REMARKS ON "QUEER BONDS"

Judith Butler

The hour is late and I will be brief, since I am sure that as much as this has been an exciting and engaging conference, we are all doubtless tired. I want to spend the few minutes I have really thanking the graduate students who conceived and then pulled off this quite impressive event, gathering so many engaged intellectuals to have these conversations. Even when conversations were not exactly had, there was a kind of speaking next to each other, successively, and this kind of discursive neighborliness is surely one meaning we might attribute to queer bonds. I will not try to summarize or pull together the various talks and responses that have happened here; it will take me some time, in any case, to register what has happened. And maybe this is the sign of a good event, even a great event: we are not precisely sure what we have been through, and if we are to know in some sense what it was, that will happen in some future that we have not yet lived. So, in this sense, the conference gives us a strange kind of future, one in which our unknowing stands a chance to be transformed into something else.

The first and main point I want to make is this: that what strikes me as quite beautiful about the event is that the graduate students who created it did not always know that they were bringing together a group of people who, left to their own, would not have been able to come together in this way. There are not only differences of opinion, but perhaps as well visceral objections, personal injuries, rivalries in the field of symbolic capital, fears of effacement, and psychic dangers of all kinds. Some people were perhaps not invited because others would not have come if they were; but maybe that is not the case at all. So what I find beautiful in this situation is that somehow the full force of those difficulties was not transmitted to the students, and that this failure of transmission became, becomes, a certain condition of whatever sociability has been created here. And it is not only a promising failure of transmission, but also perhaps a kind of forgetfulness, that allows modes of cohabitation that otherwise might seem impossible, a forgetful-

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ness that Nietzsche understood as the condition for affirmation, even for survival. So I thank you for doing something you probably did not realize you were doing. Your not realizing is terrific, and I hope you can continue not to realize for as long as possible. After all, these talks were intellectually stellar; the care, passion, and thoughtfulness, indeed, the risk taking, that characterized these presentations — are rare. When have I been anywhere where people arrived so consistently with their best work in hand? Something is at stake here, and it remains at stake.

The second point I want to make has two dimensions, one more theoretical, the other political, and I hope to be able to show, very briefly, how they are linked. I am not sure any of us know how to define a queer bond; the term functions as a point of departure, a challenge, a site of contention.

The first of these points, perhaps the more theoretical, has to do with the status of the body, what kind of bond it constitutes; in other words, in what ways it is bound up with other bodies. It may be that instead of speaking about the axis sex-desire, we are speaking about bodies and pleasures, as Michel Foucault suggested, but perhaps historically the question has shifted to the question of bodies and sociability, or bodies in sociability or indeed sociality (which is not always sociable), but where pleasure is clearly also at play. If one can speak about the "being" of the body, it is a "being" that is always given over to others, to norms, to social and political organizations that have developed historically and that allocate precariousness differentially. It is not possible first to define the ontology of the body and then to refer to the social significations the body assumes, or the social networks that form its conditions for subsistence. Rather, to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form; it is to be this very exposure. That is what makes the ontology of the body a *social* ontology. In other words, the body is exposed to socially and politically articulated forces as well as to claims of sociality — including language, work, and desire — that make possible the body's persisting and flourishing.

Bodies come into being and cease to be: as physically persisting organisms, they are subject to incursions and to illnesses that jeopardize the possibility of persisting at all. These are necessary features of bodies — they cannot "be" thought without their finitude, and they depend on what is "outside themselves" to be sustained — features that pertain to the phenomenological structure of bodily life. To live is always to live a life that is at risk from the outset and that can be put at risk or expunged quite suddenly for reasons that are not always under one's control.

That said, I want to add that this generalized condition of precariousness and dependency is both exploited and disavowed in particular political forma-

tions. No amount of will or wealth can eliminate the possibilities of illness or accident for a living body, although both can be mobilized in the service of such an illusion. These risks are built into the very conception of bodily life considered as both finite and precarious, implying that the body is always given over to modes of sociality and environment that limit its individual autonomy. The shared condition of precariousness implies that bodies are constitutively social and interdependent, yet what might be understood as a shared condition of precariousness leads not to reciprocal recognition on this basis but to a specific exploitation of targeted populations, of lives that are not quite lives, cast as "destructible" and "ungrievable." Such populations are "lose-able," or can be forfeited, precisely because they are framed as being already lost or forfeited; they are cast as threats to human life as we know it rather than as living populations in need of protection from illegitimate state violence, famine, or pandemics. Consequently, when such lives are lost they are not grievable; in the twisted logic that sometimes rationalizes their death, the loss of such populations is deemed necessary to protect the lives of "the living."

