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## Desiring Tension

### Towards a Queer Politics of Paradox

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**ABSTRACT:** The article provides a close reading of the video *Sometimes you fight for the world, sometimes you fight for yourself*, dir. by Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz (2004, 5'). It reads the video as promoting what it calls a 'queer politics of paradox', that is, a politics that acknowledges desire as a constitutive moment of the political and at the same time challenges the political via a queer understanding of desire in order to make room for the political articulation of the Other. The article argues that a reworking of the political — one that aims at de-centring its hegemonic dynamic and creating space for Otherness — becomes possible if one invites paradox as a specific, anti-identitarian, and agonistic mode of tension to function as a constitutive moment of desire and of the political.

# DESIRING TENSION

Towards a Queer Politics of Paradox\*

Antke Engel

If we want to think of the political as potentiality, as presenting the potential for an open future – or better: for heterogeneous open futures – it might be more convincing to think about political struggles as being paradoxical rather than being antagonistic. Antagonism, even though it can be understood as a mode of opening up stabilized hegemonic relations and setting them in motion, submits the destabilizing forces to the logic of constructing provisional identities and thus exclusions.<sup>1</sup> Paradox, by contrast, is a dynamic constellation in itself, undermining identitarian closures and binary oppositions. As I argued recently, a focus on paradox may address political struggles and conflicts without forcing them under the principle of identity.<sup>2</sup> Here, I will conceptualize paradox as a dynamic state of tension and propose a queer politics of paradox as an alternative to antagonistic politics. I will read paradox into the political as something not to be overcome, but to be sought as a figure opening up space for what is otherwise deemed pre-political or politically unintelligible.<sup>3</sup> Yet how can such a privileging of paradoxes turn out to be an intervention into hegemonic regimes rather than a depoliticized pluralism? Conceptualizing paradox as a dynamic form of tension will build upon a queer theory of desire, which suggests understanding desire as depending on the irresolvable paradox of self-assertiveness and relatedness. Such an understanding of desire implies acknowledging tension while simultaneously striving for a joyful relation to irreducible

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1 Cf. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

2 Cf. Antke Engel, *Bilder von Sexualität und Ökonomie: Queere kulturelle Politiken im Neoliberalismus* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2009), particularly pp. 117-27.

3 Here I am inspired by Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* [1969], trans. by Mark Lester, with Charles Stivale (London: Athlone; New York: Continuum: 2004).



Otherness that is not captured in the complementarity of identity and alterity. My thesis is that the politicization of paradox may develop out of queering phallogocentric desire while simultaneously transforming how these queering practices are bound up with socio-political relations of power and domination. Following this train of thought, desire might very well turn out to be a constitutive moment of the political.

In an exotic setting of luscious jungle plants two figures, half-hidden behind leaves and positioned at a distance from each other exchange erotic gazes. Suspense. But instead of the expected encounter, the figures enter a 'song contest': frontally facing a virtual jury, they sing a duet, confronting their disenchanted versus cliché-saturated lyrics of love. The presentation 'reveals' – and critiques – the role of power, submission, and claims to possession in practices of love. The dialogue taken from a song by The Flying Lizards (1979) unfolds an antagonistic relationship with a gendered subtext: 'Knights in shiny armor always take the key, history, history, hypocrisy, but you can still make money by singing sweet songs of love', answered by: 'I own you, you don't own me, you are my territory, this is a love song, this is a love song.' Underlined by the exotic setting, the beholder is invited to realize the analogy and intertwinement of sexist, racist, and capitalist discourses. Activated is the well-known equation: Woman equals nature equals conquerable ter-



Fig. 1-4. Stills from *Sometimes You Fight For the World, Sometimes You Fight For Yourself* (Boudry/Lorenz 2004).

ritory. Additionally, the lyrics of the song expose the ongoing tradition of capitalist expansion and colonial respectively neo-colonial exploitation, building upon and worked into love relations. The ‘herstory’ presented does not leave a lot of hope for love, exactly because ‘history’ binds it to exploitation and domination. Yet desire is still virulent after the end of the duet: again an erotic exchange of gazes, supported by exhibitionist and voyeuristic practices, takes place – but does not have the effect that the protagonists come any closer. In the end the beholder is left with an assemblage of ant and plant and birds twitter.

The scenario stems from a five-minute video called *Sometimes You Fight For the World, Sometimes You Fight For Yourself*, which had originally been published under the title ‘normal love’, a term now presented as an intermediate image after the viewer has initially dived into the close-up of pink and green tropical plants and just before the first introduction of the two characters.<sup>4</sup> As one learns in the end credits, the characters are named ‘abstract female’ and ‘abstract male’ and are

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4 Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, *Sometimes You Fight For the World, Sometimes You Fight For Yourself* (2004, 5’) [on DVD]. ‘Normal Love’ quotes a film title by Jack Smith (1963, 80’). After Renate Lorenz curated an exhibition titled ‘normal love’ (Berlin, Künstlerhaus Bethanien) in 2007 the video was renamed.

in the beginning separated by another intermediate image termed ‘her-story’. Positioned between the two figures, this term might ambiguously refer only to the character introduced first – or to both of them, in which case it would challenge the antagonism. Whether this is the case, and if so, how this challenge succeeds by complicating and subverting binaries, will be the topic of this article. Furthermore, I ask whether the production of ambiguities and the ironic hyperbole of stereotypes open up a space for Otherness to become a political force, reworking the historical legacies which used to tame it into the hierarchical complementarity of identity and alterity.<sup>5</sup> Inciting these considerations the video will contribute to an understanding of the queer politics of paradox.

