Notes Toward
a Performative Theory
of Assembly

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In Chapter 1 I suggested that gender politics must make alliances with other populations broadly characterized as precarious. I pointed to certain forms of gender mobilization that seek to establish the rights of gender minorities or people of non-conforming genders to walk freely on the street, to maintain employment, and to resist harassment, pathologization, and criminalization. For the struggle for the rights of gender and sexual minorities to be a social justice struggle, that is, for it to be characterized as a radical democratic project, it is necessary to realize that we are but one population who has been and can be exposed to conditions of precarity and disenfranchisement. Further, the rights for which we struggle are plural rights, and that plurality is not circumscribed in advance by identity, that is, it is not a struggle to which only some identities can belong, and it is surely a struggle that seeks to expand what we mean when we say “we.” Thus public exercise of gender, of the rights to gender, we might say, is already a social movement, one that depends more strongly on the links between people than on any notion of individualism. Its aim is to counter those military, disciplinary, and regulatory forces and regimes that would expose us to precarity, and though lives can be made precarious by virtue of any number of illnesses and natural disasters, it remains true that—as we saw so dramatically in New Orleans during and after Hurricane Katrina in 2005—how illnesses are handled or not handled by existing institutions, how natural disasters for certain areas are preventable for some populations and not for others, all lead to a demographic distribution of precarity. And this is true more broadly for the homeless and the poor, but also those who are exposed to ravaging insecurity and the sense of a damaged future as infrastructural conditions fall away or as neoliberalism replaces the sustaining institutions of social democracy with an entrepreneurial ethic that exhorts even the most powerless to take responsibility for their own lives without depending on anyone or anything else. It is as if under contemporary conditions, there is a war on the idea of interdependency, on what I elsewhere called the social network of hands that seek to minimize the unlivability of lives. So these plural sets of rights, rights we must see as collective and embodied, are not modes of affirming the kind of world any of us should be able to live in; rather, they emerge from an understanding that the condition of precarity is differentially distributed, and that the struggle against, or the resistance to, precarity has to be based on the demand that lives should be treated equally and that they should be equally livable. That also means that the form of resistance itself, that is, the way communities are organized to resist precarity, ideally exemplifies the very values for which those communities struggle. Alliances that have formed to exercise the rights of gender and sexual minorities must, in my view, form links, however difficult, with the diversity of their own population and all the links that implies...
with other populations subjected to conditions of induced precarity during our time. And this linking process, however difficult, is necessary because the population of gender and sexual minorities is itself diverse—a word that is not quite precise enough for what I want to say; this group draws from various class, racial, and religious backgrounds, crossing communities of language and cultural formation.

What I am calling alliance is not only a future social form; sometimes it is latent, or sometimes it actually is the structure of our own subject-formation, as when alliance happens within a single subject, when it is possible to say, “I am myself an alliance, or I ally with myself or my various cultural vicissitudes.” That means only that the “I” in question refuses to background one minority status or lived site of precarity in favor of any other; it is a way of saying, “I am the complexity that I am, and this means that I am related to others in ways that are essential to any invocation of this ‘I.’” Such a view, which implicates social relationality in the first-person pronoun, challenges us to grasp the insufficiency of identitarian ontologies for thinking about the problem of alliance. For the point is not that I am a collection of identities, but that I am already an assembly, even a general assembly, or an assemblage, as Jasbir Puar has adapted the term from Gilles Deleuze. But perhaps what is most important are those forms of mobilization animated by a heightened awareness of the cross section of people at risk of losing employment and having their homes taken away by banks; the range of people who are differentially at risk for street harassment, criminalization, imprisonment, or pathologization; the specific racial and religious backgrounds of those people whose lives are targeted as dispensable by those who wage war. In my view, this perspective implies the need for a more generalized struggle against precarity, one that emerges from a felt sense of precarity, lived as slow death, a damaged sense of time, or unmanageable exposure to arbitrary loss, injury, or destitution—this is a felt sense that is at once singular and plural. The point is not to rally for modes of equality that would plunge us all into equally unlivable conditions. On the contrary, the point is to call for an equally livable life that is also enacted by those who make the call, and that requires the egalitarian distribution of public goods. The opposite of precarity is not security, but, rather, the struggle for an egalitarian social and political order in which a livable interdependency becomes possible—it would be at once the condition of our self-governing as a democracy, and its sustained form would be one of the obligatory aims of that very governance.

If I seem to have wandered from gender, I assure you that gender is still here. For one of the questions that any group representing the enfranchisement of women, sexual minorities, and gender minorities must consider is the following: What do we do when state governments or international organizations seek to champion our rights in order to explicitly conduct anti-immigration campaigns (as we have seen in France and in the Netherlands), or when states draw attention to their relatively progressive human rights record when it comes to women, lesbian and gay people, and transgendered people in order to deflect from an atrocious human rights record when it comes to those populations whose basic rights of self-determination, movement, and assembly are denied (as is the case in Israel’s pinkwashing campaign, which deflects from the vast criminality of its occupation, land confiscation, and forced expulsion policies)? As much as we want our own rights to be recognized, we must oppose the deployment of that public recognition of our rights to deflect from and cover over the massive
disenfranchisement of rights for others, including, in this instance, women, queers, and gender and sexual minorities who are living without the basic rights of citizenship in Palestine. I will return to this issue in Chapter 3, where I consider not just what it means to ally with one another, but what it means to live with one another. A politics of alliance, I will try to show, rests upon, and requires, an ethics of cohabitation. But for now, let me say that if the allocation of rights to one group is instrumentalized for the disenfranchisement of basic entitlements to another, then the group entitled is surely obligated to refuse the terms on which political and legal recognition and rights are being given. This does not mean that any of us give up existing rights, but only that we recognize that rights are only meaningful within a broader struggle for social justice, and that if rights are differentially distributed, then inequality is being instituted through the tactical deployment and justification for gay and lesbian rights. As a result, I propose we remember that the term queer does not designate identity, but alliance, and it is a good term to invoke as we make uneasy and unpredictable alliances in the struggle for social, political, and economic justice.

