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Review by Jai Lloyd
Lancaster University
J.Lloyd4@lancaster.ac.uk

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Judith Butler's *Who's Afraid of Gender*, published in 2004, addresses the questions of what exactly gender is and explores the idea of 'gender' as a phantasm that has, along with misleading descriptions critical race theory, and moral panics about migration, led to political and social movements that have or are trying to roll back the rights of many people. I am conducting research exploring the lives of educators who experienced Section 28 and how they view the current trend in education policy relating to gender diverse young people.

While Butler's earlier work has been foundational to the development of Queer Theory (QT), this text looks directly at contemporary issues including Trump and the Christian Right in America, and British debates involving trans-exclusionary feminists (TERFs) and groups like Sex Matters. The text explicitly deals with issues and discussions relating to gender, children and education, all of which are directly relevant to my research. Butler explores the increasing backlash, restrictive policies, "cruel norms and sadistic trends" (p. 36) that have emerged in the name of the anti-gender ideology movement.

Whenever I think of QT, the first name that comes to mind has always been Butler. First encountering *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies that Matter* and *Undoing Gender* during my undergraduate degree and continuing to follow their work through my Masters and Doctoral study, my interest in Butler's work has not only been academic, but affective too. The way that they explain notions of performativity, gender norms, regulatory power and gender policing aligns with my own lived experience as a gendered and queer person. Butler's work does not feel abstract or purely academic to me; it offers language and understanding to everyday experiences I have often struggled to express. Butler's writing generally, but particularly in this text, has not only broadened my theoretical perspectives, but has also confirmed that my positionality as a researcher holds epistemic value.

In this text specifically, Butler addresses contemporary debates around so-called 'gender ideology' and 'gender critical feminism', which echo the debates that led to the institution of Section 28. Section 28 was a piece of legislation that was in place in England, Scotland and Wales, between 1988 and 2000 (Scotland) or 2003 (England and Wales). It prohibited local authorities from 'promoting homosexuality' (Day, 2019) or teaching that homosexuality was acceptable, referring to same sex relationships and families as 'pretended' (Day, 2019). Much research has explored the damage that was done to LGBTQ youth and educators through the climate of fear it created. Resources were removed, educators and students were silenced, and many learned to self-censor and hide their identities (Bates, 2018; Brockenbrough, 2012; Burridge, 2004; Day, 2019; Edwards et al., 2014; Ferreira, 2023; Gattuso, 2021; Gray, 2022; Hardie, 2011; Iglikowski-Broad, 2023; Lee, 2023; Russell, 2010; Thompson-Lee, 2017; Wise, 2000; Woodhouse, 2019).

In *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, Butler looks at how censorship and allegations of institutionalisation within schools have resulted from what they describe as a 'phantasmic sliding' (p. 91) where merely hearing the word 'gay' or affirming genders beyond the binary has the power to turn someone gay or remake their very nature, 'becoming helplessly infected and transformed' (p. 91). Butler considers the struggle over knowledge, legitimacy and liveable lives referencing Preciado's *Can the Monster Speak?*. This mirrors much of the debate and practice under Section 28, where educators were prohibited from 'promoting homosexuality' and producing a climate of self-censorship for both teachers and students. The text provides a theoretical connection between the moral manic, debates and institutional exclusion experienced under Section 28 and the current trends in contemporary education policy.

The notion of 'gender as a phantasm' that is threaded throughout the various chapters is one I find particularly interesting. In the introduction, Butler notes that in various parts of the world 'gender' has been presented as a threat to children, family, national security, cultural values, science, religion, civilisation, nature, and God Himself amongst others (p. 4-5). Butler analyses the way in which fear is used as a political weapon.

Governments and institutions such as the education system, and social organisations such as Sex Matters are able to mobilise human and non-human resources by tapping into fear and anxieties to regulate gendered life. One only needs to consider the ongoing fall out of the 2025 Supreme Court Ruling to see this play out. Particularly relevant to my research is the fear around children being 'harmed' or 'corrupted', leading to the banning of books or resources relating to LGBTQ+ lives, removal of content from curricula, parent first approaches to social transition, and calls to fire educators who teach about LGBTQ+ people. Simply acknowledging that diversity exists is seen as harm, indoctrination or even abuse. Butler explains that these mechanisms of control are not just about preventing the acceptance of gender and sexual diversity, but to once again, 'make those thoughts un-sayable, unreadable, and unthinkable' (p. 99). The bans are not just about protecting children – they are policing what kinds of futures and lives can be imagined. As with Section 28, the 'innocent child' is weaponised to justify and provide "moral alibi to destroy the lives of others" (p. 249).

Butler critiques the notion of sex assignment as a singular event happening shortly after birth. This assignment is rather an ongoing process tied up in adult desires and expectations, the process of 'girling' or 'boying' throughout their childhood as an iterative process. There is then an ongoing debate around what constitutes the 'right' way for boys to become men and girls to become women. Sex assignment therefore relays a set of desires about how one should live within the world. In a similar way, I think a lot of previous research has approached Section 28 as a singular historical event – even when looking at the ongoing impact or legacy. In my research I seek to frame it instead as an affective regime that still exists. Section 28 limited what could be thought, spoken and imagined, it forced us into closets, and continues to shape the individuals we became. This text has helped strengthen my argument that Section 28 is not just an historical document, but something that has a legacy that still affects queer identity.

In terms of the relevance to the wider field, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* is relevant to those interested in gender studies, education, sociology, political theory and queer studies amongst other areas. It helps to understand the current and historical debates around what has come to be known as 'gender ideology', and how gender critical movements and responses to gender diversity have shaped government policy and various institutions worldwide. Finally, it also addresses the notions of academic censorship and academic freedom, which are relevant to many fields of research.

Jai Lloyd

Jai Lloyd is a PhD researcher at Lancaster University in the field of Education and Social Justice. Her current research uses life history interviews and queer theory perspectives to explore the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ educators who were educated in the UK under Section 28. She is examining how these histories have influenced and affected their teaching practice and professional identities. As well as what can be learned from their experiences in light of current debates and policy developments regarding gender diversity.

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