

# JUDITH BUTLER WITH SUNAURA TAYLOR

## Interdependence



*This dialogue is unique in that it appears on camera as a conversation between two subjects. During one of my preliminary meetings with Judith Butler, I introduced her to my sister, Sunaura Taylor, a graduate student at Berkeley who uses a wheelchair because of a congenital physical disability. After a long conversation over coffee, Butler suggested Sunaura participate in the filming process, rightly suspecting they would have many interesting things to talk about. The exuberantly muraled streets and graffitied alleyways of San Francisco's Mission District provided their walk's setting.*

JUDITH BUTLER: Maybe I should start by saying why I thought this was a good thing to do?

SUNAURA TAYLOR: That sounds great.

BUTLER: All right, Sunny, so I thought that we should take this walk together, and one of the things I wanted to talk about was what it means for us to take a walk together. When I first asked you about this, you told me you take walks, you take strolls—can you say something about what that is for you? When do you do it and how do you do it and what words do you have for it?

s. TAYLOR: Well, I think I always go for a walk, probably every day I go for a walk, and I always tell people I'm going for walks—I use that word even though I can't physically walk. I mean, to me, I think the experience of going for a walk is probably very similar to anybody else's: it's a clearing of the mind, it's enjoying whatever I'm walking past. And my body is very involved even though I'm physically not walking. I have my own ways in which I engage my body, my balancing. But yeah, I use that term: walking. And most of the disabled people that I know use that term also.

BUTLER: So you move when you walk, but you also have motorized movement, and it's a combination of movements, no?

s. TAYLOR: Yeah, it's a combination of movements. And it's very subtle movements also: moving my hand very subtly, movement of my back. I'm always moving though I'm not walking.

BUTLER: It makes me wonder whether any of us move without techniques of movement. Everybody has to learn how to move in whatever ways they can.

s. TAYLOR: Well, we're very culturally ingrained early on to move in certain ways, to walk in certain ways, to gesture in certain ways. And for me it's very interesting to think about what it means to be born in a body that can't physically move in the culturally accepted ways, and you have to design your own movements. I would say that many culturally accepted movements are also restrictive on some level.

BUTLER: It seems to me that there are two ways of thinking about this. One way of thinking about it is to say that when you walk you're supplemented by a chair, by wheels—they assist you in walking—and that differentiates you and other people in chairs from those who are not in chairs. On the other hand, it seems to me we could think that there's a more general condition, maybe a shared condition, that we could even speak to.

I mean, it seems to me that we're all supported in our movements by various kinds of things that are external to us. We all need certain kinds of surfaces, we need certain kinds of shoes, certain kinds of weather, and even internally we need to be ambulatory in certain ways that may or may not be fully operative in all of us. And I'm just thinking that a walk always requires a certain kind of technique, a certain support. Nobody takes a walk without there being a technique of walking. Nobody goes for a walk without something that supports that walk, something outside of ourselves. And maybe we have a false idea that the able-bodied person is somehow radically self-sufficient. I think there's an idea of self-sufficiency that might be a fantasy and kind of an ideal norm that doesn't actually suit any of us or help any of us think about how we move or why we move as we move.

s. TAYLOR: I think that idea translates also into so many other, different fields, this idea of independence. That an able-bodied person can take a walk independently without anything else is sort of a myth. They do need certain ground, they do need shoes, as you said, they need social support. And I think that's something that definitely affects the image of disabled people. That somehow disabled people are perceived as more dependent, or that they are the ones that are dependent, when in actuality we are all interdependent, that is, dependent on different structures and on each other. There's also just the way that we are affected by other people's opinions when we're taking a walk and other people's views of us when we're taking a walk; disabled people are impacted by people's discomfort or by

people's lack of knowing how to interact or react. But I'm sure that's similar for all people in some ways.

BUTLER: So what seems clear to me is that we're always conditioned to take a walk. Certain conditions have to be met. We need means of mobilization, we need support, we need surfaces. And it seems to me that having the use of your feet is not a necessary condition for a walk. That's one of the things that becomes most clear when you talk about taking a walk or taking a stroll. Feet can be one means of mobilizing the body, but certainly not the only one, and not even a necessary one. And that means we get to rethink what a walk is in terms of all the things that power our movement, all the conditions that support our mobility.

s. TAYLOR: And I have many friends who don't have feet who go for walks.

BUTLER: Let's talk about this: Which environments make it possible for you to take a walk? What does the environment have to be like in order to support your mobility?

s. TAYLOR: Well, disability really dramatizes all these conditions that affect us, that affect both disabled people and able-bodied people. For example, a real physical condition for me would be if we're taking a walk and then suddenly there's no curb cut. Then I would literally have to stop taking my walk. And so the physical environment for a disabled person—at least at this time in our history, in our culture—makes the effects of the environment much more obvious when in fact even the movements of able-bodied people are influenced by similar factors. I've been in suburban environments created for cars and where there are no safe spaces to walk, where walking can be very hazardous. So the existence of sidewalks and paths show that able-bodied people also depend on spaces designed for them. Does that make sense?