Time and again, mass demonstrations take place on the street, in the square, and though these are very often motivated by different political purposes, something similar nevertheless happens: bodies congregate, they move and speak together, and they lay claim to a certain space as public space. Now, it would be easier to say that these demonstrations or, indeed, these movements, are characterized by bodies that come together to make a claim in public space, but that formulation presumes that public space is given, that it is already public and recognized as such. We miss something of the point of these public demonstrations if we fail to see that the very public character of the space is being disputed, and even fought over, when these crowds gather. So though these movements have depended on the prior existence of pavement, street, and square, and have often enough gathered in squares such as Tahrir, whose political history is potent, it is equally true that the collective actions collect the space itself, gather the pavement, and animate and organize the architecture. As much as we must insist on there being material conditions for public assembly and public speech, we have also to ask how it is that assembly and speech reconfigure the materiality of public space and produce, or reproduce, the public character of that material environment. And when crowds move outside the square, to the side street or the back alley, to the neighborhoods where streets are not yet paved, then something more happens.

At such a moment, politics is not defined as taking place exclusively in the public sphere, distinct from the private one, but it crosses those lines again and again, bringing attention to the way that politics is already in the home, or on the street, or in the neighborhood, or indeed in those virtual spaces that are equally unbound by the architecture of the house and the square. So when we think about what it means to assemble in a crowd, a growing crowd, and what it means to move through public space in a way that contests the distinction between public and private, we see some ways that bodies in their plurality lay claim to the public, find and produce the public through seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments; at the same time, those material environments are part of the action, and they themselves act when they become the support for action. In the same way, when trucks or tanks are rendered inoperative and suddenly speakers climb onto
them to address the crowd, the military instrument itself becomes a support or platform for a nonmilitary resistance, if not a resistance to the military itself; at such moments, the material environment is actively reconfigured and refunctoned, to use the Brechtian term. And our ideas of action then need to be rethought.

In the first instance, no one mobilizes a claim to move and assemble freely without moving and assembling together with others. In the second instance, the square and the street are not only the material supports for action, but they themselves are part of any account of bodily public action we might propose. Human action depends upon all sorts of supports— it is always supported action. We know from disability studies that the capacity to move depends upon instruments and surfaces that make movement possible, and that bodily movement is supported and facilitated by nonhuman objects and their particular capacity for agency. In the case of public assemblies, we see quite clearly the struggle over what will be public space, but also an equally fundamental struggle over how bodies will be supported in the world—a struggle for employment and education, equitable food distribution, livable shelter, and freedom of movement and expression, to name a few.

Of course, this produces a quandary. We cannot act without supports, and yet we must struggle for the supports that allow us to act or, indeed, that are essential components of our action. It was the Roman idea of the public square that formed the background for Hannah Arendt’s understanding of the rights of assembly and free speech, of action and the exercise of rights. Hannah Arendt surely had both the classical Greek polis and the Roman forum in mind when she claimed that all political action requires the “space of appearance.” She writes, for instance, “the polis, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical loca-

tion; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be.”

The “true” space then lies “between the people,” which means that as much as any action takes place in a located somewhere, it also establishes a space that belongs properly to alliance itself. For Arendt, this alliance is not tied to its location. In fact, alliance brings about its own location, highly transposable. She writes, “action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost anywhere and anytime.”

So how do we understand this highly, if not infinitely transposable, notion of political space? Whereas Arendt maintains that politics requires the space of appearance, she also claims that space brings politics about: “it is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men [sic] exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly.” Something of what she says here is clearly true. Space and location are created through plural action. And yet, in her view, action, in its freedom and its power, has the exclusive capacity to create location. Such a view forgets or refuses that action is always supported and that it is invariably bodily, even, as I will argue, in its virtual forms. The material supports for action are not only part of action, but they are also what is being fought about, especially in those cases when the political struggle is about food, employment, mobility, and access to institutions. To rethink the space of appearance in order to understand the power and effect of public demonstrations for our time, we will need to consider more closely the bodily dimensions of action, what the body requires, and what the body can do, especially when we must think about bodies.
together in a historical space that undergoes a historical transformation by virtue of their collective action: What holds them together there, and what are their conditions of persistence and of power in relation to their precarity and exposure?

I would like to think about this itinerary by which we travel from the space of appearance to the contemporary politics of the street. Even as I say this, I cannot hope to gather together all the forms of demonstration we have seen, some of which are episodic, some of which are part of ongoing and recurrent social and political movements, and some of which are revolutionary. I hope to think about what might gather together these gatherings, these public demonstrations. During the winter of 2011, they included demonstrations against tyrannical regimes in North Africa and the Middle East, but also against the escalating precaritization of working peoples in Europe and the Southern Hemisphere, as well as the struggles for public education throughout the United States and Europe and, most recently, in Chile, and struggles to make the street safe for women and for gender and sexual minorities, including trans people, whose public appearance is too often punishable by legal and illegal violence. In public assemblies by trans and queer people, the claim is often made that the streets must be made safe from the police who are complicit in criminality; especially on those occasions when the police support criminal regimes or when, for instance, the police commit the very crimes against sexual and gender minorities that they are supposed to prevent. Demonstrations are one of the few ways that police power is overcome, especially when those assemblies become at once too large and too mobile, too condensed and too diffuse, to be contained by police power and when they have the resources to regenerate themselves on the spot.

