

# On phantasms of gender: A feminist cultural studies perspective

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## Abstract

This article provides a response to Judith Butler's recent book *Who's Afraid of Gender?* making the case for the volume as a key contribution to feminist cultural studies, an exemplary pedagogic text, close to Stuart Hall's style of writing. The book works as a counter to the anti-gender currents which have demonised genderqueer and trans people through the unleashing of populist sentiments securing these to a right-wing agenda. The article draws attention to the UK tabloid press and its reliance on social media invective. With the university as a contested space, what scope is there for new forms of public pedagogy to emerge?

## Keywords

Gender-critical, genderqueer politics, Judith Butler, moral panic, social media

## Introduction: a violent storm

It is surely important to extend and update the feminist dialogue on queer and trans politics today, now that the Trump government, by Spring 2025, has already introduced a raft of exceptionally punitive measures<sup>1</sup>? In 2024 Judith Butler published *Who's Afraid of Gender?* with a major publishing trade label (Butler, 2024). This showed Butler making a decisive intervention in a debate about gender in a context where there has been unprecedented levels of animosity, scare-mongering and aggression. The conflicts have ricocheted through the universities. Friendships have been torn apart, collegial relations have soured. I want to make the case here that while this is officially a popular book, it is

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defined by a strong pedagogic undercurrent. A popular or 'trade' book brings an author onto a circuit which will be market-tested and planned by the publisher. It makes complete sense for a public intellectual like Butler to situate themselves in this broader terrain where there will be new audiences as well as activist events. But reading *Who's Afraid* from within the 'teaching machine' permits a connection to be made with the style and mode of open pedagogy associated with another prominent public intellectual, the late Stuart Hall, especially during his time at the Open University where there was, and remains, a specific address to non-traditional students (McRobbie, 2016). This link also reminds us of the relevance of Butler's writing to cultural studies. The new Butlerian 'openness' is most apparent in the final chapters where they lead the reader through some quite dense discussions on the importance of knitting together sexual politics with race and ethnicity with reference to the 'coloniality of gender' (see also Lugones, 2007; Sabsay, 2023, 2025). The teacherly voice here anchors the work within the milieu of the radical university as a currently contested space.

As trans and genderqueer communities have achieved successes in law and in civil society, so also has this attracted the venom of the populist right. With the support of the right-wing press there has been a series of moral panics about trans people, so well publicised that it would be hard for an average, perhaps apolitical person, not to have been exposed to these caricatures of the reality of trans lives. This demonisation process has also been fuelled by the 'gender critical' feminist groups (especially in the United Kingdom) who deplore the idea of gender fluidity as having any place in feminist politics and who aim to maintain a closed door stance to transwomen on the grounds of protecting 'women only' spaces.<sup>2</sup> Butler tackles the arguments that emanate from these sources, with tenacity and judiciousness and with only occasional flashes of anger or frustration. The attacks against trans politics have been ferocious, as has the demonisation of Butler themselves suggesting that a lot more is going on, a violent storm and the presence of an expansive 'authoritarian populism' tipping towards fascism (Hall, 1988).

It often feels that the gender critical feminists (or the so-called British TERFS<sup>3</sup>) have little interest in the roundtable discussions that have in the past been the favoured ways of airing feminist disputes. Their stance, states Butler, means that '(I)nformed public debate becomes impossible' (Butler, 2024: 18). In the space of the last few years, it is difficult to point to an occasion where any good faith debate has taken place. Instead and in tune with the times we live in, there is a sense that it is too late for this kind of liberal nicety. Even when the journalists among the gender-critical feminists claim familiarity with the major works by Butler, the articles suggest a superficial reading. The well-known British feminist journalist Suzanne Moore (a Cultural Studies graduate and regular contributor to *Marxism Today* in the 1990s) in her pieces for the upmarket right-wing *Telegraph* (also previously in the *Guardian* and *Daily Mail*) invariably comments that she studied Butler as a post-graduate. Most recently these articles are at the forefront of the anti-trans movement, as is clear in their titles (Moore, 2025a, 2025b).

The British university has already been the subject of several high profile legal cases on these issues, initiated by colleagues who play a leading role in the gender critical movement.<sup>4</sup> Grievances raised and recourse to law tend to be the first port of call in these instances. And this has been accompanied by campus demonstrations and resignations, followed by accusations in the right-wing press (*The Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph* in

