

Who's Afraid of Gender?

A conversation with Judith Butler on Anxieties, Alliances Across Differences and Hope for the Future

Dorthe Staunæs og Cecilie Nørgaard.¹

Dorthe Staunæs, professor at the Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6554-6632>, and Dorthe Staunæs - Aarhus University

Cecilie Nørgaard, MA in Educational Sociology & Gender Studies and CEO at Mangfold, Mangfold

Does gender on the public agenda mean more freedom? What's behind the sharp rise of the anti-gender movement? Why can't we talk about gender without addressing race and colonialism? And how is gender radically intertwined with sustainable ways of living? We sat down with professor and philosopher Judith Butler to talk about their new book *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (2024).

Gender and diversity have moved to the centre of public conversation, challenging old-world stereotypes and unequal conditions. The intensified focus on gender is welcomed enthusiastically by many. Genuine equality is seen as hindered by privileges and barriers, and for these people, gender is not a fixed destiny but a structure that must and can be changed. For them, gender is 'structural' and 'plastic.' For others, this way of thinking about gender, equality, and identity is a serious break with the world they know and the frameworks they are used to. Instead of enthusiasm, they feel confused and anxiously ask: 'Now are we not even allowed to say or do this or that?'

The idea of 'gender as structural and plastic' is apparently so controversial for some that its spread must be stopped with bans, resolutions, and shutdowns. This is certainly the case with Hungary's president, Viktor Orbán, who has

banned gender studies in Hungary. Also in several U.S. states, books on gender are being removed from school libraries. In Denmark, some libraries that have promoted non-stereotypical understandings of gender have faced heavy criticism for 'wokeness.' Meanwhile, the Vatican, with the Bible in hand, has clashed with gender studies' leading figure, Judith Butler, arguing that God alone determines gender. All of these cases are discussed in Butler's latest book, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* We meet Butler online for a conversation about the book and the anxiety gathered around what Butler calls 'anti-gender ideology' and the 'anti-gender fantasy,' but also the hope which Butler's ideas of alliances and radical interconnectedness offer.

Gender as performative

Butler's presence radiates through the screen. Such presence is needed in a time when the freedom project that gender studies was meant to contribute to, has been hit with substantial criticism. The recognition of the anti-gender movement and how it accumulates feelings of fear and anxiety, prompted Butler to write this new book

in an inviting, accessible format for a broader audience.

Dorthe Staunæs (DS): Why was it important for you to write the new book, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* What kinds of concerns did you have?

Judith Butler (JB): Well, for a long time, I was used to fielding academic questions about gender, about the performativity of gender: 'How is gender different from sex? Is gender different from sex? What is meant by performative? What is the theory of social construction? Does gender take leave of the body? What about the materiality of the body?' There was a cluster of questions that would come to me time and again about my early theory on the performativity of gender, which I worked on about 30-35 years ago. Then I realized that there was a political movement against gender. It was mainly right-wing, but there is also a feminist version that was constructing gender as this horrific and destructive power and as something that needed to be cancelled, banned, censored, or overcome. I learned that those who used gender in their social policy analysis or taught gender studies were also coming under attack, as we know from the exit of the Central European University from Budapest, which was perhaps the most traumatic example. But we can name many gender studies programs that have been defunded or de-departmentalized in the last several years as a result of a political movement against them. I know that in Denmark, there have been such proposals and they have been debated in the parliament, and I have followed some of those debates.

DS: We will return to the gender phantasm, the anti-gender movement, and the Danish version of this political movement, but let us first rewind to the performative understanding of gender that you, so to speak, invented.

JB: When I developed the idea of gender as performative in the late 1980s, I was trying to capture something about how we are given a gender. We are assigned a gender, society expects it of

us, and we also have some choice about how to live out that assignment, how to deal with those social expectations. I was trying to take into account two dimensions of gendered life: First, the fact that we are assigned and we are brought up a certain way; we are taught what gender is by how we are treated. Second, at the same time, in the midst of that process, options open for us; certain windows onto freedom emerge. 'Well, I am not going to be that kind of woman,' or 'I am not going to be that kind of man,' or 'I am going to find my own way of being a woman, man,' or 'actually, neither category quite works for me. Maybe there is another vocabulary that is being developed in my community or my culture that allows me to understand myself or live in a more free and less painful way.' So, it was always a way of trying to take into account the way in which the world makes us, and in the course of that process we also, to some degree, make ourselves. Of course, some people think 'oh, Butler thinks you can be anything you want.' Well, no, there are constraints. We are deeply affected by history, society, family, religious institutions. We are formed there. We cannot just throw off our formations as if we are radically free individuals. That process of formation does not exactly happen once or twice. It is ongoing. And as we get older, we start to think about who we are, and what we want to be; we become able to redirect the course of our gendered lives. Freedom appears always under constraint and in historically specific situations. I was trying to capture that ambiguity, but some people would say, 'oh, Butler thinks everything is determined by society and that is the meaning of social construction.' Or others say, 'Butler is a neoliberal or believes in radically free individuals who can do anything.' But the fact is, I was trying to overcome that distinction. Sometimes it worked.