Perhaps these are anarchist moments or anarchist passages, when the legitimacy of a regime or its laws is called into question, but when no new legal regimen has yet arrived to take its place. This time of the interval is one in which the assembled bodies articulate a new time and space for the popular will, not a single identical will, not a unitary will, but one that is characterized as an alliance of distinct and adjacent bodies whose action and whose inaction demand a different future. Together they exercise the performative power to lay claim to the public in a way that is not yet codified into law and that can never be fully codified into law. And this performativity is not only speech, but the demands of bodily action, gesture, movement, congregation, persistence, and exposure to possible violence. How do we understand this acting together that opens up time and space outside and against the established architecture and temporality of the regime, one that lays claim to materiality, leans into its supports, and draws from its material and technical dimensions to rework their functions? Such actions reconfigure what will be public and what will be the space of politics.

I push against Hannah Arendt even as I draw upon her resources to clarify my own position. Her work supports my action here, but I also refuse it in some ways. Arendt's view is confounded by its own gender politics, relying as it does on a distinction between the public and private domains that leaves the sphere of politics to men and reproductive labor to women. If there is a body in the public sphere, it is presumptively masculine and unsupported, presumptively free to create, but not itself created. And the body in the private sphere is female, ageing, foreign, or childish, and always prepolitical. Although she was, as we know from the important work of Adriana Cavarero, a philosopher of natality, Arendt
understood this capacity to bring something into being as a function of political speech and action. Indeed, when male citizens enter into the public square to debate questions of justice, revenge, war, and emancipation, they take the illuminated public square for granted as the architecturally bounded theater of their speech. And their speech becomes the paradigmatic form of action, physically cut off from the private domicile, which is itself shrouded in darkness and reproduced through activities that are not quite action in the proper and public senses. Men make the passage from that private darkness to that public light and, once illuminated, they speak, and their speech interrogates the principles of justice it articulates, becoming itself a form of critical inquiry and democratic participation. For Arendt, rethinking this classical scene within political modernity, speech is understood as the bodily and linguistic exercise of rights. Bodily and linguistic—how are we to reconceive these terms and their intertwining here against and beyond that presumption of a gendered division of labor?

For Arendt, political action takes place on the condition that the body appear. I appear to others, and they appear to me, which means that some space between us allows each to appear. One might expect that we appear within a space or that we are supported by a material organization of space. But that is not her argument. The sphere of appearance is not simple, since it seems to arise only on the condition of a certain intersubjective facing off. We are not simply visual phenomena for each other—our voices must be registered, and so we must be heard; rather, who we are, bodily, is already a way of being “for” the other, appearing in ways that we can neither see nor hear; that is, we are made available, bodily, for another whose perspective we can neither fully anticipate nor control. In this way, I am, as a body, not only for myself, not even primarily for myself, but I find myself, if I find myself at all, constituted and dispossessed by the perspective of others. So, for political action, I must appear to others in ways I cannot know, and in this way, my body is established by perspectives that I cannot inhabit but that, surely, inhabit me. This is an important point because it is not the case that the body only establishes my own perspective; it is also what displaces that perspective and makes that displacement into a necessity. This happens most clearly when we think about bodies that act together. No one body establishes the space of appearance, but this action, this performative exercise, happens only “between” bodies, in a space that constitutes the gap between my own body and another’s. In this way, my body does not act alone when it acts politically. Indeed, the action emerges from the “between,” a spatial figure for a relation that both binds and differentiates.

It is both problematic and interesting that, for Arendt, the space of appearance is not only an architectural given: “the space of appearance comes into being,” she writes, “wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm may be organized.” In other words, this space of appearance is not a location that can be separated from the plural action that brings it about; it is not there outside of the action that invokes and constitutes it. And yet, if we are to accept this view, we have to understand how the plurality that acts is itself constituted. How does a plurality form, and what material supports are necessary for that formation? Who enters this plurality, and who does not, and how are such matters decided?

How do we describe the action and the status of those beings disaggregated from the plural? What political language do we have in reserve for describing that exclusion and the forms of resistance
that crack open the sphere of appearance as it is currently delimited? Are those who live on the outside of the sphere of appearance the deanimated “givens” of political life? Are they mere life or bare life? Are we to say that those who are excluded are simply unreal, disappeared, or that they have no being at all—shall they be cast off, theoretically, as the socially dead and the merely spectral? If we do that, we not only adopt the position of a particular regime of appearance, but ratify that perspective, even if our wish is to call it into question. Do such formulations describe a state of having been made destitute by existing political arrangements, or is that destitution unwittingly ratified by a theory that adopts the perspective of those who regulate and police the sphere of appearance itself?

