

**PHL 661 Topics in Feminist Theory**  
**WQ 2018**  
**Wed 3-6.15pm**  
**Clifton 135**

## **Judith Butler: Gender, Desire, Vulnerability**

**Instructor:** Dr. Fanny Söderbäck  
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### **Course Description**

“How does one move from a theory of performativity to a consideration of precarious lives?” This question is raised by Judith Butler in her most recent book, and it echoes a more general concern about how we might think through the relation between her early work on gender, sexuality, power, and desire, and her more recent work on war, torture, vulnerability, and disability. This course offers a careful examination of some of Butler’s most famous texts with this question in mind, as we reflect on the ways in which her theory of gender performativity in early texts such as *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* is grounded in a set of concerns about loss, vulnerability, and precarity – concepts that she has developed more explicitly in later works such as *Precarious Life*, *Frames of War*, and her most recent *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*.

The course will be suitable both for students who come to Judith Butler’s work for the very first time, and for those more familiar with her work. We will engage in close reading of principal texts, unpack central concepts, situate her thought in relation to some of her most important interlocutors, and broach critical questions regarding some of the fundamental themes of her thinking. A public intellectual and the author of almost twenty books, Butler is one of the most influential feminist voices of our times, and familiarity with her work is essential to anyone who wants to work in feminist theory or its adjacent fields.

## Course Requirements

**Participation:** Discussion is an essential element of this class. Students are expected to attend every class, and to actively participate on a weekly basis. Please come to class prepared and willing to engage in conversation about the readings and issues at hand, and to create an intellectually stimulating and productive environment. Read assigned texts at least once, take careful notes, prepare and bring questions, and always bring a hard copy of the text that we are working on to class.

**Protocol:** Each student will present a protocol in a week of their choosing. Protocols are short summaries of the main discussion and debates that took place during the previous session. They are not detailed descriptions of what was said and the order in which it was said. They are, rather, a reorganization and critical assessment of the ideas that were shared in the previous session, and should gather the main questions that remained open for the sessions to come. Protocols should be 3-4 double spaced pages in length, and will be read at the beginning of class. Hard copies of the protocol should be brought for all attending the class, and an electronic version should be sent to the instructor by noon on Mondays.

**Oral Presentation:** Each student will give an oral presentation in a week of their choosing. Presentations should be about 30 minutes in length, and ideally should *not* involve simply reading a paper. Think of these presentations like an exercise in teaching the materials rather than as a conference presentation. Students are strongly encouraged to meet with me during office hours, prior to the presentation, to go over what you plan to discuss and the structure of the presentation.

**Prospectus:** Students are asked to turn in a prospectus in preparation for writing their final research paper. The prospectus is due on D2L at noon on March 5, and should be 3-4 double spaced pages in length. It should include a brief thesis statement, several research questions, a tentative outline of your argument, and an annotated bibliography listing 3-5 sources that you will be drawing from in your paper. Writing these will allow you to think ahead of time about your paper topic, and it gives me an opportunity to provide critical feedback on your projects while you are still working on them.

**Research Paper:** Final papers are due on D2L at noon on March 19, should be 12-15 double spaced pages in length, and should draw from assigned readings. Reference to relevant secondary literature is strongly encouraged but not required.

## Course Materials

Books have been ordered to the DePaul Bookstore. PDFs have been uploaded to D2L (under “Content”) and should be printed before class. **Please always bring annotated hard copies of readings to class.**

Most background readings are available on D2L. You will find a folder for each week. These readings are not required, but have been made available to help you navigate the reading and class discussion. Try to read them as much as time allows.

A wide range of supplementary secondary readings are also available on D2L, as well as a separate folder with additional texts by Butler. You are in no way required or expected to read these, but they are there for you as an additional resource, and they might be particularly helpful as you prepare oral presentations and research papers.

## Required Books

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 10th Anniversary Edition (New York: Routledge, 1999).

———. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York, Routledge, 1993).

———. *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

———. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004).

———. *Notes Toward A Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

## Required Readings on D2L

Butler, Judith. “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997).

———. “How Can I Deny That These Hands and This Body Are Mine?” in *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

———. “Introduction: Precarious Life, Grievable Life,” in *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2010).

