New Scenes of Vulnerability, Agency and Plurality
An Interview with Judith Butler

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IT HAD been ten years or more since the last formal interview I conducted with Judith Butler for TCS, but nonetheless, had she declined, I would not have pressed the point. One among the very many requests sent in her direction – for lectures, manuscripts, articles, comments, responses, endorsements and the like – mine was hopeful rather than insistent. Still, ten years is hardly pestering and, happily, Judith agreed to another demand on her time, asking only a few months more peace from me before we met, at her home in Berkeley, California, to sit for some several hours, drinking tea and taking stock.

Living by words doesn’t necessarily make the writer comfortable with the spoken interview format; indeed, the academic interview is a peculiar endeavour, attempting to elicit both spontaneity and brevity that are not the common habits of its subject. Judith Butler, however, has an impressive ability to speak extemporaneously, and with the broad canvas that this interview afforded her, she ranges, as I had hoped she would, over a wide terrain. Making connections between the various philosophies she engages – Foucault, Fanon, Arendt, Laplanche are all mentioned here – as well as with the present political configurations to which she feels one should attend, Judith Butler eloquently conveys a sense of her restless need to think the present, to try to comprehend it through, but also as a question for, philosophy. This, more than any concern for the consistency of argument, characterizes Judith Butler’s work and her own reflections on it. Yet there are some consistencies, concerns that have remained throughout her career to date. The terms of the title we have chosen for the interview – vulnerability, agency, plurality – are offered in an attempt to capture a few of those
concerns; while of course, as the title also implies, these terms demand to be explored in their altering, even ‘interruptive’, new scenes. The possibilities for Israel/Palestine, the question of contemporary faiths and secularism, a renewed theoretical interest in ‘vitalism’ provide some of the provocations here. The interview is not comprehensive by any means, and although it certainly covers much ground, it does not attempt to summarize Judith Butler’s work or even her approach to her thinking. Rather, it is a pause, a rest on a continuing journey, a chance to consider the paths taken but, more importantly, to wonder about our capacities to imagine what lies ahead.

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Vikki Bell: Foucault has been a constant source of inspiration in your work, informing the central arguments of Gender Trouble. But even there, and more clearly still in your more recent work – especially in Giving an Account of Oneself – your discussion brings him onto the terrain of psychoanalysis, specifically around the argument that when forms of rationality ‘become naturalized, taken for granted, considered as foundational and required, if they become the terms by which we do and must live, then our very living depends upon a denial of their historicity, a disavowal of the price we pay’ (2005: 121). You argue that Foucault shares something with psychoanalysis, which allows you to draw on both to argue that something is sacrificed or lost in the moment in which the subject constitutes him or herself. But is something of Foucault sacrificed here, i.e. the critique of psychoanalysis’ construction of the unconscious and the building of its justifications on this, when you turn his genealogical impulse into a reconstructive one? Why is it important to supplement a Foucauldian thesis with psychoanalytic arguments?

Judith Butler: Foucault is at times willing to use the word ‘unconscious’; I think he actually refers to the ‘cultural unconscious’ at one point. It’s an unexpected engagement with what one would expect to be a psychoanalytic term. So what is he doing in such instances? There’s another point in The Hermeneutics of the Subject where he makes an overture towards psychoanalysis, emphasizing the way that another discourse may operate unwittingly in the deliberate discourse of a subject. He also references the scene of address in the transference. One speaks to someone, but one’s speech is in some way the speech of an Other. So, sometimes one has to read him carefully to see what he is trying to probe. Certain kinds of oppositions get created according to which we have Foucault on the one hand and psychoanalysis on the other, and precisely when those kinds of oppositions get settled, he’ll start talking about Freud, or he’ll mention the unconscious – perhaps as a way to confuse an audience that thinks they have captured him. Without knowing his intention, we can see that, effectively, he re-articulates positions that have been opposed and shows how they might be implicated in one another, or how they might be ‘re-operationalized’.
In the interview ‘What does it cost to tell the truth/what price do we pay to tell the truth?’ he is effectively saying that when we enter a particular discursive regime or regime of rationality, we don’t enter fully, we’re not fully constructed; nor is there a way to identify the subject fully with the particular regime of rationality at issue. We enter by paying a price, by losing something that was once ours. Now, he doesn’t exactly say what is lost or given up, but I would presume that if we enter into a certain kind of regime of rationality (or find that a rationality has entered into what we call ‘our own’), then there are alternative modes of rationality that get discounted. So one of the things we pay with, by entering into a particular regime, is the capacity to operate alternative rationalities – those that are less regulated or that constitute other kinds of competing regimes. If we think about the subject as paying, as losing or giving up something, in order to enter into a discursive regime that enables it to achieve intelligibility, rationality, recognizability, then what becomes unintelligible, unspeakable, unrecognizable? There is a time of the now (Benjamin’s ‘Jetztzeit’) in which these operations take hold and which becomes the condition of our own query into what constitutes a limit or a cost. We can’t assume that there is a pure domain of the unintelligible or the unspeakable; there’s nothing that is, by nature, unintelligible or unspeakable. What Foucault’s really explicating is how certain exclusions from the domain of intelligibility produce a domain of the unintelligible – a domain that is not only produced through exclusion, but maintained there by processes involving force and iterability, insistence and frailty.

There are some standard psychoanalytic frameworks that would respond, ‘Oh no, the unintelligible is the id’, or ‘the unintelligible is the unconscious’, or suggest that the unintelligible is the domain of primary process that operates outside the domain of consciousness and established modes of intelligibility, and that has, on occasion, the capacity to interrupt those. An uncritical acceptance of the topographies of id, ego and superego gives a kind of presumptive autonomy to the domain of the unintelligible, saying, ‘Oh, it’s an established part of the psyche’. But for Foucault it’s not a pre-established part of the psyche. I agree. I don’t think we can seek recourse to a kind of ongoing structural unconscious, that’s there for every subject in the same way, or regard the unconscious as the repository of the unintelligible. But if the psychoanalytic view includes the claim that such a structure is not only instituted, but also maintained, then there’s a possible link with Foucault. So although, if we sought recourse to a law that works in the same way in every possible social and discursive universe, we would depart from Foucault, we might instead ask with him how the domains of the unconscious are produced. If the unconscious, conceived as an enigmatic domain (to cite from Laplanche), is instituted and maintained depending on how the domains of rationality and intelligibility are circumscribed and instituted (and we conceive these latter operations as operations of power), then we have a social and discursive analysis that is fundamental to the thinking of psychic process. And the
presumption of the autonomy of the unconscious, even the psyche, is called into question.