BUTLER: Yeah. Are there curb cuts in San Francisco?

s. TAYLOR: I moved to San Francisco, to the Bay Area, largely because it's the most accessible place in the world. And partly what's so amazing to me about it is that the physical access, the fact that public transportation is accessible, there are curb cuts most places, most buildings are accessible, leads to a social acceptability. That somehow because there's physical access, there are simply more disabled people out and about in the world, and so people have learned how to interact with them and are used to them in a certain way. And so the physical access leads to a social access and acceptance.

BUTLER: It's great. We can say, where there are curb cuts, there will be increased populations of people using chairs and that that will change the demographic of an entire city.

s. TAYLOR: Or, for example, in my hometown, in Georgia, I was always very nervous about going out and buying things because I do things differently. Here I don't have to explain to anybody how to help me because they are so used to working with, and figuring out, and being creative with, disabled people coming into their stores. Here almost always people will say, "Can I bring that coffee to you?" or "I'll bring you a straw." And so there's this knowledge of this whole way of physically interacting with people who are different, and that really results from physical access. But that's always been a dilemma within the disability community: How do you demand physical access first if you can't get out into society to demand it?

BUTLER: Yes, that's a big question, the access to even get the population together who can then make the claim in an effective way.

s. TAYLOR: Yeah, and it's really only just within the past fifteen to twenty years that that's really been taking place.

BUTLER: So you talk about going into stores or dealing with people who are able-bodied but who've had experience dealing with disabled people and trying to figure out creative ways to meet their needs or have whatever exchange they're having. Well, first of all, I just want to say it must be nice not to always have to be the pioneer.

S. TAYLOR: Yes. Definitely, definitely.

BUTLER: To be the first one—

S. TAYLOR: —to be the first disabled person they've ever seen.

BUTLER: To say, yes, I do speak and think and talk and move and enjoy life and suffer many of the same heartaches that you do. But anyway, what I'm wondering about is moving in social spaces, right? All the movements you can do and which help you live and which express you in various ways. Do you feel free to move in all the ways you want to move in social, public space? And to what extent are there social restrictions on you, kinds of stigmas or forms of socially acceptable movement that are restrictions on you—not your disability, but rather the social restrictions on what a “disabled” person should do?

S. TAYLOR: Well, to use going to a coffeehouse as an example, at first it was just the embarrassment of asking for help. Because of these independence issues we've been talking about, it takes a lot to be that pioneer and to ask for help and to watch someone as they're nervous trying to figure out how to help you. But I think, after I sort of went through that, I realized that actually it was strange because a lot of the time I might not even need help. For instance, I could go into a coffee shop and actually pick up the cup with my mouth and carry it to my table, but that becomes almost more difficult because of the normalizing standards of our movements and the discomfort that's

caused when I do things with body parts that aren't necessarily what we assume that they're for. That seems to be even harder for people to deal with. So this is something that I'm very interested in: How disabled people can creatively redo or reinvent those movements. Or how they have to create their own concepts of what a movement is and what their body parts are for. I think that we're sort of taught that hands are for giving things, picking things up, they're for shaking hands, that mouths are for drinking, for kissing, for talking. And when I go into a coffee shop and mess those up—when I, with my mouth, pick up a cup instead of using my hands—it's sort of undoing this assumption that people just take for granted. It's not even something that people usually think about, that there may be a socially constructed way of using your body.

BUTLER: Right, I mean, I don't know if you ever go to baseball games, but . . .

S. TAYLOR: Not often.

BUTLER: Not often. OK. But it does occur to me that if you were to look at even so-called normal eating habits of people at baseball games, they use their mouths in all kinds of ways, uncorking and spitting and putting their mouths into their bowls of whatever. And I mean, nobody says, “Oh my God, that's completely unacceptable.” And yet maybe it is unacceptable, according to a certain propriety or class mores or a sense of correctness. It makes me wonder why people don't get really upset about that. When an able-bodied person maybe uses their mouth in an unconventional way, it's OK, but if a disabled person does, then there's some kind of challenge to our idea of what human functions are or what certain body parts are meant for.

S. TAYLOR: Well, I think it's one thing if it's a choice, if it's a choice to eat the hot dog in a messy, different way. Forget the hands—they're

too busy holding the big beers or whatever. However, I actually think that while it is more acceptable, people do feel all of those restrictions in more subtle ways. And maybe it's allowed at a baseball game, but if you're at a relatively fancy restaurant, that wouldn't be the case. I guess if you're even walking down a street and you're wearing something funny, you may feel judged. It seems to me able-bodied people feel a lot of self-consciousness about their movements and presentation.

