Chapter 8
A Feminist Critique of University Education

Abstract  In this chapter, we highlight some of Judith Butler’s main pronouncements about the university and offer some ways to think differently about philosophy of higher education and academic activism. We consider three ways in which the idea of a university of critique intertwined with notions of non-mastery and ‘error-living’ education might be possible. Firstly, an open and speculative university should cultivate forms of education where making mistakes is considered not only as routine to learning but as a necessary process for learning. Secondly, a university grounded in academic freedom is not only pertinent for free, critical engagement that is unafraid but can play a pivotal role in calling into question existing norms and hegemonies, policies as well as political structures and discourses. It also opens up the possibility of free and critical thought, including intellectual positions. And thirdly, dissent is critical not only as a recognition of alternative or controversial views but for the very cultivation of academic activism.

Keywords  Judith Butler · Feminist critique · Bodies · Non-mastery · Dissent

Introduction

Our decision to focus on Judith Butler’s ideas in this chapter emanates from two intertwined reasons: her standing and reformulation of philosophy through a feminist lens and her tireless commitment and activism in ensuring that her writing is made visible in our world. Like so many other scholars we have thus far drawn and expanded upon in this book, Butler’s work symbolises the kinds of activism university education can no longer do without. This chapter has two points of interest. Firstly, we pay attention to Butler’s (1993) contention that ‘bodies matter’ and, specifically, that while certain bodies enjoy legitimacy and value, others do not and are instead (re)produced as objects. The idea that bodies signify a world beyond themselves holds particular implications for university spaces and education. Secondly, we turn to her conversation with Facundo Giuliani (2015), in which Butler offers some remarks about the university and its relationship with philosophy of education.
We continue by highlighting some of her main pronouncements about the university and offer some ways to think differently about philosophy of higher education and academic activism. We consider three ways in which the idea of a university of critique intertwined with notions of non-mastery and ‘error-living’ education might be possible. Firstly, an open and speculative university should cultivate forms of education where making mistakes is considered not only as routine to learning but as a necessary process for learning. Secondly, a university grounded in academic freedom is not only pertinent for free, critical engagement that is unafraid but can play a pivotal role in calling into question existing norms and hegemonies, policies as well as political structures and discourses. It opens up the possibility of free and critical thought, including intellectual positions. And thirdly, dissent is critical not only as a recognition of alternative or controversial views but for the very cultivation of academic activism.

A Feminist Critique of the University as Corporeal and Embodied Education

Butler’s (2015) account of a new philosophy of (higher) education interrelates with three primary ideas that we examine in this chapter. To begin with, Butler is particularly concerned with encouraging new readings around human engagements that allow resistance and disruption to manifest. In one instance, she offers an account of the university as an open place where criticism should unfold:

The University has to be the place where we have open critical debate, and we can’t have open critical debate unless we know what criticism is. And those skills – practices or exercises, like the exercise of criticism – are precisely what is supported and possible through the University. I would say that the capacity for criticism – here, thinking about critical literature analysis and also philosophical criticism – is crucial to open democratic debates on values. In what direction we should be going? (Butler in Giuliano, 2015: 185)

Through criticism, Butler envisages that the university becomes a place of potentiality – that is, the potential to become ‘a scene of an empowering contact’ (Butler in Giuliano, 2015: 186). By claiming that the university should be an empowering educational space, Butler has in mind the potential of the university to cultivate an ‘embodied, corporeal, and social’ education. When education becomes embodied, it no longer just focuses on individual ‘excellence’ and productive subjects. Rather, university education invites students and teachers to become ‘non-conforming’ beings who present themselves as embodied beings who take risks and looks at possibilities for thinking and acting otherwise (Butler in Giuliano, 2015: 190).

Long before students arrive at the universities, they would already have been socialised into particular codes of speech and conduct. This, says Butler (Butler in Giuliano, 2015: 188), would have involved knowing how to sit, how to raise your hand and wait your turn to be called upon, how to use your voice, when to be loud and when to whisper – ‘you learn all these modes of bodily performativity to learn
how to be’. These codes are not only applicable to conduct, but to conduct in relation to a binary construction of male and female students to Butler (Butler in Giuliano, 2015: 188):

Education is training in gender and is training in citizenship, and there are punishments that go along with it; there are also modes of excitement that emerge at the prospect of transgressing those rules. You can develop an entire mode of sexuality that is dedicated to the breaking of the rules in a mad effort to gain some freedom from that kind of disciplinary apparatus.

