GLOBAL TROUBLE

American philosopher Judith Butler discusses American vulgarity, Middle East upheaval, and other forms of the global crisis

Judith Butler became a rock star in academia with *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. The 1990 work, which argues that gender is performative, derived from social norms, is a core text for queer studies. She advanced her reputation as a leading gender theorist with subsequent works, such as *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* in 1993. While Butler will always be a queer theory icon, she has been well established in the past two decades as a leading political and social theorist. Her most recent book is *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, in which she discusses how movements such as the Arab Spring are driven by precarity, opposing the destruction of livable human conditions.

Butler is Maxine Elliot Professor in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Program of Critical Theory at the University of California, Berkeley. Her philosopher's trajectory toward a theory of democracy has paralleled her evolution as a public intellectual; lesbian and gay rights, human rights, and anti-war politics are among her fields of activism. She became a prominent supporter of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement that pressures Israel on behalf of the Palestinian struggle for freedom and justice. In the 2012 *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*, she argues that Jewish ethics require challenging Israeli policies. *Cairo Review* Managing Editor Scott MacLeod interviewed Butler in her office at Berkeley on July 21, 2016.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How do you view the state of the world right now?*

JUDITH BUTLER: I've been tracking closely what's happening with colleagues in Turkey, and of course it's a complex situation with a complex history. But what does seem clear is that [President Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan is not only interested in punishing those who participated in the coup or who supported the coup, but using the opportunity of the coup to suppress all dissent and to purge

◁ Judith Butler, Paris, Nov. 6, 2013. *Lea Crespi/LUZ/Redux*

the universities as well. So as we are speaking he is requesting loyalty from all deans and rectors. And whoever doesn't give the oath will be suspended or dismissed, and then the question is whether the oath obligates those administrators to police their own academic faculty and to report those who are dissenters and who don't support the government. One could pull back and say, well, we see lots of instances like this throughout the world where open criticism of the state is not tolerated and basic principles of academic freedom and democratic freedom are abrogated all the time. We can see that under various regimes and we can even start to develop a comparative framework for such problems. I think that it's important to do right now. I think that the future of critical thought is really at risk. And critical thought not just as something people do in universities, but critical thought as the term that links, say, academic freedom and democratic freedom—a kind of crossing of the right to dissent and the right to criticize.

At the same time, I'm made a little bit nervous by people who say we are now living in the age of the security state, and then proceed to give us a logic of the security state which applies to all instances. Security operates differently in South Africa than it does in Istanbul or Turkey more generally or than it does in the United States. I think we have to ask how this new securitarianism, if we are to speak that way, how in various settings it intersects with nationalism, with religion, with political party systems, with militarism—in other words, it's part of a complex constellation, and it doesn't always work the exact same way [everywhere]. I did find it interesting that various European leaders were saying if Turkey wants to be part of the European Union, it must pledge respect for democratic values—no witch hunt, no return of the death penalty. Then Erdoğan turns around and says, "Uh, declaring a state of emergency—just like France, right?" Insisting on the commonality and the continuity of this securitarian move; security trumps other freedoms, security trumps constitutions, security trumps all other possible concerns, right? And it gets mobilized and exploited as a rationale for the purposes of immunizing a regime from criticism and dissent. So that particular habit has been taken up by a number of regimes as I'm sure you know, but I do think we have to see how it works in particular contexts. I get a little worried in two directions. One would be that we can only think about the particular instances, and we can't see the links. And then I get worried in another direction, which is that there is a logic that we can outline, and we can declare this new age of security, and the logical form is instantiated in all these particular instances, at which point we obliterate history and context and specificity from the analysis.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Turkey is an important example, given how it is such a nexus for the global crisis.*

JUDITH BUTLER: We are having a global crisis that takes many different forms. I'm resisting the generalization to some degree. But I think Turkey is important because there is a certain longstanding debate: Is it East? Is it West? Is it democratic? Is it Muslim? Can it be both? How does it figure in relationship to debates about secularism and religion? How does it figure in debates about authoritarianism and democracy? Because on the one hand I read in some European press this week, "Oh, Turkey has just proven it is not part of Europe, it's part of the Middle East." As if this particular kind of crackdown is typical of a Middle Eastern state rather than something you can find in Europe. Then Erdoğan of course replies, "Well, I'm doing just what they're doing in France." In fact, this sweep in France after the attacks of November 2015 was not just a sweep of any and all Muslims or any and all people who were maybe sympathizers. That sweep included climate change protestors who were put under house arrest during the major climate change conference in Paris, and sometimes shackled to their chairs. What is Guantánamo? Is that the West? Is that a European practice? Is it a U.S. practice? I think there is a tendency to assign authoritarianism and securitarianism to the Middle East, to Africa, to Southeast Asia, in some way that allows for a cleansing of the West's reputation with itself. It gets to keep its good reputation with itself through these kinds of regional projections.