#### THE POLITICAL AS POTENTIALITY AND UNDECIDABILITY

The potentiality of the political depends on a linguistic proposition, on the impossibility of the closure of signification: no absolute, stable meaning can ever be achieved because meaning is not inherent in signs, ideas, or objects, but results from differentiation of other signs provided by specific socio-symbolic and material contexts.<sup>6</sup> If meaning production (signification) is a permanent process, there can be no stable, coherent identity, be it personal or political: ‘The subject’, ‘society’, ‘the human’, and ‘democracy’ are all to be understood as preliminary and precarious constructions, continuously challenged and continuously becoming.<sup>7</sup> Politics, the very acts undertaken to organize and re/con-

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5 Cf. Antke Engel, ‘Challenging the Heteronormativity of Tolerance Pluralism: Articulations of Non-Normative Sexualities’, *Redescriptions: Yearbook of Political Thought and Conceptual History*, 11 (2007), pp. 78-98.

6 Cf. Laclau/Mouffe, *Hegemony*; Susanne Lummerding, ‘Surplus Enjoyment: You Can Make Something out of Nothing – The Real, the Political, and the Conditions of Production: On the Productivity of an Impossibility’, in *Mehr(wert) Queer – Queer Added (Value): Visuelle Kultur, Kunst und Gender-Politiken – Visual Culture, Art, and Gender Politics*, ed. by Barbara Paul and Johanna Schaffer (Bielefeld: transcript, 2009), pp. 211-22.

7 The impossibility of closure is not reducible to a linguistic phenomenon, if one understands subject constitution as a discursive process that integrates material and semiotic with affective and psycho-sexual moments; cf. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994); Silvia Pritsch, *Rhetorik*

struct society, provide provisional closures to these ongoing transformations. Therefore, doing politics is described as taking ‘decisions under conditions of undecidability’,<sup>8</sup> where ‘undecidability’ names the effect of the impossibility of closure, which undermines assuring foundations (of knowledge, truth, facticity, faith) that could legitimize the decision.

One cannot avoid taking decisions. And one cannot circumvent undecidability, except by creating artificial closures, that is, by relying on phantasmatic, supposedly coherent, and stable identities. Yet, accepting that one has to take decisions under conditions of undecidability is promising, in that it means opening up for potentiality and affirming tension as a constitutive moment of doing politics. A political act, then, turns the potentiality of tension into non-necessary, contingent actuality – but this contingent actuality is only the condition for further decisions taken under conditions of undecidability.<sup>9</sup> The fact that decisions have to be taken under conditions of undecidability and that taking decisions does not undermine undecidability can be understood as the constitutive paradox of the political.<sup>10</sup>

In their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau/Mouffe propose the term antagonism (in the singular) for designating the impossibility of closure which effects the undecidability under which decisions are to be taken. They distinguish antagonism from social antagonisms (in the plural), which are conditions and effects of doing politics. Thus, antagonism in Laclau/Mouffe is not the same as opposition or dialectical contradiction, but incorporates the poststructuralist critique of identity logic. They explain that in the case of oppositions and contradic-

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*des Subjekts: Zur textuellen Konstruktion des Subjekts in feministischen und anderen postmodernen Diskursen* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2008).

8 Cf. Laclau/Mouffe, *Hegemony*; Jacques Derrida, ‘Force of Law: “The Mystical Foundation of Authority”’ [1990], in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. by Drucilla Cornell (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 3-67; Diane Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. en Abyme* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

9 Derrida, ‘Force of Law’; Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000).

10 Cf. Urs Stäheli, ‘Politik der Entparadoxisierung’, in *Das Undarstellbare der Politik: Zur Hegemonietheorie Ernesto Laclaus*, ed. by Oliver Marchert (Wien: Turia + Kant, 1998), pp. 52-66; Andreas Reckwitz, *Subjekt* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2008); Lummerding, ‘Surplus Enjoyment’.

tions 'A is fully A [...]. But in the case of antagonism, we are confronted with a different situation: [...] The relation arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution'.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, in Laclau/Mouffe the antagonism relies on a binary logic of A/non-A and the mechanism of exclusion.<sup>12</sup> Even if all closures and exclusions are always only provisional, even if no positivity is preconditioned and no fullness can ever be achieved, what is lacking in their account is the possibility of (political) articulations that produce meaning and enter the field of cultural representation and significations via figures of ambiguity, aporia and paradox or via processes of equivocation, polysemic excess, or subversion of logic.

At the beginning of the video *Sometimes You Fight For the World, Sometimes You Fight For Yourself* a binary gender differentiation is introduced visually and acoustically: Their voices differ in pitch and the camera presents the first figure in partial profile of the face, focusing on the downcast eye, showing delicate skin and a curl, while the other figure is introduced through the camera turning slowly upwards from tie and shirt to the bearded face. As I already suggested and will further elaborate, the video by no means isolates gender relations as a single issue but hints at the complex intertwinement of various modes of social differentiation, complicating the interests, desires, and fights put into play. Thanks to the opening shot of luscious plants, which in combination with the term 'normal love' activates the cliché of the erotic exotic, the beholder is invited to read the encounter as an encounter between an indigenous women and a white man, a reading further supported by their contrast of black versus blond hair, a slight difference in skin colour, and clothing: from the little one can see of 'abstract female's' clothes in the beginning, they appear to be flamboyantly decorated by jewellery.

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11 Laclau/Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. 125.

12 In his latest book *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), Ernesto Laclau reworks the concept of antagonism in order to acknowledge the heterogeneity of political forces. Not all of these forces are always already part of hegemonic struggles, but they may nevertheless participate in the political or, more radically, Laclau now concludes: 'without heterogeneity there would be no antagonism either'. Heterogeneity now takes on the function of the constitutive outside of the antagonism without being condemned to 'radical exclusion' (p. 149).