This makes me think of an experience I recently had. It's pretty rare unless I'm hanging out with a lot of other disabled people. I was flying back home and I was sitting next to this man, this French man, and he was very frustrated about something and I couldn't understand him. But he kept trying to communicate with me and there was something kind of off and I couldn't tell what it was. And then I realized that he had a big, fake, plastic arm. It was like a prosthetic that tried to look like a real arm so I didn't notice it until probably halfway through the flight, and then we kind of bonded even though we couldn't understand each other. I kept noticing that he would do things with his mouth a lot because he only had one hand, so he was always doing things with his mouth. So then finally, near the end of the flight, our ears were popping as we were going down and he got out this pack of gum and he offered me some, and the only way for him to get out the gum and unwrap it was with his hand and his mouth. His real hand was full or something, I don't remember exactly, but basically the only free part of himself to offer me the gum was his mouth!

BUTLER: Yes, that's very sweet! So did he?

S. TAYLOR: He did! And I was just like, well, when else am I randomly just going to be in contact with someone else who does everything with their mouth? So I took it and it wasn't weird in terms of being, like, oddly sexual or too close or anything. In fact, I was really quite

blissed out by the fact that this guy did things with his mouth too, you know? It was just really kind of a wonderful moment of just sharing intimacy because of the ways that our bodies worked.

BUTLER: Yes, that's wonderful.

S. TAYLOR: It was very funny.

BUTLER: Well, I'm thinking that what's kind of exhilarating about this story is that you could both do this somewhat improper thing together. And of course it's fully proper, it's fully appropriate, and it's actually quite wonderful. I mean, imagine if you had not taken the gum because you had no way to get it or because you were too embarrassed to exchange it in that way. That would be terrible. I think this sort of thing happens a lot at these microlevels of exchange. Like, how do you say hello to somebody? Usually they offer you their hand. And I remember when I first met you, I offered you my hand and you offered me your shoulder. And then my hand went on your shoulder and that was our contact. But I had to learn, and my first thought was, well, I don't know her very well, is it OK to put my hand on her shoulder? Yeah, that's fine, right? But whatever that formality is that suggests that bodies shouldn't have too much contact when they first meet each other unless they've—

S. TAYLOR: Or only contact through the hand!

BUTLER: Only contact through the hand! These protocols are highly structured, but sometimes they break down. For instance, a friend of mine who's nearly transsexual—she's very, very butch, nearly transsexual—every time she goes to use the bathroom (and she uses the women's bathroom still for whatever reason), she gets yelled at the minute she walks in the door. And everything about her body is inspected by people who have never met her. They want to know

whether those are her breasts; they want to figure out whether she's in the wrong place. In her case, a kind of invasiveness takes place. People feel like they can say anything to her, that they have a right to know about her anatomy or they have a right to know about her gender in a way that respects no privacy whatsoever. So that's a different case in which the social protocols are not about keeping separateness, which always assumes we know who each other are and what's appropriate, but where the kind of invasiveness seems to know no boundaries.

S. TAYLOR: And that happens a lot within the disabled community also, especially with people who can pass as able-bodied in some circumstances. Some people seem to think that they have the right to ask questions, to be overly intimate. But I think there are positive levels where these different ways of moving or being can lead to freedom of touch and freedom of intimacy in different ways, and those moments are really lovely. And I know that when I have participated in events or in settings where there are a lot of people with different embodiments, part of my favorite thing is just being completely confused about how to greet someone. Not knowing how to give that physical contact or how to even say hi, or wondering how someone is going to say hi back to me. And I think that those experiences are just so important, almost as a reminder of all the walls that we've built.

BUTLER: Yes, ways of expressing acknowledgment or welcoming somebody—those are actually really crucial acts. How do I make contact with this other human?

ASTRA TAYLOR: Sunny, maybe you could tell the story about how you became aware of disability as an intellectual issue, as a topic that could be theorized about—how disability studies fostered your political consciousness, which eventually inspired you to participate in those events you just mentioned, and how that changed your life.

S. TAYLOR: So it wasn't until I was in my early twenties, about twenty or twenty-one, that I became aware of disability as a political issue. And that happened largely through discovering the social model of disability, which is basically this: In disability studies they have a distinction between disability and impairment. So impairment would be my body, my embodiment right now, the fact that I was born with arthrogyriposis, or what the medical world has labeled as arthrogyriposis, that basically my joints are fused, my muscles are weaker, I can't move in certain ways.\* And this does affect my life in all sorts of situations. For instance, there's a plum tree in my backyard and I can't pick the plums off of it. I have to wait for them to drop. And so there's that, there's that embodiment, our own unique embodiments. And then there's disability, which is basically the social repression of disabled people. The fact that disabled people have limited housing options, we don't have career opportunities, we're socially isolated, and in many ways there's a cultural aversion to disabled people.

BUTLER: So would disability be the social organization of impairment? [*The shot is momentarily interrupted as we clear the sidewalks for passersby. "Can you make us famous?!" they ask.*] I was just trying to figure out what a good formulation for understanding the distinction between impairment and disability is. And would it be fair to say that disability is the social organization of impairment? The way impairment is addressed or fails to be addressed by social means?