How students and academics conceive of themselves – as corporeal beings – concerning their spaces, whether in lecture theatres, libraries, laboratories, seminar groups or supervision encounters, has implications for their learning and questioning. While some are noticeable and seen as present, others are not. Furthermore, even when certain are indeed seen, they are not seen as they are, but rather through a distortion of prejudice and preconceived ideas. Bodies, as Butler (1993) maintains, ‘do matter’:

The body posited as prior to the sign, is always posited or signified as prior. This signification produces as an effect of its own procedure the very body that it nevertheless and simultaneously claims to discover as that which precedes its own action. If the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all. On the contrary, it is productive, constitutive, one might even argue performative, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims prior to any and all signification. (Butler, 1993: 6)

Of concern to Butler (1993) is not the only that the corporeal matters but how the world – through its signification – perceive, construct and respond to bodies. To Butler (1993), the power dynamics which plays out in a matrix of gender relations, for example, forces us to ask ourselves who we are and how we have come to know what we know in relation to bodies – more importantly, how the ‘we’ has been constructed in relation to a question of knowledge. Certain constructions, she asserts, appear constitutive – that is, they ‘have this character of being that without which we could not think at all’ (Butler, 1993: xi). Thanks to social codes and discourses, the result is a stark binary between certain bodies, which have been rendered as valuable and legitimate – such as white, heterosexual and male – as opposed to others which have been (re)produced as an object, such as black, lesbian and female. How the body is experienced is materialised through particular normative discourses. In this sense, explains Butler (1993: ix), not only do ‘bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appeared to be quite central to what bodies are’. This might begin to explain why women in particular use their bodies as a form of protest when demonstrating against gender-based violence. It allows them to use the physicality of who they are as a weapon against abuse.

The idea that social settings, as well as educational environments, assign recognition and value to some physical bodies, while not to others, is one which has long impacted upon how students access their learning and their relationship with learning. There are many signifiers of what determines legitimacy and value – from race,
gender, ethnicity and class to embodiments of beauty and sexuality. The domain of ontology, which assigns legitimacy to some bodies, while withholding it from others, is regulated, states Butler (Meier & Prins, 1998: 280) – ‘what gets produced inside of it, what gets excluded from it in order for the domain to be constituted is itself an effect of power’. The effects of this domain are profound, yet often invisible, under-reported and unknown. Students neither enter nor similarly participate in their university education. Depending on race, ethnicity, religion, ability and sexuality, students not only encounter different responses from peers, but they are forced to find different ways of presenting themselves – this either means an insertion of the self via assimilation, or standing on the periphery, and gazing in. While race has always been a determining factor of legitimacy, and hence recognition and inclusion, signifiers of religion, gender and sexuality are increasingly (re)interpreted through discourses of antagonism.

Consider, for example, what is often described as the feminisation of the teaching profession, which stems from an uncomfortable and misleading conception of teaching as ‘women’s work’ – a signifier steeped in sexual bias. Seemingly, the issue is not only the predominance of female teachers in schools and there the effects thereof on pedagogy and classroom culture but that the absence of male role models creates problems for boys in terms of motivation, discipline and social interaction. Feminism has created an apparent shift towards the privileging of female learning styles, assessment practices, modes of discipline and so forth (Skelton, 2002: 86).

More worrying is the assumption that ‘feminised’ teaching spaces ought to be remedied through the ‘masculinisation’ of the profession. Can we conceive of a world, for example, in which the masculinisation of the corporate world is held to question and interrogation? Ironically, the perceived need for an increase in male bodies in teaching – so as to de-feminise teaching and presumably provide positive role modelling for male bodies – does not pertain to male bodies who are also gay. The normative centrality of heterosexual identity discounts the option or appeal of gay male bodies as teachers – exposing ‘the ways in which homophobia polices the boundaries of the teaching profession in relation to masculinities’ (Mills, 2004: 28). The full effects of both the boundaries and the policing cannot be fully comprehended unless directly experienced. In Butler’s words (Butler in Giuliano, 2015: 193):

Sometimes it is in the way it’s looked at, or the way power structures the visual fields, so that certain bodies are stigmatized, so let’s remember that. Power can work to efface bodies so that we do not see them, or it can work to stigmatize bodies so that we see them in a hyperbolic way, or in a way that fits a stereotype or fetish. A vulnerable population can suffer from being overexposed in the visual field, or being effaced by the visual field, or being regulated according to categories that are restrictive or false in certain ways.