'Herstory' comes into play when the one and only standard shot/reverse shot of the video follows the patterns of heterosexualized exotic othering and fetishization, but breaks them immediately. She looks up at him, he looks down on her and clicks his tongue salaciously. She still looks up at him, but then starts singing her song. With her sharp analysis of the role of commercialization and media technology in creating the hypocrisy of 'romantic love' she rejects not only the role of the passive feminine object of desire but also the cliché of the indigenous woman praised as 'authentic' when she is uneducated and represents 'pure, unalienated nature'. Until this point the narration can be read as a simple antagonism. Yet what happens when the scene ironically disturbs the distribution of gendered traces? When acting as a political subject, the figure of the indigenous woman develops 'masculine traces', shows a fuzzy beard and turns out to be wearing a black leather jacket, now looking much like a butch dyke. The camera supports this transformation into an agent by ending the shot/reverse shot with a close up, which portrays her frontally. Taking into account the camera angle, this shot cannot represent his point of view of her, and thus breaks his objectifying power. Instead, the camera creates a relationship between her and the viewer, thus triangulating the desiring relation – a point I will further elaborate on later. Even though the 'abstract female' still looks up when singing her song, her gaze is no longer directed at him; rather it seems as if she is having a political vision.

When the 'abstract male' reappears in the scene he also looks frontally into the camera, presented, like her, in close-up. In replying to her song he claims the positions of subjecthood and ownership: 'I own you, you don't own me. This is a love song.' Here, the scene is ruled by what one could call an ironic miscast: his trashy look, greasy and scraggy hair, and the campy 70s clothing subvert the capitalist subjecthood. Furthermore, he looks rather displaced in the wilderness of nature, indeed, more like a pimp fetishizing the exotic than the embodiment of the colonizer. As much as she has turned into a butch dyke, he turns into a drag king. The heterosexual constellation is not abolished, but gender ambiguity and hyperbolic identities unsettle its naturalized authenticity. Heterosexual drag provides space for gay, lesbian and transgender positions.



The aesthetic strategies of the video include un-disambiguation and equivocation (*VerUneindeutigung*):<sup>13</sup> Categorizations become blurred, the protagonists undergo unexpected transformations, subject and object status shifts, and it becomes undecidable as to who fetishizes and who is being fetishized. Nature turns out to be the effect of naturalization – a social construct, a visual illusion: the beholder, spotting metal signs in between the plants, discovers that the exotic natural voluptuousness is the cultivated product of a botanical garden. Concerning relations of desire and political conflict, it is impossible to tell whether it is gender or ethnicity that fuels the dynamic. In fact, they function inseparably. In spite of the conflict's antagonistic logic no simple binary opposition can be detected. Since ethnicity has to be deduced from the spatio-discursive context and the relational setting, it shifts according to the various foci on jungle blossoms or desert cacti or on colonial classificatory systems. Furthermore it complexly interacts with the gender ambiguity, which simultaneously suggests heterosexual (male/female), lesbian (femme/butch, butch/king) or gay male (king/king) constellations as well as their overlaps and mutations.

Taking into account these aesthetic means and strategies, it does not seem to be the case that they deploy antagonism in order to intervene into hegemonic power relations. The description of antagonism Laclau/Mouffe provide does not fit here at all:

But in any case, and whatever the political orientation through which the antagonism crystallizes [...], *the form of the antagonism as such* is identical in all cases. That is to say, it always consists in the construction of a social identity – of overdetermined subject positions – on the basis of the

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13 Cf. Antke Engel, *Wider die Eindeutigkeit: Sexualität und Geschlecht im Fokus queerer Politik der Repräsentation* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2002). A queer strategy of equivocation (*VerUneindeutigung*) intervenes into regimes of 'normality' and processes of normalization by revealing ambiguity where a single truth is claimed, where a clear line is drawn, or an entity is stabilized. It functions as an answer to the critique of identity politics as it subverts the principle of identity. Therefore a queer strategy of equivocation favours representations and practices, which resist being pinned down to a single meaning, but materialize the processes of the construction of realities and the conditions of power at work in these processes.

equivalence between a set of elements or values which expel or externalize those others to which they are opposed.<sup>14</sup>

Polysemy and ambiguity do not allow the creation of a disambiguated relationship between the two protagonists or a definite interpretation of the (post-)colonial or (hetero-)sexist conditions of their existence. If anything, one could try to argue that an antagonistic politicization is achieved through the way the beholder judges the whole scenario as condemnable from a queer-feminist, anti-racist and anti-capitalist perspective. Yet, this reading is not convincing if one takes into account the scenes that follow.

The white colonizing 'abstract male', unsuccessful in conquering her\* with his\* claims to ownership,<sup>15</sup> starts strolling through 'the jungle', finds a space denominated 'America' and lies down on his\* back on a bed of moss close to a goldfish pond. Occupying this terrain of voluptuous nature and stroking gently the moss and stone at first appears as a masculinist, colonial gesture that effeminizes nature. But when his\* hand slowly wanders down his\* own chest and belly, caressing him\*self with an enchanted, oblivious look, the scene becomes auto-erotic. It becomes even more ambiguous since his\* 'female' breasts are displayed, but the viewer has no chance to decide whether the passive exposure is organized by 'male' or 'female' traces. In any case, the boastful behaviour is gone and when the camera reopens the erotic constellation – not by a shot/reverse shot, but by wandering around, encountering her\* peering through the leaves and possibly watching him\* – the transgender\* person turns out to be a pretty likable colonizer. Yet no harmonizing happy end takes place, and also the classical open end is foreclosed: a potential desire of the beholder to imagine a loving encounter between the protagonists is subverted by the camera avoiding shot/reverse shot connections, and by inviting the viewer into the scenario.

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14 Laclau/Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. 165.

15 The \* is used in the context of transgender activism and queer linguistics as a sign that inserts a hesitation or an ambivalence into a disambiguated gender designation that relies on the binary sex/gender norm; cf. Persson Perry Baumgartinger, 'Geschlechtergerechte Sprache? Über queere widerständige Strategien gegen diskriminierenden Sprachalltag', in *Initiative Minderheiten* (2007) <[http://minderheiten.at/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=29&Itemid=33%23Baumgartinger#Baumgartinger](http://minderheiten.at/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=29&Itemid=33%23Baumgartinger#Baumgartinger)> [accessed 16 May 2010].