So I guess I'm suggesting that Turkey is a place where a number of these issues become confused, because people don't precisely know how to locate it in our conventional ways of locating political power, forms of political power, in the West, in the East, in the South, in the North. I think they break down when they look at Turkey, its complexity and the different ways it can go, right? On the one hand, Erdoğan is a neoliberal, right? He's got a neoliberal form of Ottoman nostalgia. When there was a popular revolt in Gezi, he was seeking to build an extraordinary marketplace on this public site, which is a site that belongs to all people and holds an enormous set of memories, some of them very terrible, some of them very exhilarating. But he is also building a mosque in that same site, and that particular conjunction is complicated. We all see this in many places in the world now. So how do we think about that in terms of regions? Is that East? Is that West? Is it North? Is it South? I think it is a particular convergence, and maybe it calls into question some of these taken-for-granted ways of thinking about political forms in relationship to regions.

CAIRO REVIEW: *You wrote about the Egypt protests in your recent book* Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly. *Why not "a performative theory of democracy?"*

JUDITH BUTLER: That probably would have been catchier. For me, I was interested in the way in which bodies assemble and how they signify certain kinds of political meanings through assembly. So it was the bodily dimension of democratic

action—street politics, demonstrations, what's important about the bodies assembling—that allowed me to draw upon my former work, even some of the work on gender and sexuality, and also link to democratic theory. I suppose I wasn't prepared to offer a full theory of democracy.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How do you interpret the Tahrir uprising in Egypt, and the Arab Spring?*

JUDITH BUTLER: I was in Egypt just months before. I remember sitting around a dinner table with colleagues from various universities, and I asked, "What's the chance that there would be a popular uprising here?" And they said there is no chance, there's absolutely no chance. And what I enjoyed most about that, upon reflection, was that we do live with very strong kinds of epistemic limits. Like, this is what is thinkable, this is as much as we can hope for, this is as much as we can expect. We have these limits, and they contour the horizon within which we think, and we can't really think beyond them because it would be a different world than the world we are living in if we were able to think beyond them. So what I did find quite exhilarating about the early days of the Arab Spring was what people thought was not possible was certainly possible. I suppose like many others I was caught up in that exhilaration, and it seemed to me that these were popular democratic uprisings.

Now, of course, all of those words are complex and they've only become more complex since the Arab Spring. What is a popular uprising? What is a popular revolution? Does it represent the people? Who represents the people? It seems to me that it didn't take very long for the question of who represents the people, and how are the people represented, to become really crucial questions. Are the military the people? Do they also represent the people? What about the people who were not at the square? What about the people who supported the older regime, or wish for another regime? Did the people include the Muslim Brotherhood? Do they not include the Muslim Brotherhood? Does the Muslim Brotherhood include the people? Does that include all the people?

So you have all these extraordinary divisions and we know the history and we know the outcome. So the truth is that the romantic moment of believing in a popular revolution is always beset by the question of who decides who the people are, and how is it decided. So for instance, in several uprisings you have one crowd in one square, you have another crowd in another square, or you have one crowd in a square one day and another crowd in the square the next day. A lot depends on photography, media, how the people are being constituted through the public circulation of that event. There is no event that has political significance without its public circulation, and as soon as we are involved in the question of what forms that public circulation takes, who's orchestrating that public circulation, we see how there are modes of power that are different

from popular power, that are deciding what counts as the people, what counts as the people's power, what counts as democratic, as the popular will. So one has to have a more canny, more complex idea of how power operates, and even how democratic regimes can operate, than relying on the exhilarating force of popular uprising.

I think that even in Turkey when we saw briefly an attempted military coup, they were claiming that they were operating in the name of democracy. Erdoğan in squashing the coup claims he's operating in the name of democracy. So we have a conflict, and then there are of course dissenters who are not particularly pleased with the military coup, and not particularly pleased with Erdoğan who also claim to be on the side of democracy. One question is how to deal with the military and military power. The military cannot install a democracy. There is no such thing as an installed democracy. We can speak that way but it is a perversion of language. If a democracy is installed, it's not a democracy. It's only when the military lays down its arms and demilitarizes itself that there is the possibility of a democracy. And that didn't happen in Egypt, and it didn't happen in Turkey, and it didn't happen in Guantánamo, right? All of the security guards and military personnel in Guantánamo could have refused to do their job but they did it and they still do it to this day.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Part of what is at play in Egypt, Turkey, in Europe with the backlash against refugees, seems to be identity politics?*

