

The Unbearable Nearness of Utopia

A review of *Who is afraid of Gender?* By Judith Butler. London, Allen Lane: 2024hardcover, 320 pages ISBN-10: 0241595827 ISBN-13: 978-0241595824

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With thanks to Aneesh Manangath

Manu Bazzano

Jane doesn't like J. K. Rowling. Harry Potter is a gripping story, but there is one major flaw, she says. Despite the protagonist's appeal as an orphan who discovers magic powers and so forth, his fate is predetermined. In *my* story, my client continues, the main character, a girl, is not fated from birth to do 'great things'. Instead, she stumbles on it by chance. It is an accident that makes her realize who she is. Doesn't something of the sort happen in Greek tragedies? I ask. That moment of recognition, effected by circumstances, makes the person aware of themselves for the first time. The deed precedes the doer, or something like that. Yes, Jane says enthusiastically. Didn't Borges say that of Judas? He realizes who he truly is only on receiving his thirty pieces of silver in exchange for delivering Jesus to his killers.

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Something akin to the fixity of predestination surfaces elsewhere in J. K. Rowling, namely in her defence of gender essentialism and the attendant transphobia. As with another gender-critical feminist, the academic Kathleen Stock – who believes that a trans man is not a man, a trans woman is not a woman – Rowling was exposed to unacceptable online bullying, a mode of 'address' that is now sadly the order of the day and in which the 'anti-gender ideology' movement is also deeply implicated.

Many will have noticed, even within the relatively cocooned world of therapy, the rise of an intense debate around issues concerning gender. But is it a *debate*? The latter would involve some degree of reasoned, articulate discourse paired with a willingness to properly hear, understand, and critique the other side of the argument. This is far from what is happening at present in the so-called 'culture wars'. Yet a reasoned, articulate argument is precisely what this book offers. It also presents us with an impassioned, compassionate appeal towards

greater solidarity among those who find themselves scattered and weakened by internecine wars rather than united in the common struggle towards greater inclusion and emancipation. Judith Butler is a major contemporary philosopher who inherited and significantly expanded on various schools of thought including critical theory, existential phenomenology, feminism, queer theory, and psychoanalysis. Their commentary on important thinkers such as Hegel, De Beauvoir, Sartre, Fanon, Merleau-Ponty, Freud, Laplanche, Arendt, Agamben, and Foucault advance and challenge the received wisdom and common understanding of key cultural, political, and philosophical currents of our time. It may be a strange thing to say about a thinker at times associated with poststructuralism, but I feel that by taking over from where Fanon left off, Butler challenges further the myopic tribalist essentialism now in vogue and ends up making, perhaps unwittingly, a compelling case for a *universalist* political ethic that evades the mystifications of earlier manifestations. Or it could be said, more simply, that the only acceptable version of universalism would need to be based on the experience of those whose lives are thought to be expendable and even ungrievable (Butler, 2009). This is an admittedly utopian notion of universalism, one that would certainly carry more weight than the discredited universalism of imperialist and majoritarian stances. Similarly, taking over from where De Beauvoir (1997) left off (*one is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman*), Butler questions exclusionary gender essentialism, inviting us to consider *becoming* for what it is, namely a process without end. If one *becomes* a man or a woman, does becoming come to a sudden halt? Besides, if one really attributes value to the oft quoted existentialist refrain *existence precedes essence*, reverting back to biologism (as many anti-gender ideologists do) is a backward step.

Butler's work is invaluable to psychoanalysts, existential and humanistic therapists willing to tackle complex contemporary issues invariably emerging in clinical work. It is invaluable to practitioners open to develop (rather than merely replicate) the insights of our various traditions. For over thirty-five years they have consistently focused, through a series of ground-breaking books (Butler, 1990; 1993; 1997; 2004) on the issue of gender. They return on it now with this multi-layered book – at once informative, philosophically astute, investigative as well as, surprisingly uplifting.

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The spark for writing the book came from wanting to understand what motivated a series of ugly episodes the author was subjected to. Arriving in São Paulo airport with their partner

Wendy Brown in 2017, and scheduled to speak at a conference on the threats to democracy around the world, they were threatened with physical harm. A young man with a backpack threw himself between them and the attacker, taking on his body the blows meant for them. Brazilian members of the Catholic movement called *Tradition, Family, and Property* had staged a protest against Butler burning an effigy of the author, and claiming that their philosophy endorsed immorality and even paedophilia.