Part of the confusion has to do with how the unconscious is defined. Some assume that by ‘unconscious’ is meant ‘unconscious content’ and some of those assume further that there is a topographical container for such ‘content’. Similarly, there are structuralist and functionalist accounts that claim a certain ‘variability’ to the unconscious. So some content – or, indeed, signifier – that might have to be unconscious under a certain set of variable historical conditions may not have to be unconscious at all under others. If the unconscious is linked to topography, or if we are induced to invoke the figures of spatiality when we try and broach this problem of the unconscious, that is because one of its operations is to appear as a kind of place or territory, something produced and sustained through a problematic boundary. This is why it is important to read the meta-psychology as part of the very operation of the psyche rather than take for granted a kind of structure or place-holder in which this content exists. As a domain of the unacceptable, the unintelligible or the enigmatic, it is constantly being produced and maintained, which is not to say that it is effectively so! Now, I want to say that this is also lived out psychically. If we live in a world in which that kind of separation is always happening, and that gets lived out psychically, then we can start to use terms like ‘the unconscious’ in an adjectival way, as process, or even as an iterable kind of action whose effectivity and fallibility belong to its own temporal logic. To understand how this operates, we have to ask how, say, the unacceptable gets lived out, how the unintelligible gets lived out, and how what is not lived out, what is unliveable, also leaves its mark or assumes figural or symptomatic form as spectre, monstrosity or a mode of unintelligibility. If one lives according to a rationality, what forms of ‘life’ come to haunt that mode of rationality as its outside, and how do those unliveable modes vacillate topographically between what is ‘inside’ and what is ‘outside’ the orbit of the subject? It seems to me that we can’t actually understand the whole process of subject formation without such a set of perspectives.

That said, let me just make a simple point in relation to it. For those of us who read Foucault first, within the debates on cultural construction, we wanted to be able to say that subjects were produced by discourse, or that there were discursive conditions under which subjects were produced (this was the way that Foucault entered into some academic work in the US, through an anthropological debate, but not the way he entered into academic inquiry where those were not the terms). That seems right; I would still hold to that as a kind of fundamental Foucauldian postulate. I would add two points, as I think he does. First, that there are so-called subjects who are subject to de-production, an awkward way of trying to describe those who never get to enter into the process of being explicitly produced as subjects. Note: this does not mean they do not belong to that production – their reiterated exclusion from the domain of a recognizable subject is central to the production of the recognizable subject. So, there is an exclusionary
criterion that means there are subjects who get produced, others who don’t get fully produced or who are only partially legible, and those who don’t get produced at all. Then there’s the second point, which is: ‘At what price do any of us get produced as subjects?’ Here the question of an economic model comes to bear on thinking exclusion. It strikes me as a very psychoanalytic question. We don’t have to give a standard psychoanalytic response to the question, but at least it allows us to see that there are forms of suffering or de-realization, or unintelligibility, or inassimilability that are not just there, but produced, enforced and managed over time, that get lived out, or that set a limit to what can be lived out. Indeed, it can be an entire mode of living in the mode of non-living.

So, psychoanalysis isn’t always being involved in a reconstructive project. What is it that is being reconstructed? A childhood? The causal precedents for a life, the key traumas by which we are formed? If anything, it might be understood as a ‘deconstructive’ project to the extent that one is looking for what is ruled out, what figuration that ‘ruled out’ assumes, and what maintains and risks the historically specific forms of foreclosure that make and break a subject. This can be part of a genealogical impulse. For instance, if you consider Fanon and ask: ‘At what price does one become a man?’ Well, if the black man is not a man, then the price by which one becomes a man is the effacement of race. Or, alternately, the saturation of the black man in masculinity is the effacement of the man. The problem of writing, for Fanon, is precisely how to negotiate and expose that trap, without presuming that the trap is invariable, either structurally or functionally. How does that get lived out, or, rather, how do the limits on what can be lived out make themselves known in the midst of what is being lived out? Well, it gets lived out at the level of rage, of muteness, of the inability to speak or to make use of established language that is conferring intelligibility on human subjects, right? That Fanon returned to psychoanalysis to help him with that particular conundrum strikes me as really important; we could ask, ‘At what price could Fanon become a man, if he ever could become a man?’ And that would be, at once, a question about the discursive construction of the human, its presumptive white masculinity, and the de-production of race or the effacement of race, or the association of the racially marked subject as prior to the human and not the man. My own view is that he had to reclaim embodiment differently as he does toward the end of that text when he explicitly directs his prayer to his body, asking his body to let him become a man, where ‘man’ is then postulated as a body that questions. The questioning animal crosses the conventionally racist human/bestial divide, and does so through positing a body that can become a way of knowing.

Of course, that form of knowing is not omnipotent; it does not seek to overcome what it cannot know; it only seeks to question. Perhaps the form of the question is what links Foucault with psychoanalysis here, and with a kind of social critique of subject formation that takes into account the differential modes of power at work.
**VB:** Fanon’s biography seems to me to tell the story of a particular political process as it is registered at the level of the subject; that is, the dislocating experiences of a ‘postcolonial’ process when the construction of that peculiar subject – the faithful colonial subject – dissolved. By the end of the war, after his experiences of poverty in North Africa and of racism in the French army, the 20-year-old Fanon had lost confidence in the ‘obsolete ideal’ (Macey, 2000: 104) he had wished to defend, and he returned to Martinique somewhat differently positioned in relation to France, more aware, no doubt, of the irony of the colonized being asked to help in the liberation of the colonizers. So in this sense he was, in your terms, ‘produced’ as a French colonial subject, and was even willing – ‘complicit’ – in his production as French soldier-subject, only to be brought, through the experiences of war, to the understanding that this subject could only emerge, at that time, within the racist formations, in which he was never quite soldier-subject, never quite French-subject.

**JB:** Perhaps we would have to think about the particular form of ambivalence that that entails – something that Homi Bhabha clearly did in drawing our attention to doubling of the ‘not quite’. I think Fanon really wanted to understand psychic suffering – trauma – that was produced under concrete social conditions. If we start thinking that the analysis of social conditions doesn’t include the analysis of psychic suffering or, conversely, that the analysis of psychic suffering involves the suspension of critical analysis of social conditions, then we’re lost. Suffering is both the effect and modality of oppressive social conditions, so we cannot really think the conditions without the suffering. If we attempt to think the suffering without the conditions (which is what happens, for instance, in conflict-resolution scenarios in the Middle East or in South Africa, where explicit references to power are excluded from the conversation), then a perilous obfuscation and repression occurs.