According to Butler, gender does not represent or is not equal to reproductive organs. Gender is an identification category assigned at birth (or when scanning the womb). How we should live the gender we are assigned, is determined by the norms we learn at school, in the workplace, in social media, in culture, and not at least in the

family. Gender is thus a structure that materializes through what we all do. There are norms for doing gender. But norms also change when taken up. One can live different versions of, or alternatives to, the assigned gender. Not without difficulty, and sometimes also with violent consequences. Both fans and critics of the concept of gender may find it difficult to cope with the ambiguity that Butler conveys:

JB: Let us remember that when I wrote *Gender Trouble* (1990), I was speaking to a feminist audience. And feminist theory and radical feminism had introduced gender as an extremely important category way before I wrote *Gender Trouble*. So, Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin in the U.S. context, but also most socialist feminists, used gender to talk about the social meanings of being a woman or a man. The term gender came out of feminism, and Joan W. Scott gave a definitive set of definitions for its use in history. Conceptualizing the gender division of labor was one of the great contributions that socialist feminists made to Marxist and socialist theory, as well as speaking about the gendering of housework. But also, in fundamental feminist claims, like: 'Why would a woman have a right to have an abortion? Should she have that kind of autonomy over her own body?' There were and remain people who say: 'No, the state has an interest in what a woman does with her body' and believe that form of state paternalism is justified. Now, that's a way of defining a woman as non-autonomous. So, that is an instance of the construction of gender: the law against the right to abortion is construing a woman as necessarily in a subordinate position to state paternalism. Now, that formulation is obviously not feminism, and it is not gender identity in any trans sense, and it is certainly not gender performativity. Although women who resist that kind of state control, claiming that they should have that freedom and that right, are saying, among other things: 'Not only do we have that right, but we are autonomous beings.' They are redefining gender. They are redefining gender in the act of making the claim. That is performativity, right? You do not have to leave the gender

that you are assigned at birth to be thinking gender in performative terms. You are redefining a category of what a woman is and should be. The departure from an assignment is performative as well. It is a break that does something. Feminist studies have always been insisting on redefining the category of women so that it clearly expresses freedom, equality, justice. In that sense, performativity has been part of feminism from the very beginning; it is not a departure.

I think what happened with me is that I saw that so many of my feminist colleagues were staying within the framework of marriage, within the framework of heterosexuality, and within the framework of binary gender, and then they went on to define gender in all kinds of interesting ways. But they did not call that framework into question, so it was limiting and damaging. That was what we call 'the heteronormative' or what I call 'the heterosexual matrix'. So, I challenged that. Among many other people in queer theory and LGBTQ, right? We were all challenging that.

The anti-gender phantasm

According to Butler, anxiety seems to have shifted away from earlier critiques of homosexual marriage and parental rights, and from concerns over cisgendered women's movements, to focus instead on the very notion of gender and diversity—especially the idea of gender as fluid. Those who subscribe to the anti-gender ideology today, fear that things are spiralling out of control and they long for reassurance that there are only two genders, determined solely by an immutable biology. The figure of a boundary-crossing transgender or gender nonconforming person disrupts this certainty; that figure (which is not any actual person) is then used for creating unease and fear. Today, fear and anxiety assemble with concerns for the nation, the family, and the patriarch in the anti-gender phantasm and fuel the need to attack, control, and eliminate elements that have to do with gender. Was the anxiety and resistance different in the early 1990s when Butler published *Gender Trouble*?

JB: Well, I do think feminism and lesbian and gay rights were at the center of the right-wing agenda. There were many people against rights to reproductive technology on the right. There were many people against equal wages for women. There were many people who opposed gay and lesbian human rights. There were, I think, many right-wing attacks on feminism and gay and lesbian legal rights, including rights of parenting, rights of marriage, protection against harassment and discrimination. I think the attacks have shifted to 'gender' because gender is increasingly identified with gender identity and with trans politics.