particular) that the universities have been a fomenting ground for the so-called 'cancel culture'. With a good deal of media publicity Professor Kathleen Stock resigned her post at Sussex University in October 2021 saying she was hounded out by the pro trans student body.<sup>5</sup> And indeed there were angry campaigns including posters across the campus calling for her to be sacked. (Butler acknowledges that pro trans organisations have also, on occasion, adopted violent or intimidatory tactics, which are, as they point out, totally unacceptable.) What is indisputable is that the academic writing coming from the gender critical scholars, has had considerably less purchase on the arts, humanities and social science curriculum than those who they pitch themselves against. Over the decades, the many works of queer theory have long found an attentive (even delighted) readership. There is also a long legacy in the humanities and social sciences from the late 1980s and under the influence of Foucault and others that provides an understanding of gender as not immutable. We could loosely refer here to a triage of perspectives, that is, social constructionism, post-structuralism and feminist psychoanalytic work on language, all of which, broadly taken, alluded to the power relations underpinning the historical and interpellative processes of category-formation, eg the production of 'womanhood' as a cultural phenomenon. By showing how these forces vary in time and are subject to quite dramatic change, the category of woman is de-naturalised and so revealed to be fluid and mutable. It was through this particular set of paradigms that Butler's work was at least partially inaugurated. These arguments about the power of discourse and the historical formations of categories of subjects, may have given rise to controversies inside the university departments, but when the ideas have filtered out into the public world, they were frequently ridiculed. Most typically they have been understood as doing away with truth in favour of relativism. But overall this was a moment when psychoanalytically informed post-structuralist feminist theory came to prominence and created quite seismic waves within the humanities university.

The mobilisation of fears along the lines of the classic media-led moral panic occupies a key place in this book. The 'fear' is that queer and trans politics will inflict lasting physical and mental harm on children and young people, and that the books and materials connected with gender politics will influence or recruit young people. Let us suppose that these manufactured moral panics have a multi-purpose function. Yes there is the element of fear-mongering as a way of seeking wider consent to more punitive measures, but there is also an attempt to contain and control the 'spread' of LGBTQ politics, and thus to sustain the unquestionable dominance of heterosexuality. As Butler infers, the vilification of genderqueer activities can also be seen as a new and virulent form of homophobia. Equally insidious is the concerted effort on the part of, for example, in the United Kingdom, the right-wing popular press to establish a new and expansive terrain of 'common sense' predicated on this rolling back of alliance-based LGBTQ and feminist politics. This is also where the power of vernacular language and its place in the tabloid press, becomes the primary vehicle for the construction of common sense. In Gramscian terms this is a necessary component in the securing of hegemony and consensus building for the right, underscored by emerging forms of ever more authoritarian rule. Butler refers to the various appeals to common sense by her critics, in effect the instrumentalization of 'common-sense', (noticeably ramped up since Trump arrived back in the White House). Feminist media and cultural studies

scholars might arguably look in more detail at this process of hegemony building through the dissemination of populist elements across the mainstream media and social media landscape. Frequently this works as the press picks up and inserts into the format of the 'page', highly inflammatory material from the X Twitter sphere. On one hand, this is framed as external, informal and often uncredited content, printed as a screen shot, on the other hand its very presence in the mainstream gives space and some credibility to overtly offensive and prejudicial views of the type that staff journalists would avoid. But they get aired through this system of quoting from Twitter/X. This is the channel through which the off-the-cuff, views and tweets from, for example, JK Rowling find their way out of the Twittersphere to become front page 'news' items. This further shift to more openly aggressive and adversarial styles of communication has to be seen as a key element in the wider culture of violence which has become a defining feature of our times. We are forced to become accustomed to vicious discourse, like the kick of a skinhead boot.

## **The Vatican**

Butler's attention to papal interventions on questions of gender, and ramped up during the Ratzinger era (1995–2004), constitutes a reply of sorts, since many of the official papers and reports from the Vatican suggest a fluency (perhaps secondhand) with the ideas developed in their two books of 1990 and 1993.<sup>6</sup> By citing gender politics as a major threat to humanity, gender could be targeted to shore up Catholic doctrine in a new and seemingly modern way. Gender could bring together under one roof the various dangers of feminism and 'homosexuality'. The family and the sanctity of marriage have been basic principles of faith for the Roman Catholic Church. Marriage has to be reaffirmed so that women will reproduce a new generation of pious offspring and men play their role as breadwinners and enjoy the fruits of marital union. The recent attention given by the Catholic church to gender is an opportunistic move and one that is inevitably prurient in keeping with Vatican obsessions with anything to do with sexuality. The demonisation of 'gender', likening pro-gender advocates to the devil as well as to Hitler and describing aspects of trans and queer politics as dictatorial, all of this gives the Vatican a new reason to justify its moral grandstanding role in the modern world. By means of projection, displacement and condensation gender becomes phantasmatic. Papal decrees project onto gender as a smokescreen for complicity in abuse and for the cruelty of its own offices. They deflect from an institutionalised culture of repression and sadism. As Butler remarks, the Catholic church deftly slides over decades of sexual abuse alongside institutional efforts at all levels to avoid charges, arrests and the force of the law. The question then is how successful is the fear-mongering by the Vatican and its allies? Is there not a battle being fought out here, as young secular university-educated people, especially in the arts, humanities and social sciences embrace the new sexual politics of fluidity and trans and non-binary identities, while those who are poor and possibly living in the global south, or who have little or no access to formal education provide a vulnerable and available audience for angry threats of damnation to the 'faithful' emanating from the Vatican?<sup>7</sup>

