Who’s Afraid of Judith Butler?

The philosopher and gender theorist has been denounced, demonized, even burned in effigy. They have a theory about that.

By Parul Sehgal

April 29, 2024

For their latest work, Butler became a student again, wading into a world ruled by enveloping dread. “I just tried to go deeper into that place of enormous stuckness and rage,” they said.Photograph by Jess T. Dugan for The New Yorker

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In January, the American philosopher Judith Butler and the South African artist William Kentridge took part in a public conversation in Paris about atrocity and its representations. Before an audience at the École Normale Supérieure, they spoke for nearly two hours, in lulling abstraction and murmured mutual regard: *Can we give the image the benefit of the doubt*? *What is the role of the object in thinking*? After the event, a woman—a philosopher herself—approached Butler. Tight with tension, she gripped Butler by the arm.

“*Vous menacez mes enfants*,” she said, in Butler’s recounting. “You are threatening my children.”

Butler has regularly required personal security. In 2012, the city of Frankfurt awarded them the Theodor W. Adorno Prize for their contributions to philosophy. (Butler recently adopted they/them pronouns but doesn’t “police it.”) The general secretary of the Central Council of Jews in Germany decried the decision to give the award, named for a philosopher of Jewish descent who fled the Nazis, to a “well-known hater of Israel.” A demonstration was organized. Butler, a prominent critic of Zionism, responded by citing their education in a Jewish ethical tradition, which compelled them to speak in the face of injustice.

Their academic work on gender from the nineteen-nineties, albeit in distorted form, has incited recurrent waves of fury. From Eastern Europe to South America, right-wing groups have portrayed Butler as not merely one of the founders of “gender theory” but a founder of “gender” itself—gender framed as the elevation of trans and gay rights and the undermining of the traditional family. In 2017, while travelling in Brazil, where they

had helped organize a conference on democracy, Butler was met by protesters holding placards depicting them with devil horns. They burned a puppet bearing a witch's hat, a pink bra, and a photograph of Butler's face—a "gender monster," Butler called it. At the airport, a fight broke out when a protester tried to attack Butler and a bystander intervened.

Still, that evening in Paris, Butler did not flinch or pull away. They responded, in French, "How am I threatening your children?"

"You speak in this way," the woman replied. "They listen to you. And, if they listen to you, they will stop defending Israel. You're not a European, you don't know this, but the Holocaust can come again."

"I grew up with that fear of it happening again," Butler said. Most of their maternal line, Hungarian Jews, had been killed in the Holocaust. Butler proposed a conversation "about whether this current state is actually protecting the Jews from harm or exposing the Jews to harm." The woman refused. Butler persisted—a coffee perhaps? "I'd like to understand more about your fear," Butler said. "You and I both want to live without fear of violence. We're just trying to arrive at it in a different way." The woman started to cry. "We'll meet, we'll meet," she said. Butler asked for permission to embrace her.

"I recognized her," Butler told me later. "She could have been my aunt. Her fear had been my own. Sometimes it is still my own."

Back in Berkeley, where Butler lives and teaches, I heard them tell the story to a few different people, turning it over, poking at it. "You didn't win an argument," one friend, the poet Claudia Rankine, told them. "There *was* no argument!"

Butler agreed. "I just tried to go deeper into that place of enormous stuckness and rage, fear, hatred, terror."

That place of stuckness, of enveloping dread, is the setting of their latest book, “Who’s Afraid of Gender?,” which was published in March. It is unique in Butler’s corpus—not only because it is their least theoretical work and their first written for a broad audience but because it is their first book that feels written primarily out of a sense of obligation.

“There was no pleasure in the writing,” Butler said to me. “It felt like a public service, and a necessary one because I had absorbed this violence.”

A long-simmering book on Kafka was put on hold while Butler became a student of gender again. “I was naïve,” they told the British magazine *Dazed*. “When I was burned in effigy in Brazil in 2017, I could see people screaming about gender, and they understood ‘gender’ to mean ‘paedophilia.’ And then I heard people in France describing gender as a Jewish intellectual movement imported from the U.S. This book started because I had to figure out what gender had become. . . . I had no idea that it had become this flash point for right-wing movements throughout the world.”