S. TAYLOR: Yes, yes. Exactly. The disabling effects, basically, of society. That's what it would be.

BUTLER: That seems extremely important. So what happened when you realized that disability is a political issue? At what point did you recognize that and what facilitated your understanding?

\* To learn about the environmental causes of Sunaura Taylor's impairment see "Military Waste in Our Drinking Water," *Alternet.org*, August 4, 2006.

S. TAYLOR: Well, I think all the feelings that I had grown up with—that my body was abnormal, that I was deformed, that it was a tragedy—all these sorts of things that I'd really sort of internalized as being my own personal problem suddenly blasted open and then I just realized how much they're political and they're civil rights issues, so it made me more determined to figure out a way of interacting physically with the world.

BUTLER: What happened? Did you come in contact with disability activists or did you read certain things?

S. TAYLOR: I read a book review, actually. But it was also definitely very hard because when that happened I lived in Brooklyn. And I would really try to just go and order a coffee by myself. And I would sit for hours beforehand in the park just trying to get up the nerve to do that. Because it was a matter of asking for help, which in this society is just looked down upon.

BUTLER: Well, and there's no guarantee that someone's going to help.

S. TAYLOR: That too!

BUTLER: Or that they're not going to disdain you for needing help.

S. TAYLOR: Yeah, yes. Or that it just won't be a very awkward moment. They won't know how to help you and you'll have to explain to them how to help . . . though it's never, never as awkward as one thinks it will be. But then I sort of had the epiphany that actually, in a way, it's a political protest for me to go in and order a coffee and demand help simply because, in my opinion, help is something we all need. And it's something that is looked down upon and not really taken care of in this society when we *all* need help, when we're all interdependent in all sorts of ways.

BUTLER: I think that's true and it *is* a political act to ask for coffee—I mean, you are intervening in social space in a particular way, you're challenging the protocols through which certain kinds of items are asked for or help is asked for, and you're asking for that social world to open, not only to you personally, but to all the people who are in your situation. And so I think your asking for coffee *is* political.

S. TAYLOR: Yeah, I agree. And I think it becomes more political when it involves me actually showing the ways in which I do things. Or asking other people to interact with the different ways in which I do things. Because I think it can help make people aware of the ways in which they are entangled in this web of normalcy.

BUTLER: Can we go back for a moment to moving or eating in public and what kind of challenge that is both for you and for able-bodied people who are around you or with you? I'm struck by the fact that the able-bodied population has certain feelings of anxiety and stigmatizes impairment precisely because there are things you are perceived not to be able to do, you are perceived as helpless or dependent. But, in fact, it seems to me that when you do things in the way that you want to or can—if you move in the way that you want to, if you needed to move on the floor or if you needed to eat something or drink something or move something with your mouth or paint with your mouth, and you do paint with your mouth—then it's the form your ability takes that is stigmatized at that moment. It's very peculiar.

S. TAYLOR: It is very peculiar.

BUTLER: If you're disabled, you're not supposed to be able to do *those* things, but your means of doing them, instead of being applauded and being understood as kind of the creative acts that they are—

S. TAYLOR: They freak people out.

BUTLER: They freak people out.

S. TAYLOR: They totally freak people out. And that's why I've been thinking a lot about how wheelchairs, actually, as wonderful as they are, as liberating as they are, they are actually tools to keep my body in a certain acceptable space because I'm not moving. I'm not interacting with the world physically as much as I would if my body was moving naturally on the ground without a wheelchair. Without my wheelchair I would be walking, but in a very different way than you walk. I'd be scooting. Both are movements that would make people much more uncomfortable because of—what would be the right word—the transgressive nature or something of—

BUTLER: Your transgressive movements, yes.

S. TAYLOR: Yeah, my transgressive movements would freak people out.

BUTLER: Right, well, there's a norm of what—not even what the body should be like and look like, but what parts should move and what those movements should be like. But you see, I guess I would maybe gently contest you a little bit because you're in a chair—you're moving in a chair, you are moving. And I wonder, sometimes when we say, "I move" or "I'm moving by myself," we imagine completely self-generated movement, as if the body is completely independent of an apparatus, of a machine, of even nutrition, of all kinds of things that one needs to move. So I guess I want to go back, you know, remind us that maybe that idea of the self-sufficient body, moving by itself—

S. TAYLOR: Doesn't exist.

BUTLER: I don't think so!

S. TAYLOR: Yeah. But I do think, just in terms of wheelchairs, they are a signifier of what disabled people are supposed to be. They're supposed to be helpless. And we're not supposed to be able to do things. Because if we get out in the world, then the world will have to change to some extent. So I think it's easier for society to have us be helpless, to, you know, stick us in nursing homes.

[As we turn down an alley we notice a lone sneaker.]

BUTLER: Someone's missing their shoe.

S. TAYLOR: I wonder if they can walk without it?

BUTLER: I wonder! I think that as I'm listening to you I'm hearing several things at once. That, on the one hand, there's a social expectation that if you have an impairment, you should remain helpless. There is also anxiety and stigma that many able-bodied people have in relation to that helplessness; they get freaked out by it. They don't know what to do about it. So they require you to be helpless, but they're also freaked out about your helplessness.