## The TERFS UK

Butler addresses the largely British phenomenon of the gender-critical feminists, including journalists (e.g. well-known lesbians like Julie Bindel) along with the world best-selling writer JK Rowling. They point out the flaws and misunderstandings when it comes to engaging with figures such as Catherine MacKinnon.<sup>8</sup> Butler also disputes the use of the term critical (as in ‘gender-critical feminists’) ‘they have misunderstood and distorted the history and meaning of “critique”’ . . . ‘If gender-critical feminists wish to be critical, then they should give some thought to the history of the term critique and its place in struggles for social transformation’ (Butler, 2024: 141–142).

But the reductionism of the gender-critical writing, predicated on sex as an immutable biological reality and typecasting transwomen as ‘male predators in disguise’, does not mean they have no political impact, quite the reverse. They speak to the state and to governments in office often through the mediating channels of right-wing popular and middlebrow newspapers like *The Daily Mail*. They also benefit from financial support provided by various right-wing think-tanks and organisations such as the Free Speech Union. Their power rests on the ability to speak for ‘common sense’ and added to this, with the celebrity status of JK Rowling herself. From a cultural studies perspective what is needed is an analysis of the processes that underpin the power of the right-wing press and media in the United Kingdom and, as Stuart Hall would put it, the constant ‘work’ that goes on in producing these headlines and the endless stream of ‘stories’. It is not just that they have become more sensational in order to retain their readerships but that they have also (both the right-wing *Daily Mail* and left-leaning *Guardian*) hired columnists who already are celebrities, or whose writing suggests this as their aim.<sup>9</sup> These columns are cheaper for the newspaper owners than staff reporters, and the writers have a brief to be opinionated, courting controversy where possible. The columnist produces for a genre that now comprises topicality and entertainment value at the expense of serious analysis. To shock and exaggerate, to express extreme opinions with little regard for accuracy has become commonplace. This factor alongside the relatively unregulated social media need to be more fully factored into a re-calibrated analysis of anti-trans moral panic (McRobbie and Thornton, 1996 and re-printed in McRobbie, 2024).

The reports undertaken by the gender critical campaigners will be picked up and publicised on the front pages, while the other favoured site for activism and campaigning is to pursue cases through the courts and the judicial system. Both can have considerable success. Butler carefully considers the various more coherent texts (ie not tweets) by the author JK Rowling on the topic of transgender politics and, with a psychoanalytic voice, they show how Rowling’s own trauma of sexual violence and domestic abuse leads her to see trauma at every corner ‘she lives in the repetitive temporality of trauma’. Her fearfulness is then transposed onto the bodies of transwomen who are seen as predatory, as would-be rapists. ‘Trans now represents the violence done to her’ (Butler, 2024: 165).

Gender-critical activity seems to be almost wholly concentrated around an anti-trans agenda, that is, on the tiny number of transwomen offenders being sent to women’s prisons, on limiting facilities for transpersons health, on restricting the availability of queer and pro trans literary material, and in favour of pursuing various cases through the legal system. We see little being said about women in prison as a feminist issue, and little

about the draconian impact of antiabortion measures under the new authoritarian regimes. JK Rowling may have funded refuges for women fleeing domestic violence, but an inordinate emphasis is on excluding transwomen and keeping these as 'women-only' spaces. This raises the question of how feminist these campaigners are, and where, if anywhere, they aim to create alliances across other feminist organisations? It is conceivable that the most likely allies might be found in conservative feminist circles.

However the question of gender-based violence is important for feminism of all complexions today. All the more need then to ensure it is not claimed by the gender critical activists. Here again it is easy to see the appeal of common sense based on a simplified notion of men as perpetrators. Butler engages with the alliance-based activisms of groups like the Argentinian *Ni Una Meno* on femicide and transcide, and Leticia Sabsay (echoing Lugones) has made a major contribution to the question of sexual violence from a queer feminist and post-colonial stance (Lugones, 2007; Sabsay, 2025). But still, it is almost as if as soon as one refers to 'male violence' the idea of the gender binary rears its head. Butler challenges the offensive gender critical casting of transwomen as male aggressors in disguise, but an alliance-based feminist and queer politics needs to be directed towards those non-aligned feminists who campaign for changes in the law against domestic violence, street harassment and the various other forms of male power which limit women's lives in so many ways. Intimidating behaviour by some men is after all, part of women's and young women's everyday lives and designed to keep women in their place and remind them of the superior physical strength of men. It is not all about, as Butler surmises in their consideration of the anti-trans accusations, the 'penis', rather it is cultural and about power and intimidation. It is the product of deep-seated beliefs about male dominance. When one is fearful walking home alone at night or being in a taxi when the driver begins to talk inappropriately, fear and anger at sexual injustice come together. Class and ethnicity also impinge on the differential experiences of sexual harassment, from the working-class cleaners at risk of losing their jobs on filing a complaint, to the vulnerability of low paid women shift workers navigating bus stops and public transport late at night or early in the morning. This intimidation by some men, stretches to the limit how a popular politics can be constructed without the reductionist logic of the gender critical thinkers.

