Gender Performativity

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In the past ten years or so, people who theorize gender and sexuality have been talking less and less about 'gender roles' and more about 'gender performativity'. While the concept of gender performances – in a diverse array of shapes such as drag, butch/femme, crossdressing, old fashioned panto Dames and new-look queens like RuPaul – is nothing new, the idea of 'gender performativity' is. The phrase itself, as it is currently used in theories of gender and sexuality, was first applied by Judith Butler in her extremely influential book Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990). In Butler's theory, performativity is something everyone does in order to inhabit a gendered identity, without which one can't be a meaningful subject.

As we'll see, Butler actively (one might even say strenuously) worked, both in Gender Trouble and her later book Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive Limits of 'Sex' (1993) to disarticulate her theory of performativity from ideas of performance and theatricality. For Butler, the notion of performance entails a desire for a certain level of knowingness and agency, the belief that whatever I'm representing is just playacting, and that I can locate the 'real' me underneath the representation. Rather than set these two ideas in opposition, however, what I want to do in this chapter is let them speak to each other. Many theorists, such as Kate Bornstein, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Sue-Ellen Case and Michael Moon, see a close connection between outrageous, self-conscious theatrics of gender and the too-often unchallenged performances of gendered identity that we go through every day.

Theories of gender performativity have multiple sources, but we can identify two main (although hardly mutually exclusive) threads. The first is more strictly theoretical; its origins are in the philosophy of language, psychoanalysis, and feminist theory. The second has its roots mostly outside academia, in what Kath Weston has called 'street theory', and comes out of the ways queer people have imagined the spaces their own gendered identities – of queen, dyke, butch, transsexual, nelly, femme – occupy. Both of these threads have rich and interlocking histories, but they also have disagreements, mainly about questions of agency and choice. At the bottom of all these theories is a range of interconnected questions: Where does gender come from? How much choice do we have over our genders? Are there inevitable links between sex, gender and sexuality? Could we have a world, or even a person, without gender?

In this chapter I'll be laying out where ideas about gender performativity come from, how they intersect, and how we can use them. This question of 'use' is possibly the most controversial element of performativity theory, and the place where the different camps of theorists get into the most passionate disagreement. Since Queer Theory has its roots in political movements for liberation, we need to ask, how can a theory of performativity help us change currently repressive structures of sexuality, that depend on the assumption and enforcement of binary, heterosexist gender?

In the beginning: performative language

The first person to use the term 'performativity' in a sustained study was the philosopher of language J. L. Austin. In a series of Harvard lectures later collected into the book How to Do Things With Words (1962), Austin explored the role of what he called 'performative language'. He initially divided language into two kinds, constative and performative. Constative language is merely descriptive; it tells us about the world around us but doesn't affect the world or the things it describes. Performative language, on the other hand, is language that does something – just by saying something we do something. For Austin the paradigmatic example is 'I pronounce you husband and wife'. This is not a descriptive statement: it's performing an act that can only be performed by words. Before the words were said, the two people they embrace had no more legal relationship than any two people unrelated by blood; afterwards their relationship has changed into 'married couple'. Other kinds of performative language are bets, vows, acts of naming. To say 'I bet' or 'I promise' or 'I name this baby Sarah' or 'I sentence you to five years in prison' is not just saying, it's doing. Certainly, all these acts of performative language might require other proofs – a handshake, a contract, a marriage licence, to name a few – but those texts all require, or at the very least imply, the moment of performativity that brings the act into being.
As a philosopher, Austin was especially concerned with ways in which these 'speech acts', as he called them, could go wrong. Of course, the worst case scenario is that the person saying the performative words doesn't mean them and is offering a false promise. Alternatively, it could be that the person doesn't have the authority to perform the words – there's no money to back up the bet, the baby belongs to someone else or already has a name, the person handing down the sentence is only masquerading as a judge. It's also possible that things go wrong along the way or that there's no one to hear the performance and validate it. Austin called these exceptions 'inflexibilities', arguing that while constative language can be incorrect ('the earth is flat', 'my bed is floating in mid-air'), performative language can only be misapplied or inappropriate: that is, unhappy.

Austin realized that inflexibilities happened because speech acts are tied up in social conventions and rituals that seem self-evident but in fact are quite minutely choreographed. A lot of things have to go right in order for a bet to go through, not least of which is that all parties have to agree what a bet means, what the terms are and the obligations a bet entails. But the parties involved rarely have to explain what betting itself means; it's assumed that everyone knows. Since his main concern was how performative language worked, he did not stop to ask why it worked. What is it that makes us all agree without realizing that we agree that bets are bets, that marriage is a meaningful institution, that parents have the right to name their own children?

This question was partially answered by another philosopher, Jacques Derrida. In his discussion of performativity in Limited, Inc. (1972, trans. 1988), Derrida claimed that performatives seem self-evident because speech acts are by nature reiterative. That is, they conform to a pre-existing model that can, in fact must, be cited in order to make sense, and that exists outside of its performers and witnesses. (Derrida claims that this iterable citation is, in fact, the defining characteristic of all language, but that's another story). What Derrida doesn't explain is what these iterable events actually mean in terms of cultural practice: who says them, and about whom, with what results. More important, as a theorist of language, Derrida does not explore where the assumption of the models to be cited comes from, or why people feel so unselfconscious performing them.

