

Judith Butler, Catalonia International Prize 2021

Judith Butler. Philosopher

On 27 April 2022, the American philosopher Judith Butler received the Catalonia International Prize for her contributions in the field of non-violence. Butler, one of the foundational theoreticians of queer theory, is considered one of today's most influential voices in contemporary political theory. She is the author, among others, of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993), in which she challenged the conventional notions of gender and developed her theory of gender performativity. She is a recognised activist who has participated in many social movements in favour of LGBTQBI rights and advises on several contemporary political issues in organisations such as the Jewish Voice for Peace and the Center for Constitutional Rights in New York.

Dear Jury, if you honor me, you honor my allies, my interlocutors, and all those who have made my work possible, those who have made my presence here possible.¹ For if there is a reason why I am here it is because this place has changed me, and this place has opened itself to me. You honor as well the fields of philosophy and literature, critical theory, queer theory, feminist studies, trans studies, psychoanalysis, ethics and politics. You honor as well the idea of the porous university whose walls do not shut out the world, the university as a non-corporate, even anti-corporate entity, the idea of the university as a threshold for public thinking and social transformation. For this I thank you.

As you know, we are, every day, living with enormous sorrow in the face of Putin's brutal war against the Ukrainian people; every day brings fresh news of horrific destruction. And, as we know, the destruction of war includes loss of lives and livelihood, the destruction of cities and the toxification of soil, and the accelerating augmentation of the world's refugees. The number of forcibly displaced people in the world is now estimated at more than 82 million. As we think together about the future of this world, we must re-imagine sanctuary, asylum, shelter and borders outside the framework of prison and incarceration. We will, I believe, have to dismantle detention camps to provide durable support for self-governing communi-

1. This is an adapted version of Judith Butler's speech delivered on the awards ceremony of the Catalonia International Prize in Barcelona on 27 April 2022. We have removed the acknowledgements to directly present her text in *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*.

ties, including health care, rites of passage, shelter, and pathways for finding work and belonging. For so many people living at the border, the border has become a site of abandonment and intensified subjection to carceral powers, an unwanted residence, no residence at all, in the midst of a transition that does not move, a suspended way of life at the edge of the world. What are the global obligations to provide shelter, belonging, food, health care, and legal status to all the people of the world? Has war, pandemic, climate destruction, and forcible displacement not made this into the central ethical question for our times? How can we begin by supporting those institutions that reject the idea that migration is a crime rather than a universal freedom to be honored at every border, that reject the idea of the border as a place where racism is tenaciously reproduced? As we applaud the Polish people for opening their doors to their Ukrainian neighbors, let us also oppose pernicious forms of racism and nationalism that continue on the borders of so many countries in this world, including my own – the United States – and make increasingly numbers of lives unlivable.

Putin's war happens against the background of a pandemic that is not precisely over and that has taken the lives and health of nearly six and half million people. Here again we are faced with an enormous sorrow, an ambient sense of loss for those we did not know, a searing sense of loss for those we did know. Covid-19 is a disease of the interconnected world, so let it be the occasion on which we embrace that interconnection, that interdependency, to build a global solidarity for economic and social justice and equality, and for the freedom to live in a just and livable world. We also live with another sorrow: climate grief. This is the grief we feel not just on the occasion when oil spills happen, but in relation to a world that is losing biodiversity and the conditions for life itself, human and nonhuman. We know the loss of

loved ones, and even the process, the struggle, of mourning takes time. But we also know the gatherings that make survival possible, the ones that make us want to live. For wanting to live comes about only when living is living with others, when we find ourselves in community or sociality that takes us beyond ourselves and into the world. There is no way to live now without sorrow, but there is no way to live now without each other, the ties that bind, the relationships that transform our lives and incite our imagination and our activism.

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I am aware that you honor me here today because of my contributions to what is called gender studies. Let us then remember that gender studies, including feminist, queer and trans studies, is under attack in Poland, Hungary, Russia, Brazil, South Korea, France, the United States, Turkey, by groups who claim to be defending the nation, or traditional values, man, heterosexual marriage, the difference between the sexes, civilization itself. What is this gender? And why is it so frightening? Is gender part of the new identity politics, taking us away from a more comprehensive Left movement? Or is gender precisely a phantasm mobilized by new authoritarians and neo-fascism to shore up patriarchal power, the right to inflict violence as a sign of true manhood? Gender is neither a side issue nor a distraction. When Putin and other authoritarians identify feminism, LGBTQI studies, and gender as an assault on national security, national identity, they are telling us that the nation itself depends upon gender inequality and gender violence, that the inequality of women is part of the na-

tional status quo, and that fighting inequality, demanding the end to femicide, is an attack on the authority and soul of the nation. They will go to war to defend those “traditional values”; they will put people in prison to suppress their viewpoints; they will censor books that encourage people to think anew about the embodied lives we live together. Which version of the nation is threatened by those who seek freedom, equality and justice, the end to war, who pursue a nonviolent future of social transformation? To demand equality, the end to rape and violence, the end to pathologizing queer and trans youth, the end to censorship of gender studies, the end to the criminalization of LGBTQI people throughout the world, to demand as well the freedom to move and breathe on the street in the day or the night without fear of violence or imprisonment, these are all basic demands that belong to any country that calls itself democratic. To move on the street without fear should be a basic freedom; to gather or move on the street with others to deliberate, to act, to form and expand a social movement – these two are basic freedoms for which we should not have to ask for permission. Indeed, these are freedoms that we can only take and exercise together; these freedoms belong to none of us as individuals, but only and always to all of us as inhabitants of the world, living and breathing

with one another, with all its difficulty, terror, excitement and promise.

To emerge from loss, we have to acknowledge the losses that have already taken place, as well as those that are still taking place as we speak. We should all be worthy of grief should we become lost to the world; all of our lives should be acknowledged and known and treated with dignity, but for that we need the social and political conditions in which we are empowered to live, where the lives of those subordinated and effaced come to matter. To oppose injustice, we must first name and know the forms of injustice, and we now have new forms of authoritarianism and fascism which we must analyze with forms of knowledge that make us wiser about how best to intervene, to stop this war, to dismantle those powers. For all of these tasks, we need to keep gathering, to know that even in our solitude we are populated by the living and the dead, incited by loss and the prospects of a community in process. That shared world is the one in which we give each other breath, life, expansive and affirmative infrastructures of care, as well as a sense that ongoing destruction can be brought to an end. In our sorrow and in our struggle, we find each other – I have found you, and somehow you found me. For that I am most grateful, and I thank you.