In the spirit of real debate, the book invites us to examine closely the arguments and actions that continue to prompt from many quarters a concerted attack against gender difference. Why is it that *gender*, a term considered harmless until not long ago, is now associated with a cluster of evils, with spoken and unspoken fears, hatreds, prejudices, and violence? Several chapters in the book survey the global 'anti-gender ideology' movement. Not a pretty picture. It shows the many facets of a tidal wave of venom unleashed against LGBTIQA+. Sexism, homophobia, and hatred of difference have of course been around from time immemorial. But the phenomenon under scrutiny here is something new. Attacks on gender diversity are now coming fast and furious not only from the usual suspects (the Vatican, religious fundamentalists, the global far Right) but also from ostensibly progressive quarters such as UK feminists. Regardless of the disparities within its ranks, there now exists a veritable army of the righteous mobilized around what is euphemistically described as 'gender debate' about gender 'ideology'. But is the object of their hatred an *ideology* as such? The word 'ideology' gets bandied about a lot, usually disparagingly, but what is it? Butler takes a look at the work of Karl Mannheim who in 1929, four years before Hitler became chancellor, published a seminal book in Germany, *Ideology and Utopia* (2015). His work contemplated whether "fascism could be understood as an ideology" arising from capitalism and attempted to study the "unconscious origins of mental fictions that deny the actual nature of society" (Butler, 2024, p.25). Mannheim (a Hungarian scholar who was associated with Lukacs, later with Polanyi, and who was influenced by Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky) makes an interesting distinction between *ideologies* and *utopia*. Ideologies safeguard the existing social order or seek to revert back to a past social order. *Utopias*, on the other hand, excite a set of potentials so as to engender what Butler calls "a collective imaginary of transformation" (2024, p.25). Butler comments:

Fascism was an ideology because it sought to reestablish nationalism and racist hierarchies, drawing on older social orders to detain and forcibly subjugate, attack, kill, and expel communists, Jews, the Roma, the physically challenged, gay and lesbian people, and the ill” (ibid).

Mannheim claimed that fascists assaulted what they saw as dangerous, and that the danger in question invariably came from ideas of *transformation*.

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Understanding that an ideology is driven by mental fabrications distorting one’s experience of social reality is an important first step, but it does not shed light on the violence of its manifestations. If it did, all one would need to do is to show the flaws and contradictions of the ideological stance. Another factor comes into play here, specifically in relation to the anti-gender ideology movement: *existential terror*, the sense of threat of one’s own identity, out of which *phantasmatic projections* and reactive formations are assembled and directed towards a culprit whose semblance shifts in the course of history: Black and brown people, Jews, women, communists, the Roma, the poor, the homeless, migrants, gays, lesbians, transgender people, the ill, and just about anyone whose way of living and loving does not conform to the norm. Stating one’s opinions and beliefs is one thing. Killing oppressed minorities, curbing their human rights, their health provisions, denying in every possible way their very existence is quite another.

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“The horrors of the past are much closer to us than we like to imagine.” (Gilroy, 2019)

What are the so-called gender wars *really* about? The very word ‘gender’ evokes phantasmatic reactions, Butler argues. They activate fears and anxieties which at heart may have to do with economic and ecological insecurities. War on ‘gender ideology’ has now become a focus for political mobilization on the Right. It associates gender with a range of social threats, including possible harm done to children in its name. Other fears include being robbed of one’s identity, becoming confused about the unassailable truths of selective forms of biology and science, becoming victim of what are perceived as bogus, arbitrary identitarian claims, as well as being subjugated to an ‘ideology’ that refuses the ‘natural’ demarcation between men and women. For some anti-gender agitators, gender is a form of fakery. It is also construed as danger to the natural heteronormative family and, alongside migrancy, seen as heralding the destruction of national identity. These highly contradictory statements share