Write what you know, the saying goes. Butler knows what it means to be that flash point, or “phantasm,” as they call it in “Who’s Afraid of Gender?,” borrowing a term from psychoanalysis. In the book, Butler traces the history of what they describe as a well-financed, transnational “anti-gender ideology movement.” The book took about two years to write; it is dense with journalistic detail and shaped by a particular credo. “I’m trying to respond to this rash of hatred, these distortions, and suggest some ways that we can produce a more compelling vision of the world that would counter them,” Butler has said. “I tried to make the book calm, because I want people to stay with me.”

“Who’s Afraid of Gender?” was a best-seller upon its release, although the reception was characteristically contradictory. Fans waxed nostalgic—Butler’s breakout book, “Gender Trouble,” has acquired the sheen of an avant-garde cultural object. Old foes got in their shots. Butler is so angry, one review said. Butler is irresponsibly moderate, another lamented.

In recent weeks, Butler has been occupied not just by book promotion but by handling the furor, from the left and the right, over their statements following the Hamas attacks of October 7th. Right-wing media resurfaced an old remark of Butler’s to suggest that they have defended Hamas and Hezbollah. A pro-Palestinian student group raised concerns about an essay Butler published in the *London Review of Books*, which chided those who used “the history of Israeli violence in the region to exonerate Hamas.” (Butler responded with a clarification and an apology.) Comments of Butler’s, from an event outside Paris, in which they referred to Hamas’s attacks as “armed resistance” were circulated as proof of endorsement. (Those who circulated the snippet hurried past the next part of what Butler had said: “I did not like that attack. . . . It was for me anguishing. It was terrible.”) Butler postponed a set of public lectures out of concern for their safety.

“They have been walking into storms for a long time,” the psychoanalytic writer Jacqueline Rose, an old friend of Butler’s, told me. “The work has been canonized through deep respect and hatred.”

Butler is soft-spoken and gallant, often sheathed in a trim black blazer or a leather jacket, but, given the slightest encouragement, they turn goofy and sly, almost gratefully. When they were twelve years old, they identified two plausible professional paths: philosopher or clown. In ordinary life, Butler incorporates both.

Butler apologized for the mess in their car, an old BMW, when we went for a drive one day—this amounted to a few books by the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, strewn around the

back seat. Butler's marginalia in those books are in a precise, hunched hand. Merleau-Ponty propounded the idea that the body, not consciousness, is our primary instrument for understanding the world. To be in a body is not to be contained but to be exposed to the world; from our first breath, we are in need of care from other people. Merleau-Ponty is a deep influence; one can feel him tumbling around in the back seat of much of Butler's thinking. "I am open to a world that acts on me in ways that cannot be fully predicted or controlled in advance, and something about my openness is not, strictly speaking, under my control," they have said.

And Merleau-Ponty's style—"so adjectival!" Butler marvelled. Their hands made a quick movement, flowers bursting into bloom. "Subordinate clause upon subordinate clause." Butler slid on wire-rimmed sunglasses and began reversing. "The problem is that he loses the verb, and he just keeps proliferating and twisting. You just have to go with it, without any expectation that the verb will take you somewhere. What's left is a kind of experience, a kind of ride—*all right*, *all right*, *I see you*, *go ahead*, *go ahead*." Butler squinted into the rearview mirror; another driver tried squeezing past. "He's willing to work several metaphors in the same long sentence." The driver leaned on his horn.

"My proprioceptive body" is how Butler refers to their car. "I'm surrounded by this clunky thing, and I feel protected," they'd explained. "I expand. I have this carapace." They laughed. "But it's, um, prosthetic."

