

Judith Butler

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I am most honored to be here in Santiago to accept this honorary degree. I am moved and grateful on this occasion. I ask myself whether I should consider this a personal honor, or a testament to the kind of work that I do. Those may not seem like different options, but if you have honored the work that I do, which I hope to be the case, then it is most important for you to know that I do not do that work alone. Of course, like many scholars, I spend many hours alone with manuscripts and books, but I spend them also in conversation and collaboration with colleagues who are writing in the fields of philosophy, ethics, feminist theory, gender studies, feminist and critical theory, literature and literary criticism. Those conversations emerge in my own thinking and writing, and even my own voice is in some ways populated by all those who have transformed what I think in the course of conversation. The books I have read are part of what I write, so it is hard to know how to define this I, this authorship apart from all the texts, the encounters, the transformative collaborations. This person that I am or, rather, this author that writes is nothing without the relations by which I have been both sustained and transformed. So, yes, I thank you. It is I who thanks you, but even as I thank you, the question of who I am or what I write is not entirely settled. So as you honor me for what I have written or perhaps for what I have spoken, then, you thank many people at the same time, collaborative communities, but also, social movements.

Even as I have made a contribution to some fields of study, that field of study has contributed to my thinking, so I must pass the honor on. Of course, I do not refuse it, but I must share it, for entire fields have made my work possible, including the fields of gender studies and feminist theory, queer and trans theory, but also literary and art criticism, psychoanalysis, and

social political philosophy. So I share this honor with my students as well who have been among the best interlocutors I could imagine. We have bent our heads over books, puzzled over the passages that continue to vex us, thought about the relation between what we read and the world in which we live, the world in which we hope to live. We have engendered hope in one another. Who would I be without those courses, those protracted conversations with students, and with our collective engagement with authors both living and dead? Where would I be without those forms of passionate collaborations with colleagues in California but across the world that have enlivened, changed, and revised my thought? I would be nowhere. I would certainly not be *here*.

So I thank you most profoundly for honoring me, and, in doing so, honoring these fields in which I work, the ones that should have a central place in all universities. Those of us who work in the humanities are under a demand these days to show why the work we do is of value. Must the humanities prove that it is useful to science in order to remain legitimate and keep its funding? Must we elaborate our usefulness to industry or government? When we try to explain what we do as scholars in the humanities, we are often asked to do so in a language that quantifies our results or that accepts forms of measurement that run counter to both the arts and the humanities. Yes, it is obligatory for such fields to make plain their value to a wider public. We all must translate among registers of speech and language, challenging the status quo without becoming obscure or hermetic. But if the terms, the measures, through which we are compelled to explain the value of what we do are, in fact, hostile to what we do, how do we move from there?

Perhaps we need to find a critical way to explore the very problem of value, the value of what we do, and to learn the various languages of value, so that market values and narrow

demands for instrumental outcomes do not become the dominant paradigms for understanding what the university is for. After all, we come to the university to think, to consider critically those forms of value that have been presented to us as necessary, normal or inevitable, forms of value that are too often derived from monetary and market value, utility, profit and capital accumulation. If we bring the resources of critical thought to bear upon these accepted schemes of value, it is because we seek to give value to modes of living and thinking that are regularly disparaged by those that are fully driven fully by profit. It may be that the task of the humanities in the present time is to keep the question of value alive as a question so that we do not simply accept the neoliberal formulations as settling the question of what is finally valuable.