one aspect : gender is seen by the Right a destructive power that must be stopped. What made this situation possible? And why the increase in attacks (whether by threat, murder, or legal disenfranchisement) on vulnerable communities such as trans people? Would it be right to label these attacks and the ideology behind the attacks as *fascist*? The temptation to do so is great given that authoritarian regimes and movements from Hungary to Italy to Brazil to Russia and the US have implicitly or explicitly courted fascist rhetoric and implemented policies that silence the judiciary, curtail democratic debate, and erode freedoms. The vehemence of the passions aroused by the phantasm of gender could be labelled fascist in a variety of ways. For instance, by appealing to narrow notions of national identity that risks being ‘contaminated’ by external bodies. Migrancy and gender were central topics at the 11th meeting in Budapest in 2017 of the WCF (World Congress of Families), an American Christian organisation accused of being a hate group with links to the Kremlin (Tait, 2017). In his address, Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán spoke of the importance to “enhance the protection of the Southern borders of the European Union, and not let in anyone who provokes even the mildest suspicion of wanting to attack our families and our children” (cited in Butler, 2024, p.51). He went on to bemoan the fact that marriage and birthrates are declining, and that so-called ‘illegal immigration’ weakens the natural family, which he sees as the basis of the nation. He concluded that natural reproduction would foster the European cause. “The natural family – Butler comments – is thus a national norm ... [it] reproduces the nation along national lines ... What is natural is not any kind of heterosexuality but only the kind that reproduces the nation” (p.51). For Orbán, self-styled saviour of white, supremacist, heterosexual Europe, the solution is twofold: *natural reproduction* and *anti-migrant policy*. The first is opposed to miscegenation and is closely linked to eugenics and aggressive heteronormativity. The second is opposed to the danger of ‘race mixing’ – what Heidegger (2014), another eulogist of ethnic national purity, liked to call *mish-mash* (p.324) – which would obliterate the solidity of the nation.

Contemporary authoritarians promise ‘freedom’ from the moral responsibilities promoted by an alleged leftist superego and its dutiful call to caring for the planet, paying taxes, cultivating decent civic solidarity. *Me ne frego* (‘I don’t give a damn’) was after all a popular motto among Mussolini’s thugs. “The posture and practice of impunity and shamelessness” found in “Trump, Bolsonaro, Orbán, Meloni, and Erdoğan” – Butler writes – are “distinctly different” from those of twentieth century fascists. Nevertheless “contemporary fascist trends [that]

engage in death-dealing and rights-stripping in the name of defending the family, the state, and other patriarchal institutions ... support ever-strengthening forms of authoritarianism” (p 263).

A vital expression of both old and new fascist rhetoric clusters around fears and obsessions around the body and sexuality. It tends to manifest via anxious and futile attempts to shield one’s own encased identity from the inherent porousness of embodied existence. It is driven by the fear of being contaminated by difference, a fear partly assuaged sadistically, by inflicting damage on bodies whose very existence threatens one’s own brittle sense of self. One of the collective (conscious and unconscious) fantasies of contemporary fascist narratives is that fear of annihilation will abate once we have managed to incarcerate and eliminate gender difference and migrancy.

Late fascism (Toscano 2023) doesn’t look like its old version. It promises and even seems to deliver ‘freedom’. Those in power (and those whose interests it represents) seem to be having a field day. Think of white supremacists in the US, of high-caste Hindus in India, of the petit bourgeoisie and all those who benefit from the relaxation of environmental and civic rules upheld by liberalism. Late fascism promises a ‘freedom’ with no holds barred. It slackens the moral airs and graces of liberalism, bringing out and giving free rein to greed, anger, and unbridled stupidity. The one principle of liberalism it leaves untouched, however, is *property*. Property remains sacrosanct for liberals and fascists alike. Not just the property of the castle, kids, and home variety; not only property ratified and sanctified by god and fatherland, but also, crucially that property, acquired by sex assignment at birth and confirmed by the interpellations of policemen and doctors, of what constitutes my identity as a man or a woman. Would it be acceptable to apprehend current anti-gender ideology as fascist? For Butler, the answer is yes. Anti-gender ideology is a neofascist excrescence. In the name of religion, family, and the nation, fascist passions are fuelled and disseminated – passions which result in supporting autocratic regimes and antidemocratic policies. Anti-gender ideologists rationalize their war against what they consider as destructive by creating destruction in turn. Sound psychosocial knowledge teaches us that this is a process of *inversion* and *externalization*:

When the anti-gender movement says that gender will strip you of your sexed identity, they are trying to strip a group of people of their identity. [This] should be read as a confession: it is rights-stripping that they are advocating. They warn against “recruiting”

by gay and lesbian teachers or books, but they are recruiting the public into a phantasmatic scene in which they are the ones who are being stripped of a sexed identity by progressive laws (Butler, 2024, p251).

