

# In Conversation with Professor Judith Butler

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*A front-runner in the fight for equality and justice, Professor Judith Butler is one of the most influential philosophers of the past century whose work has transformed the field of queer and feminist scholarship. By redefining what gender means and how it is displayed, Butler has broken down societal and cultural barriers, and, most importantly, allowed others inspired by their work to finally understand their identity and their place in the world. Both an activist and a scholar at UC Berkeley, they have also worked to blur the lines between the academic and public spheres, redefining what it actually means to be an intellectual in the current era. In this interview, Professor Butler delves into the increasing censorship of gender studies, discusses the unjust treatment of war victims, and reflects on their career thus far.*

*This interview was conducted on 10 May 2022.*

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**CJLPA: For the interest of our readers, could you tell us about your story and your professional trajectory, how you got to where you are now?**

**Professor Judith Butler:** I was trained in philosophy at Yale University and in Heidelberg in Germany and was meant to be a somewhat classical continental philosopher. I studied Hegel, Marx, Kant and I continue to love that work but I did enter the world of gender studies and gender politics in the late 1980s, in part because I suffered discrimination on the job market on the basis of my gender presentation and sexual orientation. I realised I couldn't get past those obstacles easily and so I thought that I should probably write about it, make it my theme. As a result, I produced scholarship that is a melange of continental philosophy and feminist theory. I've also been active in human rights organisations including a former organisation called the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, but also the Center for Constitutional Rights in New York City—and I am involved in Jewish Voice for Peace and engage in activism for Palestinian rights of political self-determination. I also continue to consult with a wide number of countries, policymakers, and feminist, queer, and trans activists on gender politics, trying to fight the anti-gender ideology movement which has turned out to be quite influential and destructive. In fact, I'm writing a book on that topic now.

**CJLPA: You mentioned your work in gender studies as well as your work with regard to feminist theory. Are the two inextricably linked or are they two separate entities, and should they be regarded as so?**

**JB:** They're interlinking projects. They're not the same but I do not think it is possible to do work in one area without connecting with the other. Both of them are important academic forms of inquiry,

and they each need institutional support. Many scholars would not be able to distinguish between what is feminist studies and what is gender studies, since gender is at the heart of both forms of inquiry. Indeed, as academic fields, they are also related to social movements, often teaching literature generated within the context of social movements. And they both require institutional support. Even when one is doing scholarly work in feminist studies—let's say one is working on renaissance literature or psychoanalytic theory, or something that feels very academic and not particularly activist—one still needs to have an institutional space where that can happen. I need funding for my research, I need a job, or I need a fellowship—in other words that research has to be supported. It cannot be censored, it cannot be criminalised, and my programmes cannot shut down otherwise I can't do my academic work. So, we might say that even the most self-referential academic work is still dependent on institutional support of some kind: publishers willing to publish, or universities establishing programmes that are keeping them alive. Our academic work depends on institutional conditions that are of public concern, and under certain circumstances, we can be censored or criminalised or our programmes can be shut down, at which point we can't do that academic work. So, the politics of the problem are in some ways linked to the academic activities themselves. That said, I would say that not all feminist theory has to immediately say, 'Oh and here's the activist implication of what I just wrote'. I don't think so. Sometimes we are trying to understand the world, we're trying to reconfigure how we understand social relations or history or even the psyche, we're undertaking projects that are academic in nature that may change people's understanding and maybe even change their lives or their activism. But I don't believe we have to justify our academic work through its activist potential, nor do I think we always have to lay out what the activist potential is.