So I have already slipped from the more theoretical into the more political but, of course, I am not always sure where that line can be found. After all, the term *queer* continues to characterize an activism—Queers Against Israeli Apartheid, for instance, or queers against racism—to be found in abundance in the struggles in the UK and The Netherlands actively contesting the harassment and disenfranchisement of new immigrants, mainly Muslim. There is queer activism against racism in Australia as well, so when we are looking for a "queer theory," it may be that we can find it precisely as a presupposition of activism, and that we cannot know that theory apart from its enactments (indeed, even here, in speaking, we are enacting theory, proving once again that theory has to be enacted in order to be). Often, when we speak about the stages of AIDS activism, for instance, we suppose that we are talking about a drama that took place within Euro-American contexts, in which the time of crisis is somehow over. But what geopolitical framework allows us to announce the passing of the crisis when it has become the predominant epidemiological problem on the African continent? Surely, the implicit maps and histories that bound our idea of theory, and that seek to separate it from intervention and activism in definitive ways, have to be rethought.

But this is where, oddly, I return to theory, since why would any of us be trying to think about modes of sociability or sociality—what binds us? from what bondage do we seek release? to what bonds of obligation do we seek to commit ourselves?—if we were not in our own ways trying to orient ourselves toward a world in which thriving is not always possible, and where the livability and grievability of lives are distributed differentially—a situation that remains radically

objectionable. It is not that we should all become imperiled but that we need to understand the condition of precariousness as something that binds us to those whom we may well not know, and whom we have never chosen. In other words, not simply the figure of the "stranger" but more broadly an entire spectral demographics in which certain populations' lives are regarded as livable, and others' as unlivable and, so, unmournable. I see this global question as emerging from a certain ethical demand that found form within the Euro-Atlantic AIDS crisis but has certainly not remained restricted there.

How do we understand this way of being bound up with one another, of being implicated in each other's lives, a mode of interdependency that is hardly chosen and never precisely easy? Perhaps it helps to return to a reflection on embodied life, of what it means to be a body whose very being is marked by exposure, imprint, formation, all of which limit and condition its passionate life. What Maurice Merleau-Ponty has called "intertwining" characterizes a situation in which the body never fully belongs to itself, where every body stands a chance of surviving only by virtue of its ecstatic existence in sociality. Can responsibility be thought on the basis of this socially ecstatic structure of the body? That the body, invariably, comes into a world it never chose, is handled from the start by those whose names it does not know, and recurrently comes up against an outside world it never made—all these are signs of the general predicament of unwilled proximity to others, of a formation in dependency, an obscurity that marks not only our beginning but our possibility, and to sustaining circumstances that are always beyond individual control. Sometimes the unchosen world is precisely the past we never made, but it emerges again within perceptual life as this "coming up against" other bodies. Furthermore, we find ourselves as the kind of beings who others come up against as well; this "coming up against" is one modality that defines the body. Yet this obtrusive alterity against which the body finds itself is surely linked to that primary dependency which is before and against our will. Without this, what would we be? And how would we account for how it is that anything comes to impress itself on us, how impressions form our thinking and feeling, in other words, for what animates responsiveness to that world, in the form of pleasure, rage, suffering, hope, desire?

Precariousness as a generalized condition relies on a conception of the body as fundamentally dependent on, and conditioned by, a sustained and sustainable world. Responsiveness—and thus, ultimately, responsibility—is located in the affective responses to a sustaining and impinging world; in other words, it names a relation to what is and is not sustainable, what is insupportable, and what supports are required.

In the context of war, which clearly remains our contemporary horizon, and which continues to link Barack Obama with George W. Bush, it is necessary to consider how responsibility must focus not just on the value of this or that life, or on the question of survivability in the abstract, but on the sustaining social conditions of life—especially when they fail. This is why it makes sense that there should be queer activism on Gaza, but also against the escalation of war in Afghanistan, and against the recent waffling on whether Guantanamo complies with the Geneva Convention.