We are aware, for example, of a few student teachers on our PGCE programme, who identify as non-binary, who experience great difficulty during teaching practice. Their difficulty starts before they even go to the respective school to which they have been assigned. They express anxiety as to whether they will encounter a welcoming school environment; whether they will be provided with the necessary
mentoring support; whether they will be assessed fairly; and, indeed, whether they have any prospects of being appointed into a teaching post. None of these anxieties have anything to do with their knowledge or skills as teachers – yet they know that their bodies will predetermine how they are perceived and judged as teachers.

**Bodies Matter Because They Do**

It is worth spending a bit more time on Butler’s (1993: xi) assertion that bodies matter and, in particular, her argument:

For surely bodies live and die; eat and sleep; feel pain, pleasure; endure illness and violence; and these ‘facts’, one might skeptically say, cannot be dismissed as mere construction. But their irrefutability in no way implies what it might mean to affirm them and through what discursive means. Moreover, why is it that what is constructed is understood as an artificial and dispensable character?

Specifically, it is worth revisiting her articulation that ‘discourses do actually live in bodies. They lodge in bodies; bodies in fact carry discourses as part of their own lifeblood. And nobody can survive without, in some sense, being carried by discourse’ (Meier & Prins, 1998: 282). In her interview with Meier and Prins (1998: 282), Butler contends that ‘we also have to worry about certain ways of describing orientalism and especially describing orientalism as it pertains to women, women’s bodies, and women’s self-representations’. She explains that there are many complex debates about the veil, yet there is little clarity on who ‘the veiled woman’ refers to – ‘In what context, for what purpose? What is the action, what is the practice that we are thinking about? In what context are we trying to decide whether or not the veiled woman is an example of the abject?’ (Meier & Prins, 1998: 282).

We find this point of discussion particularly pertinent not only in relation to growing trends among liberal democracies to regulate or prohibit the veil (or hijab), as worn by Muslim women, but also in relation to higher education spaces. From our own experiences, there is an increasing differentiation between Muslim women and veiled Muslim women – where the latter seems to suggest something more than the former. More importantly, the body of a veiled Muslim woman is seemingly more contentious, more alienating to herself and to others, than a non-veiled Muslim woman. Who decides this, as Butler (Meier & Prins, 1998) ponders, is unclear, except to consider the predominance of norms, which relies on marginalisation and subjugation in order for the centre to hold.

As a veil-wearing Muslim woman, one of us enjoys first-hand experience of being subjected to scrutiny about religious beliefs, which would not be asked of someone else. There is a particular suspicion which accompanies the veil – which precedes the voice of the subject. Stated differently, the veil on the body speaks before the subject does – whether in lecture theatres or conferences. Not surprising, Muslim women in the academy are often reluctant to wear their veils in university or conference spaces – even if they wear it in other contexts. They feel ‘less seen’
without the veil and prefer it not to interfere with what they have to say. In other cases, Muslim women worry that wearing a veil will impede their chances of appointment or promotion. These experiences and actions confirm a particular abjection of who these women are as whole beings – not only as academics.

The irony is that inasmuch as the veil has been misperceived and misconstrued as a symbol of backwardness or oppression of Muslim women, enforced by patriarchal hegemonies, rather than Muslim women’s autonomous action, Muslim women themselves have abdicated to this very biased understanding. When they remove it for any reason other than their own imperative, then by so doing, they are bowing to social pressures and biases. Of course, in this regard, we are not including those contexts – as encountered in a number of liberal democracies – which have established legal frameworks with the express purpose of regulating Muslim women or students in the public sphere, which includes educational spaces.