In Fanon’s mirror stage, the idea that this ‘I’, who I am is reflected back, but is reflected back to me in a way that ‘robs me of my skin’. This reformulation of Lacan asks us to think about being reflected back and robbed at the same time; it makes us question the way that ‘misrecognition’ works. Something similar happens when Fanon remarks that he walks into the movie theatre and waits for the black man to appear. He waits for himself, and he knows that he will arrive at some point or another. He appears on the screen, and assents to the terms of interpellation: ‘There I am’, right? If I can offer a paraphrase here, it seems to me that Fanon is saying, ‘I’m out there, framed, against my will, and in ways that are foreign to me, but which I also recognize as my own, because that foreign image constitutes the term by which “place” and “legibility” is reserved for me under the current configurations of racist conditions.’ One can see the reformulation of the Lacanian/Althusserian juncture in that scene in which he waits for the visual reflection of himself in the movie theatre, or takes in the racist taunting by the child on the street: ‘Look, a nigger!’ He is, in effect,
‘recognized’ at such moments, but the price of recognition is high. He exists socially at such moments, but the price of existence is non-existence. To be recognized or ‘reflected back’ under such conditions and through such means is to be reduced to what does not exist, to unliveable life. Of course, as he writes, as he narrates the scene, there is another question for the ‘I’ who is at issue here, since the ‘I’ who appears in writing seems to be at a distance from the scene, watching the racist insult on the street, watching himself waiting in the cinema for ‘himself’ to arrive. Do we want to say that a certain kind of splitting and repetition of the ‘I’ allows for the social conditions of racism to become specified in the making and unmaking of the subject? The impossible and illegible ‘I’ nevertheless draws upon another discursive condition to expose and criticize the one that would level the ‘I’ to the point of non-existence. Here language is essentially linked to survival, but no one survives in a pure language. It is the writing on emancipation and freedom from which he draws and which, in turn, draws him as a figure who can and does write with and against the conditions of his own construction.

VB: In *Giving an Account of Oneself* you draw on Laplanche’s argument that the infant is inaugurated, that the ‘me’ emerges through the overwhelming and ‘generalised seduction of the sexualised adult world’ (2005: 97). What has been your experience of engaging Laplanche? What is it about Laplanche’s theory that attracts your attention? For those unfamiliar with Laplanche, is there a specific manner in which he differs from classic psychoanalytic accounts that is important to you?

JB: I am impressed that this analyst in his 80s argues that we cannot assume that families are made of a mother and a father, and when we’re talking about the infant, the primary impressions an infant registers, we’re talking about a scene in which what he calls ‘the adult world’ operates upon the child. Where are the sacred norms of Mother and Father?

No matter how gently an infant is treated, the handling is always to some extent unwilled, since what we might call a ‘will’ has not been formed. No infant has entered into a contract with an attending set of adults, even as there are crucial contracts at work in the law that seek to protect infants against harm. Even the most attentive and loving modes of handling the infant are impingements that can come from several directions; there’s no single social form to that impingement.

For a psychoanalyst to say that Oedipalization does not depend on there being a mother and a father, or a nuclear family, or even that Oedipalization is itself overrated as the formative structure, is quite incredible. There are US feminists, such as Jessica Benjamin, who have done a great deal to re-think the pre-Oedipal and to shift the focus away from the Oedipal to other formative relations. Laplanche also makes a distinct contribution here. For him, what is most important is to think about how an infant in the early years is overwhelmed by signifiers from the social world,
signifiers that are inscrutable and overwhelming, and that there’s an impingement of adult sexuality. In a way, Laplanche reintroduces the seduction theory, but he alters it fundamentally. What is conveyed to (impinged upon) the child is not necessarily a desire for the child, and it is not necessarily the effort to bring the child into an explicit and incestuous sexual relation (though it can take that form). Rather, Laplanche is drawing attention to the ambivalent and insistent presence of an adult sexuality that is not only in the neighbourhood of the young child, but that acts upon that child, even ‘entering’ the young child and prompting and forming the child’s ‘own’ desire. Some other set of desires become interiorized in such a way that one’s own desire is prompted and structured by this alterity; the ‘imprint’ of these others’ desires makes one’s own desire possible, but also makes one’s own desire permanently enigmatic. In Freudian terms, Laplanche has not only given a fresh reformulation of the seduction theory, demoted the Oedipal complex and the presumptions of the heterosexual family, but has drawn new attention to infantile helplessness as a promising point of departure for rethinking sexual formation.

With infantile helplessness, something new happens. In relation to what, for instance, is the infant helpless? Well, the infant is helpless in relationship to all this language, all these signifiers that are carrying adult sexuality and adult desire, circulating but also traversing the infant. The infant can’t yet fathom this linguistic world of sexuality, even though the infant is conscripted into that world of sexuality by all the ways that language operates in and around itself. It’s an important framework because it doesn’t de-sexualize the infant, but neither does it impute incestuous desire as the basis of sexuality. It allows for there to be a kind of implication of the infant in the sexual world from the start without making any presumptions about what form that will take. The framework also marks the kind of radical asymmetry that is involved and implies certain kinds of ethical dispositions towards that asymmetry. No adult can purify the environment of sexuality without precisely communicating repression, but if the impinging sexual environment is operative, then the question is, ‘How is it there?’ ‘How ought it to be there?’ This leads to very concrete questions about how children are cared for, and how their bodies are understood, or whether autonomy is granted, or how it is discussed, or even the ethics of the touch. Indeed, the infant is delivered over to a touch that he/she could have never chosen – and this happens at the mundane level of literally taking a child out of the bath when he or she says ‘no’. So un-chosen touch is, in some sense, the pre-condition of survival, even of what we might eventually call ‘autonomy’ – and I see no way around this point. We all have to be picked up, we all have to be held, we all have to be fed; there’s all this, as it were, forcible bodily contact. And without it, there’s no survival. Indeed, without it there could be no love; there could be no capacity for love. It’s a very peculiar fact. You can’t imagine that all relationships are contractual and raise a child!

If forcible contact is necessary for survival, then it becomes all the more important to think carefully about what kinds of impingements are
necessary for survival and flourishing, and what kind are not. These ethical matters, as urgent and as necessary as they are, do not, cannot, take into account all the ways that impingement happens, since part of what is conveyed is precisely what remains enigmatic and unconscious in the adult. Still, ethics can and does take place in this sea of unknowing.