Butler and their partner, the political theorist Wendy Brown, live in a white house with blue trim, the Tudor-style façade webbed with climbing jasmine—the same house in which they raised their son, Isaac, now a musician living nearby. House sitters are staying there while Brown is at the Institute for Advanced Study, in Princeton, and Butler travels between Berkeley and Paris. The rooms are airy and uncluttered, adorned with textile hangings and other totems of travel. Giraffe figurines stalk the mantel. When I

visited, a freshly unwrapped U.K. edition of “Who’s Afraid of Gender?” lay on the hall table.

Stairs curve into a lofted study, where Butler works. The room has a woodstove and two desks, the smaller one, for administrative tasks, snowed over with paper. Bookshelves line the walls—one bearing only works published by Butler’s former students. There is French theory here, a low-slung shelf dedicated to copies of “Antigone” there, and Hegel—who has been the trellis around which Butler’s work has twined.

“Would you like free or expensive water?”

Cartoon by Amy Kurzweil

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Butler draws a great deal from Hegel’s famous master-slave dialectic, presented in a passage in “The Phenomenology of Spirit.” The self finds itself only in the eyes of another; the master must be recognized by the slave to fulfill his self-consciousness.

Thus, the two recognize one another fully at the moment when they grasp their shared ability to annihilate each other. Butler writes, “It is at a moment of fundamental vulnerability that recognition becomes possible, and need becomes self-conscious. What recognition does at such a moment is, to be sure, to hold destruction in check. But what it also means is that the self is not its own, that it is given over to the Other.”

“I recognized her,” Butler had said of the woman in Paris. “Her fear had been my own.” This wasn’t comfort or condemnation; it was simply inevitable. In Butler’s reading of Hegel, the process of recognition also involves a surrender of self—whereupon the self that’s returned to you is never the one you started with.

The surviving footage is grainy, but the careful, cultivated glamour is unmistakable. A young woman stands on a boat. The camera drifts from her face to her hip, down to her ankle, and back up again, to her face and her evident delight.

The woman is Butler’s aunt Alice; the cameraman, Butler’s maternal grandfather, Max. Butler’s grandparents had come from a Hungarian village and settled in Cleveland. Max owned silent-movie theatres. To pass as Americans, the family began emulating the actors onscreen: “My grandfather became Clark Gable. My grandmother became Helen Hayes. My mother . . . more Joan Crawford.” It was, Butler said, “assimilation mixed with an absolutely raging fear of antisemitism.”

Max filmed his wife, Helen, tanning by a pool, the straps of her bathing suit pulled down over her shoulders. Butler’s father makes an appearance, teaching his children to swim. He slicks back a child’s hair with pride.

“Maybe ‘Gender Trouble’ is actually a theory that emerges from my effort to make sense of how my family embodied those Hollywood norms and how they also didn’t,” Butler said in a documentary. “Maybe my conclusion was that anyone who

strives to embody them also perhaps fails in some ways that are more interesting than their successes."

After Hitler came to power, Butler's grandparents returned to the family village, bearing money and tickets for their family to flee. Full of fear and superstition, most of the family refused, Butler was told. Max's footage of the villagers survives—they dance together, for the camera. A few years later, the news came of the family's obliteration.

As Butler understands it now, from a story passed along by their mother, Butler's grandparents took their teen-age son Harold to Vienna, for a consultation with sexologists there. It was a matter, Butler thinks, of some anomalous sexual development. "They subjected him to countless doctors," they said. "He had to drop his pants and allow his genitals to be examined, talked about, and analyzed." It was too late, the doctors said. He needed to have been seen before puberty; there was nothing to be done now.

Back in Cleveland, Harold began acting out, as if traumatically repeating what he had endured. "Maybe he was searching for a way to tell that story," Butler said. "Or to express his anger against my grandparents. This was so shameful for my grandmother, who thought she was going to overcome poverty and antisemitism by being Helen Hayes, that she and Max had Harold shipped away to the Menninger Foundation, in Kansas."

One of Butler's cousins grew up with a very different impression: Harold was simply said to be mentally "not right"—maybe he had autism? Butler recalls being informed as a child that Uncle Harold was a vegetable. Whatever the truth was, Harold ended up in a home for people with developmental disabilities. "I was told that we couldn't visit him," Butler said. "We couldn't know him."