We would concur with Butler (in Meier & Prins, 1998: 282) that the veil can, in fact, be an exertion of power – but only if Muslim women (academics and students) reclaim the narrative by reclaiming their bodies. When Muslim women remove their veils for fear of questions or judgement, or because of a need ‘not to be seen’ and to become invisible through sameness, they allow their bodies to be held hostage by norms that are neither their own nor in recognition of who they are as Muslim women. By contrast, the veil can be used as a form of embodied activism – without necessarily assuming abjection. Muslim women or students, therefore, do not only wear the veil as an enactment of their religious identities, but they also wear it as a defiance against being objectified as sexual objects (Golnaraghi & Dye, 2016) or as an ‘act of resistance’ (Khiabany & Williamson, 2008: 71). Here, the resistance is not only a refusal to adhere to a set of prescribed norms, which dictate how women ought to dress in the public sphere, but it also pertains to maintaining control and power over how one’s body is interpreted as a body, and not as a symbolic object.

This argument is certainly not limited to Muslim women – it pertains to any individual or group that succumbs to normative discourses at a cost to individual subjectivity and voice. The purpose of enforcing a regulated school uniform, for example, is not only a demonstration of a physical attachment to and representation of a particular school. It is also about ensuring regulated conduct and thinking. Notably, school uniforms extend beyond a prescribed tie, blazer or tunic. They include long lists of sports attire, satchels, tog bags, shoes, as well as regulated haircuts, and dress or tunic lengths. In turn, this attire is not only symbolic of a school identity and ethos, but it is often steeped in particular histories, which are either disconnected from present-day politics or fundamentally at odds with the politics of people. A number of historically advantaged schools continue to emulate dress codes reminiscent of colonialist influence. So, too, are the sporting codes, school songs and general climate of the structure and organisation of the school. We mention this example, because the kind of compulsory regulated dress and thinking, which define 12 years of schooling, are not simply left behind once these school learners transition to university students. Much of the uncertainty that accompanies the first year of university education and life has to do with undoing the stifling hold, which had been sustained through education as regulation and conformity. This
begins to explain why even as postgraduate candidates, sometimes, students con-
tinue to struggle to find their voice, and to formulate their own arguments, preferr-
ing instead to rely on academics or supervisors to think for them and to tell them
what to do.

The University as Unregulated

Now that we have looked at using the body as a means to resignify how it is per-
ceived, we turn our attention to Butler’s assertion that the university offers an educa-
tion that is ‘not regulated’ but instead interrupts (Butler in Giuliano, 2015: 194). A
university education that is regulated points to mastering this or that such as stu-
dents mastering their examinations or results, as opposed to immersing themselves
in the subject and its content. We witness this kind of approach in students’ requests
for not only what texts they should read or what specific sections of the text they
should focus on so that they do well in this or that assessment or assignment.

It is similarly evident in postgraduate students – even at PhD level – who have no
interest in reading for the sake of grasping a concept or argument, but, rather, only
for the purposes of being able to cite whatever section of writing is pertinent to their
own research. Here, it would appear that the driving imperative is about attaining a
degree – often for the purposes of career advancement – rather than a love or desire
to study. In this way, it is not only the university that regulates teaching and learning,
as might be evident in a concentration on learning outcomes, or only using certain
theorists, but students, too, impose their own self-regulation by not approaching
their studies with an openness to learning, reading or a willingness to struggle with
their writing and studies. Where students are encouraged to look beyond the pre-
scribed texts of a module or course, they often resist such invitations and persist in
only engaging with the bare minimum of what they require to get through. In this
sense, mastery of a particular subject is often associated with merely repeating what
has been learnt, rather than attempting to reconsider ideas or arguments. For this
reason, it is not unusual to find students who, despite having a postgraduate qualifi-
cation, struggle to speak with confidence on their research.