S. TAYLOR: They also like it sometimes.

BUTLER: They also like it; it makes them feel . . . virtuous. I'm sure there's lots of virtue-tripping.

S. TAYLOR: Lots of virtue-tripping. Lots and lots of pity.

BUTLER: Lots of pity and virtue-tripping. Just what we need. But the other thing I hear you saying is that when you can do things, and you do them in your own way, that that's also stigmatized, right? So the



use of your mouth, the use of your body in ways that are not conventional, freak people out, which suggests that they would rather you not be able to do things than to do things in ways that challenge their idea of what human body parts, how human beings, move; what they look like when they move, what bodies are supposed to be like, how they're supposed to appear in social space.

S. TAYLOR: I think we should add to that how people smell in social space and how people sound. Because I think that both of those things have a lot to do with disability too, the random noises people make or random smells disabled people might emit. So there's many different levels of perception.

BUTLER: That's right. We've been talking about mobility, morphology; vocalization is clearly huge. So that just makes me think about what kind of norms people live with regarding what their body parts are for. Like, what do you use your mouth for? What's the proper use of your mouth? And it just strikes me that there's a broader kind of morphological politics that we could talk about that would include gender, people who live with intersex conditions, disability, race . . .

S. TAYLOR: Even just different cultures. Yeah.

BUTLER: Racialized ways of walking, speaking, gesturing. All the ways in which we have very restrictive ideas about what body parts are for and how they should appear. So when you can use a body part to paint, since you paint with your mouth, that challenges people to think what the mouth is and what the mouth can do . . . or what painting is! What the act of painting or drawing is. All of those ideas have to be rethought, but it's amazing what the resistance is. But I think we could find similar kinds of resistances to gender and to morphological issues that merge with gender. You know, the biological females for whom a certain kind of walk is

obligatory. If they don't walk in that way, their femaleness is called into question.

S. TAYLOR: Yeah. Or their able-bodiedness.

BUTLER: Or their able-bodiedness is called into question. And both can be called into question at the same time, right? I mean, if there are dimorphic ideals of what a man is like or what a woman is like, there are also able-bodied ideals, right? So able-bodiedness is a pre-supposition of gender norms.

S. TAYLOR: And I think just the words "strength" and "weakness" have a lot to do with this too. The idea of being weak or of looking weak seems definitely to be associated with the idea of being feminine. So those words, "weak" and "strong," also sort of link gender and disability.

BUTLER: Right. So you'd say there's kind of an extrafeminization of the disabled body, if weakness is associated with feminization?

S. TAYLOR: For males, definitely. There's been a lot of research and work on what it means to lose strength if you're a disabled male. But then, for a disabled female, what does it mean to not be able to walk in that way that you were just saying the ideal female should walk or women in general are supposed to walk? [*The weather has suddenly become chilly. We pass by a vintage clothing store.*] Should we stop and get me something warm?

BUTLER: Yeah. That's what we're going to do. [*Butler pauses at a rack of garish dresses.*] I don't know, honey. Let's go find something. . . . Oh look, these are really warm. These are warm.

[*A red sweater catches Sunaura Taylor's eye and Butler helps her try it on.*]

S. TAYLOR: I think this would be fine. And I like it. It's stylish.

BUTLER: It's very stylish. It's kind of, you know, sporty and fancy.

S. TAYLOR: It's gonna be a new show: "It's shopping with Judith Butler!" [Laughs.]

BUTLER: For the queer eye!

[Butler and Taylor approach the cashier.]

BUTLER: We put the sweater on.

CASHIER: It's priced by weight . . .

BUTLER: Can we guess?

CASHIER: I can give it to you for \$4.50.

S. TAYLOR: Great. [Hands money to the cashier.] Can you give me the bills first, and then the change? I can't hold both at the same time.

[We head back onto Valencia Street.]

BUTLER: There's an essay by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze on Spinoza, speaking to the question: What can a body do? And the question is supposed to challenge the traditional ways in which we think about bodies. We usually ask what is a body or what is the ideal form of a body or what's the difference between the body and the soul and that kind of thing. But what can a body do is a different question. . . . It isolates a set of capacities and a set of instrumentalities or actions, and we are assemblages of those things. And I liked this idea because

it's not like there's an essence and there's an ideal form, but there are just different kinds of assemblages.