**CJLPA: Is this a source of frustration for academia, and is there a way to change that?**

**JB:** There are two sorts of problems. On the one hand, we are fighting censorship across the world. In India, they closed down something like 40 gender studies programmes, in Hungary gender studies had to move to Vienna, along with the entire university: the Central European University. They were shutting down gender studies because gender is apparently this terribly frightening and destructive ‘ideology’ according to those who oppose it. And now we’re seeing legislation that seeks to keep the word out of certain languages, or keep gender studies and critical race theory out of curricula—both of which have become caricatures, phantasms by those in the positions that criticise them or seek to censor them. So, we do have to be able to say, ‘Look, what we do is open inquiry’. And that’s what universities are supposed to be supporting. We’re asking key questions. We are discussing and debating, we clearly don’t all hold the same view. This is a field of study like other field of studies where there are methodologies that are contested and discussed and revised. There are norms of research and ways of proceeding that are academic in character, and that have as their aim an open-ended inquiry to know something better, to find out what is true or what is real. That is what we do as scholars. We need to defend the study against those who would caricature it, demean it, and substitute a frightening phantasm for the complex work that we actually do.

On the other hand, very often in the classroom these days young people want to know what one’s own political position is or what political position they should take immediately on an issue. Sometimes, when you’re asked to take a position, for instance, are you for or against gender studies?, it is important to take a step back and question whether gender studies is a monolithic thing that any of us could, or should, vote on in that way. Maybe the reduction of gender studies to a monolith to which we say yea or nay is precisely the problem. As somebody for whom critical thought requires a willingness to call a framework into question, I don’t want to have to take a political position if I don’t like the way it is framed, when it is the frame that is politically problematic. That’s where a critical form or reflection becomes important and that’s also part of pedagogy: we have to ask people to think through their positions, the way they are framed, what they imply, which is precisely not the same as prescribing a certain position or training them how to take them.

**CJLPA: On the note of critical thinking, how can one be a gender conscious researcher, whatever the field may be?**

**JB:** Well it’s interesting, you know I’m reminded of E. P. Thompson’s very important work on the working class, and he did quite an impressive job in treating the working classes as a kind of subject, and what they underwent, and how this was produced in time and in history—a very textured and persuasive work that had, and continues to have, enormous influence in the field of social history. And my friend Joan W Scott came along and said, ‘Oh I just love this work but he’s missing something, which is that the world of work and the world of the public is already gendered’. It was not a factor or something added onto a class analysis, but it informed the very way in which we conceptualise the working class subject. Further, what Scott proposed was that gender operates through a wide number of fields as an active and consequential presupposition. Gender doesn’t just describe gender identity, as many people now assume. An entire public world might be gendered in the sense that it’s structured by certain masculine values or presumptions that are not always marked. What, for instance, is the gendering of the public sphere? Is the public sphere presumptively masculine and, if so, how we can read that?

Even now, with the war in Ukraine, we don’t see much commentary on the gendering of the war, but it’s very much there. There is a form of masculinism at stake for Putin, but also for Zelenskyy whose t-shirt and appearance re-enforced a form of heroic masculinity—the fighting man. How many women can assume that position? What does it mean that this heightened militarism and even the resistance some of us support, relies on certain ideas of embodiment: able-bodied, willing to fight, capable of fighting, of the age in which you could fight, and masculinised?—with an occasional woman with the shotgun looking like a Kurdish fighter who we’re supposed to appreciate for the feminism she represents. The recent reports on sexual violence at the border or in family homes in Ukraine are just absolutely appalling, which is why the recognition of gender-based violence is so important for legal and public policy. I think we do need to think about gendered practices, gendered spheres of life and not just gendered persons.

**CJLPA: On the topic of gender, you’re most well-known for your ground-breaking theory of gender performativity which was introduced most famously in your book *Gender Trouble* in 1990. On the note of the Ukrainian war, as well as the gendered reporting of the war and the gendered war itself, if gender is performative, who or what dictates the script in the current era?**

**JB:** In general, you can try to dictate a script—people do try, and sometimes scripts seem to be pretty strongly dictated when strong directors are at work, and actors are willing to acquiesce to their will. In such cases, scripts are fixed in place—but I think in fact there’s some contingency and unexpected turns in scripts that, if I follow your metaphor, are a bit more improvisational, sometimes departing from the script, or sometimes shredding the script. For me, there may be gender norms that prescribe what we should do, but even in the act of apparent compliance, we can be departing from the norm, even contesting its power.