In "Gender Trouble," Butler wrote that the book's aim was not to prescribe any particular way of life but "to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized." Then, as if anticipating that this

thought might be dismissed as so much jargon, they pressed the point: “One might wonder what use ‘opening up possibilities’ finally is, but no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is ‘impossible,’ illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate is likely to pose that question.” The sentence has a curious shape, advancing and withdrawing a question, almost as if to create a space for a person who was and was not there.

Harold was in his sixties when he died. Butler heard from a relative that Harold had been lucid all those years. He was close to his caregiver. “I’m told that he received a clean sweater, new pants every year, and a little package,” Butler recalled. His brother was said to have paid him an annual visit, but Harold otherwise seemed to have been cut off. “I felt it said something very deep about the cruelty of this family in this history. A family that both suffered cruelty and inflicted it—not the same, but horrifying, nevertheless.”

As an adolescent, Butler was increasingly oppressed by what they describe as panicked “gender patrolling.” Their father was a dentist; their mother worked in fair housing and helped run campaigns for Ohio Democrats. Butler was the middle child. Their siblings “monopolized the genders—he was Mr. Man, and she was this petite dancer who went to Juilliard. I was—I don’t know.” There were thunderous arguments. “I couldn’t wear a dress. It was impossible.”

When it emerged that Butler and two of their cousins were gay, all three were shamed. “I always felt solidarity with Harold,” they said. “We were the queer revenge. We’re not going to conform to everybody’s idea of what we should be.” But, they added, “we suffered.”

School was a reprieve, although Butler was so disruptive in Hebrew school, so often accused of clowning, that they were assigned private tutorials with the rabbi. Butler recalls telling him at their first meeting that they wanted to focus on three questions: “Why was Spinoza excommunicated from the Jewish

community? Could German idealism be held accountable for Nazism? And how was one to understand existential theology, including the work of Martin Buber?" Butler was fourteen.

Jewish education gave Butler what felt, initially, like an invitation into open debate and a consideration of what counts as evidence, what makes an interpretation credible. In high school, they travelled twice to Israel, as part of a program that was something of a predecessor to Birthright. It was the early seventies; Butler had been witnessing the civil-rights movement and was disturbed by what they saw as the racial stratifications within Israeli society.

At home, a sense of isolation grew. Butler was outed by the parents of a girlfriend. They began to scratch at their arms uncontrollably. Dermatologists proved to be of no use, and Butler's parents eventually sought help from the head of psychiatry at a local hospital. He surprised Butler by asking if they were familiar with the concept of the hair shirt, from the Bible—the donning of a scratchy garment to expiate a sense of sin.

"He was reading the Bible as literature," Butler recalled. "I didn't know you could do that. He was reading a symptom as a metaphor. He was telling me that my body was speaking in a symptom and saying something that I needed to understand and could reflect on." By the end of the conversation, Butler told him, with wonder, "You're not trying to change my object of desire." And he responded, "Well, frankly, given where you come from, you are lucky to love anyone at all. So let's affirm your capacity to love."

Butler has remained a "creature of psychoanalysis," they said. "It's where I learned how to read. I was given permission to live and to love, which is what I do in my work. It was a wise and generous gift, which allowed me to move forward with my life."

Adeck, with a large hammock and a small lemon tree, connects Butler's study with Brown's. After work, they meet here to talk or nap. It is an architectural delineation of their way of thinking together. "Influence, not synthesis," Brown told me. Butler brings Brown closer to poetry and psychoanalysis; Brown prompts Butler to think about climate change and political economy, about nonhuman lives that must also be considered grievable. "We joke I'm closer to the animals," Brown said. "Judith is very human." Every day, Butler swims in a nearby pool, and Brown in the bay, year-round.

