In Brief

Judith Butler is a professor of Rhetoric and Comparative Literature at UC, Berkley. Major influences include Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault, Gayle Rubin, Eve Sedgwick and Monique Wittig. She is typically considered as a post-structuralist feminist scholar.

1. The collection Undoing Gender moves beyond the notion of gender as representing an essential self, claiming instead that our performance of gender - which she defines as a “practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint” (1) - hides its very construction within our own bodies. The body gives rise to language and language in turn signifies the body.

2. This collection is not about the “doing” of gender, which her essay Gender Trouble focused on, but is instead interested in how we may “undo” constructions. “... we must be undone in order to do ourselves ...” (100) This undoing creates a paradoxical space between and within society as well as the individual. This paradox is a theme of the collection. The way norms are constructed and regulated simultaneously create and undo subjects.

3. We cannot escape a society’s ideology, but must work through the tools of hegemony in an effort to subvert them. The result of such subversion would hopefully lead to more livable lives. “… to intervene in the name of transformation means precisely to disrupt what has become settled knowledge and knowable reality and to use … one’s unreality to make an otherwise impossible or illegible claim” (27).

4. It would be impossible to appropriately summarize all the ideas in such a dense theoretical text, so the below statements are provided merely as overviews on content.

5. The essay Beside Oneself explains her idea of inclusive transformation, a continuous critical disruption of what we think we know, and argues for an ethic of integration, which never cements itself but always shifts in dialogue between ego and other. She uses grief as her launching point and explores what makes lives livable/grievable.

6. Gender Regulations opposes the distinction between cultural and psychological analyses of gender and sexuality. She argues that regulation of gender norms does not naturally follow the existence of gender norms, but regulation instead creates those norms.

7. Doing Justice to Someone and Undiagnosing Gender deal with intersex/trans politics. Both pieces deal with the pathologizing of anything non-heteronormative, and problematics of regulation (medical, psychological, legal). Paradox is again a key issue in her discussion on Gender Identity Disorder testing (required for sex reassignment surgeries), whereby it on one hand creates a space for the expression of changing oneself, but also constrains by forcing submission to psychological tests that reinforce norms.

8. Is Kinship Always Already Homosexual examines gay marriage legislation, possible repercussions on other norms, and how it could render other forms of kinship illegitimate. She claims that kinship has “lost the capacity to be formalized and tracked in the conventional ways” (103), but that it’s far from “over.” Who gets to define what constitutes “family?” Why do things like health care benefits need to be tied to marriage anyway?
Discussion questions

How do presumptions about normative gender determine in advance what will qualify as ‘human’ and ‘livable’?

How do normative gender presumptions work to delimit the very field of description that we have for the human?

What is the means by which we come to see this delimiting power, and what are the means by which we transform it?

CASE STUDY: Contact Improvisation


“CI reassembles the usual roles ascribed to individuals ... there is no leader and no follower ... partners dance on equal footing and can break from usual societal expectations, dismantling prevalent hierarchal disparities based on gender, sexual preference, race, class, or ability ... In this new world of equality, partners can examine given roles and opt to abandon them for a revised relationship ...” (79) “Such hierarchal reshuffling is not an abstract idea subject to debate and equivocation, but an experience rooted in felt sensation which can profoundly alter behaviors, perceptions, and community bonds ... [CI] erases socially reinforced differences ...” (80)

VIDEO: Contact Improvisation

What is Contact Improvisation? 2009 Easter Impro Festival, Gottingen, Germany.

EXERCISE: Contact Improvisation

An exploration of certain basic contact improvisation principles in pairings and then perhaps as an entire class.

Additional resource: There is an hour-long TLC special on David Reimer made after his death that is available to watch on YouTube. Dr. Money refused to participate, but you’ll see interviews with our good friend Anne Fausto-Sterling.