Obviously, there is a hyper-gendering of issues going on right now, not only in the war, but in a wide range of political efforts to deny reproductive freedom, LGBTQI+ rights, and debunk gender studies. Obviously, Putin and his version of masculinity has been commented upon at length, but I would underscore the public and shameless form in which he displays his willingness to destroy and to subject the most vulnerable people to violence. This is a sign of the kind of masculinity he values, one measured by the shameless infliction of harm. It is important to remember that there is no one masculinity, no single norm that organises the appearance or operation of masculinity. With Putin, we see a lethal version of masculinity at work. For instance, Masha Gessen has written about Putin’s masculinity in a way that I think is pretty interesting, and then of course in the *Boston Review*, just recently, there was an important statement by the Director of Gender Studies at Kharkiv National University, her name is Irina Zhrebkina, and she’s a translator who, in fact, translated some of my work and some of the major work of feminist theory from across the globe. She understands the attack on gender and feminism as a key component of this war. Putin himself named ‘gender’ as a potential threat to the spiritual values of Russia in his policy statement on national security in 2015.

**CJLPA: Does performativity extend to other forms of identity? Whether that be race, disability, class, religious association, to what extent is identity in these instances on the other hand performative?**

**JB:** I said gender was performative over 30 years ago and I'm not sure I would hold to the exact same position I put forward then. It's interesting the positions you write about when you're unemployed. I did have a temporary position at the time, but I think that when we say gender is performative, we don't mean that it's only performative or that's the only thing we can say about gender. It just means that people generally have to establish their gender within a grid of legibility, or that gender is established through various means. Though the ways in which we do in a daily way unconsciously or consciously assert gender or establish it, suggests that it needs to be asserted or established, it could go another way. And it is never fully or exclusively in our power to do that establishing. There's no natural necessity about the ways in which gender becomes available to us, which is not to say that nature plays no role or that volition is all that matters. Gender is established and re-established through various powers, and always through processes articulated in time and space. Performativity doesn't mean it's all fake or false or artificial, and it surely doesn't mean that it's fully chosen in the sense that 'Oh, I can choose whatever I want to be today'. It means only that gender is negotiated for us before we have any agency, and we come to negotiate it in quotidian ways in time. It is not established once and for all through sex assignment, and even sex assignment cannot stabilise sex through time.

As I have moved through the world, there were times where I would walk into a bathroom or locker room, because I'm a swimmer, and be told that I'm in the wrong one and I'm pretty sure I'm in the right one. Once in China I was not able to speak the language, so I literally took my shirt off so that they could see, then they were, 'Ohhh ok, ok, ok, ok!' But like, what did I have to do? It wasn't immediately clear. I mean there's some ways in which cultural legibility works this way. Obviously not just about myself, but a range of people who deal with how they are perceived, what they have to make clear time and again in order to be known or recognised or even to pass into or out of regulated spaces. This happens differently with disability. Sometimes you have to let it be known. It doesn't mean that your disability is a performative effect in the sense that it has no substantial reality; on the contrary, the problem is that if you seek to make yourself known, legible, recognisable, or seek to evade forms of recognition that imply criminalisation or pathologisation, then a kind of orchestration of the body becomes important, a way of making plain or public one's bodily situation, quite regardless of whether or not one has a visible disability.

