation to the supporting conditions it has or must demand, but this means that the body never exists in an ontological mode that is distinct from its historical situation. Perhaps it helps to put it this way: the body is exposed, to history, to precarity, and to force, but also to what is unbidden and felicitous, like passion and love, or sudden friendship or sudden or unexpected loss. Indeed, everything unexpected about loss might be said to touch upon a vulnerability that we have that we cannot predict or control in advance. In that sense, vulnerability denotes some dimension of what cannot be foreseen or predicted or controlled in advance, and that might be the stray comment that comes your way by someone who happens to be riding the same bus as you, or the sudden loss of friendship, or the brutal obliteration of a life by bombing. These are not the same, but as creatures who are open to what happens, we can perhaps be said to be vulnerable to what happens when what hap-

pens is not always knowable in advance. Vulnerability implicates us in what is beyond us yet part of us, constituting one central dimension of what might tentatively be called our embodiment.

Perhaps now I can make clear several points about vulnerability that seek neither to idealize nor to discount its political importance. The first is that vulnerability cannot be associated exclusively with injurability. All responsiveness to what happens is a function and effect of vulnerability—of being open to a history, registering an impression, or having something impressed upon one's understanding. Vulnerability may be a function of openness, that is, of being open to a world that is not fully known or predictable. Part of what a body does (to use the phrase of Deleuze, derived from his reading of Spinoza) is to open onto the body of another, or a set of others, and for this reason bodies are not self-enclosed kinds of entities.¹³ They are always in some sense outside themselves, exploring or navigating their environment, extended and even sometimes dispossessed through the senses.¹⁴ If we can become lost in another, or if our tactile, motile, haptic, visual, olfactory, or auditory capacities comport us beyond ourselves, that is because the body does not stay in its own place, and because dis-possession of this kind characterizes bodily sense more generally.

It is also why it is important to speak sometimes about the regulation of the senses as a political matter—there are certain photographs of the injury or destruction of bodies in war, for example, that we are often forbidden to see precisely because there is a fear that this body will feel something about what those other bodies underwent, or that this body, in its sensory comportment outside itself, will not remain enclosed, monadic, and individual. Indeed, we might ask what kind of regulation of the senses—those modes of ecstatic relationality—might have to be instituted

for individualism to be maintained as an ontology required for both economics and politics.

Although we often speak as if vulnerability is a contingent and passing circumstance, there are reasons not to accept that as a general view. Of course, it is always possible to say, "I was vulnerable then, but I am not vulnerable anymore," and we say that in relation to specific situations in which we felt ourselves to be at risk or injurable. Those can be economic or financial situations when we feel that we are exploited, having lost work, or find ourselves in conditions of poverty, in need of public assistance that is itself being cut back assiduously. Or they can be emotional situations in which we are very much vulnerable to rejection, but later find that we have lost that vulnerability. Even as it makes sense that we speak this way, it makes equal sense to treat with caution the seductions of ordinary discourse at this moment. And though we may legitimately feel that we are vulnerable in some instances and not in others, the condition of our vulnerability is itself not changeable. This does not mean that we are objectively or subjectively equally vulnerable all the time. But it does mean that it is a more or less implicit or explicit feature of our experience. To say that any of us are vulnerable beings is to mark our radical dependency not only on others, but on a sustaining and sustainable world. This has implications for understanding who we are as emotionally and sexually passionate beings, as bound up with others from the start, but also as beings who seek to persist, and whose persistence can be imperiled or sustained depending on whether social, economic, and political structures offer sufficient support for a livable life.

Populations marked by differential vulnerability and precarity are not for that reason immobilized. When political struggles emerge to oppose such conditions, they are mobilizing precarity,

and even sometimes quite deliberately mobilizing the public exposure of the body, even when it means being exposed to force or detention or possibly death. It is not that vulnerability is converted into resistance, at which point strength triumphs over vulnerability. Strength is not quite the opposite of vulnerability, and this becomes clear, I would suggest, when vulnerability is itself mobilized, not as an individual strategy, but in concert. This is probably not what Hannah Arendt had in mind when she said that politics depends on acting in concert—I can't imagine she would have much liked the Slut Walks.¹⁵ But perhaps if we rethink her view so that the body, and its requirements, becomes part of the action and aim of the political, we can start to approach a notion of plurality that is thought together with both performativity and interdependency.

Now, I realize that I have introduced new terms without being able to clarify my meaning sufficiently. "Interdependency" is one. I'd caution in this way: We cannot presume that interdependency is some beautiful state of coexistence; it is not the same as social harmony. Inevitably, we rail against those on whom we are most dependent (or those who are most dependent on us), and there is no way to dissociate dependency from aggression once and for all—this was perhaps the profound insight of Melanie Klein, but surely also Thomas Hobbes in another idiom. In the early 1980s, the black American feminist Bernice Johnson Reagon put the point this way: "I feel as if I'm gonna keel over any minute and die. That is often what it feels like if you're really doing coalition work. Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don't, you're not really doing no coalescing. . . . You don't go into coalition because you just like it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill

you, is because that's the only way you can figure you can stay alive." Toward the end of her remarks, she makes clear that interdependency includes the threat of death: about the idea of a common world, one we could call "our common world," she remarks, "You must be sure you understand that you ain't gonna be able to have an 'our' [as in our world] that don't include Bernice Johnson Reagon, cause I don't plan to go nowhere! That's why we have to have coalitions. Cause I ain't gonna let you live unless you let me live. Now there's danger in that, but there's also the possibility that we can both live—if you can stand it."¹⁶

In a sense, the people you find in the street or off the street or in the prison or on the periphery, on the path that still is no street, or in whatever basement that houses the coalition that is possible at the moment are not precisely the ones you chose. I mean, for the most part, when we arrive, we do not know who else is arriving, which means that we accept a kind of unchosen dimension to our solidarity with others. Perhaps we could say that the body is always exposed to people and impressions it does not have a say about, does not get to predict or fully control, and that these conditions of social embodiment are those we have not fully brockered. I want to suggest that solidarity emerges from this rather than from deliberate agreements we enter knowingly.

Finally, then, how do we understand resistance as the mobilization of vulnerability or exposure? Let me just offer the following as a way to close: When the bodies of those deemed "disposable" or "ungrievable" assemble in public view (as happens time and again when the undocumented arrive in the streets in the United States as part of public demonstrations), they are saying, "we have not slipped quietly into the shadows of public life: we have not become the glaring absence that structures your public life." In a

way, the collective assembling of bodies is an exercise of the popular will, a taking up or taking over of a street that seems to belong to another public, a gathering up of the pavement for the purposes of action and speech that press up against the limits of social recognizability. But the streets and the square are not the only way that people assemble, and we know that social networking produces links of solidarity that can be quite impressive and effective in the virtual domain.

Whether bodies appear in public shorn of technology or hold cell phones up in concert (as many now do to document police violence in demonstrations), or whether bodies are interned under forcible conditions of isolation and destitution, the body remains a resource, not an endless or a magical one. A group acting together has to be supported to act, and this takes on special meaning when the action takes place increasingly as a way of demanding enduring support and the conditions of livable life. It could sound like a vicious circle, but it should come as no surprise that the bodies gathered in social movements are asserting the social mobility of the body. This can be a minor way to enact the world we wish to see, or to refuse the one that is doing us in. Is this not a form of deliberate exposure and persistence, the embodied demand for a livable life that shows us the simultaneity of being precarious and acting?