

Philosophy in Review



Judith Butler "What World is This? A Pandemic Phenomenology"

Ruth Okonkwo

Volume 43, Number 2, May 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1100426ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1100426ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Okonkwo, R. (2023). Review of [Judith Butler "What World is This? A Pandemic Phenomenology"]. *Philosophy in Review*, 43(2), 6–8.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1100426ar>

© Ruth Okonkwo, 2023



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Judith Butler. *What World is This? A Pandemic Phenomenology.* Columbia University Press 2022. 144 pp. \$80 USD (Hardcover 9780231208284); \$17.95 USD (Paperback 9780231208291).

For many across the globe, the early days of March 2020 memorialized what became a yearlong commencement of panic and confusion. The COVID-19 pandemic can rightfully be described as one of the, if not the sole, most transformative incident in our lives within the past decade. While not endured similarly across the globe and even within national borders, all lives were changed by the new expectations, restrictions, and modifications to the physical and social elements of daily life. Judith Butler makes a pioneering effort within philosophy to reflect on the pandemic experience and what can be elucidated from this introspection. Butler draws from phenomenology as well as anti-racist critique, Marxist thought, and feminist and queer theory to bring forth an exciting synopsis of how humans experience and make sense of the world after a health crisis such as COVID-19. At the heart of the text are the ethical queries that emerge from the fallout of the pandemic. Reassessments of what was once thought fundamental or mundane now have new meanings and rules when connected to a deadly virus.

What World Is This? A Pandemic Phenomenology is a compelling reflection of the pandemic that leaves trails for continued investigation among general readers and philosophers alike. Butler befittingly touches on how the pandemic revealed the world's disharmony. Utilizing Achille Mbembe's work, Butler distinguishes between a world and a planet when reflecting on how humans live. While everyone is on the physical earth, humans encounter the world differently based on status, access, and meanings ascribed to other social elements. Butler uses this disjointed view of the world to think about how the pandemic unequally affected people across the globe due to pre-existing discrimination. They also use this view as a point of imagination in creating new worlds that unite and connect the human experience: 'The common has not yet been achieved. Perhaps it is more apt to say that there are many and overlapping worlds, for so many of the major resources of the world are not equitably shared, and there remain those who have only a small or vanished share of the world' (2). However, while the pandemic revealed the disparities rampant across geographical spaces, it also showed how humans remain linked physically and socially. The pandemic could not have become a pan-demic, spreading across the globe and impacting all, without a level of connection inherent to human society. Butler emphasizes this relation by examining Morleau-Ponty's exploration of the body and touch. While we commonly think of contact as a unidirectional experience of someone touching another, receptivity is intrinsic to touch. One cannot touch without being also touched. Touch signifies how humans are not wholly independent in the world but rather share fundamental elements of the human physical and social experience from air to surface: 'The pandemic upends our usual sense of the bounded self, casting us as relational, interactive, and refuting the ecological and self-interested bases of ethics itself' (12). These explorations lead to fundamental questions of the text: What constitutes an inhabitable world? What makes life livable? The pandemic demonstrated that humans are not as independent as we were once comfortable believing. We all contribute to making life and the planet habitable for ourselves and others.

This book is also a call for climate action against the continued destruction of the planet. Rather



than seeming out of place, the insights from a pandemic experience naturally lead to a reexamination of the conditions and health of the earth. Continued climate change will have real impacts on the health of humans as the destruction of the climate makes for an inhabitable planet. An essential condition for life is having a world in which one can live. While climate ruin showcases the limitations of humanity differently than a pandemic, the affected elements are similar. For example, climate collapse can decimate viable shelter and land, meaning that in another pandemic, a virus may spread more quickly because humans will need to live even closer together, and may not be able to quarantine effectively. For Butler, the comprehensive and holistic health of human beings should be conceptualized with a vibrant and stable planet and climate in mind. Humanity's current unhealthy method of being has had a detrimental influence on planetary conditions. The deceleration in human activity that resulted from the pandemic had favorable environmental effects. In the last chapter, Butler examines the problem of mourning mass death and who is deemed worthy of being mourned. Once again, the topic of a shared human and global experience is brought forth. We do not mourn those we do not know and don't feel connected to. A lack of connection to fellow humans' shared experiences in a similar physical and social space is evident even within the same national borders. The lack of mass mourning for the staggering death and sickness the globe encountered together reinforces how we do not all live in the world together, sharing a unified human experience. There is no global social avenue to express our shared sorrow across boundaries and borders; instead, mass death is individualized and limited solely to those immediately affected through a personal connection. This reflection on mourning and death strengthens Butler's point concerning the world's disunity. Even within a shared global experience of a pandemic, there are local and individualized expectations for overcoming and dealing with what should be a shared trauma.

While this text provides an excellent introduction to philosophical inquiries and reflections on the pandemic, some aspects could be improved. Butler confusingly ignores the work of critical geographers and theorists such as Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter, who have extensive scholarship discussing the multiple worlds and spaces created within the planet due to white supremacy and Western imperialism. This a significant misstep as these scholars, and more like them, have already given us the vocabulary to understand that the world is not a shared experience and reality for all. Instead, many different worlds across geographic spaces reflect the legacy of racism, environmental discrimination, and more. Kathryn Yusoff states, '...imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialism have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence' (Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, University of Minnesota Press 2018). Likewise, Katherine McKittrick notes, 'If prevailing geographic distributions and interactions are racially, sexually, and economically hierarchical, these hierarchies are naturalized by repetitively spatializing "difference"' (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, University of Minnesota Press 2006). Further analysis of the work of critical geographers could provide a more significant and precise analysis of the onset and impact of the pandemic as well as gearing theorists towards ideas of socio-spatial liberation in the form of climate change and destruction of systems that create marked differences on both geographical spaces and the discriminated people who overwhelmingly inhabit those regions. Lastly, the size of the text makes this a great, easy read and

introduction but also limits the depth with which Butler could investigate what qualifies as a livable world and how we can overcome those obstacles.

The impacts of COVID-19 are still being felt as the pandemic becomes endemic and rages on. As a result, our recollection and contemplation of this moment will continue to develop and evolve the more distance is created. By investigating the world's disunity, Butler provides an excellent text where readers can reflect on how the pandemic affected us all and what it revealed about the nature of our national and global realities. Early on, it became explicit that the most marginalized in society would be impacted most by the pandemic's deadly effects. These were the people living in more crowded places without proper access to hospitals and healthcare centers, who did not have the social security net to quit their jobs or the option to work remotely, and who had abysmal health due to pollutants and toxins. Countries in the Global South could not gain access to the best vaccines due to capitalistic intellectual property laws upheld in a time of need, and suffered as a result. All this reveals how humans are simultaneously connected and disconnected and the problems that arise from this imbalance. Butler challenges readers to think more deeply about how they share their physical and social space with other humans to assemble a more interconnected and livable world. They advocate for a new ethics of care that seeks to repair connections between humans and the planet in light of the destabilizing event of COVID-19.

Ruth Okonkwo, University of Cambridge