There are, of course, many misunderstandings about performativity because it draws on both linguistic and theatrical traditions. In my view, it cannot be reduced to either domain, but rather names their interconnection, the site of their overlapping. For those who take performativity to be a theatrical mask that you put it on and take it off at will, performativity is a bit of entertaining fakery. Although masks, as we know, can have much more important meanings in dance, religion, and rituals. The example of drag that I offered in *Gender Trouble* became inadvertently exemplary for some readers of what performativity means. A number of women do get up and 'put on their face' and 'fix their eyes' and 'do their hair'. These are just daily ways of crafting, inspired by both anxiety and, presumably, gender idealisations of various kinds. One might not describe such activities as a gendered kind of crafting, but it is a gendered kind of crafting, just as some sorts of activities seek to de-constitute those norms on purpose, or engage in another way of doing gender that doesn't really work with masculine and feminine, either exposing a gendered spectrum, or a position outside the spectrum as it has been established. At the same time, and equally importantly, we're *done* to

*by* norms, *by* the unconscious, *by* others; we're undone and redone by norms that work on us in ways that we can neither track nor control. We're not just crafting ourselves in some radically agentic way; we are struggling with the ways in which we were treated and situated and formed over time, and that's why it's a struggle rather than an arbitrary expression of personal liberty.

On the issue of race people have thought, 'Oh well does Butler think that somebody could just say: 'Well I'm Black', when they're not Black, when they have no Black formation, they have no Black legacy, they don't come from Black parents or a Black world, they just have decided that they feel Black and they want to say they're Black. Or they want a fellowship, so they falsely claim they're Black, or they want to belong to a certain community and deceive people in order to achieve that sense of belonging. We've seen people who have lied, who have fraudulently appropriated racial or cultural identities, including indigenous ones, and these are all unethical actions. That is not performativity—that is lying. For me, performativity is actually a way of challenging restrictive and oppressive norms, but cultural appropriation is an example of racial oppression. Sometimes one has to make plain what one's background is, the community from which one comes, the sexuality that is one's own, or the gender that represents one's lived reality. In those cases, performativity does not create that history or sexuality or lived reality, but it does make it legible, and sometimes for the first time, or against a way of saying and naming that leaves one effaced and erased. Performativity seeks to break through that erasure, but cultural appropriation is a form of erasure. Obviously, we have to be able to understand the situations in which performativity is operating in order to evaluate its effects. We can, for instance, ask how racial norms consolidate racism through forms of performativity, in which case performativity is a way of analysing a social issue, but not, by itself, something to be celebrated or condemned. It helps us to see how reality is construed, how intelligibility is established and contested, and we might sometimes like that contestation, and sometimes not. Performativity is not its own frame of reference.

**CJLPA:** On the note of the changing terms of reality—and you also briefly mentioned your example of Drag queens—what role, if it plays a role at all, does art have to play in performativity?

**JB:** At the time that I used the drag example, I wanted to show that what counts as feminine and masculine can change, and that some traits we take as natural or fixed are, in fact, constituted over time by virtue of practices and repeated styles. But the example was taken to be exemplary of performativity itself, and that produced some consequences I neither anticipated nor wanted. For instance, some drag performers do, in fact, clothe themselves and act in certain ways under very specific conditions, but then 'return' to their truer genders in everyday life. This is, of course, not the same as what happens with trans people who are living their gender reality in every aspect of their lives. The idea of a punctual, discrete, and transitory performance was reinforced by the example of drag, but, in fact, gender as lived is another matter. I did not clearly grasp the implications of that example when I wrote about it nearly 35 years ago, but I see it better now. For those who quite legitimately want the reality of their genders recognised, or who prefer to use the language of sex to describe their trans lives, it is important to underscore that sex can be reassigned, that genders can change, and that the sex or gender arrived at by trans people designated their reality. I believe that performativity can still describe that reality, since the language and recognition is achieved by various means.

I would now say that gender is the apparatus through which sex is assigned, established, and re-assigned and re-established. Gender is not the cultural form that natural sex assumed, but the process through which that assumption and establishment takes place. In this sense, it is not an identity, but the process through which identity is established. Similarly, performativity is not fluff or artifice, but rather the name for the very consequential process by which subjects are formed and come to identify themselves, establish their reality, and demand recognition.