From the moment when ‘abstract female’ looks frontally into the camera, the beholder is no longer merely the judge of the song contest or of their performance in a wider sense. In fact, s/he may no longer be judging at all, but is rather involved in a scenario that undermines any safe, external voyeuristic position. Indeed, the beholder finds her\_himself being part of the postcolonial setting and implicated in negotiations over colonial and patriarchal legacies. Frontal view and the dislocation of internal viewing angles effect a triangulation which includes the beholder in the desiring scenario: not simply identifying with one or the other, or projecting her\_his own wishes, or fantasizing about various potential relations, the beholder is given over to the shifting dynamics of ambiguity. In order to further elaborate on how a queering of desire defines the politics of the video as it disrupts a subject-object opposition and contributes to the de-centring of the viewer’s position, I will now turn to queer theories of desire and explain how desire can be understood as being built upon a constitutive paradox. Later on I will then connect that to some abstract considerations of a queer politics of paradox.

#### DESIRE AS CONSTITUTIVE MOMENT IN POLITICS

Queer Theory proposes to understand desire not solely as a category of subjectivity, of sexual practices or intimate relations, but as productive in the social and of the social – including macro-political processes and institutions.<sup>16</sup> ‘Heteronormativity’ functions as an analytical and critical term in queer theory, whereas queer theory’s notion of ‘desire’ provides for re-articulations of heteronormativity. Feminist and queer approaches to desire open up an anticipatory and transformative dimension by challenging the heterosexual norm and the premise of binary gender difference as well as subverting the complementary, hierarchical divide of subject and object of desire. Re-readings of psychoanalytic theories sug-

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16 Cf. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Lauretis, *Practice of Love*; Elspeth Probyn, *Outside Belongings* (London: Routledge, 1996); Antke Engel, ‘Traveling Images: Desire as Movement – Desire as Method’, in *Out Here: Local and International Perspectives in Queer Studies*, ed. by Tomasz Basiuk, Dominika Ferens, and Tomasz Sikora (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007), pp. 13-24.

gest that one may understand desire as taking place in shared fantasy scenarios where positions of subject and object are no longer distinguishable,<sup>17</sup> or they de-centre the subject by evoking not only the ‘desire of the Other’<sup>18</sup> but the ‘desire of the Other of the Other’.<sup>19</sup> The latter move is interesting for considerations of queer politics because it turns the uncontrollable affectedness by the ‘Other of the Other’ from a psychic into a social experience. Furthermore, theorists like Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn,<sup>20</sup> who take up Deleuze/Guattari’s understanding of desire as productivity and movement,<sup>21</sup> transfer desire into a concept for socio-political analysis, while simultaneously feeding the political with a sexual understanding of desire.<sup>22</sup> Although Probyn’s considerations in *Outside Belongings* would also provide a very interesting framework for reading *Sometimes You Fight For the World, Sometimes You Fight For Yourself* I will here concentrate on what could be called Judith Butler’s post-Lacanian queer theory of desire because it connects to the question of paradox.

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17 Cf. Lauretis, *Practice of Love*.

18 Cf. Jacques Lacan, ‘The Meaning of the Phallus’ [1958], in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the ‘école freudienne’*, ed. by Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York / London: Norton, 1985), pp. 74-85.

19 Cf. Judith Butler, ‘Longing for Recognition’, in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 131-51.

20 Cf. Elizabeth Grosz, ‘Refiguring Lesbian Desire’, in *The Lesbian Postmodern*, ed. by Laura Doan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 67-84; Probyn, *Outside Belongings*.

21 Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia 1* [1972], trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Continuum, 2004).

22 An understanding of desire as sexual stands in contrast to approaches in political philosophy that neutralize desire e.g. as the desire for recognition (Hegel), the will to power (Nietzsche), or the desire to secure one’s existence (Spinoza). Yet, in twentieth-century theorizing sexualized desire harmonizes with psychoanalytic, discursive, constructivist, and deconstructive approaches that present sexuality as an interface between subjectivity and sociality, most notably Sigmund Freud and Michel Foucault, who are taken up in various ways for rethinking the connection between sexuality and the political (Freudo-Marxism, Critical Theory, feminist and queer theory).

How does paradox articulate itself in desire? 'Desire is the desire of the Other'.<sup>23</sup> This statement by Jacques Lacan is polysemic and equivocating: is the Other desiring or desired? And if the Other is desired, do I desire the Other itself or its desire, which might be the other/Other desiring me.<sup>24</sup> From Lacan's point of view the other/Other is permanently shifting between being the subject and being the object. This can be seen as yet another paradox, which cannot be reduced to one side or the other. In *Undoing Gender* Judith Butler translates this situation into the proposition that concerning desire one has to take into account that the Other is shifting between the social or concrete Other (who desires and/or talks back), my fantasy of the Other (a projection, perhaps, representing the symbolic order), and the ek-static Other (who is not in control of her/himself, but a product of the history of her/his relationships with others).

Butler refines her psychoanalytic reading of Lacan<sup>25</sup> through deconstructively taking up Jessica Benjamin's theory of inter-subjectivity.<sup>26</sup> Benjamin's work is interesting for Butler, because Benjamin insists that we can have multiple, even contradictory identifications simultaneously,

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23 Jacques Lacan, cited by Butler's 'Longing for Recognition', p. 137. Here she also writes: 'When Jean Hyppolite introduces the notion of 'the desire of desire' in his commentary on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he means to suggest not only that desire seeks its own renewal (a Spinozistic claim), but that it also seeks to be the object of desire for the Other. When Lacan rephrases this formulation of Hyppolite, he enters the genitive in order to produce an equivocation' (ibid.).