A Nietzschean/Deleuzian *axiological* reading of these passions will appraise them as *reactive* – i.e., forces that turn against the experimental quest for greater actualization (Bazzano, 2019) while perversely shrinking the range of experience. This deliberate, fearful shrinking of experience is a definition of pathology (Goldstein, 2010). Fascist passions are pathological in that they perform the double act of endogamic reduction and projective identification onto those deemed undesirable.

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The presence, especially in the UK, of feminists against gender greatly confuses the topic investigated here. If for instance transphobia were the sole province of a variegated but consistent conservative front, (Pentecostal churches in Africa, the Catholic Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, the US Evangelical Right, some Muslim states, Orthodox Jews, and a host of reactive secular groups), things would be relatively straightforward. The struggle for gender difference would be an integral component of progressive, intersectional struggle on the Left for human rights and freedoms against the characteristic assemblage of bigots and authoritarians. The current picture, however, is much more complex. It is puzzling and painful to realize how feminists “willingly cite and validate right-wing caricatures of gender studies” (Butler, 2024, p.13). All the same, the author wants to understand why feminists, particularly in the UK, are happy to do so despite the obvious and important differences. In that spirit, they write:

The difference between the two camps seems to revolve on questions of who can count as a woman or a man, but also on what they call the “matter” of sex, a term that always brings up the matter of the body and the issues that the body presents. (ibid)

On the materiality of the body, gender-critical feminists surprisingly and uncritically rely on pure and simple, outmoded *positivism*, contending that those who champion the idea of “gender” deny the material reality of sex. This argument relies on biological differences and more or less explicitly on what is considered the distinctiveness of women, namely their reproductive capacity, an argument which ends up “idealiz[ing] reproduction as the defining moment of sex” (p171), a point of contention put to bed long ago by feminists (or so we thought). Regardless of the conservative worship of women as mothers (also found in

attachment theory) not all women can become pregnant. They are “no more and no less women than those who did become pregnant” (p172). Some trans men and non-binary people may also be able to become pregnant and for that reason it would be sensible to open out “our frameworks, our vocabularies, and our minds to take in the facts as they stand”. When one considers the sheer breadth of “capacities, desires, and gender identities, it is absurd “to identify a *specific biological capacity as defining gender, which should never serve as the exclusive fundamental criterion by which gender is determined*” (ibid, emphasis in the original).

This is one of the many valuable lessons we learned from feminism, that women are not defined by motherhood. Some feminists, Butler goes on to say, see sex difference as foundational and will make the point that it is crucial to rely on it so as to protect reproductive rights. This argument founds patriarchal domination in women’s reproductive systems. But the opposite is true, the author responds. “It is the patriarchal social organization of reproduction that leads to the conclusion that states should decide whether or no abortion is appropriate, rebuffing the autonomy of those who are pregnant to decide how best to conduct their lives” (p.173). There are grounds here for solidarity between feminist, trans, and non-binary struggles, if one is able to link reproductive freedom to the freedom of gender self-determination. It is a sad state of affair when that potential and necessary solidarity is undermined by some feminists’ support of state’s intervention in limiting the freedoms of those seeking reassignment. Time and again, this book admirably calls for the formation of new alliances based on focused opposition to the state interference on people’s embodied existence.

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The British author Shon Faye (2022, p239) writes:

What it means to be a woman or a man (or neither) is not a fixed and stable entity, but a complex constellation of biological, political, economic, and cultural factors, which may shift over time. In contrast to this complexity, British anti-trans feminism ... has tended to market itself as a common-sense approach that breezily waves nuance away.

