

Butler, J. (2024). *Who's Afraid of Gender?* Allen Lane, 308 pp, ISBN: 0241595827

Reviewed by Rebekah Galbraith*

In October 1998, Matthew Shepard, a 21-year-old student at the University of Wyoming, was abducted by two men and driven to a remote area near Laramie. Here, they tied Matthew to a split-rail fence and beat him, tortured him, pistol-whipped him and left him to die. He was found the following day by a cyclist, who mistook his bloodied body for a scarecrow (Matthew Shepard Foundation, n.d). As he lay in the hospital bed, Judy and Dennis Shepard recognised their son from his braces. Tubes in his mouth, an eye partially open, Matthew's mother explained how "his face was swollen, actually kind of unrecognisable till you got closer" (Sheerin, 2018). He died five days later, having never regained consciousness (Gjelten & Kelly, 2018).

The men who abducted and murdered Matthew did so because he was gay. While in prison, one of his killers wrote to another inmate's wife: "Being a verry [sic] drunk homofobick [sic] I flipped out and began to pistol whip the fag with my gun, ready at hand" (Sheerin, 2018). In the years that followed, his parents established the Matthew Shepherd Foundation and fought for the safety and protection of the LGBTQI+ community (Matthew Shepherd Foundation, n.d).

Despite their efforts, for two decades Matthew's ashes were not laid to rest; his parents feared his grave would be desecrated, their child unable to lie in peace without becoming a further target of fear, hatred and bigotry (Riedel, 2025). Enter Bishop Mariann Budde. In 2018, Budde presided over the interment of Matthew's ashes at Washington National Cathedral. On the day of his service, the 4000-seat cathedral was filled with mourners gathered to celebrate and remember Matthew, his life and death—a sharp contrast to the "anti-gay protests that marred his funeral" (Gjelten & Kelly, 2018). The service, led by Right Revd Gene Robinson, the first openly gay man elected as a bishop in the Episcopal Church, was a significant moment for the LGBTQI+ community in America, with spaces associated with conservative faith a long-held source of hostility, pain and vilification (Gjelten & Kelly, 2018). Matthew now lies in the crypt beneath the Cathedral: "Gently rest in this place, you are safe now", Robinson spoke at the time, "Matthew, welcome home" (Gjelten & Kelly, 2018).

In January 2025, standing above the remains of Matthew Shepard, Bishop Marian Budde delivered the sermon at President Donald Trump's inaugural National Prayer Service at Washington National Cathedral. She made a direct plea for Trump to show mercy, after he declared in his inauguration speech that there are only two genders. "There are gay, lesbian and transgender children in Democratic, Republican and independent families, some who fear for their lives," Budde said (Holland & Mason, 2025). In response, Trump described the bishop as "nasty", claiming the service was "boring" and "uninspiring" (Holland & Mason, 2025). He called her a "radical left hard-line Trump hater" (Janse et al., 2025). Trump and his press secretary, Karoline Leavitt, demanded an apology, to which Budde, in an interview with NPR, responded: "I don't feel there is a need to apologise for a request for mercy" (Janse et al., 2025).

This is the America where Judith Butler writes: gender as moral panic, its associated fears and anxieties monopolised and exploited by the far-right. Gender: the phantasmic threat to modern civil society.

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Butler's latest book, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (2024), scrutinises this global disquiet and mistrust, asking the reader from the outset: "Why would anyone be afraid of gender?" (p. 3). The introduction deftly canvasses the supposed fear of destruction often associated with the vague catchall "gender ideology", where the global debate around gender reveals that "not one approach to defining, or understanding, gender reigns": Is gender a "covert way of referring to 'homosexuality'", or perhaps a word "synonymous with 'women'", or is gender instead the presumption of sex—biological, legal, sociocultural? (p. 3). While feminist scholars may disagree among themselves about definitions and parameters, crucially, Butler argues, the "anti-gender ideology movement" positions gender as a "monolith, frightening in its power and reach" (p. 4). A danger, a threat, a denial, a plot, an attack, even the work of the devil: Butler notes that the anti-gender movement positions gender as the rival that must be "countered, or destroyed, at all costs" (p. 5).