24 In Lacan's framework one has to differentiate between 'the Other' (irreducible otherness, or the Other as symbolic order) and 'the other' (as another subject and screen of projection). Yet, when Butler writes about 'the Other of the Other' ('Longing for Recognition', p. 135) she subverts exactly this differentiation and suggests a) that there is (an) 'Other' of the symbolic order (questioning the latter's monolithic status) and b) that 'the other' is always also 'the Other', this is, irreducible otherness. I take up Butler's version of consistently using the capital O in writing of 'the Other', which I see as a way of reminding the reader of the tensions between the dimensions of being social other, fantasized other, screen of projection, and symbolic figure. Sometimes, when referring to the concrete Other Butler simply uses the term 'another'.

25 Cf. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.

26 Jessica Benjamin, *The Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

and that identification and desire are not mutually exclusive processes, as we can also identify with what or whom we desire.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the state of over-inclusiveness, that is, of experiencing myself as part of the other and/or the other as part of myself, is not limited to pre-oedipal childhood phases but recurrent in adult life. The challenge for Benjamin (and for Butler taking this as a starting point for a queer reading of psychoanalysis) is to develop practices that answer to multiple identifications and over-inclusiveness neither with propagating a singular, coherent identity, nor with limited desires fitting to this identity. In order to achieve this, Benjamin proposes embracing aggression and negation as processes potentially leading to recognition or, even stronger, suggests that there will be no recognition that does not go through negation.<sup>28</sup> The inter-subjective dynamic involving all protagonists as active figures demands that there is not only a figure claiming self-assertion through negation, but also an addressee of the aggression who ‘survives’ the negation.<sup>29</sup> Thus, for Benjamin, upholding a tension between negation and recognition is of vital importance for processes of inter-subjectivity. In order to highlight that neither negation nor recognition are processes which are one-dimensionally exerted from one onto the other, I suggest talking about the paradoxical tension of ‘self-assertiveness’ and ‘relatedness’,<sup>30</sup> where the former simultaneously contains the negation *and* survival of the other’s destructiveness, while the latter means simultaneously ‘giving oneself over to the other’ (Butler) *and* ‘pocketing’ (incorporating) the other. Upholding the tension and acting artfully on the threshold of self-assertiveness and relatedness leads to practices of desire, where desire is not something evolving from a self-contained subject directed to an outside object. Rather, desire is seen as an interrelational and fantasy-based process, which intertwines self and other, while keeping up double or multiple ambiguities of aggression and adhesion. This latter moment can be understood as the constitutive paradox of desire: recognition of the other has to be developed out of the circular dynamic that evolves from the continuous tension between self-assertiveness and relatedness.

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27 Ibid., pp. 66-74.

28 Ibid., p. 96.

29 Ibid., p. 98.

30 ‘Self-assertiveness’ and ‘relatedness’ substitute for the psychoanalytic terms ‘omnipotence’ and ‘contact’ used by Benjamin.

Such a non-symbiotic intertwining of self and other is reached by introducing an understanding of ‘triangulation’ as a process that neither depends on the concrete father nor on the monolithic phallus,<sup>31</sup> but on the abstract and open concept of ‘the third’ entering a relationship previously defined by identification. The third is a representation of ‘a double-sided perspective, [a representation that] maintains a space between self and other’.<sup>32</sup> In psychoanalytic thinking, triangulation is a decisive moment of desire. Or, to put it differently: triangulation is the moment when difference is entering into identificatory forms of love – when the Other is no longer the one who satisfies my needs but the one who fuels my wishes.

Butler takes up this difference between gratification of needs and fulfilment of wishes from Jean Laplanche/Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, who explain that the formation of desire and the formation of sexed and gendered subjectivity depend on fantasy.<sup>33</sup> Sexuality and fantasy come into existence when the gratification of need is postponed and translated into the fulfilment of desire; when the wish shifts from its real object to a sign/fantasy, which stands in for the object. The wish, ‘disengaged from any natural object, moves into the field of fantasy and by that very fact becomes sexuality’.<sup>34</sup> This is a decisively denaturalized understanding of desire, and therefore very attractive for queer theory. It is not the object (respectively, subject) effecting desire, but a fantasy. And fantasy itself is not an a-historical, anthropological faculty, but develops simultaneously with sexuality in an interwoven process.

In order to capture this understanding of desire based on fantasy Butler formulates that it is not simply the Other, but ‘the Other of the

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31 In the Oedipal model it is the father who promises liberation from a supposedly symbiotic relation between mother and child. By evoking the threat of castration (to the son) or the promise of a child from another man (to the daughter) the father declares the heterosexual patriarchal law and teaches the socially acceptable forms of desire. Instead of this patriarchal narration it is also possible to provide a structural understanding of triangulation: Benjamin offers the neutral term of ‘the third’, which introduces a moment of difference into relations of identification.

32 Ibid., p. 25.

33 Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, ‘Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality’, in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. by Victor Burgin et al. (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 5-34.

34 Ibid., p. 25. See also Lauretis, *Practice of Love*, pp. 81-85.

Other', which or who triggers my desire. Taking up Benjamin's term of 'the third' she writes: 'The third is not the concrete Other, who solicits desire, but the Other of the Other who (or which) engages, motivates, and exceeds a relation of desire at the same time that it constitutes it essentially.'<sup>35</sup> As Butler insists, things become even more difficult, since first of all it might also be me, an ek-static self or 'the Other of myself' who desires.<sup>36</sup> And secondly, the concrete Other would then not be out of the game and desire would not be reducible to fantasy, as it is the concrete social Other who embodies the fantasy, who functions as a screen for the projection of fantasies. This is how misunderstanding, conflict, abuse, and violence become part of the picture. Butler is most sceptical about Benjamin's euphemizing metaphor that the third might be 'the music to which both partners attune'.<sup>37</sup> She insists that concerning desire one has to take into account that the Other is permanently shifting between the social Other (who desires and/or talks back), my fantasy of the Other (a projection), and the ek-static Other (who is not in control of her\_himself, but a product of the history of her\_his relationships with others). In other words, one can never rely on a smooth, coherent image of the Other in practices of sex, and love, and desiring enactments, but one always acts under conditions of undecidability:<sup>38</sup> I address my fantasy in the social Other. Or I rework my fantasy, because the social other subverts my projection. I agree to become the other's fantasy. Or I start to rebel in the gap between social and phantasmatic being. This, Butler says, subverts an understanding of desire as being dyadic and opens up possibilities of 'thinking gender beyond complementarity and reducing the risk of heterosexist bias implied by the doctrine of complementarity'.<sup>39</sup>