JUDITH BUTLER: Maybe this would sound like a bit of a leap, but I'm so much more interested in coalitions and alliances that background identity claims for the purposes of a common struggle. I think one of the questions that I would have about popular democratic movements is one that Ernesto Laclau articulated most eloquently in his theory of hegemony. How is it that groups which identify with very different kinds of issues—sexual rights, or questions of poverty, or issues of literacy, or perhaps non-violence, or anti-militarism—how do they articulate with one another? How do they come together? Not just physically in the square or on the street, but how do they begin to articulate their political demands in a coalition that demands that they identify what they wish to achieve and who they wish to defeat, having that kind of clear sense of the primary antagonism. And how then do those groups work together even when they do not fully identify with each other, or they do not fully agree with one another? That interests me on the left. We have to assume that harmonious ideas of left unity are not plausible. I don't believe for instance [with] Michael Hardt that love binds us on the left, or with the late Freud that Eros has this binding character. If only we chose love over hatred, we would come together. My sense is rather that we have to think more about how to live with those we don't particularly like, and never chose to be in solidarity with, but with whom we are obligated to cohabit the world

and enter into solidaristic alliances despite what might be some pretty heartfelt hostilities. I think it is those forms of alliances where people are able to background their hostility, or their strong disaffection for one another, for another purpose. In the work that I have done in Israel and Palestine, there are some who believe that you build up mutual understanding, mutual respect, mutual trust, and you learn to identify with the other person's pain, or you learn to expand your zone of identification. For instance, in bereavement groups that bring Palestinian and Israeli Jewish parents together who have lost children, they have these kinds of conversations where they seek to identify with the extraordinary sorrow that the other is experiencing. It is through expanding that capacity for identification across religious and ethnic divisions that a certain kind of hopefulness is built. I have great respect for those groups, and I actually think that they are probably living out what Martin Buber thought of as the formation of an organic community, something like a community that starts through smaller acts of identification. But it seems to me that there is a broader issue that those kinds of models can't quite address, which is longstanding rage, longstanding hatred, against those one holds responsible for the destruction of one's relatives, or the destruction of one's people, or the destruction of one's land. I think it is not the case that we are ever going to see a full resolution, at least in our lifetimes. I might be marking my own epistemic limit for thinking here, but I don't think we are going to see a full resolution of that enormous rage and enormous sorrow.

I think all we can do is insist that people try to find a political forum in which they live together on land that they share, and defend the rights of everyone to live on that land on the condition of equality, on equal terms, regardless of what they feel about one another. Quite regardless. At some level I have to say, I don't want to hear, I don't want to know, how much you feel that you hate the other, or that you are sure the other hates you. I actually think there are global obligations, and also territorial obligations, to live with other people we may not love and to honor their equal right to live there too. So I think it is in spite of love that we have to build our ideas of cohabitation. I think that is maybe linked to the question you asked me, because if you start just with our particular identities, and we hold firm to them at the expense of all else, then we can't actually think about relations in which we are obligated to live that necessarily put us in contact with others who don't share those identities. So I'm less interested in expanding the capacities for identification than I am in undercutting identification as the basis of common living or cohabitation. I think you don't have to identify, you do not necessarily have to fully understand, in order to honor the absolute rights of another group or another person.

I think apartheid South Africa and its aftermath has shown us the difficulty of that. I mean, they did hold out for the truth and reconciliation commission to provide a reconciliation of hearts. A reconciliation that would be to the side of law. But the