At stake is the question of whether the destitute are outside of politics and power or are in fact living out a specific form of political destitution along with specific forms of political agency and resistance that expose the policing of the boundaries of the sphere of appearance itself. If we claim that the destitute are outside of the sphere of politics—reduced to depoliticized forms of being—then we implicitly accept as right the dominant ways of establishing the limits of the political. In some ways, this follows from the Arendtian position that adopts the internal point of view of the Greek polis on what politics should be, who should gain entry into the public square, and who should remain in the private sphere. Such a view disregards and devalues those forms of political agency that emerge precisely in those domains deemed prepolitical or extrapolitical and that break into the sphere of appearance as from the outside, as its outside, confounding the distinction between inside and outside. For in revolutionary or insurrectionary moments, we are no longer sure what operates as the space of politics, just as we are often unsure about exactly in what time we are living, since the established regimes of both space and time are upended in ways that expose their violence and their contingent limits. We see this, as mentioned earlier, when undocumented workers gather in the city of Los Angeles to claim their rights of assembly and of citizenship without being citizens, without having any legal right to do so. Their labor is supposed to remain necessary and shrouded from view, and so when these laboring bodies emerge on the street, acting like citizens, they make a mimetic claim to citizenship that alters not only how they appear, but how the sphere of appearance works. Indeed, the sphere of appearance is both mobilized and disabled when an exploited and laboring class emerges on the street to announce itself and express its opposition to being the unseen condition of what appears as political.

The impetus for Giorgio Agamben’s notion of “bare life” derives from this very conception of the polis in Arendt’s political philosophy and, I would suggest, runs the risk of this very problem: if we seek to take account of exclusion itself as a political problem, as part of politics itself, then it will not do to say that once excluded, those beings lack appearance or “reality” in political terms, that they have no social or political standing or are cast out and reduced to mere being (forms of givenness precluded from the sphere of action). Nothing so metaphysically extravagant has to happen if we agree that one reason the sphere of the political cannot be defined by the classic conception of the polis is that we are then deprived of having and using a language for those forms of agency and resistance undertaken by the dispossessed. Those who find themselves in positions of radical exposure to violence, without basic political protections by forms of law, are not for that reason outside the political or deprived of all forms of agency. Of course,
we need a language to describe that status of unacceptable exposure, but we have to be careful that the language we use does not further deprive such populations of all forms of agency and resistance, all ways of caring for one another or establishing networks of support.

Although Agamben borrows from Foucault to articulate a conception of the biopolitical, the thesis of “bare life” remains untouched by that conception. As a result, we cannot within that vocabulary describe the modes of agency and action undertaken by the stateless, the occupied, and the disenfranchised, since even the life stripped of rights is still within the sphere of the political and is thus not reduced to mere being, but is, more often than not, angered, indignant, rising up, and resisting. To be outside established and legitimate political structures is still to be saturated in power relations, and this saturation is the point of departure for a theory of the political that includes dominant and subjugated forms, modes of inclusion and legitimation as well as modes of delegitimation and effacement.

Luckily, I think Arendt did not consistently follow this model from The Human Condition, which is why, for instance, in the early 1960s, she turned again to the fate of refugees and the stateless, and came to assert in a new way the right to have rights. The right to have rights is one that depends on no existing particular political organization for its legitimacy. Like the space of appearance, the right to have rights predates and precedes any political institution that might codify or seek to guarantee that right; at the same time, it is derived from no natural set of laws. The right comes into being when it is exercised, and exercised by those who act in concert, in alliance. Those who are excluded from existing polities, who belong to no nation-state or other contemporary state formation, may be deemed “unreal” only by those who seek to monopolize the terms of reality. And yet, even after the public sphere has been defined through their exclusion, they act. Whether they are abandoned to precarity or left to die through systematic negligence, concerted action still emerges from their acting together. And this is what we see, for instance, when undocumented workers amass on the street without the legal right to do so; when squatters lay claim to buildings in Argentina as a way of exercising the right to livable shelter; when populations lay claim to a public square that has belonged to the military; when refugees take part in collective uprisings demanding shelter, food, and rights of sanctuary; when populations amass, without the protection of the law and without permits to demonstrate, to bring down an unjust or criminal regime of law or to protest austerity measures that destroy the possibility of employment and education for many. Or when those whose public appearance is itself criminal—transgendered people in Turkey or women who wear the veil in France—appear in order to contest that criminal status and assert the right to appear.

The French law that prohibits “ostentatious” religious display in public as well as the hiding of the face seeks to establish a public sphere where clothing remains a signifier of secularism and the exposure of the face becomes a public norm. The prohibition against hiding the face serves a certain version of the right to appear, understood as the right for women to appear unveiled. At the same time, it denies the right to appear for that very group of women, requiring them to defy religious norms in favor of public ones. That required act of religious disaffiliation becomes obligatory when the public sphere is understood as one that overcomes or negates religious forms of belonging. The notion, prevalent in
French debate, that women who wear the veil cannot possibly do so from any sense of choice operates in the debate to veil, as it were, the blatant acts of discrimination against religious minorities that the law enacts. For one choice that is clearly made among those who wear the veil is not to comply with those forms of compulsory disaffiliation that condition the entrance to the public sphere. Here as elsewhere, the sphere of appearance is highly regulated. That these women be clothed in some ways rather than others constitutes a sartorial politics of the public sphere, but so too does compulsory “unveiling,” itself a sign of belonging first to the public and only secondarily, or privately, to the religious community. This is especially pronounced in relation to Muslim women whose affiliations to various versions of public, secular, and religious domains may well be coterminous and overlapping. And it shows quite clearly that what is called “the public sphere” in such cases is built up through constitutive exclusions and compulsory forms of disavowal. Paradoxically, the act of conforming to a law that requires unveiling is the means by which a certainly highly compromised, even violent, “freedom to appear” is established.

Indeed, in the public demonstrations that often follow from acts of public mourning—as often occurred in Syria before half of its population became refugees, where crowds of mourners became targets of military destruction—we can see how the existing public space is seized by those who have no existing right to gather there, who emerge from zones of disappearance to become bodies exposed to violence and death in the course of gathering and persisting publicly as they do. Indeed, it is their right to gather, free of intimidation and the threat of violence, that is systematically attacked by the police, the army, hired gangs, or mercenaries. To attack those bodies is to attack the right itself, since when those bodies appear and act, they are exercising a right outside, against, and in the face of the regime.