Art is enormously important for me. It was what I missed most, aside from friends, during the pandemic. It has the power to embrace and fix my mind, claim my attention and transform me.

**CJLPA: Is it a vessel for power or is it more a platform for self-expression?**

**JB:** If we are speaking about art or artistic practice, or art objects, we have approached a complex problem. Personally, I love going to museums even though I understand the critique of museums and love both public art and performance. I am also drawn to abstraction, even though I understand the critique of abstraction from several quarters. I'm very often interested in when a painting is finished, in what year, and seek to understand how history is refracted in non-representational modes. That doesn't mean I don't love realism, but I do wonder about the ways in which it has been written about. Lukacs interests me, for instance, but his writing also maddens me. Is it realistic to imagine that society gives itself to us as a totality? I suppose I am always somewhat ambivalent in museums. I might want to burrow myself within the frame in order to take in what that painting is asking of me, but it's very hard as I move around a museum structure not to be saturated with capitalism, with the hurting feet of the guards, the cost of membership, and, of course, the cost of the artworks themselves. One is, after all, roaming around a market. I remember one day I had fully enjoyed a day inside the Whitney in NYC only to exit and find people I knew protesting members of the museum's board, Warren Kandors, who eventually resigned because his company was selling tear gas used against protestors!

How do I allow myself that absorption in painting, that sense of renewal and reconfiguration, that can happen within a frame, or within a play, or even in a performance piece that is provisional without thinking about the infrastructure, who's paying, who's profiting? I suppose I am influenced by Brecht who cautioned not only against identification, but absorption as well.

I'm very interested in performance studies, and luckily taught in the field a couple of times at UC Berkeley with my colleague, Shannon Jackson, so seeing what happens when performance moves off the proscenium and into the street or various public spaces is important to me. Performance can become part of a strike against museums or other corporate entities, and that counterpoint is very powerful. In general, there is a performance dimension to strikes and protests that is very important for the articulation of political rage but also political sorrow. We see a lot of improvisational art and performance in the Movement for Black Lives, as Patrisse Cullors has shown. I am also aware of the power of plays that were written in classical Athens but have enormous power in contemporary life: Esperanza Spalding's rendition of *Iphigenia* is one. But *Antigone* remains ever-generative; *Antigone* was played under dictatorial Argentina and then post-dictatorial Argentina. *Antigone* was played in Colombia, in Ecuador. Colombians in exile performed the play in Mexico City;

it was performed in Palestine on a rubble of rocks that used to be somebody's home, changed into a platform. The Jenin theatre project on which I served on the international board, was all about turning political rage and sorrow into art, especially photography and performance. I think for me, some of the most emotionally powerful and life-changing, but also conceptual-framework-changing events have happened through powerful, powerful performances and powerful art, including poetry. We could document, as well, the way photography has changed our experience of illness, of war, of science, of the virus in ways that have enormous social and political implications.

**CJLPA: You say how walking through a museum and seeing certain frames, paintings, sculptures, whatever they may be, emotionally affects you, and that art has both positive and negative aspects. I can also see how that could be a source of anxiety for many people, not being able to, for example, walk through the museums and enjoy the art available without the knowledge of how it was retrieved—take, for example, the current scandal with the British Museum and how they retrieve certain historical items. How do we manage that anxiety?**