problem with that is people can give their stories and make their works of art, and they are really important works of art, documenting the suffering, the outrage, the loss, the violence, and brutality. All amazingly important, and I continue to support those efforts. But in fact apartheid was only partially overcome. There are still massive economic inequalities. There are still massive social inequalities. And the apartheid deal that put an end to legal forms of discrimination in no way affected the economic distribution of wealth. In other words, whites got to keep their property and wealth. Blacks got to remain poor, coloreds as well for the most part. And those more basic structures of inequality, which are structures of racial inequality, were nevertheless preserved as apartheid ended. So we can't look to non-juridical forms of reconciliation to solve all those political problems. At a certain level the problem of economic distribution cannot be addressed by reconciliation techniques. Reconcile yourself to economic inequality? No, no, that's not something to which people should be reconciled. That's something about which they are still quite angry. I think the student movements now, the Rhodes Must Fall movement, the movements that have been important in Johannesburg and Cape Town, are all evidence of the unfinished status of apartheid. My hope is that they can find non-violent means to transform society.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Economics is the basis of the policy to address these issues?*
JUDITH BUTLER: I don't necessarily think that economics is at the base of all these policies. I think that if we look to modes of mutual understanding, reconciliation, or love, or harmonious cohabitation, we have to ask—well, in the case of Palestine, you know there are groups that try to achieve mutual understanding between Palestinians and Jewish Israelis. But those groups very often achieve an understanding on the condition, like Seeds of Peace, that when you come into dialogue you are not allowed to talk about power, you are not allowed to talk about politics, you are not allowed to talk about economics or land. You can talk about how you feel, what you experienced, you speak in the first person, and you seek to have a mutual understanding with other people. You can achieve a mutual understanding if you recognize each other's pain. But the status quo remains the same. You have someone with colonial powers understanding someone who is a colonized subject, and maybe vice versa, but the structure of colonial power is not addressed within that. So what does that mean to have achieved a mutual understanding on the condition that you don't talk about colonial power, or the way in which different interlocutors are defined in relation to colonial power? In a way you're saying mutual understanding occurs on the condition that the status quo is not destabilized. So that means that these kinds of groups don't work in that organic fashion to go from smaller communities of understanding to larger ones. They are circumscribed in such a way that issues such as economics,

politics, continuing colonial structure, none of them can be addressed on those terms. Similarly in South Africa you can have truth and reconciliation and you can actually feel like the history you are suffering under apartheid, especially if you are black South African, has been recognized or seen in a certain kind of venue. But the minute you leave that venue, you see that radical economic inequality along racial lines, that is to say continuing institutional racism, is not affected. So there again truth and reconciliation doesn't become a model for a future society; it becomes a way of cordoning off this ideal of mutual understanding from lived inequality.

CAIRO REVIEW: *So justice is?*
JUDITH BUTLER: I think it is really a hard question. Am I willing to live with people who killed my child? Am I willing to live with people who destroyed my village, who excommunicated me? I mean that's hard, that's really hard. But that is the challenge for just cohabitation, right? It's not learning to love. I mean, maybe there is love that comes about inadvertently, that's great. I'm all for love. I just don't think we should over-idealize its power to lay the groundwork for a radical democratic vision of equality and justice. I think that's much harder work.

CAIRO REVIEW: *In the Palestine issue, you've become involved in the BDS movement. You became destabilized about speaking in public for awhile after a difficult time during a talk at a New York school.*
JUDITH BUTLER: It is an interesting issue to raise right now. At the time when I spoke at Brooklyn College in 2012, there was quite an uproar because there were people who argued that to support the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement was to engage in a form of anti-Semitism. That argument had a couple of different prongs, one of which was that to boycott Israel is to boycott Jews, and boycotting Jews is anti-Semitic. Well, 20 to 30 percent of Israel is not Jewish, by the way. People kind of forget that. But also the State of Israel doesn't necessarily represent the Jewish people, even though I think that is what the State of Israel claims. As a dissident Jew, which I am, and belonging to several dissident Jewish organizations, which are among the fastest growing and largest in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, at least in the Anglophone world that I live in, that's a very insulting kind of claim. Jews who have strong criticisms of Israel, who are not Zionists perhaps, or maybe are Zionists with strong criticisms, or who used to be Zionists and now no longer are—it's a very complex terrain for Jewish people these days. Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, Sephardic Jews from many different locations in the world who are very unclear what relation to take to the State of Israel, and see its militarism, and its own forms of discrimination and occupation, as unjust. How do you make that claim without being called an anti-Semite? Of course,

many people will not make that claim because they don't want to experience that allegation. For a Jew, especially for a Jew whose family partially survived the Nazi genocide and partially did not survive the Nazi genocide, to be called an anti-Semite is horrible. But for those of us who grew up reading socialist Jewish work or even reading Primo Levi and other works on Jewish ethics it was important to say when you see something is unjust, even if it means you will be charged with horrible things. But I don't think it ever occurred to any of us that we would ourselves be called anti-Semites by the virtue of the fact that we saw and named an injustice that was to some degree being conducted in our names, and therefore we were obligated and remain obligated to oppose.

The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement was something that I thought about for a long time. I argued with people about it for several years before I decided to join. I joined after one of the more hideous Gaza bombardments, I believe in 2009. I joined as a way of being able to say that no one should have a direct relationship with Israeli institutions unless or until they make clear that they oppose the occupation, that they accept the Palestinian right to return, and that they oppose forms of institutionally entrenched discrimination within the State of Israel as it is currently defined. Yes, I thought that was a good claim to make, it was a way of saying no. It was a way of saying no relations until those things have changed, and trying in its own way, to build an international community of consensus that this is unjust and unacceptable.