The two met in the late eighties. Butler had been invited to give a talk on Sartre at Williams College. It was a difficult time. A few years earlier, Butler had completed a philosophy dissertation at Yale on desire and recognition in Hegel, filtered through twentieth-century French thought—Alexandre Kojève, Sartre, Lacan, Foucault. It became their first book, "Subjects of Desire" (1987), and advanced a reading of the "Phenomenology" as a journey with a singularly blundering and resilient protagonist, forever failing in his quest for identity but constantly renewing himself—his tragic blindness turning out to be "the comic myopia of Mr. Magoo," who crashes his car into a chicken coop but lands, as always, on all four wheels. Yet a secure teaching position proved elusive.

"I was what we used to call a street dyke," Butler said. "Nobody had taught me about haircuts or shirts. I didn't have silk blouses. I had sweatshirts. But I'm not thinking about how I look. I'm thinking about Sartre."

Butler recalled giving a job talk at Williams, and learning that the customary dinner with department members wasn't going to happen. Butler returned to their motel and sat on the bed, confused. A professor called to apologize: the faculty had been taken aback by Butler's appearance. The next day, still stinging, Butler found their way to a women's faculty meeting, and in walked Wendy Brown, a political philosopher at Williams, a little late.

“Williams, you can’t be totally bad,” Butler recalled thinking. “She just came in and said hello, and she was so luminous. She’s still luminous. She walks in and it’s, like, there’s too much light in the room.”

Butler, still in search of a tenure-track job, wrote a draft of “Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity” as a visiting fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study, as part of a program on gender run by Joan W. Scott, who became a lifelong friend. Though “Gender Trouble” was written, Butler says, for a few hundred people at best, it has sold more than a hundred thousand copies.

One day, Brown was sitting in the audience at a conference at Rutgers, listening to Butler speak on a panel, when she sensed from the atmosphere that something had changed. “It was early in the star system in academia, so probably 1992,” she said. “That whole business of celebrity academics—we’re so used to it now. But academics then were old tweedy guys. There may have been some eminences, but they weren’t celebrities. And, all of a sudden, Judith was one.”

Başak Ertür, a legal scholar and a Turkish translator of Butler’s, told me that more than nine hundred people filled an auditorium in Ankara to hear them speak: “Not just academics but L.G.B.T.Q. activists, antiwar activists, sex workers.”

Butler told me that they had little notion of what was happening at first. “Someone from the *Village Voice* asked, ‘What are you thinking about the new directions in queer theory?’ I said, ‘What’s queer theory?’ They thought I was being Socratic.”

Brown still worries about the costs of Butler’s celebrity, the memes crowding out the meanings. “Neither the person nor the richness of the work can cohabit with celebrity—they just can’t,” she said. “I think that the ‘gender-troubled Judith’ and the ‘anti-Zionist Judith’ and the ‘activist Judith’ can miss that this is a person formed by philosophical questions and readings. Careful

and close reading, which you generally do by yourself. ‘Gender Trouble’ came out of what we then called gay and lesbian emancipation. But it was not born in the lesbian bar. No, they took it home and wrote it, alone. It is a part of them that I think vanishes sometimes in the hullabaloo.”

That book, inciter of hullabaloo and produced in private by a thirty-four-year-old junior professor, is itself now thirty-four years old. It drew on Derrida’s reading of the Oxford philosopher of language J. L. Austin and his speech-act theory. Austin had anatomized “performative utterances”: linguistic acts that don’t depict reality but enact it, as when you promise something by using the words “I promise.” Butler broadened the notion to behavior, arguing that gender was something people did performatively. The incorrect reading of “performativity,” which remains the popular one, posits gender as a kind of costume, chosen or discarded for some theatre-in-the-round. What Butler was describing was more obdurate, involving constraint as well as agency. For Butler, the question was “What is done to me, and what is it I do with what is done to me?”

“Butler made thinking so expansively about gender possible,” Paisley Currah, a political scientist and the author of a recent book about transgender identity and the law, told me. “We’re all kind of rearranging what they say and not quite agreeing and responding to it or doing something a little bit different.” Academics in other disciplines, too, found the notion generative. The literary scholar Saidiya Hartman told me that “Gender Trouble” influenced her own thinking about the “coerced performance in Blackness, the performance imposed upon our bodies.”