JB: Then of course comes the fear about what is trans, and about what is being taught in schools about gender affirmative healthcare² for young people. Should it be allowed? Should it be prohibited? Are young people being encouraged or recruited to become gay or trans or whatever it is. Remember that we are also living in a time where many of the signatories to the Istanbul Convention³ have withdrawn their signatures precisely because they do not want to accept the idea of gender-based violence or comply with the requirement to instruct civil servants in anti-harassment procedures or to oppose rape or violence within families. So, I think there is more of a continuity between then and now than we may think.

JB: Gender in early feminism, including radical feminism, could mean any number of things, right? But now, as Joan W. Scott (1986) has maintained, it was an analytic framework for understanding power differentials. Recently, however, gender seems more to be about 'my' gender or gender identity and how that's recognized. And the debates center on questions such as 'Should it be recognized? Is the sex that I am assigned at birth necessarily the gender that I am supposed to live out in life or is there a difference between them?' You do not need a distinction between sex and gender to distinguish between the original assignment of a particular sex and the sex lived out in life. But we all know that those can be different. Now there are some who want to say it should not be different, that it should *never* be different, right? For them, sex is immutable.

Orbán, Trump, DeSantis in Florida. I think Meloni, certainly Putin. And some of your politicians in Denmark.

Shutting down knowledge

The tension between gender as a constructive concept and as a destructive demon also appears in Danish debates and daily life. Educators, consultants, artists, welfare organizations, businesses, and families feel a strong need to address diversity, inequality, discrimination, and sexism. They seek experts, attend courses, read books, and implement local policy and organizational changes. In contrast, there is noticeable political pressure from above to do little or nothing. Efforts regarding gender must not become 'political' or 'activist,' as several centre-right politicians paradoxically state. However, as Butler points out, doing nothing is also political, as it maintains the status quo and still constitutes gender. Butler recognizes the image of knowledge being 'shut down' and delegitimized from their analyses of the U.S. and other countries, including Denmark. In May 2024, in Denmark, a ministerial task force consisting of gender and equality researchers and stakeholders published a report with 21 recommendations on gender equality in education (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2024). Immediately, the report and recommendations were dismissed by the Minister of Education, as he criticized the report as 'nonsense' and claimed that schools should not become battlegrounds for identity politics. As we discuss this with Butler, they say:

JB: All you need to do is invoke the phantasm of gender and gender politics and it becomes an occasion to trigger a mechanism for censorship and exclusion. All you need to do is to mention the demon 'gender' because, as a phantasm, it becomes something represented as dangerous, threatening society. You do not have to explain it, because what you have done is to have collected a bunch of fears and anxieties under a single sign,

and people are asked whether they should get rid of everything associated with that sign, and then people will say yes, right? Reject that thing. Some would say that gender studies is not rigorous scholarship or it is sloppy. But what criteria are they using, and what biases inform those criteria? There are, at the same time, fundamental tenants of academic life – open inquiry, critical thought—that are also being attacked. The new wave of censorship and misinformation seeks to close down debate, and it does.

The effort to shut down knowledge reveals that schools and welfare institutions have already become battlegrounds for and against gender issues. While politicians have long called on research to legitimize policies, Butler observes that studies on gender are now being delegitimized and demonized, and professionals working with gender are harassed. This mirrors the resistance faced by climate researchers, whose work shows that societal problems of inequality, destruction, and violence cannot be solved by maintaining the status quo, but only by changing behaviours, mindsets, and the distribution of privilege.

Conflating the national and the natural

The conversation moves to the question about the connection between the anti-gender movement and anti-migration ways of thinking. We ask Butler how that conflation between the national and the natural is discussed in *Who's Afraid of Gender?*

JB: I think that there are forms of nationalism that frame many of these debates, right? Gender is a concept or 'ideology' that comes from the outside; it is an unwanted import, or it is an imperialist power; it is being generated in urban centers, in Europe or in the United States, that will destroy local communities and the spirit of the nation. Putin will say that it is a threat to national security because Russian spiritual values are linked to the sacred nature of the (heteronormative) family as stipulated by the Russian Orthodox Church, right?