S. TAYLOR: So by assemblages do you mean ways in which we put together the use of our bodies?

BUTLER: Our capacities, our instrumentalities, also what we feel, what we respond to, zones of passivity, interdependency, and action. All those come together in some way or another. But what I mean—I'm not really Deleuzian and I don't even know if I'm a Spinozist, maybe I am a little bit—but it seems to me that it goes against certain ideas of ideal morphology and what a body should look like. It's exactly *not* that question. Or what a body should move like. And one of the things that I found in thinking about gender and even violence against sexual minorities or gender minorities—people whose gender presentation doesn't conform with standard ideals of masculinity and femininity—is that very often it comes down to how people walk, how they use their hips, what they do with their body parts, what they use their mouth for, what they use their anus for or what they allow their anus to be used for, how they handle being in a relationship to other people's orifices, which orifices you can enter and how and which you cannot, which orifices can be used for certain actions, which cannot, right? All those things are very highly regulated. So I remember at the beginning of the queer movement, there were straight men who thought, well, if they enjoyed anal intercourse, no matter what the gender was of the person who was penetrating them, they were made gay by the act. Why are you "made gay" by the act? Why should that have to be just gay? But people got confused about acts and orifices and body surfaces and what they could be used for and if you used them one way or another, then your identity was called into question. So people, I think, had to work against certain stigmas that body parts could only be used for certain purposes and that's how gender got constituted. So I'm interested in this. I think

gender and disability converge in a whole lot of different ways. And one thing I think both movements do is get us to rethink what the body can do—what are its abilities and what are its actions and what are its modes of receptivity—and free up our understanding of how we can make use of what we have and for what purposes. But it does mean challenging certain very entrenched ideas of how those things are supposed to line up.

S. TAYLOR: I've always seen the body as a creative tool and that we're sort of taught how to use this tool in certain ways. And I think that's probably, really, one of the benefits of being disabled or of being born into a situation where you have to realize this creative capacity. Or else you won't be able to do anything, you know? Just to think about mouths, my mouth is put in all sorts of places—because I can't use my hands—that are just totally socially unacceptable. I put my mouth on doorknobs, which I know people think is highly disgusting! Or I put my mouth on pens. I'm constantly putting things in my mouth.

A. TAYLOR: I want to interrupt you and see if Judith could talk about that young man who was killed because of his feminine walk. It seems related to what you were both just talking about.

BUTLER: I tell this story, when I'm trying to explain gender violence to people, about a guy in Maine who, I guess he was around eighteen years old, and he walked with a very distinct swish, hips going one way or another, a very feminine walk, a conventionally feminine walk—I would say not even conventionally feminine, I would say hyperbolically feminine. And he was teased by his classmates on the way to school and he got used to it and he just walked, and I think he even walked a little more outrageously the more he was teased. Maybe there was a little bit of a "fuck you" in the walk. But one day he was walking to school and he was attacked by three of his classmates and

he was thrown over a bridge and he was killed. And the question that community had to deal with—and, indeed, the entire media that covered this event—was how could it have been that somebody's gait, that somebody's style of walking, could engender the desire to kill that person? I mean, what is it that's so threatening in that social space? And I think, if that young man could show that gender was that variable or if he could cross over to another gender so effectively, it really raised the question for everybody else—and especially for those that attacked him—of whether their own genders were also perhaps not quite as stable or quite as fixed as they thought. And I think it also evoked sexual panic because, if he's a girl, if he's girling himself on the street, then, those boys in relationship to him, are they in a heterosexual encounter? Is this an encounter with a girl? And does that make them homosexual? Does that make them heterosexual? I think the panic around all those issues led to a desire to obliterate this person from the face of the earth because they could not handle the challenge. And that makes me think about the walk in a different way. I mean, a walk can be a dangerous thing. If you go for a walk, you're also vulnerable socially. There's no question about that. You assert your rights of mobility and you take a certain risk in public space.

S. TAYLOR: I'm just remembering when I was little, when I did walk, when I would walk places, I would be told that I walked like a monkey. And I think that for a lot of disabled people, the violence and the sort of hatred exists a lot in this reminding of people that our bodies are going to age and are going to die. And in some ways I wonder also, just thinking about the monkey comment, that it is also—and this is just a thought off the top of my head right now—where our boundaries lie as a human and what becomes nonhuman. You know?

BUTLER: Well, it makes me wonder whether the person was antievolutionary? Maybe they're creationists. It's like, why shouldn't we have some resemblance to the monkey? *[Laughs.]*

S. TAYLOR: Well, the monkey's always been my favorite animal, so, actually, quite a lot of the time I was flattered.

BUTLER: Exactly!

S. TAYLOR: But when in those in-between moments of in between male and female or in between death and health do you still count as a human?

BUTLER: Right—or animal-human-machine. Right? Animal-human-machine. You know, those boundaries, they make up the complex environment for all of our lives. There's no way that we can distill the human out of those relationships.

S. TAYLOR: And I think what's ultimately threatening about it, about all these things, about the way in which someone moves or the way in which someone uses their bodies or the way in which someone speaks differently, is that it's a threat to our most basic categories that we've built our systems of power on. And maybe that's why it hits people at such an emotionally uncontrollable level.

BUTLER: I think so. And these are really restrictive ideas about what the human is. I have to have a fixed gender in order to be a recognizable human, I have to be able to be human and not animal, or to be human and not motorized by metal, I have to be somehow extracted from all these things and stabilized, able-bodied, fully capable according to various standards.