Although the bodies on the street are vocalizing their opposition to the legitimacy of the state, they are also, by virtue of occupying and persisting in that space without protection, posing their challenge in corporeal terms, which means that when the body “speaks” politically, it is not only in vocal or written language. The persistence of the body in its exposure calls that legitimacy into question and does so precisely through a specific performativity of the body. Both action and gesture signify and speak, both as action and claim; the one is not finally extricable from the other. Where the legitimacy of the state is brought into question precisely by that way of appearing in public, the body itself exercises a right that is no right; in other words, it exercises a right that is being actively contested and destroyed by military force and that, in its resistance to force, articulates its way of living, showing both its precarity and its right to persist. This right is codified nowhere. It is not granted from elsewhere or by existing law, even if it sometimes finds support precisely there. It is, in fact, the right to have rights, not as natural law or metaphysical stipulation, but as the persistence of the body against those forces that seek its debilitation or eradication. This persistence requires breaking into the established regime of space with a set of material supports both mobilized and mobilizing.

Just to be clear: I am not referring to a vitalism or a right to life as such. Rather, I am suggesting that political claims are made by bodies as they appear and act, as they refuse and as they persist under conditions in which that fact alone threatens the state with delegitimation. As much as bodies are exposed to political powers, they are also responsive to having been exposed, except in those
cases when the very conditions for responsiveness have been decimated. Although I do not doubt at all that it is possible to murder the capacity for responsiveness in another person, I would caution against taking that figure of full decimation as a way of describing the struggle of the dispossessed. Although it is always possible to err in the other direction, claiming that wherever there is power, there is resistance, it would be a mistake to refuse the possibility that power does not always work according to its aims, and that visceral forms of rejection break out in consequential collective forms. In those instances, bodies are themselves vectors of power where the directionality of force can be reversed; they are embodied interpretations, engaging in allied action, to counter force with another kind and quality of force. On the one hand, these bodies are productive and performative. On the other hand, they can persist and act only when they are supported, by environments, by nutrition, by work, by modes of sociality and belonging. And when these supports fall away and precarity is exposed, they are mobilized in another way, seizing upon the supports that exist in order to make a claim that there can be no embodied life without social and institutional support, without ongoing employment, without networks of interdependency and care, without collective rights to shelter and mobility. Not only do they struggle for the idea of social support and political enfranchisement, but their struggle is its own social form. And so, in the most ideal instances, an alliance begins to enact the social order it seeks to bring about by establishing its own modes of sociability. And yet, that alliance is not reducible to a collection of individuals, and it is, strictly speaking, not individuals who act. Moreover, action in alliance happens precisely between those who participate, and this is not an ideal or empty space. That interval is the space of sociality and of support, of being constituted in a sociality that is never reducible to one's own perspective and to being dependent on structures without which there is no durable and livable life.

Many of the massive demonstrations and modes of resistance we have seen in the last months not only produce a space of appearance; they seize upon an already established space permeated by existing power, seeking to sever the relations between the public space, the public square, and the existing regime. So the limits of the political are exposed and the link between the theater of legitimacy and public space is severed; that theater is no longer unproblematically housed in public space, since public space now occurs in the midst of another action, one that displaces the power that claims legitimacy precisely by taking over the field of its effects. Simply put, the bodies on the street redeploy the space of appearance in order to contest and negate the existing forms of political legitimacy—and just as they sometimes fill or take over public space, the material history of those structures also works on them, becoming part of their very action, remaking a history in the midst of its most concrete and sedimented artifices. These are subjugated and empowered actors who seek to wrest legitimacy from an existing state apparatus that depends upon the regulation of the public space of appearance for its theatrical self-constitution. In wresting that power, a new space is created, a new "between" of bodies, as it were, that lays claim to existing space through the action of a new alliance, and those bodies are seized and animated by those existing spaces in the very acts by which they reclaim and resignify their meanings.

Such a struggle intervenes in the spatial organization of power, which includes the allocation and restriction of spatial locations in which and by which any population may appear, which implies
a spatial regulation of when and how the “popular will” may appear. This view of the spatial restriction and allocation of who may appear—in effect, of who may become a subject of appearance—suggests an operation of power that works through both foreclosure and differential allocation.

What, then, does it mean to appear within contemporary politics, and can we consider this question at all without some recourse to the media? If we consider what it is to appear, it follows that we appear to someone and that our appearance has to be registered by the senses, not only our own, but someone else’s. If we appear, we must be seen, which means that our bodies must be viewed and their vocalized sounds must be heard: the body must enter the visual and audible field. But is this not, of necessity, a laboring body and a sexual body, as well as a body gendered and racialized in some form? Arendt’s view clearly meets its limits here, for the body is itself divided into the one that appears publicly to speak and act and another one, sexual, laboring, feminine, foreign, and mute, that generally is relegated to the private and prepolitical sphere. Such a division of labor is precisely what is called into question when precarious lives assemble on the street in forms of alliance that must struggle to achieve a space of appearance. If some domain of bodily life operates as the sequestered or disavowed condition for the sphere of appearance, it becomes the structuring absence that governs and makes possible the public sphere.