If we take up these considerations on desire as being built on a triangulation that consists of an imagination fuelled by desire (fantasy), we can understand the productive role of paradox. Paradoxes open up space for the Other of the Other, exactly because it hinders the development of an opposition: rather than defining and stabilizing entities,

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35 Butler, 'Longing for Recognition', p. 135.

36 Ibid., pp. 149-51.

37 Ibid., p. 135.

38 'The term "queer" gained currency precisely to address such moments of productive undecidability' (ibid., p. 142).

39 Ibid., p. 135.



which could be opposed, it develops a circular dynamic of incompatibilities, which are nevertheless unavoidably linked to the other. Thanks to the paradox, these relations become understandable as a relation of tension, even as an agonistic relation. Thus, desire is not a harmonious togetherness, but can be analysed for the power relations organizing it. It is exactly because it introduces an openness, a longing, a passion for the Other of the Other, but simultaneously carries inherent power relations and legacies, that this kind of queered desire becomes a starting point for rethinking the political.

The video *Sometimes You Fight For the World, Sometimes You Fight For Yourself* ends in undecidability and thus, an open future and an invitation to agency. In the end one records simultaneously failure and success, which are furthermore ambiguously intertwined and depend on situated knowledges and perspectives: the failure of the 'colonizer', who strands in imposing his tenure (claim to ownership), is simultaneously the success of breaking the hegemony of a (post-)colonial racist and sexist regime. The success of the 'indigenous' gaining political agency, as well as the success of introducing transgender visibility and subverting heteronormativity are simultaneously the failure of initiating a desiring relationship between the protagonists. However, this failure might also be read as a successful opening up of space for other versions of desire, neither built upon the romantic fantasy nor bound to the couple. The final shot of ant and blossom and bird twitter might be the image that turns the triangulation into the open future of potentiality – or into a 'line of flight'.<sup>40</sup>

In the video, desire is not foreclosed or suspended but takes place through triangulation. Yet, the viewer is not simply invited to enter the desiring scenario, but the desiring scenario is a stage for the Other of the Other. The video does not address the viewer in a disambiguated, clearly defined spectator position, but rather keeps changing and shifting this position. For this reason, the protagonists cannot be reduced to objects of the voyeuristic gaze of the beholder. Rather, both of them claim an erotic subject position, actively entering the stage as objects for the gaze – thus inhabiting the paradox of self-assertiveness and relatedness towards the beholder. This kind of activity produces the viewer's position that longs to recognize the figures as erotic subjectivities, while being her\_himself continuously dislocated in the relationship. As

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40 Cf. Deleuze/Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*.

the viewer is following the transformation process of the two protagonists, her\_his positioning also experiences a continuous reconfiguration, which is fuelled by the interweaving of Others as social others in historical relations of dominations, desiring fantasies of Otherness, and the Other of myself asking for recognition. Desire and politics are thus inseparably joined. This is why I would like to argue that the constitutive paradox of the political and the constitutive paradox of desire are connected in a queer politics of paradox.

## POLITICS OF PARADOX

Traditional political theory is most sceptical about paradoxes, seeing them as states of inauthenticity or alienation, which have either to be politicized by disclosing the contradiction behind the paradox, or have to be dissolved to one side or the other, creating a state of harmony or hegemony, that is, of social integration. It is only recently that paradoxes have found some attention at least as an analytical tool that provides for understanding the dynamics of neoliberal socio-economic transformations,<sup>41</sup> but still lacking is an acknowledgment of the political potential of paradoxes.<sup>42</sup> Taking into account the former considerations on desire I would like to promote paradoxes against their dismissal in traditional political theory.

The figure of paradox provides for a specific mode of thinking tension, namely tension as a circular dynamic driven by the prevalent simultaneity of incompatible elements, rather than tension as a precariously stabilized linear constellation between two poles. A paradox puts divergent or incompatible elements in a relation that can be equally described as ‘neither/nor’ and ‘as well as’, thus inscribing a tension of ‘reconciled irreconcilability’ that is inextricable (*unauflösbar*). As such a paradox is a dynamic, anti-identitarian, and agonistic mode of tension.<sup>43</sup> This stands in contrast to thinking of tension as ‘contradiction’, which

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41 Cf. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000); Wendy Brown, ‘Suffering Rights as Paradoxes’, *Constellations*, 7.2 (2000), pp. 230-41; *Befreiung aus der Mündigkeit: Paradoxien des gegenwärtigen Kapitalismus*, ed. by Axel Honneth (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2002); Stäheli, *Politik der Entparadoxisierung*.

42 Engel, *Bilder von Sexualität und Ökonomie*.

43 Ibid.

suggests oppositions that cannot exist simultaneously, but occupy clearly separate positions. It also differs from ‘ambiguities’, which are continuously shifting perspectives, unfixable and characterized by polysemy, while a paradox can still be defined by certain elements, which inspire the agonistic dynamic. Therefore, I suggest understanding paradox as an intermediate figure that can be either antagonized into a contradiction or relativized into ambiguity, or taken as a thoroughly anti-identitarian figure in its own right. Paradox, contradiction, and ambiguity do not need to be played out against each other. Rather, one can ask about their specific political usages for certain purposes, and can strategically apply the translatability between them.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, for politics interested in destabilizing identitarian closures and complicating theories of power, domination, and hegemony built around simple antagonisms, it is promising to introduce paradoxes into political analysis.