If survival depends not so much on the policing of a boundary—the strategy of a certain sovereign state in relation to its territory—but on recognizing how we are bound up with others, then this means we have to conceptualize the body in the field of politics. We have to consider whether the body is rightly defined as a bounded kind of entity. What makes a body discrete is not an established or known morphology, as if we could identify certain bodily shapes or forms as paradigmatically human bodies. I am quite sure we cannot and should not identify a paradigmatically human form. And as the critiques of gender normativity, ableism, and racist perception have made clear, there is no singular human form. To demarcate the human body through identifying its bounded form is to miss the crucial fact that the body is, in certain ways and even inevitably, unbound—in its acting, its receptivity, in its speech, desire, and mobility. It is open to what is outside it, and must be, in order to survive. Thus what is outside is essential to what it is, which means, of course, that it has no essence. It is outside itself, in the world of others, in a space and time it does not control, and it exists not only in the vector of these relations but as this very vector. In this sense, the body does not belong to itself and never can. It is bound and unbound. Indeed, if it is to exercise autonomy at all, it would be precisely as a consequence of this ecstatic and bounded relationality.

In *Frames of War*, I suggest that I am already in the hands of the other when I try to take stock of who I am. I am already up against a world I never chose when I exercise my agency. That countervailing world forms us as morphological creatures through normative frameworks that differentiate between who is recognizable and who is not, that establish in advance what kind of life will be a life worth living, what life will be a life worth preserving, and what life will become worthy of being mourned. It is not as an isolated and bounded being that I survive, but as one whose boundary exposes me to others in ways that are voluntary and involuntary (sometimes both at once or in ways that are indistinguishable), an exposure that is the condition of sociality and survival alike.

The boundary of who I am is the boundary of the body, but the boundary

of the body never fully belongs to me. Survival depends less on the established boundary to the self than on the constitutive sociality of the body. But as much as the body, considered as social in both its surface and its depth, is the condition of survival, it is also what, under certain social conditions, imperils our lives and our survivability. Of course, the fact that one's body is never fully one's own, bounded and self-referential, is the condition of passionate encounter, of desire, of longing, and of those modes of address and addressability on which the feeling of aliveness — and pleasure, to be sure — depends: sensateness, receptivity, activity. But the entire world of unwilled contact also follows from the fact that the body finds its survivability in social space and time, and this exposure or dispossession is precisely what is exploited in the case of unwilled coercion, constraint, physical injury, violence. Contact, unwilled, unexpected — it crosses at least two ways, in the direction of insupportable pain and injury, in the direction of sudden discovery, falling in love, unforeseen solicitude.

One's life is always in some sense in the hands of others; even when I extend my own hand, it is as one who has been handled and sustained that I may offer something sustaining. We are all over each other, and that is true from the start. This implies struggling for and against dependency, negotiating exposure to those we know and to those we do not know. Sometimes these are relations of love or even of care, but sometimes they are relations to anonymous others, to institutions, to states, or to nongovernmental agencies.

If we bear responsibility within such a scene, it follows from the fact that no one escapes the threat of precarity or the need for social and political organizations that safeguard living creatures against injury and destruction. In this sense, the obligations at issue are not exhausted at the limit of the nation-state or established communities of belonging; they are toward those we sometimes cannot name and do not know, and who may or may not bear perceivable traits of familiarity to an established sense of who "we" are. Indeed, it may be that what this notion of ethics requires is that we no longer know precisely who "we" are or to whom we sustain obligations. I laughed two days ago when I saw a bumper sticker that said, "I love my country, but I think it is time that we start to see other people." It's a good point, but it is not precisely mine, since love of country does not interest me, still subscribes to the primacy of nation, and doubtless gets in the way of trying to think about what global obligations actually entail. We could say that "we" have such obligations to "others" and act as if "we" know who "we" are. But if there is another notion of sociality at stake, one that lacks the intimate connotations of sociability, then the "we" has to come up against its own limits where

it does not, cannot, recognize itself. Something queer happens then, happens here, or so we hope.

Note

Parts of this talk comprise a (significantly modified) version of text that also appeared in Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 2–3, 52–54.