Joan Scott, as a historian, situates “Gender Trouble” historically: “The seventies and eighties are the start of the critical exploration of gender identity. Feminism starts out with consciousness-raising and asking, What are women? The whole enterprise of critical work is to refuse the singular identity of women, men, gender, race, whatever. All of that, the book is looking to complexify.”

Butler has called identity politics a “terrible American conceit” that proceeds “as if becoming visible, becoming sayable, is the end of politics.”

This critique didn’t necessarily register. “I wrote a whole book calling into question identity politics, only then to be constituted as a token of lesbian identity,” Butler told *Artforum*. “Either people didn’t really read the book or the commodification of identity politics is so strong that whatever you write, even when it’s explicitly opposed to that politics, gets taken up by that machinery.”

In a deeply wooded part of Codornices Park, a creek was running fast and high. A child with long, loose hair swung over it, on a rope hanging from a tree, observed by two small, serious-faced friends, caked to the neck in mud.

“My son played here,” Butler said. We took a winding path to a rose garden. The ground was soft and cratered, full of murky pools. In time, we arrived at the roses, but there were no roses, not yet. We toured the thorns instead, and admired the names of the varieties: Jekyll, Bubble Bath, Perfume Factory.

Brown and Butler took teaching jobs at Berkeley in the nineties, and raised their son amid a web of friends and their children. “It is important for all three of us that our understanding of ourselves as a family is more than nuclear,” Brown said.

“They were lesbians who had a child, had jobs, careers, and they let themselves be seen,” the poet Brenda Shaughnessy, a former student of Brown’s, told me. “I remember people called Judy ‘the rabbi,’ ” for their willingness to think through deep questions, to offer advice.

Former students spoke of the support Butler offered as immediate and material; graduate students who had worried about losing their stipend for protesting on campus told me that Butler promised to find money in their budget to support them if

necessary. Hartman, whose first teaching job was at Berkeley, called them a “lifeline”: “Scholars of color are supposed to repair the institution, not lead a life of the mind. I had seen people become overwhelmed and die doing that work. Judith protected me. Judith used their power. I was given room to do my work.”

Butler and I were walking along a narrowing rill when the muddy ground turned slick and I started sliding backward. They steadied me. A while later, I noticed that they were walking oddly, their arm held out at an unnatural angle. “I am trying to be subtle,” Butler told me. “My imitation of a nonintrusive, permanent bannister.”

After their son was born, Butler would write with the baby in the carrier, those years so flush with momentum that there was no need to question when or how to write. When the baby cried, Butler learned to wait a beat or two and then match him vocally at a particular note. “He would hold it with me,” they recalled. “Or then we’d hold it together. We’d pass it back and forth. Or I’d take him into a song. Hebrew songs have these really elongated vowels.” Butler stopped and sang out, “ ‘*Baruuuuuuuuch ataaaah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam*.’ He would be very assuaged by those kinds of sounds.”

Butler went on, “My question to him was never ‘What have I made?’ or ‘How did I make you?’ The question was always ‘Who are you? Who the fuck are you?’ Here’s this independent creature. Yes, I helped bring him into the world, but what do I have to do with this? Sometimes I think, Well, I’m not the biological parent, but I think everybody feels that way. He’s not a reflection of me or on me. I’m constantly getting to know him. It’s really important to keep that question open: Who are you? Don’t fill it in too quickly.”

The author of “Gender Trouble” became an icon of another form of trouble in the decade after the book’s publication. Here was a thinker who was highly visible and yet wrote in the fiercely furled language of Continental philosophy and post-structuralism. Some

took Butler to be emblematic of the hieratic and hermetic nature of the humanities writ large. They were awarded first prize in a Bad Writing Contest held by the journal *Philosophy and Literature*, which cited such turns of phrase as "The insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony." In a 1999 review in *The New Republic*, Martha Nussbaum wrote, "It is difficult to come to grips with Butler's ideas, because it is difficult to figure out what they are."