Butler's text mobilises the misgivings and misinformation around gender to dispel the myth (or, indeed, perceived threat) of so-called gender ideology, as much as it provides a skilful roadmap for how and why gender has become such a contemporary pariah. Andrea Long Chu (2024) notes that Butler's scholarship has long had to contend with criticisms around the "materiality of sex"; that the radical proposition of gender performativity in Butler's (1990) *Gender Trouble* had "effectively denied the reality of biological sex". *Who's Afraid of Gender?* is Butler's confrontation with the global panic around gender, but Chu (2024) argues it is sex—not gender—that offers a new site of freedom, where the right to change one's sex cuts at the frantic, ugly desperation of the anti-trans movement: hiding their "repressive goals behind the rhetoric of neutral biological fact", at its core, the movement is "afraid of what sex might *become*".

In the chapter "Trump, Sex, and the Supreme Court", Butler (2024, p. 112) describes the discrepancies and limitations of the first Trump administration's challenge to define sex as "an unchangeable feature of a person, that is, either male or female, based on genitalia, and given as an assignment at birth". As Butler (p. 113) notes, this was not the president's attempt to use the US Department of Health and Human Services to establish a definitive criterion of sex, but rather something more nefarious: a bid to "[narrow] the scope of sex discrimination under the law so that trans people could not claim until Title VII to be discriminated against based on sex as an acquired status". Eventually, the policy was abandoned, but Butler's analysis of the legislative branch illustrates that recent measures to define sex within the United States are less about securing meaning and more about removing protections against homophobia and transphobia. The right's move to "return gender to sex, and eradicate any possible difference between the two ... fortifies patriarchy and heteronormativity" (p. 114). It was, in hindsight, a forewarning: mere hours into his second administration, President Trump signed an executive order declaring that the US Government's official policy is that there "are only two genders: male and female" (Parks, 2025). The order effectively achieves what Butler argues Trump failed to enact within his first administration; namely, the return of gender to sex, where the second administration will give:

Licence to bigots, affirming that not only that homophobic and transphobic practices should thrive without intervention by the law, and that those who were the targets of such practices should remain unprotected from those who act against them, often violently, but also that the government would henceforth abandon them to discrimination. (Butler, 2024, p. 114)

The United States is not alone in its dogged persecution of gender, and Butler devotes an entire chapter to the rise of anti-gender feminism in the United Kingdom, aptly titled "TERFs and British Matters of Sex". Butler recognises that the anti-gender ideology movement does not take a singular form, but rather, persists across many geopolitical boundaries, social and digital spaces, and religious and faith-based circles. While the shape and purpose of objections to gender may differ across these lines, what unites them is an intense campaign of public conflict, bullying, censorship and hostility (Butler, 2024, pp. 134–135). Last year, following the release of the Cass Report—a summary of a four-year study by former President of the Royal

College of Paediatrics and Child Health Dr Hillary Cass—the National Health Service (NHS) indefinitely banned the use of puberty blockers for anyone under 18 years seeking hormone replacement therapy for treatment of gender dysphoria (Department of Health and Social Care, 2024). Hadley Freeman (2024), a UK-based journalist who refers to gender theorists and gender-inclusive feminists as “gender activists” or “gender ideologues”, celebrated the decision, equating the belief that one could change their sex as fantastical “as wine can change into Jesus’s blood”. “Isn’t transgenderism [sic] itself then a kind of gay conversion therapy?” mused Freeman (2024), who earlier claimed in a *Sunday Times* column that trans youth were faking and weaponising suicidal ideation as a manipulative “threats” against their parents, nothing more than a tactic to get their way and receive “sex change hormones and surgery” (Freeman, 2023; see also, Hansford, 2023). Butler’s analysis of the division on “TERF Island” (the United Kingdom) is the most revealing chapter of *Who’s Afraid of Gender?* “The idea that gender is fakery or ‘ideology’” (Butler, 2024, p. 136) has taken extreme hold, and Butler’s chapter delicately positions the United Kingdom—the destruction stirred by the trans-exclusionary views from people like Kathleen Stock and J. K. Rowling—as a proxy towards explaining how contemporary feminism finds itself in such conceptual division. In continuing a public discourse of “anti-gender ideology”, Butler (p. 142) rightly asserts that the contemporary “radical feminist” finds themselves in “woeful complicity with the key aims of new fascism”. It is a uniquely powerful observation. This is not the first time Butler has drawn a direct connection between anti-gender views and fascism. Writing in the *Guardian* in 2021, Butler interrogated the global spread of opposition to gender, arguing:

Anti-gender movements are not just reactionary but fascist trends, the kind that support increasingly authoritarian governments. The inconsistency of their arguments and their equal opportunity approach to rhetorical strategies of the left and right, produce a confusing discourse for some, a compelling one for others. But they are typical of fascist movements that twist rationality to suit hyper-nationalist aims. (Butler, 2021)

As a colonial outpost and member of the Commonwealth, Aotearoa/New Zealand has the sociopolitical trappings of its own TERF Island. Like the Cass Report, Te Whatu Ora | Ministry of Health recently closed their public submissions on access to hormone replacement therapy for adolescents. A long-awaited evidence brief on the use of puberty blockers was initially due for release in late 2023, before it was pushed back to the following April, when the deadline came and went again with no documentation made available (Sowman-Lund, 2024). On 21 November 2024, the Ministry of Health finally published its evidence brief and opened up for public consultation until 20 January 2025 (Te Whatu Ora | Ministry of Health NZ, 2024), a decision PATHA (Professional Association for Transgender Health Aotearoa) President Jennifer Shields argued was flawed and discriminatory, designed to support a predetermined outcome—a blanket ban on puberty blockers:

The government is directing the ministry to implement restrictions on one population’s right to access healthcare without good cause. They are rushing this process, hoping we don’t notice over the summer break ... This process is discriminatory, already doing harm, and has the potential to do massive and irreversible damage to a generation of trans children. (Shields, 2024)

The decision to open for public consultation was similarly criticised as wholly inappropriate by PATHA Vice-president Dr Rona Carroll, who claimed:

Medical decisions should be guided by scientific or clinical concerns and remain free from political interference. Banning or restricting access to puberty blockers would go against best-practice recommendations from major medical bodies—including the Endocrine Society, the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association—and likely cause harm to young people. (Carroll, 2024).

In “What about Sex?”, perhaps the most relevant chapter to readers in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Butler (2024, p. 170) addresses one of “main contentions of feminist anti-gender activists”: that gender theorists are “accused of refusing to accept biological differences, or of eradicating biological differences in the effort to defeat forms of biological determinism”. With no Trumpian executive order to hide behind, what does that argument look like in Aotearoa/New Zealand? In August 2024, Deputy Prime Minister and New Zealand First leader Winston Peters tabled a petition in Parliament, on behalf of Bob McCroskie of Family First, requesting that the House define “woman” as “an adult human female” in “all New Zealand laws, public policies, and regulations” (Petitions, Papers, and Select Committee Reports, 2024). The following month, Peters met with Save Women’s Sport Australasia representatives Ro Edge, Candice Riley and Gary Anderson to discuss their open letter to the government about the review of Sport NZ’s gender guidelines. “The fairness of competition and safety for women and girls in sports is the paramount focus for this stance and should not come second place to woke ideology,” posted Peters (2024) on social media in support of the letter, signed by many sporting notaries including Olympic gold medallist Barbara Kendall. In May 2024, New Zealand First introduced their Fair Access to Bathrooms Bill, requiring “that all new non-domestic publicly accessible buildings provide separate, clearly demarcated, unisex and single sex bathrooms” (Mendis, 2024). Designed first and foremost to protect the safety of women and girls, the Bill was described by Peters as a “commonsense solution to an issue that has often been overshadowed by ideology” (Mendis, 2024). But you may ask, protection and safety from what? It is, of course, only implicit in New Zealand First’s anti-gender politicking. But in matters of sex, Butler is thankfully more direct:

The phobic focus on the penis, which vacates a common sense, is a case in point ... The organ is not a simple appendage in these descriptions, but an instrument of attack. The attribution of dangerous power may well draw upon terrible experiences of rape and assault, yet that is not reason enough to generalize ... and cast all people with penises on the model of the rapist. The phobic or panicked relation to ‘the penis’ as such separates the organ from the person and from the entire life-world in which it makes sense. The subsequent attribution of dangerousness to trans women who have penises relies on a phobic transposition of the organ. (Butler, 2024, pp. 175–176)

In what follows, Butler (2024) examines the distinction between nature and culture, to respond to the question of whether gender denies the materiality of sex (it does not). Butler is not denying sex, just as gender theorists do not deny sex, despite what the anti-gender movement may suggest. Rather the chapter “offers an alternative way of understanding [the reality of sex] apart from a natural-law thesis of complementarity or any form of biological determinism” (p. 180). It provides insight into the decisions undertaken by right-wing political parties to categorise, classify and define sex and sex assignment, as much as it decontextualises the gendered body and the individual right to self-determination.

In May 1999, six months after Matthew Shepard’s murder, 14-year-old Jeff Whittington was beaten by two strangers and left to die down Inverlochy Place in Aro Valley, a popular suburb for students in central Wellington, nestled beneath the university. The attack was so severe Jeff’s body was left with boot markings; he sustained brain damage and a perforated bowel, and he died the following day (Shadwell, 2016). Former Wellington High School principal Prue Kelly remembers Jeff as a boy in sewing class, who “dressed with flamboyance”, wore make-up, coloured his hair purple and his nails green (Shadwell, 2016). During the trial, a witness reported Jeff’s attackers had come home boasting about “how they fucked up a

faggot and they left him for dead”, with one attacker laughing, “The faggot was bleeding out of places I have never seen before” (Watkins, 2024).

Butler’s closing remarks remind us of the ultimate cost of fear, where “history advises us not to look away from the fascist potentials” (Butler, 2024, p. 264). “We can stop that momentum, but only by intervening as an alliance that does not destroy its own bonds,” Butler continues, imploring the reader to create a liveable life, and a world worth living in, “where gender and desire belong to what we mean by freedom and equality” (p. 264). In a broader sense, sex and gender are not to be feared, but the debate over affirming and determining both terms has led to obfuscation and hostility, the “fertile soil for the horrid collaboration of fascist passions and authoritarian regimes” (p. 23). How, then, to dispel the falsehoods? How do we counter the anxieties and weaponisation of gender? Where do we begin with the shameless attacks on sex and the anti-intellectual posturing of authoritarianism? The answer lies not from Butler directly, but in their arguments against the key claims of anti-gender movement. “It is time to rethink the coordinates of the contemporary political map,” Butler concludes, where all our struggles “are now linked as we seek to overcome the powers seeking to deprive us of basic living conditions” (p. 264). Gender is the canary in the coal mine, the litmus test for what can be denied, reclassified and suppressed. It is the same forces “closing borders in the name of racist and nationalist ideals” who are “targeting lesbian, gay, nonconforming, and trans youth, especially youth of colour” (p. 262). To bridge our differences is the way forward; not to struggle in isolation, but rather acknowledge that fear of gender is merely a vehicle of mobilising hate in a myriad of ways. *Who’s Afraid of Gender?* is Butler’s reminder that to oppose discrimination for one group is not licence to perpetuate it against another; it is only through growing and expanding our alliances across the political and social divide that the toxin of fear dissipates, and we can finally “make freedom into the air we together breathe” (p. 264).

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