It has been often claimed the ‘gender theory’ is anti-science, but that claim ignores the crucial work of science scholars such as Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) and others, for whom biology is at all times intermingling with social and ecological forces. It is reductive to think of biology without taking these into consideration: “the biological requires the social to be activated,

and the social requires the biological to produce its effects. The one cannot act as a formative power without the other (Butler, 2024, pp176-77).

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The appeal to solidarity goes a long way and includes opposition to the violence of the prison system. The trans-exclusionary academic Kathleen Stock (2021) concentrates on a few episodes of trans women transferred to women's prisons and committing sexual violence and ignores the fact that in the UK trans prisoners are routinely subjected to violence – one person every month (Parson, 2020) – alongside migrants and people of colour. Stock imagines that sex segregation will afford greater protection for all women. But what about trans women? Is the violence they are subjected to of no consequence?

The hallucinatory rhetoric of anti-gender ideologists assumes, more or less consciously, that anyone who has or had a penis is a potential rapist. "Rape is an act of social and sexual domination – Butler writes – arising from social relations that establish masculine domination and access to women's bodies without consent as a right and a privilege. The reason for this domination is not biological; the body, rather, is suffused by the operative relations of power at work. (p.157). As with other instances of anti-gender rhetoric, the scene conjured up is phantasmatic, as if in a dream: the penis is the cause of rape, and without a penis rape will not happen. It would be helpful to consider, Butler argues, "how many kinds of objects and body parts are used to enter others' bodies without consent" (ibid). If one sees trans women as abusive because, deep down, they are men and all men are seen as abusive, we must ask, the author goes on to say whether this perspective is grounded on "a romantic idea that women are only victims and never abusers, even though children of abusive mothers know how untrue this can be, as do survivors of lesbian intimate and domestic violence"(159). If one imagines rape as the wild biological urgency of an organ, then one has thoroughly misread the social element of rape culture. The penis, Butler continues, "is phantasmatically invested with social power under some conditions and becomes the site of fearful fantasy under others" (p160). Trans women – with or without a penis – constitute one of the most vulnerable groups. They do not identify with traditional masculinity. They suffer on their body masculine violence and abuse. "How foolish, then, not to realize the alliance at hand between trans people and feminists of all kinds, especially when so often they are not distinct groups at all" (p.161). Not acknowledging trans women as women because one fears that they are men, i.e., potential rapists, is to allow a "traumatic scenario loose on one's description of

reality” (ibid), to project onto a particular group one’s own unchecked fear, to fail to understand the complexities of social reality. The author develops this point further:

“If I become convinced that a trans person carries or represent my personal trauma, then I have accomplished a projection and displacement that makes it even more difficult to tell my story, as well as theirs. Trans people now represent the violence of what has happened to me, even though they were not there, and someone else, who is strangely nameless, and notably a cis male, certainly was. Are feminists not inflicting a form of psychic violence on trans people by projecting in this way, associating them with rape when they are themselves struggling to get free of myriad forms of social violence as well? (p167).

Is feminist politics a politics of alliance? Butler asks. If it is, then trans-exclusionary feminists would not only defend women “but also oppose all forms of intersecting oppressions, affirming that Black and brown women live at the intersection of compounding oppressions”. They would equally assert that women “often suffer from economic discrimination and poverty” (p135), that their being in the world has been framed in relation to geopolitics, sub-standard conditions of work and health care, and vulnerability to varying degrees of violence.

Those feminists who seek to undermine “gender” purposely or inadvertently attack the alliance of which feminism is an integral part, including a broader left politics that keeps gender oppression, the exploitation of women’s work, and sexual justice as priorities. The extraordinary histories of socialist feminism and Black feminism in the United Kingdom are effaced by anti-gender feminists in order to focus on a single issue: why sex matters. (pp.135-136)