If we are living organisms who speak and act, then we are clearly related to a vast continuum or network of living beings; we not only live among them, but our persistence as living organisms depends on that matrix of sustaining interdependent relations. And yet, our speaking and acting distinguishes us as something separate from other living beings. Indeed, we do not need to know what is distinctively human about political action, but only finally to see how the entrance of the disavowed body into the political sphere establishes at the same time the essential link between humans and other living beings. The private body thus conditions the public body not only in theories such as Arendt’s, but also in political organizations of space that continue in many forms (and that are in some sense naturalized in her theory). And even though the public and private body are not utterly distinct (bodies in private sometimes “show” in public, and every publicly exposed body has its private moments), the bifurcation is crucial to maintaining the public and private distinction and its modes of disavowal and disenfranchisement.

Perhaps it is a kind of fantasy that one dimension of bodily life can and must remain out of sight, and yet another, fully distinct, appears in public. Is there no trace of the biological in the sphere of appearance? Could we not argue, with Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers, that negotiating the sphere of appearance is, in fact, a biological thing to do, one of the investigative capacities of the organism? After all, there is no way of navigating an environment or procuring food without appearing bodily in the world, and there is no escape from the vulnerability and mobility that appearing in the world implies, which explains forms of camouflage and self-protection in the animal world. In other words, is appearance not a necessarily morphological moment where the body risks appearance not only in order to speak and act, but to suffer and move, as well, to engage others bodies, to negotiate an environment on which one depends, to establish a social organization for the satisfaction of needs? Indeed, the body can appear and signify in ways that contest the way it speaks or even contest speaking as its paradigmatic instance. Could we still understand action,
gesture, stillness, touch, and moving together if they were all reducible to the vocalization of thought through speech?

This act of public speaking, even within that problematic division of labor, depends upon a dimension of bodily life that is given, passive, opaque, and so excluded from the conventional definition of the political. Hence, we can ask: What regulation keeps the given or passive body from spilling over into the active body? Are these two different bodies, and if so, what politics is required to keep them apart? Are these two different dimensions of the same body, or are these, in fact, the effect of a certain regulation of bodily appearance that is actively contested by new social movements, struggles against sexual violence, for reproductive freedom, against precarity, for the freedom of mobility? Here we can see that a certain topographical or even architectural regulation of the body happens at the level of theory. Significantly, it is precisely this operation of power—the foreclosure and differential allocation of whether and how the body may appear—that is excluded from Arendt's explicit account of the political. Indeed, her explicit account of the political depends upon that very operation of power that it fails to consider as part of politics itself.

So what I accept from Arendt is the following: Freedom does not come from me or from you; it can and does happen as a relation between us, or, indeed, among us. So this is not a matter of finding the human dignity within each person, but rather of understanding the human as a relational and social being, one whose action depends upon equality and articulates the principle of equality. Indeed, there is no human, in her view, if there is no equality. No human can be human alone. And no human can be human without acting in concert with others and on conditions of equality. I would add the following: The claim of equality is not only spoken or written, but is made precisely when bodies appear together, or, rather, when, through their action, they bring the space of appearance into being. This space is a feature and effect of action, and it works, according to Arendt, only when relations of equality are maintained.

Of course, there are many reasons to be suspicious of idealized moments, but there are also reasons to be wary of any analysis that is fully guarded against idealization. There are two aspects of the revolutionary demonstrations in Tahrir Square that I would like to underscore. The first has to do with the way a certain sociality was established within the square, a division of labor that broke down gender difference, that involved rotating who would speak and who would clean the areas where people slept and ate, developing a work schedule for everyone to maintain the environment and to clean the toilets. In short, what some would call "horizontal relations" among the protestors formed easily and methodically, alliances struggling to embody equality, which included an equal division of labor between the sexes—these became part of the very resistance to the Mubarak regime and its entrenched hierarchies, including the extraordinary differentials of wealth between the military and corporate sponsors of the regime and the working people. So the social form of the resistance began to incorporate principles of equality that governed not only how and when people spoke and acted for the media and against the regime, but how people cared for their various quarters within the square, the beds on the pavement, the makeshift medical stations and bathrooms, the places where people ate, and the places where people were exposed to violence from the outside. We are not just talking about heroic actions that took enormous physical strength and the exercise of compelling political rhetoric. Sometimes the
simple act of sleeping there, in the square, was the most eloquent political statement—and even must count as an action. These actions were all political in the simple sense that they were breaking down a conventional distinction between public and private in order to establish new relations of equality; in this sense, they were incorporating into the very social form of resistance the principles they were struggling to realize in broader political forms.

Second, when up against violent attack or extreme threats, many people in the first Egyptian revolution of 2009 chanted the word *silmiyya*, which comes from the root verb *salima*, which means “to be safe and sound,” “unharmed,” “unimpaired,” “intact,” and “secure”; but also “to be unobjectionable,” “blameless,” “faultless”; and yet also “to be certain,” “established,” “clearly proven.” The term comes from the noun *silm*, which means “peace,” but also, interchangeably and significantly, “the religion of Islam.” One variant of the term is *hubb as-silm*, which is Arabic for “pacifism.” Most usually, the chanting of *silmiyya* comes across as a gentle exhortation: “peaceful, peaceful.” Although the revolution was for the most part nonviolent, it was not necessarily led by a principled opposition to violence. Rather, the collective chant was a way of encouraging people to resist the mimetic pull of military aggression—and the aggression of the gangs—by keeping in mind the larger goal: radical democratic change. To be swept into a violent exchange of the moment was to lose the patience needed to realize the revolution. What interests me here is the chant, the way in which language worked not to incite an action, but to restrain one: a restraint in the name of an emerging community of equals whose primary way of doing politics would not be violence.