Unlike most other universities in South Africa, our university considers the for-
mal assessment of a PhD to comprise an examination by three examiners (two of
whom should be external to the university) and a viva voce. It is interesting to note
how differently students perform in these two assessment processes. Students who
attain a good report based on their written thesis do not necessarily perform well
during the viva voce. The concern here is not that of student anxiety or nervousness;
instead, while students might be able to write coherently and logically, they might
be less articulate and clear in the presentation or substantiation of their research
hypothesis and argument. From engaging with these students – even outside of the
context of the viva voce – there is seemingly a gap in the internalisation of their
research.
In other words, their understandings of concepts or theories remain on a surface level; any sort of interrogation of their knowledge of their own research study leaves them unconfident and incoherent. To us, this raises serious concerns not only about how mastery is understood, but indeed what the doctoral journey suggests and entails. Why do these gaps arise? Why do most students not have a comfortable command of their research? One answer resides in the pressure of completing a PhD within a stipulated time-frame – in South Africa, this is 5 years; failure to do so results in a loss of government subsidy. Students are obligated to complete and successfully defend their proposals within their first year of registration. Thereafter, they are under pressure not only to conduct whatever empirical work they have set out to do but to read extensively while also producing drafts of writing on a regular basis. In turn, supervisors are under pressure not only to attend to a study but to continuously remind students of an emptying hourglass.

One infers from a Masters or a PhD that the student has reached a level of mastery on a specific research topic. From the discussion at hand, it becomes apparent that mastery can be misinterpreted so that it is seen as a means to an end, rather than as a process. In this way, mastery can result in curtailing the potential of students – in terms of not only their grasp of a particular research topic but indeed how they are invited into the ethos and field of research. Here, the role of the supervisor is critical. It is common for academics or supervisors to direct students to their own field of research. Quite correctly, academics explain that in order to supervise students adequately, they need to be experts on a topic. However, we cannot ignore the reality that some academics direct students only to certain theorists or theories, because of their own familiarity with that theory. In other words, some academics do not want to be bothered with having to read new texts or engage with new ideas. The problem, however, with a practice of repeating the same theoretical and conceptual frameworks, or research methodologies, is that it means that students have to fit into a research area, which is predetermined by an academic. Students do not have a say or space to decide on their own research topic. As such, students do not have autonomy, and research is not open, bringing into contention the idea of research contributing and advancing new debates and reimagined thinking. Furthermore, what such a narrow understanding of research and supervision implies is that academics, too, might only end up working within one research area, thereby curtailing their own growth. Moreover, there is a risk that the kinds of knowledge in an academic department or faculty stagnate, without the possibility of opening new kinds of debates and thinking.

Of course, we are not arguing that academics should always be able to work across disciplines or that they need to have many specialisations. The very idea of a specialisation implies mastery, which is how professional appointments in universities are made. We are, however, concerned that not only do certain supervisors only allow certain research topics for their students, but they initiate their students into the same theorists and research paradigms year after year. In this regard, mastery stunts the possibility to see things as they could be otherwise, which closes university education to anything new that might arise. Knowledge conceived in a mastery way has already been finalised, and no educational spaces are left to see things
differently. To Butler (in Giuliano, 2015: 186), ‘education allows us to not become a master subject aware of all the disciplines or to just simply stay in our self-interested or instrumental modes of living, but to take into account larger versions of power that have produced the world that we live in’. Quite differently, an unregulated university education involves ‘the surprise that happens in the midst of education and in the midst of formation. It’s a way of responding to the world or realizing what a certain encounter can bring, and that’s very different from … mastery … as control’ (Butler in Giuliano, 2015: 195).

In turn, Butler (Butler in Giuliano, 2015: 198) claims an ‘error-living education’. By this, she means that university education should be concerned with making mistakes and lauding one’s mistakes. In her words, university education should be about ‘living error as a way of accepting our perceptible, limited frame, accepting that as part of what is to be living, to becoming, to be in process’ (Butler in Giuliano, 2015: 198). This implies a willingness to engage with the unfamiliar and to venture into unknown and new debates. As we write these words, the global pandemic (COVID-19) has forced universities as well as most other sectors to reconfigure how it functions. In the case of universities, traditional contact sessions of lectures, tutorials, seminars as well as conferences have been replaced by widespread digital learning and communication platforms. In most instances, this presents a new terrain and methodology of teaching and learning. While encouraged and affirmed for its capacity to maintain the academic programme, online learning is not without its pitfalls. Key among these is the absence of physical engagement, which has implications not only for student and academic wellbeing but also for how students as well as academics engage with divergent viewpoints and, more importantly, how to sustain human connection in a world of unprecedented connectivity. The point is, inasmuch as there have been gains in teaching and learning through technology, there is room for error and, hence, revisiting. When university teachers and students pursue an ‘error-living education’, they do not look at themselves as actualised beings who can learn nothing more or who are infallible. Instead, being educated with error is a recognition that our human fallibility can arouse in us an urgency to take risks as we would not be chastised if we err.