Of course it mattered that there were 170 or so Palestinian organizations that made the call that asked the broad international community to please join a non-violent effort which is extremely important. It is the largest non-violent effort of the Palestinian resistance. It is broadly supported within Palestine. It is an explicit request made on the part of Palestinians. I thought that I would answer yes. It may sound peculiar but you know Levinas, who is the great Jewish philosopher and ethicist, says that very often an ethical demand comes to you in the form of a call. You are called up. Someone makes a call, and that was a call. Will you or will you not support us? This is how you can support us. It is non-violent. It is in the name of international human rights. It's not even a radical Marxist agenda. Some people fault it for being too weak. Basic principles of democracy like freedom of mobility, freedom to own your own land, freedom to vote, freedom of self-determination, political self-determination—yes, all of these are prerequisites of democratic life and the Palestinian people should not be deprived of these basic democratic rights and goods. For me it was a principled decision and one that I continue to stand by.

Now we have new laws being drafted in the United States, which seek to criminalize anyone who supports the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement. The problem with that of course is the right to boycott has long been defended in the United States. If you can show that a boycott is in the service of discrimination, it's

not acceptable. If a shopkeeper wants to boycott black people, that's not acceptable. But it would be quite a stretch to say that the boycott of the State of Israel, not its people but the state and its institutions, is a discriminatory action.

I'm shocked by the number of state legislatures and even governors, like governor [Andrew] Cuomo of New York, who are defending the criminalization of BDS as a point of view. It's one thing to argue against it. I argued against for years before I came to accept it. I'm happy to have a robust argument about it. People should argue about it, it should be thought through, it should be forced to defend itself in the strongest possible way. That's an open, important public debate. But to say it ought not to be debated or that it is not legitimate as a viewpoint is an act of enormous suppression. It makes the United States closer to Erdoğan, because Erdoğan is also trying to suppress dissent.

It's a worrisome time. As a theorist, I have been involved in defending the BDS movement, although I have never been a leader of that movement. People thought because of the publicity garnered by the Brooklyn event that I was somehow at the forefront. I'm not at the forefront, I maybe speak about it once a year, and I defend the right to boycott, yes I do.

I am part of a group called Jewish Voice for Peace, which is seeking to realize justice in Palestine, and I'm also on the international board of the Jenin theatre in Palestine, which is an extraordinary group again committed to non-violence; BDS is committed to non-violence. The Jenin theatre is committed to non-violence although they debate it there and I have been part of those debates. I'm always trying to find non-violent ways to enter into that particular struggle, but I'm also on the board of the Center for Constitutional Rights in the United States. It's a group in New York City that has opposed racial profiling, that has sought to defend the rights of the Guantánamo prisoners, that has opposed the death penalty, and also solitary confinement in the U.S. prisons. I am active in organizations such as these and they are an important part of my life.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Let's dive into American politics. What do you make of the Trump movement?*

JUDITH BUTLER: It is a frightening moment, there is no doubt. I think what is at stake is whether or not we are a constitutional democracy. I think for someone like [Donald] Trump there are no basic constitutional principles. I never heard him defend the constitution, for instance. He just made a remark that he wouldn't necessarily agree to defend all NATO allies, the first time that has been said since the inception of NATO. And why does he say that? Because everything is a deal. Everything is a deal to be brokered. If we look more closely at that, we see that he understands politics as brokering a deal, and it's about who can profit from what, and what will it cost. So

there is a cost-benefit framework that is brought to bear. Also a kind of narcissism that is overweening. "I know how to make a deal, vote for me I'll make a deal with these countries, I'll make a deal to get rid of ISIS." He doesn't say, "I'll defend this principle," he says "I'll make us strong again." But what is strength? It's the ability to make the deal, to seal the deal, right? You can just see the exhilarated narcissism when he talks in that way. There is a way that the business model is, as it were, trumping the political model. It might be part of the economization of the political field, if we are to look at it theoretically. But more than that, what Trump has done is unleash forms of hatred that people were largely unwilling to express in public. What he's done is he's figured feminism, gay and lesbian rights, struggles for social and economic equality, are all superegos that have stopped us from being able to say what we really feel about women, what we really feel about Muslims, or what we really feel about blacks, what we really feel about the superiority of whiteness, or what we really feel about taxes or being told that we can't carry a gun. I suppose one might have to be a little psychoanalytic here to get it, but I call them forms of sadistic exhilaration that he has unleashed. And he's figured feminism and struggles against racism, struggles for social and economic equality, all of them as these nasty superegos who have silenced us for too long.