This idea is supported by J. Simon Hutta in his analysis of conflicting political strategies of *LGBT* (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) activism in Brazil. Hutta writes:

In making productive use of the tensions between the divergent elements they keep together, paradoxes may effect the lively spilling over and cross-fertilization of heterogeneous intentions, desires and articulations on different – ‘molar’ and ‘molecular’, ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ – levels.<sup>45</sup>

When Hutta proposes the concept of ‘paradoxical publicness’, an understanding of publicness open for heterogeneous, unexpected articulations and ‘imperceptible becomings’, he points out that introducing the figure of paradox allows the extension of perspective beyond a simple opposition of hegemonic publics and counterpublics. Hutta draws the connection to Gilles Deleuze who praises paradoxes for not being contradictory, but allowing us ‘to be present at the genesis of the contradiction’.<sup>46</sup> This means Deleuze backs the idea that paradoxes may be translated into contradiction, although his concern with *The Logic of Sense* is exactly to widen the idea of meaning production beyond identitarian

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44 Ibid., pp. 117-27.

45 J. Simon Hutta, ‘Paradoxical Publicness: Becoming-Imperceptible with the Brazilian LGBT Movement’, in *Rethinking the Public: Innovations in Research, Theory and Policy*, ed. by Janet Newman, Clive Barnett, and Nick Mahony (Bristol: Policy Press, 2010), pp. 143-61 (p. 152).

46 Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, p. 86; quoted by Hutta, p. 152.

logics: 'The paradoxes of signification are essentially that of the *abnormal set* (which is included as a member or which includes members of different types) and that of the *rebel element* (which forms part of a set whose existence presupposes and belongs to two sub-sets which it determines).'<sup>47</sup>

Thus the figure of paradox seems to be the ideal candidate for queer politics because it not only disrupts rigid gender identities and normative desires, but also provides an aesthetic figure for developing representations of difference that do not follow the identity principle. Instead of dismissing them as unintelligible, such cultural and often artistic representations may launch political articulations, opposing the idea that political agency is reserved to those already recognized as political subjects. Queer politics of paradox make use of the pleasure in paradoxes and parasitically inhabit neoliberal appellations of individualized difference and processes of projective integration.<sup>48</sup> Yet in destabilizing rigid identity constructions and binary oppositions they deploy paradox also as a rhetorical and aesthetic figure that is anti-identitarian as well as thoroughly agonistic: the paradox points out what is incompatible and, thanks to the paradoxical simultaneity of 'reconciled irrecconcilability' creates an ongoing struggle. Transferred into politics, such agonistic struggles refer to conflicts between incompatible perspectives, which are nevertheless presented as unavoidably linked to each other.<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, from this point of view incompatible perspectives do not have to be turned into distinct, consistent and unambiguous positions in themselves. Yet even though agonistic struggles captured by paradox are not reducible to binary oppositions, the politics of paradox also do not reside in neutrality or relativism. They may either relate to concrete political controversies or quote many different kinds of socio-historical relations of domination, and they may also activate the destabilizing function of paradoxes in order to intervene into discursive constructions of difference. Therefore, paradoxes do not have to be read as symptoms of de-politicization.

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47 Ibid., pp. 86-87.

48 Engel, *Bilder von Sexualität und Ökonomie*.

49 In my recent book *Bilder von Sexualität und Ökonomie* (Images of Sexuality and Economy) I have outlined how the queer politics of paradox may become subversive interventions into neoliberalism, exactly because neoliberal discourses make use of paradoxical appellations, which function as catalysts for activating the individual's capacities to make impossible ends meet.



Fig. 5-6. Stills from *Sometimes You Fight For the World, Sometimes You Fight For Yourself* (Boudry/Lorenz 2004).

#### THE PARADOX OF LOVE

The video *Sometimes You Fight For the World, Sometimes You Fight For Yourself* is built upon a paradox: on the one hand it shatters the discourse of love as anthropologically universal by foregrounding how love is implicated in historical relations of domination. The idea of love as a timeless, worldwide, pre-discursive affect is presented as a media-made fantasy. On the other hand it makes use of exactly the claim to universality in order to subvert love's preoccupation with a binary sexual difference. According to the video it is very possible to let the drama of heterosexual love be told by transgender figures, or, to put it another way, to have trans figures inhabit the hetero-sexualized discourse of love. This contradictory double movement that characterizes the video's political strategy is what I conceive as a 'queer politics of paradox'. I understand it as a specific form of what Judith Butler calls a politics of subversion: political strategies working from within a hegemonic system of norms in order to trouble and undermine it through repetition and exposure; or, as Samuel Chambers and Terrell Carver write in support of Butler's position:

Subversion must be a political project of erosion, one that works on norms from the inside, breaking them down not through external challenge but through an internal repetition that weakens them. A subversive politics thus becomes a subtle politics, one that requires patient, repeated, local action.<sup>50</sup>

The video shows that paradox works closely together with ambiguity. It does not need stable identity positions or entities, but also produces tensions between ambiguous figures, allowing for a complex simultaneity of options and potentialities. Fathoming the possibilities in paradoxes to subvert totalizing logics and to open up the field for pluralities, Christoph Holzhey suggests that paradoxes allow consideration of ‘how categorizations based on different criteria relate to each other, and how a simple opposition becomes complicated through the coexistence of different perspectives that establish different alliances and oppositions’.<sup>51</sup> Referring to the video one could, as suggested earlier, point out that the simple opposition of male and female becomes complicated through the perspectives of ownership, of (post-)colonial appropriation, and agency. Or, one could point out that the coexistence of a perspective aiming at transgender visibility and a perspective of challenging heterosexual romantic love establish an alliance of a femme dyke and a drag king. Together they perform the simple opposition of male and female in the form of a more complex version of ethnicized gender in order to subvert racism, sexism, classism, and heteronormativity simultaneously. Or, one could also suggest that drag desire problematically appropriates orientalism and hetero-romance, as such standing in opposition to postcolonial and feminist critique and still failing the idealized desiring relation. Holzhey explicitly draws the link between paradox and desire, suggesting that ‘delectic difference’ – ‘the possibility of diverse organizations of pleasure’<sup>52</sup> – describes desire much better than a naturalizing ‘sexual difference’ or an understanding of desire as lack, bound to a fantasy of homogeneity and wholeness. Accordingly, it is for Holzhey the paradoxical structure of masochistic desire, which finds pleasure in pain,

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50 Samuel Chambers and Terrell Carver, *Judith Butler and Political Theory: Troubling Politics* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 142.