S. TAYLOR: I'm just thinking about the eugenics movement. I mean, that is a very clear, physical thing that happened very recently in history where it was: this human doesn't count enough as a human to be allowed to breathe, basically.

BUTLER: Well, I think this leads to the question of how we conceive of human lives that are worth protecting, worth sheltering, worth supporting in their capacity to flourish, however they might flourish, and I think that's also true in our contemporary war effort. For example, the way Iraqi civilians are consistently presented by the media—theirs are lives not worth preserving. They're not even human lives that we've destroyed. They're threats to the human. They don't look human enough to protect from war. I think that we're all very confused and cruel when it comes to thinking about the category of who is human.

A. TAYLOR: Can we dig even deeper into the perceived threat that the populations you are discussing pose? Why the aggression and fear towards them?

BUTLER: Well, I think there are a lot of different reasons for social violence toward people who are perceived to be on the margins of gender, the margins of able-bodiedness, the margins of racial normativity, and a lot of it has to do with fear of contact and contagion, that maybe somebody else's vulnerability will become one's own. I think the thought of another person in a state of dependency, in a state of social marginalization, makes some people want to assert their centrality and their power as a way of evading any feelings they might have of their own limitations or dependency or permeability otherwise. So in a world in which we are all subject to violence, where we could all be violently impinged upon against our will, people manage that sense of precariousness. They want other people to embody it for them so they can feel protected or immunized from it.

But, in fact, my own sense is that a lot of what we've been talking about brings us to a recognition that lives are precarious, fragile, dependent, but also capable in very specific kinds of ways. And that gets organized differently for different people. But I don't think that there's any evading either side of that territory. I guess the main point

that I want to make is that, as bodies, we're vulnerable. I mean, that's the thing about bodies. They're not just self-motored, they're not just self-sufficient, they're always vulnerable to being looked at, to being called, to being touched. They're also capable of touching or sexual love or intimacy, to other forms of physical contact, right? And none of us get to fully control the way in which that happens. So I would say one feature of human bodies is permeability. We can be contacted, we can be impinged upon by others, and sometimes that's great and welcome and sometimes it's horrific. But there's no way to get rid of that aspect of the body. And I sometimes think that the social violence that affects people who look more permeable, who look more dependent, who look less defended, is a way in which impermeability on the side of the people who are violent is managed: *you* be the permeability of the body, *you* stand for the vulnerability of the body, and *I* will be the impermeable. So it's a way of managing and allocating that permeability so others stand for it and one gets to feel through one's violent acts that one's exempt. But no one's exempt.

[*We take a short break and move to a different part of the Mission District.*]

I was thinking about these ideals of self-sufficiency that people have about bodies: that bodies should be self-sufficient, that we worry when they're not. And one thought that I've had about gender, for instance, is that nobody has their own gender. That is to say, no one gets to have a gender all on their own. That's because we're embodied; we fundamentally depend on other people to recognize who we are and to help us figure out who we are in a social world. We can't—we don't, actually—make radical or self-sufficient decisions about who we want to be or how we are perceived or recognized. I mean, one of the struggles for gender and sexual minorities has been to get recognition for who one is. And if one doesn't have recognition for one's gender presentation or one's gender identification, then there's a certain kind of suffering—one doesn't get fully constituted socially, one doesn't get a place in the social order. So that's a kind of

dependency, right? If I need someone else or some group of people or a social world to recognize me in my gendered reality, then I'm going to petition the law or I'm going to petition medical establishments or I'm going to petition educational establishments to allow me to be whatever gender it is I'm petitioning to be. But I can't really do it on my own. In other words, we're all dependent on social vocabularies, on the availability of recognition, on institutions that will give us the acknowledgment we need in order to live the lives that we have to have. So, in my view, none of us simply makes up our gender on our own or lives it as a radical individual, self-sufficiently. We're constantly negotiating to gain certain kinds of recognition or to produce the social world in which we can live. And that means gender is kind of constituted socially, interrelationally. It doesn't generate from me, it's not an expression of my individual personhood; it's my effort to negotiate a social world on which I'm radically dependent.

[*At this point we realize that we're stranded on a stretch of sidewalk that has no curb cuts. We have to stop filming as Sunaura's chair and the camera, which is mounted on a dolly, are lifted onto the street.*]

I'm interested in that moment where you picked up that article at the age of twenty or whatever it was. I wonder what the language was that allowed you to recognize that disability was not a purely personal issue, that it was socially constituted, and what kind of empowerment is involved in that recognition? And it's hard because it means there's a limit to individualism, although each of us are obviously negotiating our individual solutions to the problems of ability, disability, gender normativity, all these issues, we can't do that as radical individuals. We can only do it by entering social space, demanding different kinds of recognition, producing certain kinds of bodily scandals in the world, and, also, acting in concert with other people as a way of changing what is normative and what is not.