I think there is also a backlash against [Barack] Obama, there's a white backlash, and also against Obama's elegance, his education, his capacity to write and speak in paragraph form, which is nearly a lost art in the United States. I have lots of difficulty with Obama's politics, but he did and he still does have enormous personal dignity and intelligence. I think there is an attack on that. People say, "Oh, Trump is so vulgar. How could anybody vote for him, he has no chance of winning." The truth is that it is precisely *because* he is vulgar that he has a chance at winning. People want the vulgarity. They want the unbridled sadism. They want to be able to make terrible jokes about women again. They want to be able to say how much they hate Muslims. It is a reckless and sadistic kind of unleashing.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Where does that come from?*

JUDITH BUTLER: It comes from in many ways a large number of people feeling that their economic chances have diminished and they can blame immigrants for that. That their sense of their ability to keep a job, to have longevity in a job, to get a mortgage, to keep their mortgage, to have retirement, many of these opportunities have been restricted over time mainly through the devastation of social democracy. In other words, the devastation of all the social institutions that people have relied upon to have economic well-being. I think we could understand it as neoliberalism to some degree, and the way in which it undermines basic economic structures, but also the outsourcing of public goods. Who runs our prisons? Who runs our retirement? Retirement

companies. Do we still have a public post office? Sort of and sort of not. Even libraries are massively underfunded, education underfunded. As we lose a sense that we are living in an economy in which people really have a chance to gain a sense of economic well-being, to feel an economic sense of flourishing or to have a sense of an economic future, a viable economic future, people cast about for scapegoats of various kinds. They don't always grasp the economic phenomenon. You know the economic processes in which we are living. I do think, quite frankly, that the Occupy Movement was right in saying that we are living in a country of accelerating inequalities and that the rich become richer and fewer and the poor become larger and greater. I mean more poor and greater numbers of people become poor. I think that that took maybe two different populist forms. Some Bernie Sanders people saying the system is rigged, and being able to name it at least as a system. And then some people going to Trump saying what we need is a strong man who will intervene on our behalf and who's normal like us, who's like a regular guy. Even though he is not a regular guy, he's one of the richest people in the entire world, but to the degree that he can communicate the vulgarity of the regular guy. I think there are people who are drawn to that and believe he is an alternative to the existing status quo. What's surprising for me is to see that there were a certain number of Bernie Sanders people who are willing to vote for Trump before they would vote for Hillary [Clinton], who I think stands for the status quo to some degree.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Can we go so far as to say there is a movement that Trump has become a leader of?*
JUDITH BUTLER: I don't know if it is unified enough to be a movement. It seems to me that it's a movement of resentment.

CAIRO REVIEW: *We have the Tea Party movement on board with Trump to some extent.*
JUDITH BUTLER: I think Trump will only ever be an unreliable representative of Christian values. But they do seem to be preferring him to the alternative.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Because so much of his rhetoric correlates with their agenda?*
JUDITH BUTLER: I'm not sure it is a movement. I think it has its internal divisions, and we'll see how it plays out. From my point of view as an academic it probably sounds very intellectually elitist to say they suspend their critical judgment to support him. But I actually think he is giving them an occasion not to think, an occasion not to have to think. To think is to think of a very complex global world, and he's making everything very, very simple. I think that there is a kind of suspension of thinking he promises and he delivers.

CAIRO REVIEW: *By contrast, the Clinton campaign is presenting Hillary Clinton who understands the world is complex.*
JUDITH BUTLER: Hillary is right to say it's a more complex world, and I'm in the position to handle that. Many things about Hillary Clinton I absolutely object to, so don't understand me as a fan. I'm not. But when she says it's a more complex world, and we need someone who can make good judgments about this complex world, that's actually a turnoff for some people. Because they don't want the world to be that complex and they don't want to have to think that hard. They are on a kind of populist high. They want an easier answer. They want law and order. They want someone who will defend the United States and who they are, and who will put the ban on the Muslims, and build the wall against the Mexicans, and keep us predominantly right and return us to simpler times and to simpler visions of the world. So there is a rancor against complexity.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Because it goes against American exceptionalism? If the United States is the exceptional nation, then everything just falls into place because of who Americans are as a nation.*
JUDITH BUTLER: I think that Trump is revivifying the belief in American exceptionalism. I think that is correct. But you know Hillary could play that card. I mean, she is a hawk. She goes to war in faraway places and destroys lives with impunity. So she also belongs to our illustrious history—that's ironic, in case it doesn't come across!