It is clear that every assembly and demonstration that produced a change in regime in Egypt relied on the media to produce a sense of the public square and the space of appearance. Any provisional example of “the public square” is located, and it is transposable; indeed, it seemed to be transposable from the start, though never completely. And of course, we cannot think of the transposability of those bodies in the square without the media. In some ways, the media images from Tunisia prepared the way for the initial media events in Tahrir, then those that followed in Yemen, Bah­rain, Syria, and Libya, all of which took different trajectories and take them still. Many of the public demonstrations of these last years have not been directed against military dictatorships or tyrannical regimes, and many of them have produced new state formations or conditions of war that are surely as problematic as those they replaced. But in some of the demonstrations that followed upon these uprisings, especially those that took aim at forms of induced precarity, participants have explicitly opposed monopoly capitalism, neoliberalism, and the suppression of political rights, and done so in the name of those who are abandoned by neoliberal reforms that seek to dismantle forms of social democracy and socialism, eradicate jobs, expose populations to poverty, and undermine the basic rights to public education and housing.

The street scenes become politically potent only when and if we have a visual and audible version of the scene communicated in live or proximate time, so that the media does not merely report the scene, but is part of the scene and the action; indeed, the media is the scene or the space in its extended and replicable visual and audible dimensions. One way of stating this is simply that the media extends the scene visually and audibly and participates in the delimitation and transposability of the scene. Put differently, the media constitutes the scene in a time and place that includes and exceeds its local instantiation. Although the scene is surely and
emphatically local, those who are elsewhere have the sense that they are getting some direct access through the images and sounds they receive. That is true, but they do not know how the editing takes place, which scene conveys and travels and which scenes remain obdurately outside the frame. When the scene travels, it is both there and here, and if it were not spanning both locations—indeed, multiple locations—it would not be the scene that it is. Its locality is not denied by the fact that the scene is communicated beyond itself and so constituted in global media; it depends on that mediation to take place as the event that it is. This means that the local must be recast outside itself in order to be established as local, and this means that it is only through globalizing media that the local can be established and that something can really happen there. Of course, many things do happen outside the frame of the camera or other digital media devices, and the media can just as easily implement censorship as oppose it. There are many local events that are never recorded and broadcast, and some important reasons why. But when the event travels and manages to summon and sustain global outrage and pressure, which includes the power to stop markets or to sever diplomatic relations, then the local will have to be established time and again in a circuitry that exceeds the local at every instant.

And yet, there remains something localized that cannot and does not travel in that way; and the scene could not be the scene if we did not understand that some people are at risk, and the risk is run precisely by those bodies on the street. If they are transported in one way, they are surely left in place in another, holding the camera or the cell phone, face-to-face with those they oppose, unprotected, injurable, injured, persistent if not insurgent. It matters that those bodies carry cell phones, relaying messages and images, and so, when they are attacked, it is more often than not in some relation to the camera or the video recorder. It can be an effort to destroy the camera and its user, or it can be a spectacle for the media produced as a warning or a threat. Or it can be a way to stop any more organizing. Is the action of the body separable from its technology, and is the technology not helping to establish new forms of political action? And when censorship or violence is directed against those bodies, is it not also directed against their access to media, in order to establish hegemonic control over which images travel and which do not?

Of course, the dominant media is corporately owned, exercising its own kinds of censorship and incitement. And yet, it still seems important to affirm that the freedom of the media to broadcast from these sites is itself an exercise of freedom and so a mode of exercising rights, especially when it is rogue media, from the street, evading the censor, where the activation of the instrument is part of the bodily action itself. This is doubtless why both Hosni Mubarak and David Cameron, eight months apart, argued for the censorship of social media networks. At least in some instances, the media not only reports on social and political movements that are laying claim to freedom and justice in various ways, the media also is exercising one of those freedoms for which the social movement struggles. I do not mean by this claim to suggest that all media is involved in the struggle for political freedom and social justice (we know, of course, that it is not). Of course, it matters which global media does the reporting and how. My point is that sometimes private media devices become global precisely at the moment in which they overcome modes of censorship to report protests, and in that way they become part of the protest itself.

What bodies are doing on the street when they are demonstrating is linked fundamentally to what communication devices and technologies are doing when they “report” on what is happening
in the street. These are different actions, but they both require the body. The one exercise of freedom is linked to the other, which means that both are ways of exercising rights and that, jointly, they bring a space of appearance into being and secure its transposibility. Although some may wager that the exercise of rights now takes place quite at the expense of bodies on the street, claiming that Twitter and other virtual technologies have led to a disembodiment of the public sphere, I would disagree in part. We have to think about the importance of media that is “hand held” or cell phones that are “held high,” producing a kind of countersurveillance of military and police action. The media requires those bodies on the street to have an event, even as those bodies on the street require the media to exist in a global arena. But under conditions in which those with cameras or Internet capacities are imprisoned or tortured or deported, the use of the technology effectively implicates the body. Not only must someone’s hand tap and send, but someone’s body is on the line if that tapping and sending gets traced. In other words, localization is hardly overcome through the use of media that potentially transmits globally. And if this conjuncture of street and media constitutes a very contemporary version of the public sphere, then bodies on the line have to be thought of as both there and here, now and then, transported and stationary, with very different political consequences following from those two modalities of space and time.