Again I think underlying all of this is the idea that we are interdependent as we try and attract certain social transformations that affect us at very personal levels, right? How I can love and how I can

move and how I can eat. I think this also links to the idea that the body is itself—whatever else it is—a site of dependency. None of us come to the world independently. Infants are radically dependent. We're all radically dependent, and if we're not cared for by others, if we can't rely on that care, we cannot thrive, and even what we call our self-sufficiency, whatever that might be, can't come into being without a certain kind of well-met dependency, a dependency that got addressed and continues to be addressed. And it's not as if any of us, no matter how able-bodied we are, overcome that dependency when we become adults. We might posture as if we do, but think about the systems on which all of our bodies depend. It's quite astonishing if you think about health care or you think about systems of shelter or any number of things like that.

S. TAYLOR: The disability community sort of has this distinction between what people think of as being independent and actual individual physical independence. Because, the truth is, in our society right now it's really about being in control of services. It's being able to be in control and choose. I think this way of understanding independence is helpful.

BUTLER: Yeah, but even if we take that formulation, right?—to be independent is to have the ability to choose certain kinds of services—that depends on a world of services being in place. That depends on Republicans not controlling the universe and the social-service economy not being decimated by the effects of capitalism. There are so many things we are dependent on in order to exercise what we call our autonomy. My sense is that what's at stake here, both in the kind of gender politics like we've been talking about and the disability movement, is really rethinking the human as a site of interdependency. I think that there are certain notions of autonomy, of self-sufficiency, that have actually led us astray, that have made us think about individuals as self-motored, and, in fact, individuals are

never self-motored, no one comes into the world self-motored. And to the degree that we find ways of moving, of living, we do so because we've been cared for by people and we continue to be cared for by people. Systems of care are essential to human relationality and they don't ever cease to be. And that becomes especially true with illness, it becomes true with aging, but I think it's true within every phase of life.

S. TAYLOR: Yeah. I do think it's important in this conversation just to think about economics and capitalism and how that has affected and created, in a lot of ways, this myth of self-sufficiency and of independence. And also how capitalism in so many ways treats some human beings as . . .

BUTLER: Expendable?

S. TAYLOR: Expendable, because they're no longer efficient in the workplace. And I think that has a lot to do with aging and weakness and disability. To put it really simply, certain bodies can't be good workers, and all bodies at a certain point in the process of aging won't be good workers.

I guess the question is, what do we want from society? What do we want a society to be? Do we want a society that only values people for the ways in which their bodies are efficient or fit these norms of productivity and profit? Or do we want society to value the sort of dependency that all people share?

BUTLER: Well, of course one of the problems of capitalism is that it exploits precisely that dependency, right? It offers a certain prospect of survivability to those who can comply with its work norms. And it does actually have a stake in keeping a working class dependent in that way. The question is, what would dependency look like if it weren't being exploited under those kinds of conditions? And I think

when you walk into the coffee shop, if I can go back to that moment for a moment, and you ask for the coffee, or you even ask for some assistance with the coffee, the question of asking for assistance is also a question in which you're basically posing the question: Do we or do we not live in a world in which we assist each other? Do we or do we not help each other with basic needs? And are basic needs there to be kind of decided on as a social issue and not just my personal, individual issue or your personal, individual issue? So there's a challenge to individualism that happens in the moment in which you ask for some assistance with the coffee cup. And hopefully people will take it up and say, "Yes, I too live in that world in which I understand that we need each other in order to address our basic needs. And I want to organize a social and political world on the basis of that recognition!" It's no less than that kind of challenge.

But I think what we're also seeing these days—and we see it in Europe with the decimation of the social welfare state, I think we see it in the U.S. under the conditions of neoliberalism, which I don't want to get into too much—but we see the systematic production of precarious populations, populations that are always living on some edge, whose survivability is not guaranteed, it's not guaranteed by anyone, and the retraction of that obligation to imperiled populations, to refugees, to the poor, to those who are without health care. We're seeing a heightening of that precariousness under contemporary conditions. And I think it really poses the question of whether we still conceive of the human community as a system of necessary interdependency. And I think there are people who really want to say no, who really want to break that and let certain lives go, for the purposes of maximizing profit or even a kind of theory of the survival of the fittest.

s. TAYLOR: Disabled people make up the largest minority in the world and we have the lowest employment rate. There's also, for instance, the nursing home industry, which has a vested interest in institution-

alizing people, and different movements throughout history that have aimed either to do away with people who have disabilities or to stop them from breeding. Considering all that, I think we are definitely a very strong example of a precarious community.

BUTLER: Of a precarious community, yes. And I think some of what we've been talking about in terms of who constitutes an intelligible human or who's recognizable as a human being—what are the norms that constrain our conceptions of who is human and who is not—that these, what seem like intellectual issues or conceptual issues, are actually profoundly economic ones as well. Those lives considered precarious or not worth sheltering or protecting—

s. TAYLOR: Even giving birth to.

BUTLER: —not worth giving birth to, not worth mourning when they die, not worth attending to when they're ill, not worth providing the conditions under which they might flourish—we see more and more populations differentiated along those lines. I think the question of whose lives are worth protecting, valuing, furthering, really gets to the heart of the issue.