VB: I know that recently you have been thinking about Arendt’s work on responsibility and re-reading *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1984[1963]) In your paper on Arendt you consider how Arendt places herself in the position of judge in her writing; she ‘sentences’ Eichmann. How does that peculiar moment in her text relate to your own modes of (textual) ‘judgement’? Furthermore, in Arendt you find, again, this emphasis on a plurality within the subject’s sociality, i.e. Arendt’s ‘two-in-one’-ness. You say this two-in-one-ness is the ‘very precondition of responsibility’. Arendt argues something similar later on. In her so-called ‘apology’ for Heidegger, an essay written for his eightieth birthday, she depicted him as erring in his attempt to move into the public world of human affairs. Heidegger’s retreat to the seclusion of his thinking was an entirely appropriate response to his ‘collision’ with the public world, she suggests, for thinking requires ‘essential seclusion from the world’ (1978: 299). Arendt’s position seems to be that, unlike Eichmann, Heidegger recognized his error and restored his capacity for judgement by retreating and thinking in the ‘place of stillness’ appropriate for thought (Bradshaw, 1989: 70), concurring with Heidegger’s own position in his ‘Letter on Humanism’ that thinking must not be inscribed in a ‘technical horizon’ – as a means toward acting or making – but may be regarded as the pursuit of thinking Being, that which is ‘farther than all beings and yet nearer to man than every being’ (1993: 234). For the Arendt of ‘Thinking and Moral Considerations’, and of *The Life of the Mind* (1978), thinking can prevent immoral action in the world, and therefore it has to become ‘ascribed to everybody; it cannot be a privilege of the few’ (quoted in Bradshaw, 1989: 73). What should we make of this set of arguments? Where is your thought leading you on philosophy and its relationship to judgement?

JB: It’s true that in my recent work on the problem of giving an account of oneself I’m trying to think about ethical modes of relationality that do not centre on judgement. I think Deleuze famously, at one point, calls for an ethics without judgement. I worry that the kind of over-determination of judgement within the contemporary political field has produced a kind of high morality, a suspicion of any kind of thinking that makes us try to rethink our moralism, or rethink the fixity of our normative judgements of a certain kind. So I certainly have, in my own way, cast certain kinds of suspicions on judgement. This does not mean that there are no strong normative aspirations in my recent work, especially on war, but that the struggle to realize certain normative goals is not the same as making judgement into the central feature of an ethical philosophy. Of course, this may also turn out to be a
way in which I differ from Arendt, though some of what she writes about
judgement is surprising in good ways.

I have found Arendt interesting for two different reasons. What I liked
about her idea of judgement is that she makes use of aesthetic judgement
to think about politics. So it’s not Kant’s categorical imperative, it’s not even
moral judgement as he lays it out in various ways, it’s aesthetic judgement.
And that kind of judgement has a performative character, as Bonnie Honig
(1995) has pointed out. But it is also about a judgement that seeks to respond
to new historical circumstances without recourse to established guidelines
or rules – which isn’t to say that it’s fully spontaneous, although sometimes,
lamentably, she talks about the spontaneous productions of the imagination
in ways that betray a rather stunning romanticism. What’s quite useful is to
suggest that sometimes we can and must judge precisely when we don’t have
firm precedents by which to judge, which means that judgement cannot be
understood as an application of pre-existing rules (rules which are presumed
to be sufficient to any and all of the circumstances to which they will be
applied). In a way, she reworks the theory of judgement in light of new
historical circumstances, the task of judging Eichmann, for instance. That
interests me.

Arendt offers an ontology of the subject: what kind of being must we
be in order to be responsible? In her view, we have to be, in some sense,
divided, in order to be responsible. Of course, this goes against ideas of
‘de-cision’ that draw from the etymology of that term to suggest that a cut
or rupture is overcome through decision, and that decision is central to
responsibility. It may be that Arendt is offering an alternative to this view,
one that bases responsibility on a notion of social plurality. More important
than individual decision-making (which seems to presuppose both a liberal
ontology of individualism and heroic action as a model for ethics) is social
cohabitation and the norms that it yields. Over and against those who have
caustically remarked that ‘the divided subject’ can never supply a ground
for ethics, Arendt reverses the formulation we must be divided in order to
be responsible.

VB: So divided in the sense of thinking this two-in-one-ness?

JB: Yes. This two-in-one-ness that she ascribes to thinking is related to the
plurality she ascribes to the social-political world more generally, and I
think she is, as it were, of two minds about this particular problem! Some-
times she takes a more Heideggerian view and tries to separate thinking as
an activity that happens either by myself or with one other, and then reserves
action as something that happens in concert with others – more than two –
and which belongs to the domain of plurality and politics. There are several
moments where the plurality that belongs to politics, though, seems to be
implied by the thinking that belongs to the pre-political domain of the
solitary or the dyadic. And so I’m interested in the chiasmic relation that
links the two. I think she cannot, with consistency, hold the Heideggerian
position. As much as she tries to defend Heidegger by praising what he has
to say about thinking and deflecting from what he has to say about politics,
she seems to re-engage the distinction between the two. She describes
thinking on various occasions as implying a certain kind of political respon-
sibility (responsibility under dictatorship requires thinking) and as implying
a plurality to which we belong (one is minimally social when one thinks).
My sense is that her own ambivalence vis-a-vis Heidegger’s philosophy
comes out, but in the ways that she inconsistently maintains the distinction
between thinking and acting. I think she does sometimes claim, as you
yourself point out, that thinking can prevent a moral action in the world,
and it is true that she holds everyone accountable to this. She is quite strict
on this matter, and there seem to be only two thinking possibilities for her.
She doesn’t have any sympathy with the idea that maybe, depending on
whether and how one is confined and coerced, one finds oneself in a kind
of ‘grey zone’ in Primo Levi’s sense, where one is coerced, so one is trying
to act, if one can, to ameliorate suffering or refuse complicity, but one is
also trying to live. She has some morally pure ideas not only about what true
thinking is, but what morally right action is, in that case. I’m not sure many
people could have lived up to her standards there, or whether she thinks it
is relevant to understand the conditions of extreme coercion under which
moral decisions were made.

Heidegger does, of course, make this extremely important claim that
thinking must not be inscribed in a technical horizon. I was brought up on
that notion within the philosophy departments where I studied, and I
continue to believe that, though it probably bears some reconsideration! I
think it would be terrible if thinking became a pure instrument understood
on a technical model. For Arendt, judgement is not techne, it is a kind of
poesis, or, indeed, phronesis. So there are ways of being practical or active
without subscribing to the instrumentalist model. So if we were to think
about what Arendt’s kind of true rejoinder to Heidegger might be, it seems
to me she’s saying, ‘Look, we don’t just live in a world in which we have
thinking on the one hand, and techne on the other, we have thinking on the
one hand, and it can lead to practice, praxis, phronesis, poesis, all of which
are modes of action that are different from techne.’ So, I would prefer that
she owned the more robust rejoinder than she, in fact, probably does.