Quite frankly, it is indeed the case that we stand to learn more from our mistakes and our failures – in this way we are forced to reflect not only on the error itself but on ourselves and the thinking and actions which led to the error. In most cases, it would be equally true to describe the writing process as an ‘error-living’ education – we write, convinced that we have expressed ourselves in a coherent way and that we have taken account of any potential criticism or counter-argument. But, a few days later when we read the text again, or when we subject our work to scrutiny and review, we might be surprised to find just how weak or illogical our writing has been. This speaks to the rhythmic ebbing and flowing of writing, a continuous back and forth, if the writing is to get to a point of standing on its own. Moreover, it confirms the necessity and importance of peer review – we cannot know the worth of our work unless it is seen and critiqued by others.
Towards a University of Criticism, Non-mastery and Fallible Truths and Their Implications for Academic Activism

Following the above, taking risks involves opening ourselves to engaging with different viewpoints and a willingness to engage from different perspectives. As aptly put by Maxine Greene (1995: 120), university education should aim ‘to find ways of enabling the young [students] to find their voices, to open their spaces, to reclaim their histories in all their variety and discontinuity’. This can only unfold if the university has an ethos, which affords hospitality to diverse communities of students and where students recognise and experience a sense of belonging where their respective identities, histories and stories enjoy the same legitimacy as all others. Now if university education is about cultivating ‘error-living’ practices, then such an education cannot be about resolving this or that, or to direct students in this or that way, or to improve on this or that matter. ‘Error-living’ demands more in terms of time and emotion – it demands patience, which allows for students to come into their own without simply providing all the tools and knowledge. At times, it is easier to simply correct students or to provide articles for their research than to step back and invite them in and allow them to follow their own journey, which might involve going back and forth, or getting it wrong, or decide against continuing with a certain module or programme.

Postgraduate students, particularly those who are interested in establishing careers in higher education, are often under the illusion that they need to follow the same steps as their mentor academics. This illusion is often propagated and perpetuated by the academic, who will also insist that the student has to first do X, before moving onto Y. Yet, no two experiences are exactly the same, and what is the value of expecting students to embark on a similar path as a mentor? Such an approach is not only restrictive of the student’s potential to be different but suggests that mentor-student encounters are exclusively one-directional – that is, that while only the student learns, the mentor only guides. ‘Error-living’ implies a recognition that what academics or mentors know is neither all there is to know nor without faults. The student has to be exposed to the full value of education – this includes an acceptance of errors as necessary to self-understanding. This can happen in a context of university education where making mistakes is considered not only as routine to learning but as a necessary process for learning. Even our ability to persist, explains Butler (Butler in Giuliano, 2015: 186), ‘depends upon a certain kind of contact, what we call potential, which cannot be actualized without a contact, without a reaction from the world that allows it’. To Butler (Butler in Giuliano, 2015: 186), it is necessary to conceive of education as a scene of an empowering contact:

Teachers empower students. Teachers are aware of this, although sometimes we notice that students are going in the wrong direction, because we don’t control that, we can’t. All we can do is produce the space for thinking in a key of relative safety within educational institutions, and this must be thought as something that is not always accomplished.

In sum, Judith Butler (2015) reminds us that an open and speculative university should cultivate forms of education commensurate with criticism, non-mastery and
learning by mistakes. This is possible and can happen in a context of university education where making mistakes is considered not only as routine to learning but as a necessary process for learning. If university education were to be enacted in such ways, the possibility is there that a philosophy of higher education would be about reconstituting criticism, non-mastery and the recognition of human fallibility. Moreover, an open and speculative university has to both emanate from and sustain the fundamentals premises of academic freedom. In emphasising the criticality of academic freedom, Butler (2017: 857) draws a careful distinction between freedom of thought or freedom of expression and academic freedom. While related, they are not the same, argues Butler (2017). Individuals have the right or not to express certain views (freedom of expression); the university has a certain obligation to uphold academic freedom – ‘academic freedom implies a right to free inquiry within the academic institution, but also an obligation to preserving the institution as a site where freedom of inquiry can and does take place, free of intervention, and censorship’ (Butler, 2017: 857).