**JB:** I followed Christopher Hitchens' writings on the Elgin marbles scandal, and I thought it was among the better things he did, really instigating that campaign to return the marbles to Athens. I've seen the partial display of those marbles in Athens as well as in the UK, and I've deliberately gone between the two sites to see what was stolen and how it was presented by the British Museum. I won't not go see stolen art, but then part of looking involves seeing how the stealing is framed, and how the frame effaces the crime. Something similar happened in France after the opening of the musée du quai Branly and art stolen from Africa was identified. After being petitioned by Felwine Sarr from Senegal, Macron agreed to return the art to Africa. Reparations of this kind are crucial to exposing the continuing colonial legacies at work in the art world, including legacies of military destruction and pillage. The repatriation of artworks is a counter-imperialist move that we need to examine and continue to think about, including the way that those legacies have contoured the canon of art history itself, as Banu Karaca has demonstrated. The history of looting is also something we look away from when we become absorbed in the work of art, but maybe we can somehow have both. There are aspects of capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism that enter into my 'seeing' when I go to museums, but it does not fully preclude becoming claimed by a work of art. It is that seeing moves from one dimension to another, and that the one is always hovering in the background of the other. I think we can allow ourselves that absorption, but also try to figure out what the institutional and labour conditions for this beautiful encounter I'm having are. It doesn't destroy it for me, but it needs to be part of what I take in when I go.

**CJLPA: I'm particularly interested in your notion of grievability and your work in the field of necropolitics more generally, and I wanted to ask you a more topical question on this basis. I was wondering whether grievability could be applied to describe the differences we see in the treatment of war victims. Are there differences in the grievability of war victims, for example, in Ukraine compared to Palestinian citizens, or Syrian refugees? And if there is, how do we minimise this?**

**JB:** I think there's no way to think about war without thinking about those who are fleeing war, and that means that we're thinking about borders and detention practices. Wars are often about contesting or claiming borders, as we know. They can be ways of moving borders or breaking borders. But the border, wherever it is, is the place for the gathering of refugees and the treatment of refugees, the negotiation of alterity, citizenship, and rights of mobility, even rights of existence. Some people, following Michael Walzer, make a distinction between just and unjust war and, according to that framework, an unjust war is obviously being waged against the Ukrainian people (as of June 2, 2022). But is it right to say that the Ukrainians are waging a just war? Or is it better to say that they are engaged in a fully legitimate resistance to military aggression? Those kinds of debates centre on established nations, but let's remember that nations get established through establishing territorial boundaries and regulating rights of passage. On the border with Poland, radical social inequality accompanies, and qualifies, the general admiration for Polish hospitality. Some refugees merit hospitality, but others clearly don't. I'm reminded of Mahmood Mamdani's book *Good Muslim Bad Muslim* where he argues that the Muslim who can assimilate well, the one who is well educated, who shares cultural or class behaviours and values with Europeans, including secular commitments, stands a chance of becoming the good one. But the one who holds out, affirming their community of belonging, participating in religious or cultural activities that deviate from dominant religious, cosmopolitan cultures, is usually deemed bad or suspect, not only because they adhere to certain religious practises, but because they are *seen* to adhere: they are publicly regarded as adhering to that community rather than assimilating to a national one, or they wear something that announces that they are in fact religious, or that they belong to a religious tradition and community.

I recall Mamdani's distinction because at the borders of Europe, we are witnessing mechanisms that distinguish between good and bad refugees. It's been the case for some time that wealthy people can buy their way into citizenship in places like Spain, and that other European nations demand to see bank and investment accounts in deciding who can come in and who can stay. Even as Angela Merkel invited Syrians to Germany—and that was a great thing that she did—she discriminated against a number of North Africans at the border and did not open that same door to them. These are all examples of social inequality, but also decisions about whose lives are worthy of supporting and whose can be abandoned. For those who make those decisions according to national policies, they are all the time distinguishing between those lives that are legible, intelligible, valuable, and those that are clearly not. Even if they never say it to themselves, they are deciding whose lives are dispensable, can be tossed, or can be left to die at the border or drown at sea. For instance, in Honduras, people are living in conditions at borders that not only put them at extreme risk for COVID, but also, now, other diseases. They are living in unsanitary conditions, or without basic medical or health provisions. They are a population that is left to become ill, made increasingly susceptible to illness and to death by the lack of infrastructure provided. Maybe nobody is shooting them or bombing them, but some powers are letting them die. This is a form of slow violence, as Rob Nixon has said. That letting the population die in a way that many countries do—and I think Europe does this as well in its maritime restrictions on immigration over the Mediterranean—constitutes the second form of death-dealing that Foucault describes in *Society Must Be Defended*. The first might be understood as the deliberate decision of sovereign powers to declare war or sentence someone to death. Putin is emulating that form of sovereign power as we speak.