It is probably worthwhile to note something about the judgement that
she does perform in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, where she simulates the death
sentence against him. I’m not at all sure she can justify the death penalty,
and although she seeks recourse to it, I don’t actually see that she offers an
explicit justification. What she faults him for is his decision to cohabit with
one part of the existing human population and not another, and that he
thinks he can decide with whom he will cohabit on the earth. It is not just
a matter of with whom he decides to have proximity, but who will live and
who will die as an inhabitant of the earth. She is arguing that we have no
choice about those with whom we cohabit the earth, that the conditions of
cohabitation are prior to contract, prior to voluntary assent, and prior to
decision. The ones who live here with us are the ones whose lives we are obligated to protect by the sheer fact of this coexistence. If norms are yielded from involuntary cohabitation, then Arendt conducts here a critique of a liberal contract theory. We never got to choose, we never entered into a contract. There are those we never chose, and who are contingently there, but who we are, nevertheless, obligated not to kill. I think there is a little bit of a Levinasian echo in there, the one place where the two of them suggest that obligations emerge from unwilled domains of proximity and cohabitation, not from contract. I hope to pursue this connection in time.

VB: I've always found it provocative that she would reserve certain obligations for the political realm; by contrast, her idea of the social seeks to protect the freedom of associations irrespective of egalitarian or perhaps even ethical obligation. As in the moment when she explains that although she would not wish to, ‘If I choose to go on holiday with just Jews, then I should be free to do so’, because the social does not and should not require the same obligations as the public or political. So in a sense that's what she’s suggesting is happening here with Eichmann, that he was complicit with the wish to destroy these distinctions that was integral to German National Socialism’s vision, to remove ‘the social’ altogether. But how far do we need her distinctions to make this point? Her distinctions are often perplexing and seem to lead her off course. With the Little Rock essay, for example, where she got herself into this counter-intuitive position, because she held so firmly to her own distinctions, it seems to me. They don’t hold in that instance, and that collapsing of the schema cannot be resolved simply by saying ‘well, the school is a peculiar institution, an exception’.

JB: I think that’s right. One has to wonder about those exceptions. There’s a struggle about whether or not Arendt is a communitarian or whether she’s a universalist and I can see why there would be an inevitable tension there. What I like about the idea of plurality is that everything in Eichmann leads you to think, ‘Oh, she’s going to say, “As a Jew, I sentence you”’. She can’t say that and does not say that. She faults the Israeli state for speaking as the Jewish people; at the same time she thinks, ‘Oh well, they have a right to hold this trial, the Jews have not been able to try their oppressors.’ You can hear her vacillate. But when she speaks against Eichmann, it’s in the name of plurality; not as a Jew, but in the name of an inevitable plurality that has to be preserved. And yet what does she do in the name of that plurality? She sentences him to death. Of course, fictionally, but at that moment she is effectively deciding with whom to share the earth and with whom not to share the earth, and distinguishing the conditions under which that can be done legitimately and illegitimately. So we have to ask, can she hold to that idea of plurality, or is she saying that the one exception to the right to life, which seems both to belong to and obligate every other inhabitant, would be those who plan or execute genocide? So the death penalty is reserved for those individuals who seek to destroy some part of the
population. And then, if we ask who is legitimately in the position to make the decision about the death sentence, we do not exactly get an answer.

Her position engenders many exceptions. It cannot extricate itself from the concrete instance, which always seems to compromise the universality of the principle. I agree that sometimes she ends up tripping over her own stipulative definitions and distinctions, but other times it seems as if judgement is the least rigid and most flexible of practices.

VB: But you have found, in Arendt – I’m thinking of the lecture that you gave at Goldsmiths – the possibility of another vision of Israel that you wanted to reassert, or maybe, just remind people of?

JB: Well, I think the idea of plurality in the name of which she indicts Eichmann actually relates to her idea of federations as non-sovereign modes of government. After all, she thinks none of us have a right to decide with whom we inhabit the world: cohabitation is not an effect of contract, but an obligation that is pre-contractual. She offers a very trenchant critique of sovereignty in some ways, at least theoretically, and she offers a distinct alternative to the rush to Schmidt that we’ve seen in recent years. In the years 1945–8, she really struggled to support the bi-national alternative for Palestine proposed by Martin Buber and Judah Magnus.

One must remember that bi-nationalism was also part of at least one strain of Judaism. It was part of Buber’s ‘cultural Zionism’, so that bi-nationalism was one of the meanings of Zionism. Now it has become anti-Zionism. It resonated, I think, with some of Arendt’s ideas of plurality, federation, cohabitation, all of these notions. But she was very aware that a state formation that presupposes a homogeneous community or nation, or nationality as a precondition of citizenship, would, under modern conditions, always produce a set of refugees or stateless persons, so that the nation-state implies a structural reproduction of the refugee problem. And it’s why she took an extraordinary historical view on the concentration camps, situating it within the refugee problem after the First World War; she traced it back to earlier forced migrations in the 20th century, and then to more contemporary ones in Palestine and in India after the partition. She was really trying to understand what it is about the nation-state that seems systematically to reproduce the refugee problem. She understood Israel to be committing that crime of trying to hold to a nation-state model that it should know could only produce the very problem of statelessness under which the Jews, themselves, had suffered. So why force that upon another population?

In a way it was the lesson of the concentration camps and the expulsion of the Jews that made her crystallize her critique of the nation-state in a certain way, and led more directly to her questioning of Jewish sovereignty as the basis of citizenship for the state of Israel. It’s especially important when people say, ‘Oh well, the conditions of World War Two led inexorably to the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, as sanctuary.’ But sanctuary for whom, and at the expense of whom? She was asking those questions as
early as 1946, saying, ‘Wait a minute. We’re learning the wrong lesson here. There’s a different Zionism, and there’s a different notion of cohabitation.’ That’s why she really struggled for the federated bi-national proposal, which won support very temporarily in 1947. Now, that plan may not have worked, and perhaps it, too, was mired in colonial presumptions that are finally unworkable and unacceptable. But I thought it was a worthy endeavour, and would have initiated a different history, if implemented.

VB: I’m wondering whether this idea of plurality, cohabitation and so on, can serve us as a link to the arguments around the sexual politics and the secular in your British Journal of Sociology essay? In your BJS essay on sexual politics, torture and secular time, you consider how feminism and the struggle for sexual freedom may have become signs of civilization, deployed in ways that in recent events, especially in relation to this so-called war on terror, depict Islam in simplified version. At the end of that essay you argue via Benjamin’s 13th thesis in ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ that the present has to be understood as a ‘difficult and interruptive scene of multiple temporalities’ (2008: 20). You pit this against cultural pluralism or a liberal discourse of rights. How does a focus on multiple temporalities revise multicultural discourse? What have been the mistakes of responses from these camps?