CAIRO REVIEW: *Why aren't you a fan? Is that to say you won't vote for her?*
JUDITH BUTLER: No, I will probably vote for her. I see that my friend Cornel West has come out in favor of Jill Stein. Jill Stein is a principled and interesting person but I think I would at this point vote for Hillary, because I am concerned about the Supreme Court. I believe she will make better appointments. You know unfortunately in the United States we have come to treat elections like Facebook—like, dislike. I don't care whether you like Hillary or you don't like Hillary. I have to say this to my 21-year-old son: you don't have to love any of these people. You can hold your nose and vote for someone. There is a long history of that. I'm sure I voted like that in the past. I'm really not a purist. I think one has to look at the consequences and wage your bets. I haven't liked Hillary's foreign policy. I haven't liked her hawkish impulses. I think she has not always supported public education in the way that it should be. I think her feminism is admirable but I think it is limited. It's liberal feminism and it doesn't go deep enough. I think there is a lot more she can do to oppose racist violence in this country. There are a lot of ways in which I see her as part of the new entrepreneurial ethos in the country. The Clintons in general did dismantle a fair number of

social benefits when Bill Clinton was in power. So it's hard to be enthusiastic, for sure. But I do think we will get a better Supreme Court and better appointments. Maybe some of her appointments will be better than she is.

CAIRO REVIEW: *You make the case that Trump could be very dangerous.*
JUDITH BUTLER: It feels very compromised to vote for Hillary Clinton but Trump is a massive danger. He's a massive danger to democracy as we know it. And not just internal to the United States, but also in foreign policy. I'm not sure what this man knows. I feel like he's full of bluster. He doesn't have considered judgment. When and how would he go to war? What would he do? He's a loose cannon. He strikes me also as profoundly ignorant. And yes dangerous in his racism and in his contempt for basic rights. So I'm very, very concerned.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Are you struck by how one of the great established political parties would be able to nominate such a candidate?*
JUDITH BUTLER: I think that what we are seeing is an anti-establishment populism. They want someone outside the box, right? His son said, "This is a man who has never taken a check from the U.S. government," and people just screamed with pleasure. He's outside and he also represents someone who is not beholden to anyone because he is so damn rich and they love that idea, like, "Oh, what if I'm not beholden to somebody?" There is that phantasmatic moment where they're imagining he won't be beholden.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Would the election of Hillary Clinton have any symbolic power or empowerment for women in the United States or around the world?*
JUDITH BUTLER: I don't think it is a sufficient reason to vote for her, that she is a woman. Maggie Thatcher was a woman. Golda Meir was a woman. There are women who conducted brutal wars and caused great suffering in the world. So I don't think there is anything about being a woman that is important here in terms of understanding what kind of policies she might have. Would it affect her policies? Not necessarily. On the other hand, yes it has a symbolic importance. It was symbolically important that Barack Obama was elected, the first black man in the history of the United States, and it would be symbolically important if Hillary Clinton is elected as, by the way, I expect she will be. Yes, that has a symbolic importance because women can now occupy those positions and if we had thought that those positions were only for men, we can now rethink that category. But beyond that, I am not at all sure. I don't think we'll see a difference in values because she is a woman, nothing that follows from that. Without disputing the enormous symbolic importance of Obama's election, the fact is

that racial inequality has increased in the United States under his administration, and that for any number of reasons, but certainly the new forms of the market economy have had devastating effects. And institutional forms of racism have not necessarily been addressed by this massive symbolic overcoming of racism that Obama achieved. So we can say, yes, on a symbolic level he achieved that. But institutional racism, the killing of black men, the enormous form of institutional racism in our prison system—those have intensified. The prisons are a kind of an industry devoted mainly to containing black and brown men and women. So I don't think we can put too much weight on the symbolic value.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Obama is inspirational but you have difficulties with him.*
JUDITH BUTLER: I wish that he had compromised less. I wish he had fought harder. I wish that he had stood for all kinds of principles that he does not stand for. I can give you a very long list of my complaints with Obama. I think he is a centrist. I think he plays it safe. I do think he has some principles, even if he doesn't actualize them. Actualizing them in words does matter but it can also produce a great feeling of skepticism, like "Oh, this person says this at the level of rhetoric but he doesn't do this at the level of policy." So you know it could be that he's produced a scene where we no longer trust words in the way we might have before.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Is this Obama's failing, or democracy's failing?*
JUDITH BUTLER: It's hard to know how much of anything is Obama's fault. I mean he's in a structurally horrible position and I think that that's clear. The Senate, the House, there are people who blocked him at every step of the way. At the same time, what kind of a fight did he put up? And did he do what he could to avoid compromises that were horrible and to maintain principle in the light of intense antagonism? I think that's a longer discussion, but my sense is he has compromised too often and perhaps unnecessarily.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Out of legitimate fear of backlash?*
JUDITH BUTLER: If you look at his entire career he's always been a centrist. He's still a centrist. We elected a centrist.