But then there's this 'letting die', which usually happens through policy or through neglect and dispensability. Neglect can be unthinking or it can be deliberate policy, as when Malta turns back leaky vessels filled with migrants. I think that by letting them die, we can call it necropolitical as Achille Mbembe has, I have no problem with that and I use that term myself, but sometimes those forms of death dealing are intertwined and I think we do see that in war.

**CJLPA:** In light of that, should there be a criteria or international law in place so that countries, or specific countries, keep their borders open and welcome refugees with open arms?

**JB:** I think there's clear racism at the border of Poland, and the Polish government was clearly happier with Ukrainian refugees than with refugees coming from Afghanistan or Syria or North Africa. At work is both racial and religious discrimination. It's also part of this assimilationist logic that says, 'Oh you can come to a European country, but you must assimilate to this culture, or be regarded in advance as capable of that assimilation'. Why does anyone make a demand of that sort? Why can't anyone come and actually change the country, change and enrich the culture of the country? Inviting migrants in implies agreeing to be transformed by new members of the society and, yes, becoming a different country. Yes! Allow the country to evolve into a more international, transnational region, that's actually enormously hopeful. Multilingualism, that's no less than fabulous, especially when educational and cultural institutions provide for that, and support that vision. So, although we surely need firmer anti-discrimination laws at the border, that only goes part of the way toward realising the new vision of society that is required. We also need to strengthen international covenants to stipulate that all stateless people have the right to belong somewhere, and that it is the obligation of every state to admit people from whatever origin or location for asylum procedures and to give their petitions fair, transparent, and comprehensive reviews on a non-discriminatory basis. Also, it will be imperative to rethink the state not just as a sovereign entity that defends its borders through military means and hyper surveillance but considers its borders as a portal and a threshold. The border should be rethought as portal and threshold, the site of translation, exchange, and movement, and the state should be rethought as a set of dynamic relations with other territories, regions, and states. It should be defined by that relationality rather than by its sovereign defensive position.

**CJLPA:** What advice would you give to aspiring researchers, students of inequality, or activists?

**JB:** I would say that if you're a researcher in a university, make sure you do not stay fully enclosed within the university, that you don't treat the university walls as protection and enclosure. You actually need to insist that those walls become porous and that the communities around you, the broader world, enter the university and help to decide the purpose and plan of research. I think that academics can become very self-referential within the university, and I believe some of the anti-intellectualism on the right comes from not really understanding what we do in universities and why we do it. I think there's also anti-intellectualism on the left or on the part of those who believe that the internet provides more knowledge than any possible classroom. I don't know about this term, 'scholar/activist', I don't know if I am that or not: sometimes I'm just a scholar, sometimes I'm just an activist, and sometimes I'm blending, so I don't really know how to reflect upon that distinction. But I think learning how to go out into the world through other platforms and making

our knowledge known, and explaining its value, and handling the challenges to it in various kinds of venues, whether it's online or in person, is a really important thing for academics to do. If we work in public universities, and the public cannot understand the value of what we do, they will seek to defund us, especially during austerity. Besides, it sharpens our thinking and it connects us with people, so we don't become hermetically sealed within academic life and too neurotically self-referential. The academy is a place where neurosis can breed dangerously, so one needs to remember to stay connected to a larger world; it lifts one out of oneself and reminds us that we are not the centre of the world.

I do think academics at the start of a career should be afforded the chance to wake up in the morning and feel passionate about what they do. Don't pick the topic that you don't love because you think it'll get you somewhere professionally: No. Especially if you're writing a dissertation or a first book, you must want to see that page when you wake up. You must be eager to get back to where you left off. But that means you have to find your desire and stay with it, and trust that it will yield something that's valuable to you and to others.