JB: Yes, okay. My argument in the BJS piece was over and against those views like Thomas Friedman’s – the editorial writer in the United States – who claims that Islam hasn’t yet achieved its modernity, or that Islam is stuck in a childish mode of cultural development, or Islam represents an anachronism that is somehow re-emerging in a frightening form in the present. We might consider that there is no single normative present, and that whatever present there is, is inhabited precisely by people who have emerged into this time through a variety of narratives and means, and a variety of ways of experiencing and framing temporality. But my point is not simply to accept variety or multiplicity as such, but to think about these scenes of interruption. Friedman would have us understand Islam as somehow anachronistically interrupting the present or causing a problem within the present. But what if that experience of interruption is, in fact, the experience of the now – what Benjamin calls ‘now time’ (Jetztzeit). What if what characterizes the present is precisely the situation where established frames of reference are called into question through modes of cultural encounter and translation that require that we think something new, or find a new way of thinking?

This recalls Arendt’s idea of judgement, in that it has to respond to new historical situations and can’t always rely on past precedent. So what happens when past precedent no longer works, or we can’t assume a single monolithic history that delivers us all into the same present? We’re up against these conflictual and, I would say, promising interruptions, as a mode of life. Cultural pluralism cannot describe this well enough; it
presumes that there are distinct temporalities or distinct spatialities, or distinct cultures, and what we need to do is come up with frameworks that provide for modes of recognition and participation of each separate domain. Such a model doesn’t give us a way of actually understanding the modes of contact between such presumptively discrete domains, or how they interrupt one another, or how they even – through contact and interruption – reformulate and remake one another. It’s that particular historical process that I’m interested in: what are the venues in which that can happen, and happen well? Maybe group rights moves us away from ideas of liberal individualism, but it doesn’t actually help us to understand these sites of contact, interruption and reformulation, that are perhaps the most important to address as part of the contemporary political culture. That brings us to the question of faith and critique – we could move there if you want.

VB: Yes. On the question of faith and possibility of critique: is there something about the attachment to a faith that is qualitatively different from the attachment to other historically given discourses/domains/identifications? I’m thinking of Roxanna Euben’s (2002) argument that suicide bombers might be thought of as enacting an action on earth in an Arendtian sense, rather than as blindly following faith – an argument that makes commitments to a faith worldly – and also Talal Asad’s work on how secularism becomes centrally defined as the ability to debate one’s beliefs, even most fundamental beliefs, as the sign of secular ‘maturity’ such that those who act on the basis of faith can be cast as ‘madly’ clinging to their beliefs. I feel sympathetic to these interventions, that blur distinctions, that show faith enacts itself on earth and that secularism has a belief structure and an intimate relationship to religious faith. But I wonder whether strong faith – of any religion, even of secular faith as it were – may not wish to understand itself as worldly, by definition, nor treat its tenets as historical. So my query is about the politics of critique. The direction of your work, and my work too, has been precisely to encourage people to understand the historical specificity of their situation, of their beliefs, of their very sense of themselves. But is it always the role of critique to make subjects question and expose themselves? It’s a question that I don’t know how to go about answering, but I think as teachers we need to consider!

JB: Dogmatism is happy to reside in religion and secularism alike, that is the problem! I think there can be secular and religious forms of dogmatism, but I’m not sure if faith always translates into dogmatism. So, for instance, Jacob in the Old Testament wrestles with the angels; it’s about not knowing whether one believes or doesn’t believe. So how are we to understand that ‘wrestling’ as religious practice? We could point to Christian traditions of doubt that remain unresolved, or places in various other religions where scepticism, doubt, struggle with how or whether to believe, or how to translate one’s belief into conduct, is part of religious reflection, speculation and practice. So I think we have to be careful here.
I'm not so interested in faith as a state of mind, as either a suspension of cognitive activity or breach in rationality, which is what defenders of rationality regularly worry about. In their view, ‘If I have faith, I do not think’, and they are constantly asking about the propositional content of a belief, treating belief as a cognitive disposition, ‘I believe in God’, or, rather, a breach in cognition. What's much more interesting, within the pedagogical frame, is to think about religion in terms of subject formation on the one hand, and modes of conduct on the other. So maybe, with Saba Mahmood (2004), I'm bringing this back to a certain Foucauldian framework. If I say that I'm ‘of’ a certain faith, or that I have certain beliefs, I may be actually saying something about the sense of who I am or what makes my life intelligible, the modes of belonging that establish my sense of who I am – a kind of matrix with which I operate and through which I was formed – that is crucial for my way of understanding, and it may be that that matrix is itself evolving or goes through all kinds of challenges; it may be that I'm actually talking more about my formation as a subject than I am about the cognitive content of my belief structure. And even when we do talk about faith or belief, which have to be distinguished from one another, we're almost always also talking about modes of conduct. Even the speech act in which faith is declared is a practice of sorts. Very few religious people simply maintain their religion either through recourse to faith as the suspension of cognitive activity or through maintaining a set of beliefs, understood as a cognitive disposition that takes its cue from a particular kind of content. For the most part, religious questions are about how to live or how to conduct oneself, and these questions are formed, posed and lived within certain lexicons that form a kind of horizon for existence.

VB: In some ways, the hermeneutic tradition requests that we ask of our students something very intimate. It seems to me, that to question the formation of yourself as a subject – I know from teaching *Gender Trouble* for example – is a very intimate question to discuss. Maybe there's a sort of arrogance to the university that it is the proper place to ask these questions. But perhaps the place to doubt is exactly – as you suggest in your comments on biblical teaching – situations in which people have already made a first gesture of faith. It’s difficult to reproduce that commitment and safety in the contemporary university, although a large part of me longs to defend that, and I would even say occasionally it is achieved. But it is a very elevated idea of the university, in times when the getting of a degree is becoming more and more a technical exercise, so that it seems inappropriate to attempt to pose such radical doubting of the self. I mean, every part of me wants it to happen there, but on the other hand, I’m just not convinced; we're not all Socrates!

JB: Sometimes the university can function as a kind of secular church in which the presumption reigns: ‘We are the place, and the only place, that truly can undertake critique.’ But since when is critique in the business of
debunking? I don’t think it matters whether someone belongs to a given faith or not, that faith is doubtless also an academic subject, and can be treated that way. So if we are studying Islam, we would have to study the successive revisions of that doctrine; in other words, we would have to consider what a ‘critical’ practice is that is part of the very formulation and transmission of the religion. There are several competing schools, different regional versions, and criticisms among different practitioners and theorists of the religion. There’s lots to be studied there – that doesn’t necessarily mean that you have to ask the question of whether it is true or not. Perhaps you have to find out the conditions under which its truth claims are posited and contested – but that is another issue. And you can ask lots of questions without ever saying it’s right or wrong, or true or false. It would be a mistake to think that if you ask these questions you must give up your allegiance.