It matters when public squares are filled to the brim, when people eat and sleep there, sing and refuse to cede that space, as we saw in the first gatherings in Tahrir Square, and continue to see in other parts of the world. It matters, as well, that it is public educational buildings that have been seized in Athens, London, and Berkeley. At the Berkeley campus, buildings were seized, and trespassing fines were handed out in response. In some cases, students were accused of destroying private property. But these very allegations raised the question of whether the university is public or private. The stated aim of the protest—for the students to seize the building and sequester themselves there—was a way to gain a platform, indeed, a way to secure the material conditions for appearing in public. Such actions generally do not take place when effective platforms are already available. The students there, but also in the United Kingdom more recently, were seizing buildings as a way to lay claim to buildings that ought properly, now and in the future, to belong to public education. That doesn’t mean that every time these buildings are seized it is justifiable, but let us be alert to what is at stake here: the symbolic meaning of seizing these buildings is that these buildings belong to the public, to public education, and it is precisely the access to public education that is being undermined by fee and tuition hikes and budget cuts. We should not be surprised that the protest took the form of seizing the buildings, performatively laying claim to public education, insisting on gaining literal access to the buildings of public education precisely at a historical moment in which that access is being shut down. In other words, no positive law justifies these actions that oppose the institutionalization of unjust or exclusionary forms of power. Can we then say that these actions are nevertheless an exercise of a right, a lawless exercise that takes place precisely when the law is wrong or the law has failed?

The body on the street persists, but also seeks to find the conditions of its own preservation. Invariably, those conditions are social ones, and demand a radical reorganization of social life for those who experience their existence as imperiled. If we are thinking well, and our thinking commits us to the preservation
of life in some form, then the life to be preserved takes a bodily form. In turn, this means that the life of the body—its hunger, its need for shelter and protection from violence—becomes a major issue of politics. Even the most given or unchosen features of our lives are not simply given; they are given in history and in language, in vectors of power that none of us chose. Equally true is that a given property of the body or a set of defining characteristics depends upon the continuing persistence of the body. Those social categories we never chose traverse this given body in some ways rather than in others, and gender, for instance, names that traversal as well as its transformations. In this sense, those most urgent and largely involuntary dimensions of our lives, which include hunger and the need for shelter, medical care, and protection from violence, natural or humanly imposed, are crucial to politics. We cannot presume the enclosed and well-fed space of the polls, where all the material needs are somehow being taken care of elsewhere by beings whose gender, race, or status render them ineligible for public recognition. Rather, we have not only to bring the material urgencies of the body into the square, but to make those needs central to the demands of politics.

In my view, a shared condition of precarity situates our political lives, even as precarity is differentially distributed. And some of us, as Ruth Gilmore has made very clear, are disproportionately more disposed to injury and early death than others. Racial difference can be tracked precisely by looking at statistics on infant mortality, for example. This means, in brief, that precarity is unequally distributed and that lives are not considered equally grievable or equally valuable. If, as Adriana Cavarero has argued, the exposure of our bodies in public space constitutes us fundamentally and establishes our thinking as social and embodied, vulnerable and passionate, then our thinking gets nowhere without the presupposition of that very corporeal interdependency and entwinement. The body is constituted through perspectives it cannot inhabit; someone else sees our face in a way that we cannot and hears our voice in a way that we cannot. We are in this sense—bodily—always over there, yet here, and this dispossession marks the sociality to which we belong. Even as located beings, we are always elsewhere, constituted in a sociality that exceeds us. This establishes our exposure and our precarity, the ways in which we depend on political and social institutions to persist.

In those demonstrations where people sing and speak, but also arrange for medical care and provide provisional social services, can we distinguish those vocalizations emanating from the body from those other expressions of material need and urgency? In those instances in which demonstrators were, after all, sleeping and eating in the public square, constructing toilets and various systems for sharing the space, they were not only refusing to disappear, refusing to go or stay home, and not only claiming the public domain for themselves—acting in concert on conditions of equality—but also maintaining themselves as persisting bodies with needs, desires, and requirements: Arendtian and counter-Arendtian, to be sure, since these bodies who were organizing their basic needs in public were also petitioning the world to register what was happening there, to make its support known, and in that way to enter into revolutionary action itself. The bodies acted in concert, but they also slept in public, and in both these modalities, they were both vulnerable and demanding, giving political and spatial organization to elementary bodily needs. In this way, they formed themselves into images to be projected to all
who watched, petitioning us to receive and respond and so to enlist media coverage that would refuse to let the event be covered over or slip away. Sleeping on that pavement was not only a way to lay claim to the public, to contest the legitimacy of the state, but also, quite clearly, a way to put the body on the line in its insistence, obduracy, and precarity, overcoming the distinction between public and private for the time of revolution. In other words, it was only when those needs that are supposed to remain private came out into the day and night of the square, formed into image and discourse for the media, that it finally became possible to extend the space and time of the event with such tenacity as to bring the regime down. After all, the cameras never stopped; bodies were there and here; they never stopped speaking, not even in sleep, and so could not be silenced, sequestered, or denied—revolution sometimes happens because everyone refuses to go home, cleaving to the pavement as the site of their convergent and temporary cohabitation.

Chapter 3

Precarious Life and the Ethics of Cohabitation

I hope to address here ethical obligations that are global in character and that emerge both at a distance and within relations of proximity. The two questions that concern me are at first quite different from one another. The first is whether any of us have the capacity or inclination to respond ethically to suffering at a distance, and what makes that ethical encounter possible when it does take place. The second is what it means for our ethical obligations when we are up against another person or group, find ourselves invariably joined to those we never chose, and must respond to solicitations in languages we may not understand or even wish to understand. This happens, for instance, at the border of several contested states, but also in various moments of geographical proximity—what we might call "up againstness"—the result of populations living in conditions of unwilled adjacency due to forced emigration or the redrawing of the boundaries of a nation-state. Of course, presumptions about farness and nearness are already there in most of the accounts of ethics that we know. There are communitarians who do not mind the local, provisional,
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Credits


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