51 Christoph F. E. Holzhey, *Paradoxical Pleasures in Aesthetics: Masophobia, Sexual Difference, and E.T.A. Hoffmann’s Kater Murr* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 2002), p. 32.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 381.

that best disrupts the appropriating and totalizing logic of the sovereign subject.

It would certainly be interesting to consider whether masochistic desire in Holzhey's sense would enable an encounter of the video's protagonists – and whether this would also provide a chance for reworking the legacies of relations of domination virulent for their potential encounters.<sup>53</sup> However, *Sometimes You Fight For the World, Sometimes You Fight For Yourself* does not follow this line. Instead, it initiates the paradoxical appropriation and rejection of the discourse of universal love, at this stepping directly into politicization. Insofar as female and male are presented as 'abstract', all their individual traces are declared irrelevant. On the one hand, this affirms the universal discourse. On the other hand, universalization functions here less as normalization than as an invitation to dissident genders: 'abstract female' and 'abstract male' appear on stage as transgender or gender bending figures. Desiring relations can no longer be decoded easily as homo- or heterosexual. Simultaneously, and these contradictory moves are played off against each other, the video exhibits a warning: 'Feel free to claim universal love – but this also means that you become part of a historical discourse that supports relations of appropriation and exploitation as well as hypocrisy.'

'Normal' as in 'normal love' claims a space for transgender and trans-desire, but also points out the social constructedness of love, historicizes the presumably universal discourse, and asks: What is understood as 'normal', at which time, under which conditions?<sup>54</sup> Thus the politics of the video are neither defined by social integration or emancipatory discourses that are built upon identities, nor do they aim at

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53 The chapter 'Die Widersprüche der Paradoxien' (in Engel, *Bilder von Sexualität und Ökonomie*) provides a reading of an artwork by Viennese artist Ines Doujak, which, indeed, supports this idea.

54 This is a classical question of Queer Theory, if we follow Michael Warner, who writes in the introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* that the term heteronormativity opens up a perspective that understands sexuality as a category of social critique not restricted to subjectivity and intimacy, but to 'a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal' (Michael Warner, 'Introduction', in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. by Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. vii-xxxi (p. xxvi)). Later Warner adds a book entitled *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

establishing a queer mode of love. Rather, the video confronts the relations of domination and suppression and incites one to think about the conditions and possibilities of intervening transformation. Thus, the title of the video might be understood programmatically – while producing yet another ambiguity: do fighting for oneself and fighting for the world easily go together if only they are guaranteed their specific time slots? Is there an incompatibility between these aims? ‘Sometimes you fight for the world, sometimes you fight for yourself’. Thanks to the title of the video and the lyrics of the songs, the love discourse is placed in the context of political struggles and connected to questions of justice: how are love and capitalism intertwined? How is it possible to make money by selling kitsch that celebrates relations of violent appropriation or submission? Who may claim what kind of properties and tenures they encompass? How can power of definition constitute hierarchical relationships? The lyrics of the songs open up these questions. Yet the concern is not to provide answers, but to create a situation where the beholder experiences these questions in their political urgency.

In experiencing paradoxes one finds oneself confronted with the poststructuralist understanding of the political. Upholding paradox rather than turning it into an antagonism or cutting its agonistic character by translating it into ambiguity, effects a situation where the beholder is confronted with the challenge of making decisions under conditions of undecidability. There is no safe grounding of truth that defines and rationalizes the decisions, but only relative and contextual power/knowledge. The political is not pre-defined, decisions must be taken – and cannot not be taken.

In this context, hegemony could be understood as a state of tension, a balance of forces at the edge of turning into conflict, yet temporarily resolved into consensus. However, hegemonic consensus is not the product of radical democratic participation or negotiations under equal conditions, but consists of agreement to relations of inequality and domination; it demands in different and differentiating ways the agreement to one’s own subordination. Thus, one could say that hegemony names the pacification of conflicts into tender tensions. From this point of view, stating an antagonism is a way of re-dynamizing the provisionally stabilized political field by turning tension into conflict. This can clearly be understood as politicization, explicating diverging interests and desires and the relations of power and domination that organize their presumably consensual, but unequal and hierarchical relationships.



But in order to effect this politicization, disambiguated political positions are defined, which exclude everything that disrupts the formulation of a clear-cut contradiction between them. Therefore, in this article I have developed an argument in favour of paradox as another way of dynamizing tension, of challenging the relations of power and domination inherent to the hegemonic compromise, and, maybe, of politicizing tension itself rather than claiming that antagonism is holding the monopoly of the political. Queer politics of paradox make use of the pleasure in paradoxes and parasitically inhabit hegemonic orders. More than that, paradox can also be understood as a form of desiring tension, since its anti-identitarian and agonistic mode supports the queering of rigid identity constructions and binary oppositions.

Antke Engel, 'Desiring Tension: Towards a Queer Politics of Paradox', in *Tension/Spannung*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey, *Cultural Inquiry*, 1 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2010), pp. 227–50 <[https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-01\\_12](https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-01_12)>

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