Why does sex matter so much now? And what are the politics behind this deeply divisive stance born and bred in conservative Britain? In other parts of the world, strong coalitions spring up incorporating feminist, trans, and LGBTQIA+ groups against extractivism, racism, and class inequality. One great example is *Ni Una Menos* (NUM) in South America, a transnational movement that was sparked in Argentina in response to the brutal murder of 14-year-old Chiara Páez at the hands of her then-16-year-old boyfriend who beat her to death for wanting to keep the baby in her womb. In the UK, on the other hand, gender studies programs are shut down on a regular basis. The notoriously nonprogressive British government certainly bears responsibility for this sorry state of affairs. On top of that, gender-critical feminists dispute trans identity, in particular the assertions of trans women. They argue that sex is real whereas gender is a construction, in the sense that it

is fake and unnatural. For Butler, they do not understand what social construction is. For some, the social construction of gender means that we are simply the product of conditioning and conventions. For others, construction is itself fake, obstructing the living reality of the body. Both perspectives are wrong: they do not take into account an important phenomenon observed by Laplanche, a key influence in Butler's understanding of psychoanalysis and a key thinker in my own formulation of *Affect Therapy* (Bazzano, forthcoming). They explain:

An adult's desire is already incited and formed by a prior series of desires, those that belong to the adults who addressed and raised that person as a child. To the extent that those desires were linked with norms and normative ways of life, we can say that norms precede us, circulating in the world before they impress themselves upon us. But when norms do impress themselves upon us and when we register that impress, an affective register is opened. Indeed, the "we" who would register that impress is already at work. Norms act upon a sensibility and susceptibility at the same time that they give it form; they lead us to feel in certain ways, and those feelings can enter into our thinking even as we might well end up thinking about them, asking, "Why do we feel this way rather than that?" (p.31)

No one comes into the world in a pristine state that is separate from the norms that lie in wait for us. We are not simply 'formed', nor are we simply and unconditionally "self-forming". Which is another way of saying that "we live in historical time" and that historical time lives in us "as the historicity of whatever gendered form we assume as human creatures" (p32). It could be said that anti-gender ideologists want to interrupt this unpredictable aliveness, this historical complexity and internal enigmatic ambiguity. The Vatican spells it out in no uncertain terms: admitting to the aliveness and ambiguity of self-determination is a sin, for one takes over a power that solely belongs to God. Gender-exclusionary feminist substitute God in favour of a reductive, positivist understanding of the body.

Like the right-wing efforts to strip trans people of their rights of self-definition, the cruellest of the trans-exclusionary positions also deny the rights of self-assignment to trans women and men, and take aim at sex workers whose rights to organize for health care and protection against violence should be a central part of any feminist agenda. In denying the reality of trans lives, TERFs [trans-exclusionary radical feminists] claim proprietary rights to gender categories, especially the category of

women, yet gender categories are not property, and they cannot be owned. Gender categories precede and exceed our individual lives (p137).

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In her seminal book *Gender and the Politics of History*, Joan W. Scott (1988, p43) wrote:

‘Man’ and ‘woman’ are at once empty and overflowing categories. Empty because they have no ultimate, transcendental meaning. Overflowing because even when they appear to be fixed, they still contain within them alternative, denied, or suppressed definitions

To deny trans people of their rights to self-determination is deadening: it obliterates their experience. It is also paternalistic: it claims to know the lived experience of trans people better than they do themselves. It is both sad and frustrating that such positions are found among psychotherapists in the UK. But then again British psychotherapy arguably latched itself onto the most conservative versions of psychoanalysis and existential/humanistic psychology. Think of the undisputed hegemony of Attachment Theory, of the uncritical acceptance of Heidegger among existential therapists, and of the whitewash of the shadow in person-centred therapy.

For Butler, gender-critical feminists’ ‘critique’ is not real critique. There is more to critique than opposition and desire to abolish something. Critiquing masculinism implies that existence and society do not have to conform to masculinist norms. Critiquing the gender binary imply asking questions as to “why gender is organized that way and not in some other way”. It is also, and I found this next sentence very moving, “a way of imagining living otherwise” (Butler, 2024, p141).

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What is sorely missing from current gender ‘debate’ is a genealogy of dimorphic idealism of gender and the gender binary, which, when undertaken, traces it back to the extensive and cruel history of colonial power and slavery (Lowe, 2015). It is crucial that we look closely at dimorphic idealism – what the far-Right and trans-exclusionary feminists superficially see as ‘natural’ – and begin to understand how gender was violently enforced. Discussion of gender cannot be uncoupled from colonial legacies and their still-existing frameworks and histories

of racism, immigration, and diaspora (Oyewùmì, 2002; de Magalhães Comes, 2018; Thomas, 2007).