### **'Open pedagogy' in neo-fascistic times?**

In the final sections of the book the Butler voice is that of the pedagogue making the case for genderqueer politics. This is when we are reminded of how Stuart Hall's late night lectures for the Open University are widely recognised as having inspired a new generation of radical academics (e.g. Kobena Mercer).<sup>10</sup> Here we find a careful unpacking of those who might understand the ideas of gender theory as arrogant, a kind of cultural imperialism when viewed from other non-Western perspectives. There are also those who suggest the term is 'untranslatable'. These claims are tackled head on with a series of quite dazzling inversions. Echoing Bhabha and Walter Benjamin, Butler returns to the idea that 'translation' produces a surplus of residues, its own impossible excess which is also a space of potential political meaning-making. Butler sees the claims that genderqueer thinking is somehow a foreign imposition, as part of a fortress

mentality of keeping borders somehow pure from contamination. Instead the term foreign is turned into something rich and dynamic. We are destined to be foreign to ourselves and to others. Strangeness to ourselves reflects that we are born into a world of pre-existing expectations and fantasies as well as social structures about who we might be prior to our birth. Parents will invest a whole realm of dreams and hopes and expectations in the arrival of a baby. This point suggests a radical de-centring of the subject as a separate entity entering the world with a unique identity and consciousness. Butler asks intriguingly ‘what does gender want of me?’ (Butler, 2024: 239). The child has to navigate or translate those expectations in daily life.

Refuting the ‘dominance of monolingualism’ in Anglophone spheres, we are urged here to embrace new words, new descriptors and phrases for the fresh life they bring to language. Butler evokes a sense that we live within a state of constant translation embroiled in the struggles for change, for averting catastrophe, for remaining open to difference. ‘Translation is in fact the condition of possibility of gender theory in a global frame’. (Butler, 2024: 223). ‘One has to stay with the struggle of translation’ (ibid, p 238). The authoritarian nightmares and neo-fascistic violence of our current times, the hasty dismantling of rights and protections, the determination to more or less obliterate the left-feminist-queer, anti-racist and also the transgender movements and their hard won achievements, are formidable challenges which as Butler more recently indicates can lead to paralysis, which must be resisted (Butler, 2025). But our resources are not wholly depleted, the universities offers just one space for re-imagining new forms of resistance pedagogy. Let me emphasise then the richness of the teaching machine. It remains possible to subvert the attempts to reduce higher education to ‘deliverables’. With closures in sight we might indeed have to consider re-inventing the university and higher education as a series of low-cost extra-mural activities. Echoing bell hooks, it remains now, at this point in time, crucial to acknowledge and avow the emotional flow, the element of love and even passion for learning, and the gratitude proffered on the part of the students, readers and audiences in a non-sentimental way, to figures like Butler, Stuart Hall and bell hooks. We can locate Butler within the cultural studies tradition, as someone who extends the realm and reach of a radical pedagogy.

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Data sharing not applicable to this article as no data sets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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## Notes

1. This entails rolling back on transgender participation in women's sports, introducing new constraints on trans young people's health care, refusing to recognise non-binary status for visitors entering the United States and so on.
2. For a wide ranging account of the US political origins of the anti-trans movement and the recent cross-overs with the radical right see Lewis (2024).
3. Trans exclusionary radical feminists.
4. See the case of criminology lecturer Jo Phoenix 16.5.2024. Sex Matters website 'Learning from the Jo Phoenix case'.
5. And in a ruling of 26.3.2025 the University of Sussex was fined more than £.5 m on what were found to be restrictions of 'freedom of speech' in regard to the case of Kathleen Stock. This outcome will be contested but has already re-ignited across the tabloid press the complaints by Prof. Stock.
6. Butler (1990, 1993).
7. Butler was physically attacked in Brazil, and a grotesque effigy with exaggerated sexualised features dragged through the streets (Butler, 2024). The crowds might have come from either Catholic or Evangelical congregations?
8. MacKinnon (2023) argues that trans assertive politics do not endanger CIS women.
9. As a self-branding exercise, income generating based on being controversial.
10. Kobena Mercer has often described as a teenager encountering Hall on OU programmes which were broadcast by the BBC late at night or in the early hours (Hall, 2017).

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### Biographical note

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