Gender must be kept out, and it is, in fact, one reason he opposes the European Union so strenuously. It is because there are a variety of laws and policies that protect against discrimination based on gender. He calls it "Gayropa," famously. But Orbán uses that argument too; the idea that the nation of Hungary is such that it needs to keep gender out. It also needs to keep migrants out. Both of these threaten to undermine the purity of the nation and means of its reproduction, right? So, Orbán is explicitly against miscegenation. He does not want mixed race Hungarians being reproduced. And that is a way of holding on to a sexual order that is at once heterosexual and White and Hungarian and is anti-migrant and anti-gay, lesbian, et cetera. He clusters all these issues in his policies: the heteronormativity of the family is necessary to reproduce the nation, and national purity requires both heterosexuality and anti-migrant politics. A heterosexual norm, which, at least Orbán would say, is not just a national value, but a *natural* one. He conflates the national and the natural. Putin does the same, but so too does Meloni in her own way. And the right-wing in France is now very devious. So, you know, it will confuse the issue so it does not seem homophobic or transphobic, but it is, profoundly.

No history of gender without race

In *Who's Afraid of Gender?* Butler draws on key insights from Black feminism and Black American studies (e.g., Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, C. Riley Snorton) as well as postcolonial and decolonial approaches (e.g., Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí, María Lugones, Aníbal Quijano). These perspectives help illuminate how dimorphism—the idea that creatures exist in only two kinds—manifests in actions and toxic anxieties about what counts as liveable lives.

JB: When we talk about what it means to be a woman or a man, we simultaneously make assumptions about race, even if unspoken. Whiteness was an unmarked assumption in much feminist theory until Black feminist critique was

taken seriously. We cannot tell the history of gender without also telling the history of race and racialization.

According to the literature Butler engages with, gender norms were shaped by colonization, capitalism, enslavement, and racist surgeries. For example by violently rearranging gender and kinship relations through the commodification of humans, separating children from mothers, and making them property, while the slave owner was established as the absolute patriarch. These events, Butler notes, were overlooked by early second-wave feminism, which ignored the racialized and colonial legacies in the nature/culture divide and the binary gender ideal (i.e., 'he' or 'she') rather than acknowledging more identities (e.g., 'they').

JB: There are two chapters, one on race and another on colonialism, where I seek to show that gender norms have been created through slavery and racist surgical practices as demonstrated by C. Riley Snorton's work. But Hortense Spillers clearly elaborated this in a different way, in 1986, before *Gender Trouble*. It's really important to return to her work. Certain kinds of racial norms operate in our assumptions about what it is to look like a woman or to fully be a woman. Those norms emerge from white supremacist frameworks of value. Spillers was asking, 'can a Black woman be a woman?' in the way that Fanon asks, 'can a Black man be a man?' Thus, we have good reasons to ask, 'what is the idea of woman at work here?' And what is this idea of man that makes it unclear whether Blackness can be included in the gender norms or whether it is a kind of exclusion or a kind of material from which white gender norms are produced by contrast or by opposition.

JB: Another thing that has really worried me is that I have heard right-wing anti-gender people and anti-migrant people, very often the same, using arguments that sounded left-wing; when people say 'oh, these are colonizing processes, gender is part of the colonization of local cultures' or, 'critical race theory will make us all feel like

we, White people, are all racist to the core and everything about our history is racist and must be rejected.' These are fantastical conclusions.

DS: It is these strange ways of co-opting critiques.

JB: Yes, I looked a little bit more into the colonization issue because, as we know, there are decolonial feminists who have also said gender is produced through colonial power. But when decolonial feminists say that, what they are saying is that Christian missionaries came into Africa and Latin America and tried to impose certain kinds of northern European norms or U.S. norms on cultures that produced man and woman according to certain ideals of whiteness. So, there you have a convergence of what happened in the Southern States of the United States, the institution of slavery and its violent aftermath, and the history of colonization. Gender got produced precisely within a binary. So, as gender studies scholars, or as feminists, or as people who are involved in gender politics, we need to have anti-racism as a fundamental commitment. We also need an anti-colonial criticism in order not to be reproducing those norms.

DS: You do not use the word 'intersectionality' so often in your book. Are you going into another archive of texts?

JB: I think I mention it, but I have always been a little surprised because the history of Black feminism, of Latino feminism, Latin American feminism, it has been dealing with race for a very long time without the concept of intersectionality. Sometimes in Europe, intersectionality tends to stand for race, and I do not know how that happened. But, you know, Angela Davis does not use intersectionality. I mean, there are many strains of Black feminism, including Audre Lorde and C. Riley Snorton, who understand intersectionality to be one concept. It is very important, but it does not stand for all of Black feminism, or for all of anti-racist or anti-colonial feminism.