———. “Introduction: Acting in Concert,” and “Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy,” in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

## Secondary Literature (Books) on Butler

Brady, Anita and Tony Schirato. *Understanding Judith Butler* (Sage Publications, 2011).

Chambers, Samuel A. and Terrell Carver. *Judith Butler and Political Theory: Troubling Politics* (Routledge, 2008).

Chambers, Samuel A. and Terrell Carver, eds. *Judith Butler's Precarious Politics: Critical Encounters* (Routledge, 2008).

Davies, Bronwyn, ed. *Judith Butler in Conversation: Analyzing the Texts and Talk of Everyday Life* (Routledge, 2008).

Jagger, Gill. *Judith Butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of the Performative* (Routledge, 2008).

Kirby, Vicki. *Judith Butler: Live Theory* (Continuum, 2007).

Lloyd, Moya. *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics* (Polity Press, 2008).

Loizidou, Elena. *Judith Butler: Ethics, Law, Politics* (Routledge-Cavendish, 2007).

Salih, Sarah. *Judith Butler* (Routledge, 2002).

Thiem, Annika. *Unbecoming Subjects: Judith Butler, Moral Philosophy, and Critical Responsibility* (Fordham, 2008).

For a complete list of books published by Judith Butler, including translations, see:

<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/judith-butler/bibliography/>

## Reading Schedule

### Jan 3:            **The Social Construction of Gender: Performativity and Subversion**

- “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”
- *Gender Trouble*, chapter 3 (section IV)

Background Reading:

Plato, *Republic* (cave allegory)

René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (meditations one and two)

J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (lectures one and two)

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (Panopticism)

### Jan 10:           **The Power of Language and the “Woman” Problem**

- *Gender Trouble*, Prefaces, chapters 1 (all) and 3 (section III)

Background Reading:

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Introduction)

Luce Irigaray, “This Sex Which Is Not One” and “When Our Lips Speak Together”

Monique Wittig, “One Is Not Born A Woman” and “The Straight Mind”

### Jan 17:           **Psychoanalysis and the Heterosexual Matrix**

- *Gender Trouble*, chapter 2 (all)

Background Reading:

Joan Riviere, “Womanliness as a Masquerade”

Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1 (parts one and two)

Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex”

**Protocol:**

**Presentation:**

**Jan 24:           Body Politics, Sexual Politics**

- *Gender Trouble*, chapter 3 (sections I and II) and Conclusion

Background Reading:

Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (chapters 1-2)  
Fanny Söderbäck, “Motherhood According to Kristeva”  
Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin* (Introduction)

**Protocol:**

**Presentation:**

**Jan 31:           From Construction to Materialization**

- *Senses of the Subject*, chapter 1
- *Bodies that Matter*, Introduction and chapter 1

Background Reading:

René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (meditations one and two)  
Plato, *Timaeus*  
Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Plato’s *Hystera*)

**Protocol:**

**Presentation:**

**Feb 7:           The Constative Is Performative: On Race and Sex**

- *Bodies that Matter*, chapters 4 and 6

Background Reading and Viewing:

Nella Larsen, *Passing* (novella)  
Jennie Livingston, *Paris Is Burning* (documentary)  
Sara Jordanö, *Kiki* (documentary)

**Protocol:**

**Presentation:**

**Feb 14: Mourning, Kinship, and State Power**

- *Antigone's Claim*

Background Reading:

Sophocles, *Antigone*

**Protocol:**

**Presentation:**

**Feb 21: Precarious Life: Ethics in a Globalized World**

- *Precarious Life*, Preface, chapters 2 and 5
- *Frames of War*, Introduction
- *Notes Toward A Performative Theory of Assembly*, chapter 3

Background Reading:

Emmanuel Levinas, "Peace and Proximity"

**Protocol:**

**Presentation:**

**Feb 28: Acting in Concert: From Ethics to Politics**

- *Notes Toward A Performative Theory of Assembly*, Introduction, chapters 2, 4, and 5

Background Reading:

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, chapter 5 (Action)

**Protocol:**

**Presentation:**

**Mar 7: Gender and Vulnerability: Connecting the Dots**

- *Undoing Gender*, Introduction and chapter 1
- *Notes Toward A Performative Theory of Assembly*, chapter 1

**Protocol:**

**Presentation:**