CAIRO REVIEW: *He's been out there on gender issues more than any other president.*
JUDITH BUTLER: It has been impressive recently. He recently took a stand supporting transgender people's rights to use the bathroom of their choosing. He says "transgender." He supports their rights at some basic level, that's an enormous breakthrough. At the level of defending individual rights, he can do that. But when it comes to basic economic and

institutional changes, such as those required by the prison system, or pervasive poverty, or immigration, he has a much more difficult time. There are substantial failures even according to a basic humanitarian framework. You don't have to be right or left to say these are failures. I think a lot of people believe that on LGBTQ issues, he's been great.

We have also seen a kind of separation of some of those issues, which are now concerned more with individual rights, from these other kinds of social movements. Which is why we have queer activism, the queer movement, which reminds us that we are part of a social movement concerned with broader questions of equality, freedom and justice, and not just individual rights. So there's been an internal division in the LGBTQ community between individual rights and property rights and marriage rights, and those who are part of larger coalitions fighting for broader economic equality against racism and against militarism. So we are a divided movement at this point.

CAIRO REVIEW: *You have remarked that your book* Gender Trouble *is dated. Many people credit you for the advancement of gender identity.*

JUDITH BUTLER: I think that is probably not right. I was part of a movement of scholars and activists who made a big difference in the late 1980s and early 1990s but I don't think it's me, I'm not at the heart of it. I know that *New York* magazine said that but I think that's wrong. *Gender Trouble* did not make a clear enough distinction between an individual's freedom and what we could call social freedom, or the struggle for freedom that groups undertake. So it could be read in a very individualistic way. If I had it to do over I would probably try to change that. The work on assembly that I have been doing is a way of thinking about group actions or performative actions that try to bring into being a different reality. I also think that at the time I was most concerned with debunking efforts to criminalize or pathologize not just gay and lesbian sexuality or bisexuality but also modes of gender appearance that were non-normative, people who appear in ways that you don't know what gender they were, or they were perhaps too feminine for a man or too masculine for a woman. I wanted to combat those forms of discrimination, and I think it was successful in doing that for some groups of readers and their friends. But I think that in fact I had a pretty strong critique of identity politics and thought that we didn't have to agree on who a woman is, what a woman is, in order to have feminism. You can be a feminist, it doesn't matter what gender you are, how you identify, you can pledge yourself to strong feminist goals and be part of that movement. I was always trying to move against strong ideas of identity. But a lot of trans people came back later, maybe ten years later, and said "Look, you know what, we want strong ideas of identity, and what you are describing doesn't actually fit our experience." So maybe I didn't in that context provide sufficiently for those communities who feel that their identities are

being effaced, or negated, and who actually feel that the assertion of their identity is an extremely important political act, and maybe I'm still weak on that issue. I understood that as a legitimate criticism and something that I needed to think about.

CAIRO REVIEW: *You said a moment ago that Hillary Clinton would not necessarily be an advantage for feminism.*

JUDITH BUTLER: I think she is a feminist, I think she is a liberal feminist. It could be a problem if her version of liberal feminism comes to stand for feminism in the United States. That would be rough, that would be rough. She does stand for some principles—women can occupy any job that a man occupies, women deserve equal pay for equal work. On basic questions of formal equality she's good. But feminism it seems to me is dealing with three major issues globally that I'm not sure she has addressed in the way that is required. One of them has to do with differential levels of poverty for women globally. The effect of U.S. policy abroad, like U.S. markets abroad—making use of cheap women's labor outside of the United States in order to market their goods. What's the exploitation of women workers that happens outside the United States in the service of American markets? Literacy—in many different countries women are not given opportunities to establish literacy and sometimes also in this country. How are they supposed to exercise basic political rights without literacy? It's an impossibility. So illiteracy is a crime against democracy. Then of course violence. Violence against women is not just battery and rape but it is also the killing of women in various parts of the world, including trans women. There is an enormous movement in Latin America against what they call femicide. I think that the tools we need to understand the levels of violence against women globally are not provided by the kind of liberal feminism that Hillary Clinton represents. It's very much about equality on the market. It's a market-based idea of equality. It's not looking at what those markets are doing somewhere else, or what the effects of those markets might be on women. Nor is it really taking on a strong global perspective. She has supported various initiatives to provide cooking ovens to women in parts of the world who don't have them. Which is good, of course. But it doesn't really represent a strong understanding of global feminism and the broader needs for economic redistribution of wealth, all of which is most urgent.