DS: Yes. I do not know, my colleagues and I have been discussing the Nordic reception of intersectionality in for instance a special issue of *NORA* (Hvenegård-Lassen & Staunæs, 2020; Hvenegård-Lassen, Staunæs & Lund, 2020). Also, in the newly published Danish anthology on performative and intersectional feminism (Hvenegård-Lassen, Staunæs & Khawaja, 2024; Nebeling Petersen, Khawaja & Kivi, 2024), we translated a chapter about doing gender and justice by you into Danish (Butler, 2024b), just as we translated chapters by Snorton (2024) and Spillers (2024). Maybe it is something about what a concept like intersectionality travels along with. When intersectionality first travelled from the United States into the Nordic countries in the 2000s, it quite often travelled together with standpoint feminism, law, and sociology. It also came with Black British feminism, social psychology, and socialism (Lykke, 2020). I guess the other archive, the one including Spillers, Snorton, Hartmann et cetera, that is a different archive. One where race comes first, as the genre of human and gender is a code in that genre. It is an archive from the humanities, it is history, and it links with poststructuralism, posthumanism and postcolonial thinking. I mean, the question of archives, paradigms, and travels, might be one of the reasons why intersectionality has had that profound way of coming into European feminism as the proxy for race, but did not get the grasp for simultaneously deconstructing gender and the human?

JB: Yes. Well, I think intersectionality is fundamentally a legal framework. The concept has been very important for those who seek to produce a more complex analysis, one that brings gender, race, and class together. And that is very important in order to avoid the reproduction of a White feminism that is blind to issues of race. So that seems absolutely right. But at least in the United States, both standpoint feminism and intersectionality are very useful and very important, but we have also had a criticism from within Black feminism of both positions. Saidiya

Hartman does not use the term intersectionality. Or Claudia Rankine, or, you know, any number of Black feminists who are extremely important to the field. I think intersectionality does not allow for a historical analysis or a textured analysis. It can become an easy model that you impose on anything. It is important that we keep the field open to an array of positions within Black feminism and postcolonial perspectives. Debates on these internal differences are important for thinking something through in more complex ways.

The interconnectedness is key to hope and the healing of the earth

Gender as performative should not be confused with what 1970s second-wave feminism called the distinction between biological sex and social gender. That distinction left biological sex as fixed, with culture as the driver of change. Butler argues that neither biology nor the social is pre-given or exists independently. Nature and culture are always formed in a radical, mutual interplay. In *Who's Afraid of Gender?* Butler explores this relationship through another feminist thinker, biologist Donna J. Haraway, who since the 1980s has contributed to an ecofeminist and ecocritical approach to gender. Haraway argues that humans, for better or worse, are radically connected to, and dependent on, other living beings. We experience this in terms of gender, and also, as Butler adds, with the climate crisis. Butler's thinking of the near future involves hope for alliances. It involves care across differences and in relation to other living creatures at the Earth. Throughout the conversation, Butler returns to the interconnectedness of humans, nature, and culture, especially considering feminist ecocriticism, which has long engaged with the planetary crises we now face.

JB: There must be a counter-imagination to resist the fear, authoritarian regimes stoke and demand. This means envisioning a way of living together based on equality and freedom. We should not fear each other's freedom—your freedom does

not take away from mine. It is also crucial to forge alliances among feminists, LGBTQ+ communities, and those fighting for migrant rights. I believe this must be connected to the healing of the Earth. We need to ask ourselves, more broadly than just in terms of gender, what kind of world we want to live in. And how do we live in that world together? One essential element of the

response is to not contribute further to the exclusion or subordination of others, and certainly not to further violence or discrimination. We must be more conscious of how interconnected we are as living beings and find political and social methods of organizing that recognize and value our shared entanglement, our interdependent lives.

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Notes

- ¹ This interview came into being due to Cecilie Nørgaard's insisting knock on Judith Butler's door, asking for an interview, as the guest editor for the Danish Magazine *Eurowoman*. Dorthe Staunæs conducted the interview on June 18, 2024. Together, we edited this version for *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*.
- ² In Danish: 'kønsbekræftende behandling.'
- ³ The Istanbul Convention is short for the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. It requires parties to develop laws, policies, and support services to end violence against women and domestic violence.