The colonial history of gender dimorphism illustrates how colonial powers enforce gender normative frames on brown and Black bodies, naturalizing and fetishizing white heteronormative modalities. The Vatican and the far-Right like to concoct the idea that 'gender' is an imposition from white metropolitan elites, but the histories of colonialism tell a different story. The assumption is that 'natural' biological dimorphism was the norm before 'deviant' ideas were 'imported'. On this particular point, the limits and prejudices of structuralism are evident, presuming as they do the universality of patriarchal rules – a notion that is also present in Lacanian ideas of the name-of-the-father and reflected in mainstream anthropology from Levi-Strauss onwards.

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The feminist philosopher Catherine Clune-Taylor (2021, p190) writes:

Within biology, male and female sex is determined solely on the basis of gamete size – those members of a species who produce the smaller gametes (“sperm”) are identified as male, whereas those who produce larger gametes (“eggs”) are the females.

Interaction is the model that can best account for the multiplicity of processes operating in the making of sex. One of these modes of interaction is between 'nature' and 'culture'. We have supinely accepted the liberal ideology sold to us by some social scientists during last century, Donna Haraway writes, allowing “the theory of the body politic to be split in such a way that natural knowledge is reincorporated covertly into techniques of social control instead of being transformed into sciences of liberation” (1991, p.13).

A useful work in understanding the connection between dimorphic idealism and colonial power is Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017), detailing a history of gynaecological interventions on Black women during and after slavery. They were routinely denied anaesthesia and regarded as flesh to be used by medics for their experiment. This research reveals that in the US the history of gender, and in particular trans identity, is implicated in slavery and brutality. Snorton draws on Hortense Spillers' seminal article *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe* (1987), highlighting in particular her notion of *ungendered flesh* in order to depict the deep-rooted derealization of Black bodies in relation to the white normative frame and its entanglement with slavery. “Flesh – Butler comments – is not pure

passive matter, but the very condition of legible relations” (p.217). For Snorton, “as a thing that produces relations, flesh transorients sex and gender” (cited in Butler, *ibid*).

The book offers many other convincing examples from different cultures, including South America and Africa that counter in their beliefs and traditions the gender binary. She quotes luminaries such as Maria Lugones, Oyèrónké Oyewùmì, Zethu Matebeni, and others. A disturbing picture emerges from the research carried out by these scholars, documenting the fact that the colonial assault on local cultures has been historically carried out through and alongside the imposition and regularization of colonial gender binary frames.

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This book presents a thoroughgoing and necessary *ideology critique* (as it used to be called in Critical Theory and Hegelian studies on the Left) of the anti-gender movement, unmasking its prejudices and reactionary agendas. At the same time, the author acknowledges that critique is not enough. Continuing a case made with their previous book *The Force of Non-Violence* (Butler, 2020), where they wrote of the need to create counter-fantasies, they similarly call for a *shared imaginary* to counter the phantasmatic projection of the Vatican, the far-Right, and trans-exclusionary feminists, helpful in creating new alliances and free assemblages of people. They draw on the quiet yet powerful force of active positive desire and on Hannah Arendt’s forgotten plea for public happiness. The struggle for gender self-determination is more than mere identitarianism. It embodies a call for complex relationality; it is one with environmental and anti-racist struggles. It can draw greater force and momentum by establishing solidarity with indigenous epistemology.

Ideology can be countered by pragmatic utopia. This book inspires us to move in that direction. An empathic and rigorously utopian stream of thought that were to capitalize on counter-traditional thought and alert us to *the unbearable nearness of utopia* (Greenaway, 2024) would be a welcome change from the politics of division and defensiveness, of internecine wars, of passivity and pessimism that has plagued progressive thought and praxis for such a long time.

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My client Jane is keen to develop her story along different lines, away from what she sees as Harry Potter’s deterministic, fate-oriented narrative. Maybe, I suggest, there is a difference between fate and destiny. While fate is predetermined, destiny is destination, journeying, and

it calls for particular choices. Maybe that's what your story emphasizes at some level. She is silent for a while. Sounds interesting, she says finally. I'll think about it, thanks.

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