Where, for instance, is the incalculable and immeasurable in our accounts of the humanities, in our justification for why literature, philosophy, and art are essential to the university, but also in our efforts to show why feminist, queer, and decolonial perspectives must be regarded as indispensable to knowledge itself. When we object to the destruction of nature, the exploitation of workers, or the exploitation of women, to sexual violence and economic destitution, or to the rights of migrants, we seek to mark what is of incalculable value about a group or a life or a set of living processes. We object to some lives being regarded as more valuable than other lives; we object as well some lives being regarded as more grievable than other lives. We reject the calculus that makes such distinctions, and we assert the incalculable value of those lives, whether they are still living or gone. Indeed, writing and other art forms seek to document and to dignify those lives that were lost through persecution or abandonment, and the means by which we tell those histories has a value that no number can fully represent. Even when we count the dead, the lives destroyed by persecution or war, the numbers are important; they document a history, and they defy revisionism. But the sorrow cannot be

captured by a calculus; and neither can joy or love be captured in that way. Of course, we need to know how much land has been destroyed in the course of the exploitation of natural resources, especially here in Chile where the imperial North has acted as if this land was made for their profit, but when we seek to understand the value of land, of sacred sites, indigenous histories and practices, the religious and cultural meanings of the mountains and the seas, we require story, image, poem, testimony, embodied theory – for the ethical and political task is to assert the value of lives, of their history, but also of the future of memory, and the grounds for political hope and commitment.

Such accounts are rarely straightforward; they demand that we rethink the patterns of thought, the genres of writing. For Genet, it was the blank page of a book that spoke of the massacre of Palestinians in Lebanon in 1982. For Alain Resnais in 1956, it was the pervasive silence in the face of the image that began to represent the mass deaths at Nazi concentration camps. For Paul Celan, it was the inscrutable dash in the middle of the poem that gave his readers the ineffability of loss – these are the breaks, the interruptions by which something incalculable emerges, something that does not fit into the form of the word or the syntactical order of the sentence. This is also what the Nelly Richard has taught us about what traumatic memory does to language and to representation. Sense making must sometimes fall apart so that we can start to ask, what now counts as common sense, and are we right to call it into question. This becomes all the more important when violence is accepted as a way of life, including violence against women, against trans people, travestis, against all those who are gender non-confirming or who are sexual dissidents. That mode of living, that mode of politics, must be challenged, and to do so we need a way of calling radical injustice into question.

In my view, the university has to be created as a site for critical thought, a space and a time for reflection, for reading, for collaboration, and for being transformed by one another as we read and think together. When panic and irrationality move public opinion, whether xenophobia, racism, or attacks on gender minorities or women, it is, in my view, the obligation of the university to provide a space for thoughtful discussion of how we must act: what, for instance, are our global obligations? What, the ethical and political demands upon us to safeguard the environment against destruction? Why and how do we come to understand violence, and to oppose both its state-sanctioned forms as well as those that operate throughout civil society and within the family.

So many people are struggling to live without violence in a multi-racial and multi-religious world, a world where gender and sexual diversity compels us to accept new social arrangements that allow people to live free of fear and harassment, to be part of the evolving complexity of the human community. But to oppose violence and to build a world without violence, we must be able to identify how it works, not only the acts of violence, but the social structures that reproduce and exonerate those acts. For that we need analysis, history, theoretical reflection, and embodied commitment. Only through a relational understanding of the world can we come to understand humans as living creatures among living creatures, equal and dependent on the continuation of a non-toxic earth, the building of a just global economy and a social infrastructure in which to live and thrive. As much as we are produced by history, by conventions, by practices, we also reproduce ourselves and our world in and through our action and our thought. The point is not to convert theory into action, but to recognize that at its best, theory opens up a possible world, and our action requires a sense of the possible.

So thank you for the honor, but I will take this as an honor that you give to critical thought, to thought that transforms our social world in the direction of greater equality, social freedom, and political justice. Critical thought is by definition a collaborative process. I am lucky to belong to a vibrant world of people who refuse to normalize violence, who keep critical thought alive, and who seek to imagine a future of greater social equality and embodied freedom. I accept this honor, then, as a sign that this university does, and will, honor engaged and critical thought, the kind that seeks to transform the world into a more livable and just domain, one that supports the values of equality, solidarity, non-violence, and persistence. I thank you, I thank the university, and I thank the spirit of critical thinking that opens the university to the teeming life outside its walls. I am honored to find intellectual sustenance there and here. Thank you.