The university can be a place where we consider the formations of religious belief, or formations of religious subjects, or the history of certain kinds of conduct or reading practices, or how religion works. And, depending on the circumstance, that could produce all kinds of misunderstandings or interruptions, conflict, antagonism, demands for translation or revisions in our understandings of, say, what secularism is or what religion is. Of course, it would be invasive to tell a student that he or she could not possibly believe X, because X was false. But if we seek to be non-invasive, then I worry that that puts us into a tolerance model where everybody is just in their separate corner with their own views, and we’ve despaired of the possibility of some kind of actual conversation or mode of cultural translation that would make exchange possible. There are modes of chic scepticism that are part of secular elitism, where the presumption is that beliefs not accepted by that secular perspective have to be destroyed; that isn’t what critique should or can be, even though it doubtless will raise questions that produce unease or anxiety, to be sure.

VB: Your current work seems to be developing the notion of vulnerability that you highlighted in Precarious Life, and formulating a notion of affective sociality. At a recent lecture (at Birkbeck College) you argued through a discussion of Freud that the loss of discreteness is an inevitable part of sociality – that we have to loosen the self’s boundary – to recognize we are fundamentally sustained by others... ‘if my survivability depends on you then my boundary is a function of the relation’. You linked this point to Klein and the question of survival as preceding that of guilt. For you these explorations are, as those of Precarious Life, bound up with the question of war – its specific channelling of affective response. Can you talk us through what these connections are?

JB: Maybe this follows, in a way, from what we’ve been talking about throughout – the questions of cohabitation and plurality. Since 2001, that government discourse has sought to win over public opinion by promising invulnerability; it’s made me think, ‘What’s so popular or exciting about
invulnerability, and what’s actually being promised here? And it seems to me that implicitly what’s being promised is that, as a major First World country the US has a right to have our borders remain impermeable, protected from incursion, and to have our sovereignty guarantee our invulnerability to attack; at the same time, others, whose state formations are not like our own, or who are not explicitly in alliance with us, are to be targeted and presumptively treated as expungeable, as instrumentalizable, and certainly not as enjoying the same kind of presumptive rights to invulnerability that we do. So it’s led me to think about the differential distribution of vulnerability and, in a corollary way, the differential distribution of grievability – whose lives are worth grieving and whose are not? Whose lives are presumed, from the start, to be grievable and if lost, would be grieved, and whose lives are, from the start, understood as already lost and so ungrievable. I’ve been trying to think about what would it mean politically, say in the US, to offer a discourse that moves against this idea of the differential distribution of vulnerability. I think that the tortures in Abu Ghraib, for instance, really produced a kind of horror in this country because we were so preoccupied with defending ourselves against a presumed enemy that we didn’t actually understand that we could be guilty of war crimes ourselves, as we surely have been. I think that particular kind of reflection was really instrumental in changing public opinion about the US war efforts.

What does that imply? That if we’re outraged, if we are able to apprehend what happened in Abu Ghraib, then we have to extend the apprehension of vulnerability beyond some nationally bound population. That suggests that, under contemporary global conditions, there’s irrefutable interdependency, so that any nation can be both aggressor and aggressed upon, and there’s no way of securing vulnerability against incursion; indeed, some of the very military means through which the US seeks to secure vulnerability against incursion heighten precarious conditions for populations everywhere, including its own. It’s a kind of anti-war polemic that I’m involved in! Some of what I’m saying is not particularly new, and maybe is even predictable, but it does seem to me that we’ve seen the idea of vulnerability produced not just as weakness but as a kind of harm done to a sovereign self, which leads that phantasmatic sovereign to try to establish other populations as definitionally vulnerable and maintain them in precarious conditions. So how to understand that kind of ‘split’ ideology, or however one might put it, in relation to the problem of the differential distribution of vulnerability.

Klein suggests that guilt as a phenomenon is an effort to inhibit a destructive impulse, or to repair a bond that has been broken, and that the reason for the inhibition or the repair has to do with securing conditions of survivability. Because any and all of us feel a destructive impulse toward those upon whom we depend most fundamentally. Now, you can, of course, see that in the life of the child, within the family, such as it is, or within interpersonal relations that are sustaining, desires for destruction call one’s own survival into question. It seems to me that this bind has a broader
political salience. I must kill this other in order to survive, but my own survival will be imperilled if I destroy this other – it is the marriage of Klein and Hegel. There is no way out of this dilemma without realizing that survival is a function of interdependency. Part of the Obama appeal has been an effort to re-enter international community, but I don’t think cohabitation, or even Arendtian plurality, can ever be the same as internationalism, because internationalism depends on the nation-state whereas cohabitation is about populations who may or may not be citizen subjects, who may very well be the refugees produced by the nation-state.

*VB:* In *Who Sings the Nation-State?*, you explicitly address the issue of nation-states, distancing yourself, for one, from Agamben’s arguments (asking for what I see as a sociological attention to different experiences of those living at the edges or even outside the citizen–sovereign couplet). But your attention is given more to the singing ‘illegal residents’ of California, those supposedly outside the nation-state, performing that from which they were supposedly excluded – you wanted to see in this ‘performative contradiction’ a political possibility. Acting *like a citizen* does not make one a citizen in any legal sense, but it is nevertheless a *call* for ‘protection and guarantee’ (Butler and Spivak, 2007: 65); it requests the legitimation of that freedom which is already, minimally, being exercised. But is the biopolitical argument of Foucault on which Agamben draws under-discussed here? It would allow, for example, an attention to a state-reproduced caesura, a racism, that divides the people who are gathered geographically in one place, that one might not ‘see’ if one begins from the moments of resistance, as it were.