And yet other people worried about the malign influence of that style, treating it as a covert contagion. *You speak this way. They listen to you*. In truth, difficulty is only one part of Butler's prose. This, too, is Butler, one of their best-known passages, from "Undoing Gender," as direct as any love song:

> Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something. If this seems so clearly the case with grief, it is only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact. It may be that one wants to, or does, but it may also be that despite one's best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel.

Still others have relished Butler's difficulty, as a road to hard-won revelation. "Gender Trouble" enacts "an anti-common sense," the novelist and scholar Jordy Rosenberg writes. "You have to subject yourself to the difficulty of its language in order to begin to unstitch the only-seemingly coherent logic of gender, order, and discourse that you have grown accustomed to, that has been made natural to you—no, through which you, your gender, has been made to seem natural."

For a time, Butler fought back, defending their style. Now they shrug, and joke: "Sorry about the sentences."

What they don't shrug off is that, as Butler says of their early books, "I was not good on trans." Almost from the beginning, there were critics who objected to Butler's depiction of transness as a social critique, rather than as lived experience, a sense of self, deeply known. Some argued that Butler did not account for those

who sought and found comfort in a gender category, or that the emphasis on the philosophy of gender ignored the more pressing material concerns—and dangers—facing trans people. Butler's stance has evolved, but there are activists who fear that the early characterizations, and the misinterpretation of performativity, have had a pernicious staying power.

"I had fun, but it was the kind of fun I don't like."

Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

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"That notion that queer identity is inherently subversive, which presupposes that there is a natural order, that the very identity of trans people is a provocation—it's become the dominant narrative, and it has had a huge impact on legal advocacy," Shannon Minter, the legal director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights, told me. "It has convinced the public that gender identity is self-definition."

Butler has never been stinting with amplifications, apologies, adjustments: their career can be read as a long act of deeply engaged self-criticism. In "Bodies That Matter" (1993), the book that followed "Gender Trouble," Butler sought to clarify the nature of the performative, and to fill in other lacunae. In a similar spirit, they returned to the notion of the speech act, taking it up, turning it over, and looking at it anew, in "Excitable Speech" (1997), in which they examined arguments concerning hate speech and pornography, acknowledging that language can wound but urging caution about laws aimed at expression deemed hateful or obscene; even pornography, Butler argued, can be read against itself—its meaning isn't controlled by its creators.

Later work on mourning was inspired by Freud but also by what Butler witnessed during the *AIDS*{: .small} crisis, when the grief of those losing their lovers and life partners was ignored and dismissed. Butler explored mourning as a political act in a series of books, beginning with "Precarious Life" (2004), a work that considered which 9/11 deaths were publicly commemorated in media (the married, the educated, the property-owning) and which were likely to be omitted (the poor, the undocumented, the queer, the Iraqis, the Afghans). "Precarious Life" also marked a turn toward writing about Palestine, and the development of a specifically Jewish critique of Zionism and Israeli policy, informed by Butler's reading of Martin Buber and Hannah Arendt. In "Parting Ways" (2012), Butler wrote about a Jewish obligation to enshrine the rights of refugees and to cohabitate with non-Jews. A set of arguments about whose lives matter was elaborated in "Antigone's Claim" (2000), "Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?" (2009), "Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly" (2015), and a book on the pandemic, "What World Is This?" (2022).

It's a signature of Butler's work that each book responds to critique and subtly re-angles their ideas. "The flip side to the misunderstanding and distortion of the work is Butler's own ambivalence to the work being admired and used," the Belgian philosopher Michel Feher told me. "There's something jazzy

about it, because recurrent themes keep coming back, coming back, coming back. But each time there's a difference in the repetition. People can think that they're parroting back what they heard or read and Judith will say, 'No, it's not exactly like that.' "

How do you escape the role of phantasm? It's not enough to point out the incoherence of the arguments that frame gender as an indoctrination, Butler thinks. What's required is to conceive of a "counter-imaginary," a more compelling alternative.

