

# **What the Fuck is Going on?**

**Who the hell are you to ask what the fuck is going on?**

**4/8/25**

**Who has imposter syndrome?**

# **Social Identity – Performativity**

# Judith Butler – The Performativity of Gender



**“One is not born but becomes a woman” – Simone de Beauvoir**



# Gender Trouble

**Judith Butler (They/Them)**

- Draws on the poststructuralist approaches of Foucault, a critical reading of psychoanalysis (Freud, Lacan, Kristeva, Irigaray), the deconstructive analysis of Jacques Derrida, the analytic linguistics of J. L. Austin, as well as debates in feminist theory following De Beauvoir.
- They use this to argue that not only is gender identity produced through socially regulated (disciplined) performative gestures, but that the concept of gender identity is itself such a performative gesture.





Performativity –

How to Do Things with Words (Austin 1962)

- Speech-act/ Performative utterances – words that make the world different in some way.
  - “The sky is blue” – Descriptive (**has a truth value**).
  - “I take this man as my lawfully wedded husband”. Performative (**changes the conditions of truth**)
- By the end of the book, he’s not so sure about the difference between these anymore.
  - What do I perform to you when I make the descriptive statement, the Sky is Blue.

One is not born but becomes... What?

Butler sees this basic process (performative statements and gestures changing what is true) taking place in the production of gender.

## Gendered performances (in the mainstream of the global north)

### ***Feminine (coded)***

- Clothing to display the body but lacking practical functionality.
- Higher-pitched voice (sometimes with upward inflexion).
- Delicate gestures with a great deal of articulation.

### ***Masculine (coded)***

- Clothing to establish bodily “neutrality” with practical functionality.
- Lower-pitched voice (flat inflexion).
- Assertive gestures with minimal articulation.



**The performance of gender is citational –  
we're copying how we remember seeing  
it done**



There is your gender trouble



# Perfromance means failing the ideal



derek guy ✓  
@dieworkwear



there's a very painful period when you see guys start to pay attention to clothes and they start to dress worse than they did before they started paying attention to clothes



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See "How Jordan Peterson's Suits Taught Me Fashion" for a full explanation of this image



# Performance discipline

Through ambiguous  
surveillance





# The Abject

## Julia Kristava

- Abjection is a social/subjective response to things that threaten the ideal conception and integrity of the subject (excrement, urine, menstrual blood, people with diseases or disorders).
- For **Butler**, abjection is the historically contingent production of boundaries of what is acceptable and **disciplines** the boundaries of subjectivity.
- Examples include **Sexism** [stigma around menstruation, breastfeeding, male tears], **homophobia** [stigma around diseases such as AIDS, or engaging in non-reproductive sexual practices], and **transphobia** [diagnosis as a mental disorder].



**Imposter syndrome is the anxiety that comes from knowing how abject we are and worrying others will find out if our performance slips, while not really knowing about how abject anybody else is – but they are**



# Identity trouble

**Pick an identity one or all of you perform**

- What are the qualities of the ideal performance?
  - Where do they come from?
- How do you fail in acceptable ways?
- What would an unacceptable failure look like?
  - Do you sometimes want to do this?
- Where does the threat of punishment for unacceptable failure come from?
  - How real is it?
- How could failure lead to change?