**CJLPA: At this moment in time what is your current research interest, what are you working on, and what was your motivation behind this interest?**

**JB:** Well, I'm writing a book called *Who's Afraid of Gender?* which is a critique of the anti-gender ideology movement. I'm trying to take apart their arguments while tracking the phantasms that haunt their thinking, which show the limits of argumentative discourse. Of course, it's hard to argue with somebody who won't read the work in question but nevertheless has a firm idea of what it is about. One is confronted with a highly phantasmatic side of anxiety and fear. One also has to think about how to address that. If you can't work at the level of argumentation and evidence, how do you proceed? How do you address somebody's massive anxiety and fear and hatred? So, that's my problem and I'm trying to confront that question.

And then I have a long-standing project on Kafka on the law—I guess we could have talked about that—where I am trying to understand, in general, how his writing relates to indefinite detention. Indefinite detention has become the most common carceral practice in the world, and Kafka had a developed premonition about how it works. In particular, he was interested in the status of legal systems when the sequence of a trial and punishment is reversed, that is to say, when one is found guilty first and then the trial and its deferment becomes an indefinitely extended form of punishment. So, I'm also interested in how Kafka thinks about the architecture of law because law is both a temporal and spatial problem in his work. When it takes architectural form, law comes to resemble prisons and their impasses. His literary writing collapses narrative into carceral space and its impasses.

**CJLPA: What kind of course is feminist philosophy currently taking?**

**JB:** I think there are several things going on. I think Black feminism has enormous influence not only in the US and UK, but throughout Europe, Africa, and Latin America. There's a great deal of work being done by contemporary feminist philosophers on race and gender, but also prison abolition. We have to think about abolitionism as a form of Black feminist philosophy. There continues to be work being done in the philosophy of science relating to reproductive freedoms, personhood, the question of life, care, and the technologies of both

reproduction and sex assignment. There is also a fair amount being done on feminist movement politics, especially the feminist strike, bringing forward the work of Rosa Luxemburg into contemporary feminist politics, and a great deal of reflection on both resistance and revolution. Many feminist philosophers are interested in how we think about desire and affect in politics. To answer that question, many feminist philosophers go back to Spinoza or bring Spinoza forward into the present to try to do that—I find those positions very interesting even though I cannot always go along. Decolonial feminism is important for philosophy and for several other fields, engaging feminist thinkers who have written extensively on colonisation such as Rita Segato and Françoise Vergès.

**CJLPA: Do you have any career memories or regrets that you have as a philosopher or as an activist?**

**JB:** I think that *Gender Trouble* was written when I was trying to secure a permanent job, and I think it was kind of trapped in the French discourse of the time in the US. It was written in a more difficult style than it should have been. Despite its difficulty, it remains popular and people still read it. Perhaps I could have shown more clearly how I was influenced by social movements, especially AIDS activism and LGBTQI emergent movements, but also the history of feminist thought, including Black feminist thought and poetry. I wish that I could have written that book for a broader audience and perhaps with a broader citational base, but I somehow imagined that it would not have much of a life. Of course, I have many regrets in my career, and there were times when I responded to a plea from a friend that ended up putting me in a morally compromised position. I cannot undo that kind of mistake, but I can now live my life differently. One has to be humble in relation to one's errors, affirm the errancy, as it were, to become a more attentive and responsible person. On the other hand, I have been gifted by the connections that my work has made among readers and translators, the latter group being some of the most important intellectuals I have met. They have introduced my words, and me, to worlds that I would have never understood or known about. So, basically, I feel gratitude. So, I'm much more connected to different parts of the world by virtue of very brilliant translators who spent time with me and who ultimately became my intellectual colleagues and friends. Translation is difficult, frustrating, and transformative, like life.

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