*JB:* Foucault is absolutely right to call attention to ways in which the state enacts racism, or produces a kind of racist division within the population, or divides populations on the basis of certain kinds of racist criteria, and I think in the US, for instance, the prison system is a brilliant example of Foucault’s thesis, right? The prison system is predominantly concerned with the incarceration of black men, and so we have millions of black men who are literally relieved of rights of citizenship through incarceration. Angela Davis has pointed out that, in some ways, the contemporary prison system in the US is the continued legacy of slavery – a new mechanism for depriv- ing voting rights. We’re talking about ways of dividing and managing populations on the basis of race, and actually also producing racial significations, so we now have very strong racist associations of black men with criminality in this country. It follows that we have a demographic distribution of the population according to certain kinds of racist aims, that produces populations that are unprotected from violence – prison populations – who are exposed to greater violence, who are exposed to greater situations of precarity and who are largely considered to be ungrievable. Part of what I am doing is specifying ways in which populations are differentially distinguished: some of them are along lines of race, and some of them are along lines of ethnicity and religion. They may well also be along lines of class and gender, and even sexuality or able-bodiedness.
My problem with Agamben is not that he seeks recourse to Foucault on biopower. I think Foucault on biopower is crucial. It’s that the idea of bare life that he takes from Arendt is not fully compatible with the idea of biopower. The idea of bare life is an idea of a life that is simply exposed to power, that has been reduced to a kind of pre-political existence, a metaphysically rudimentary life that’s outside of the polis. It’s not exactly outside, it may be outside of a polis in the sense of the life of a non-citizen – say the life of somebody in prison, the life of somebody who’s illegal or stateless or a refugee. But that life is saturated in power. That is one reason we cannot use the polis to delimit the field of the political. That’s the point at which we need a more robust Foucauldian rejoinder to Agamben. It’s not a life that’s outside the polis, and therefore outside of power. Hardly! It’s outside the polis and therefore saturated in power. It is not ‘bare’ – it is mired. To be stripped of rights is already to be in the ‘grip of power’. We can’t be stripped without being stripped by some mechanism of power and be maintained in a stripped mode without an apparatus of power, whether it be the prison or some other institution of detention or disenfranchisement.

VB: Can I press you, finally, on the question of how your work relates to recent debates that revisit vitalism? This work emphasizes the movement of creativity whereas perhaps you have been more interested in tracing the limitations of processes of becoming. The difference is between an understanding of difference as a constitutive citation (in discourse for example) and difference as itself the motor of creativity. In the latter the notion of the virtual – while also historical – constrains the (real) potential of things to be otherwise. Elizabeth Grosz’s work has taken the latter route, re-reading Bergson and Darwin, whereas you have remained somewhat distant from both Deleuze and discussions of internal differentiation. I’m wondering about your distance from that sort of route and maybe most obviously from Deleuze, from an emphasis on positivities, creativities and multiplicities, although as I’ve said to you before, I’m always intrigued by the little Spinoza moment when you quote Spinoza – ‘the desire to exist is an endlessly exploitable one’ – and I wonder whether this isn’t a vital moment. It takes us back to the psychoanalytic discussions of the infant as well.

Another related set of debates has emerged around the self-activity of matter, or materiality as ‘agential and productive in its own right’, as Karen Barad has put it. To cut a long story short – referring to my short piece on your work and the question of survival that you have seen – you have been focused on human interactions and questions of the ethical, but do you recognize yourself as part of these debates on intra-activity that includes material elements as themselves engaging each other (and humans)?

JB: There are certain moments in Deleuze I like, like his question, ‘What can a body do?’ I teach that, and there’s something about that that I really like, and especially thinking about vulnerability, because he is trying to suggest that the more a body can be acted on, the more capacity it has for...
action. That’s an extremely interesting formulation; it reworks ideas of passivity and activity, permeability and creativity, drawing clearly from Spinoza. I think there are some people working on Deleuze – like Paola Marrati, who brings out this dimension of his work. A lot of my early work on re-signification has Deleuzian and Bergsonian resonances – the idea that there’s always a certain kind of possibility of becoming otherwise and becoming what is not fully anticipated. Surely that was crucial to the kind of temporality of gender I tried to articulate and to the question: what would it mean to be neither man nor woman, but be working, living, within or between those categories and yet spawning some new set of categories or some new set of spaces outside or between? That strikes me as a perfectly Foucauldian/Deleuzian conjuncture and problematic. So there are people who have suggested that I am Deleuzian in that way – one is not born a woman but becomes one, therefore woman, the category, and all categories of gender, are modes of becoming. I mean, I did say all those things, and I wasn’t always just looking at impasses or restrictions, so I think there is that mode in what I do – a continuing preoccupation with time, to be sure. And I’m interested in the inadvertent productivity of certain modes of resistance, one that’s not Hegelian in the end (or, rather, has no Hegelian ‘end’). Something new, for instance, happens in the Guantanamo poems, and something new happens when the non-citizens sing the anthem – but in each case, the new emerges in the midst of a citation.

On the other hand, I cannot operate from a presumption of plenitude (neither plenitude nor lack as foundations work for me). I think that the full expunging of negativity from life is a beautiful fancy, and I can certainly understand why some people want it. But I find it to be on the manic side; it disavows difficulty and loss. So if I become the melancholic corrective to the Deleuzian position, it’s not because I don’t accept some parts of the Deleuzian position, it’s just that I worry that some versions of the Deleuzian position are so intent on the expulsion of the negative that there’s something suspicious going on. Can there be a Deleuzian theory of mourning? What would it even look like? What does it mean if mourning is precluded from the theory? What kind of symptom does the theory become? That is precisely what Freud called the ‘manic phase’ of the denial of loss – it is necessary, to be sure, since it separates the one who survives from the one who is dead, and there is some affirmation of life that takes place through that process. But perhaps it is more important, more timely, to consider notions of life that are bound up with transience, which is not necessarily an exclusively negative thing. One could argue that the precariousness of life is the ground or the basis upon which our obligations to shelter life emerge. I also think, maybe, it’s a kind of modest conceit that keeping in mind the transience or precariousness of life allows us to value life differently or more vigilantly, so it does translate into a more ethical position for me. I’m aware I don’t have a full theory of life, and I am not sure life admits of a full theory; I’m particularly concerned not to be appropriated by any kind of pro-life discourse – that would be quite abominable.
Ann Fausto-Sterling did a wonderful job of rethinking the sex–gender distinction through using an interactive model, suggesting ways in which materiality informs cultural articulation and vice versa, and Liz Grosz has also taken that up in an important way. I have looked at Karen Barad’s (2007) work, at Charis Thompson’s (2005) work on reproductive technology, both of whom are relocating agency in material contexts. I’ve become more and more interested in modes of agency that don’t reside in human subjects, and I think there can be institutional modes of agency that are distributed throughout institutional scenes. When we talk about agency, we in fact need to divorce it from the idea of the subject and allow it to be a complex choreographed scene with many kinds of elements – social, material, human – at work. I think something like that happens in Rayna Rapp’s (2000) analysis of the pre-natal testing clinics, where she looks at all the actors in the field. Charis Thompson, I think, does something very similar. She has a notion of ontological choreography, which derived from a Haraway-like position that suggests an invariable interaction of human and non-human elements in the scene of agency.

VB: Thank you so much.

References

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