To Butler (2017: 858), ‘higher education is not only a public good that every state should provide, but higher education based on principles of academic freedom is necessary for an informed public, a public that can understand and evaluate issues of common concern and form judgements on the basis of a knowledgeable understanding of the world’. A university grounded in academic freedom is not only unafraid but can play a pivotal role in calling into question existing norms and hegemones, policies as well as political structures and discourses. It opens up the possibility of free and critical thought, including intellectual positions. Within the academy, contends Butler (2017: 858), a ‘critical’ position is defended on the basis of academic freedom:

From the perspective of public life, that critical position may well count as dissent. Thus, viewpoints pursued within the academy ought rightly to be protected and supported by the principles of academic freedom; viewpoints that constitute political dissent in public life ought rightly to be protected and supported within democracies as freedom of expression.
(Butler, 2017: 858)

The emphasis for Butler (2017) is on the possibility and preservation of dissent. Dissent is not just a matter of holding an alternative or controversial opinion; dissent is about a willingness to consider what else might be possible.

Consider a recurring debate about the place or value of statues of certain historical figures, who, depending on an individual’s context and perspective, evoke different responses from different people. At the time of writing and against a highly vocal background of ‘Black lives matter’, a group of protesters in Bristol toppled a statue of the seventeenth-century slave trader, Edward Colston, and dumped the effigy in the nearby harbour. The removal of statues as a symbolic enactment of political change is, of course, not new – from the dismantling of Russian Tsar Alexander III after the 1917 revolution that led to communist rule in Russia; the breaking down of Stalin’s statue during the Hungarian revolution in 1956; to the destruction of Saddam Hussein’s statue in Baghdad in 2003.
In South Africa, the issue of statues remains mired in controversy. Leading up to the eventual removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes from the campus of the University of Cape Town were not only waves of protest but vandalism which saw the statue covered in faeces. Significantly, this was not the first time that the statue of Rhodes had provoked anger and demands for its removal. Similar calls had been made in the 1950s by an entirely different group of students, but for the same reason – Afrikaans students had wanted it removed because it symbolised British colonial rule and the oppression of Afrikaners. Not surprisingly, the successful removal of the Rhodes statue emboldened actions against other statues, which included the defacement of more statues, including the smearing of green paint on the statue of Queen Victoria; the statue of King George VI being spray-painted at the University of KwaZulu-Natal; and the defacement of the Mahatma Gandhi monument.

The removal of the Rhodes statue, as well as the ensuing acts of vandalism against statues across South Africa, opened necessary debates about how South African society ought to deal with the symbols of its horrific history. Of course, the statues of Rhodes or Colston are abhorrent because of their representation of discrimination and oppression – at least, to those who agree with this description. Few, therefore, would disagree with a view that there is legitimate anger directed at the actions of these individuals. But, as Habib and Leisegang (2020) point out, whatever one’s ideological orientation, ‘questions have to be asked about these attacks on statues. Who decides which ones fall and which ones stand? What are the public deliberations that underlie these decisions, and what are the legitimate parameters on making judgements on historical figures?’ And, in line with Butler’s (2017) call for the necessity of dissent in university education, what would be the harm in retaining these statues and symbols? Would the world be a better place if there were no symbolic reminders of historical oppressors?

In the academy, posits Butler (2017: 859), we are free ‘to imagine alternative forms of society and of the very relation between society and the state, to develop new accounts of justice and freedom in response to historical realities that compel our thinking’. In this way, it is possible to (re)conceptualise and (re)construct to extend historical memory and inform public consciousness, so that some experiences are never repeated. ‘This is more than simply learning history in a narrow sense; it is really about public conscientisation and the transmission of values and memory from one historical epoch to another’ (Habib & Leisegang, 2020). As Butler (2017: 859) maintains, ‘when we develop forms of thought concerning a historical crisis, our thought becomes critical – critical in the sense that it is a form of questioning presuppositions, tracking forms of power, but also imagining possibilities of transformation’. To Butler (2017: 859), the freedom to imagine the transformation of society is part of academic freedom. Transformation, like imagination, cannot hinge on one interpretation or a singular perspective; both transformation and imagination rely on the existence and expression of divergent views and truths. The university has to accommodate and tolerate divergence and dissent – even if it is against its own truth.
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