With a grant from the Mellon Foundation, Butler has helped arrange public dialogues about these questions. Before one such event, on a winter morning in Berkeley, Claudia Rankine waved hello, with a hand wrapped up in a thick white bandage, asking if we knew that the origin of the word "collapse" was "fall together."

She and Butler waited together offstage. Their conversation had the feel of a practiced volley; they tested an idea, added a little spin, sent it back.

"That's what the Mellon wants, they're trying to get the public to imagine freedom," Butler said. "If we could only have a strong public imagination, we'd have the resources we need to defeat, deflate—"

"But it's one imagination up against another," Rankine said. "They're winning. Because they've tapped into the subterranean fears."

"We can tap into desire—"

"No, you can't tap into desire, because the church has forbidden desire. You have to tap into fear, but a different one."

At the event, Rankine read from a work in progress, "Triage," and spoke about falling and feeling, about the rest required for action.

“I do think you change people’s minds not just by your good arguments but by your poetry and the collaborative work you do in the arts,” Butler told her in the onstage conversation. “We do need to reach people where they are shaken or where they are fearing destruction, or where we are fearing collapse or feeling collapse.”

At a lunch afterward with colleagues, Butler and Rankine talked about the struggle to move beyond despair and find what Butler called “generative potential.” Critical theory is not, for Butler, a matter of taking things apart, but it is a matter of taking time. It enables them to share with others what philosophy has allowed them to do and feel. “Philosophy for me has always been a way of ordering things,” they have said. It’s a way of “making things less dramatic so that I can see.” The new book, too, aims to drain the drama from its subject.

Some of Butler’s allies are impatient with their patience. “I worry that we have run out of time to be this sober,” the historian Jules Gill-Peterson, who has written a book chronicling hostility toward trans women, told me. This year, legislators throughout the U.S. have already introduced more than five hundred bills restricting trans rights. Gill-Peterson added, “At what point does that reasonableness and generosity, so characteristic of Butler, deactivate the reader’s political activation?”

Aday after the event with Rankine, Butler was still mulling. They hadn’t left the event with the sense of lift they’d hoped for. “I just think it’s a public obligation to offer some way of holding out for what will sustain us.”

Butler had rented a house, which was high on a hill. The small terrace was smothered in plants. “Are you here?” Butler called into a dark bedroom. Their son had been visiting, but he was out, spending the night with friends on a beach in Santa Cruz. “He expands into nature,” Butler said. “He bounds.”

Butler's bathing suit hung in the bathroom, drying from the morning's swim. Their hair was combed back. I recalled the child in Max's home video, swimming into their father's arms; how he had slicked back the child's hair.

"I'm sixty-seven," Butler said. "He was sixty-eight when he died."

Butler's father spent his last decade suffering from Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. To this day, his death has remained "a kind of shocking devastation," Butler told me. They did a bit of arithmetic. "Thirteen years till eighty."

"I do keep going back to gender, even though I feel so exhausted by it and wanting very much to be liberated from it," Butler said. "There's a history of handling it in extreme isolation, without a vocabulary or a community. It is important for me to be part of that vocabulary and community, and say this thing that I say throughout 'Who's Afraid of Gender?,' that people have a right to move and breathe and love, or to walk the streets without fear of violence."

After this year's frantic travel and exposure, though, Butler has been thinking that it might be time to step back, maybe move away, "keeping the books that are most important to me."

"Something comes along, we all know that," they said. "Will it be my heart? Will it be my lungs? Will it be early dementia? Will it be something else that I can't imagine?"

Butler made tea. The doors and windows were thrown open, and the little house filled with bright morning light.

They talked about the Kafka book they'd put off to write "Who's Afraid of Gender?" Kafka, they've explained, has this idea of a figure—"a fugitive figure, eluding capture"—who vanishes into pure line and motion.

“I snuck eight pages in the other day,” Butler said. “I was in it and nowhere else. No voices were coming in to tell me it was good or bad. I was just following the thought.” ♦

Published in the print edition of the May 6, 2024, issue, with the headline “The Phantasm.”

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