Making subjects: Althusser and Foucault

One theorist for whom this was an important question was Louis Althusser. As a Marxist, Althusser wondered what it is that not just keeps people working within the system of capitalism – a system that clearly makes most of their lives harder – but that engenders their loyalty to that system. In part it is fear of the power and violence of the state, which could easily crush resistance. But fear cannot explain people's enthusiasm for the perpetuation of their own oppression. He theorized that there must be social mechanisms that teach everyone to agree to their own domination by capitalism, to consider it not just acceptable or even a virtue, but self-evident and inevitable, something that one would have to be crazy or evil not to accept as true. In fact, those mechanisms provide the ways in which we understand our place in the world and without which we can't function as subjects. Althusser calls these mechanisms Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) – they are political structures that are produced by and uphold the state but that feel private and normal.

For Althusser the most important part of Ideological State Apparatuses is that they feel so natural. In fact, he suggests that a defining characteristic of ideology that 'it imposes (without seeming to do so, since these are "obviousnesses") obviousness as obviousnesses, which we cannot fail to recognize and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying out . . .: "That's obvious! That's right! That's real!" (p. 172). He maintained that this happened through a process of 'interpellation' or hailing. Interpellation works like this: through ISAs we understand our world and thereby ourselves. In fact, we can only understand ourselves as subjects in the world through the mediation of ISAs like education, religion, the family, the legal system. Althusser argued that subjects do not create ISAs: quite the opposite. In fact, ISAs interpellate us or call us into being, literally giving us (legal) names, constructing family relationships and so on, even as they make seem self-evident the fact of having a name, or an aunt, or a legal system that has the power to establish both of those facts. In Austin's terms, then, interpellation is the definitive performative speech act: when the doctor says 'It's a girl', or a parent says 'That's my child' or a judge says 'I sentence you' (or 'I marry you') they're all reiterating ideology saying 'You are a subject'.

Part of Althusser's discussion of ideology is an analysis of the punitive and policing elements of interpellation's performativity. There is a constant threat of not being a subject, or of having one's subjectivity severely
compromised. As we'll see, this kind of policing is particularly effective in the realm of gender—people who don't conform to expectations of gender are accused of not being 'real women' or 'real men.' Since so much of our sense of self depends upon fitting into the appropriate gender, to fail in being a 'real woman,' for example, is to be an incomplete subject. Of course, the worst fate is falling off the ideological map and being a non-person. It's hard to imagine what a non-subject could be; something we don't have a name for or can't recognize as even human, perhaps. Those are the people we call 'unnatural,' as though their inability to conform to ideological structures divorces them from the natural order of things.

Althusser's concept of a subject created by ideology was taken up by another French philosopher, Michel Foucault. Central to Foucault's ideas was the notion that systems of power such as the family or the legal system produce subjects, not vice versa. Foucault's work traced the historical development—what he called 'genealogies'—of seemingly unchanging ideas like madness, criminality, justice, sexuality and medicine: ideas that shape the ways in which people understand themselves as subjects.

One of Foucault's most influential works is *The History of Sexuality* (1977), a projected three-volume study that traced the genealogy of 'sexuality' as an identity from the eighteenth century to the current era (Foucault died before completing this project beyond the first introductory volume). Foucault believed that sexual identities as we inhabit them today—'gay,' 'heterosexual,' 'bisexual,' 'homosexual,' 'lesbian,' and so on—are not fixed or 'natural,' but rather are a product of the interlocking systems of power that form subjectivity. In other words, in order to be a subject one has to 'have' a sexuality, something that makes a specific set of identities out of a collection of sexual practices and partnering. For, only some practices get attached to identities, mostly in connection to the gender of the partners; other practices are just 'preferences'. Part of the work of these 'discourses'—the interweavings of language, cultural practices and assumptions; Althusser's ISAs without the Marxism—of sexuality is to seem self-evident and natural as well as compulsory.

Discourse is like a menu in a restaurant: there may be a lot of choices, but you can only order from the menu, and you have to pay the price indicated. The menu circumscribes what choices you can make, or even consider making—if you're at a Chinese restaurant, you don't think to order spaghetti. The same goes for sexuality. That is, not only do you have to inhabit a sexuality in order to understand yourself as a subject, you can't imagine not doing so in the terms set up by discourse.

Judith Butler and gender performativity

In the late 1980s, particularly in the US, feminists were grappling with the question of identity. What does it mean to 'be' a woman, for example? Or a lesbian? How do those identities intersect with racial, ethnic and class identities? A lot of feminist organizing had centred around identity, but had not managed to close the gaps between different kinds of women, and had in some cases made those gaps wider. Into this fray strode several feminist theorists (to name a few: Denise Riley, Drucilla Cornell, Elizabeth Grosz, Diana Fuss) trained in the work of Austin, Althusser, Derrida and Foucault as well as of Lorde, Irigaray, and Rich. Of this group, the most influential has been Judith Butler.

A philosopher by training, Butler wanted to use the paradigms developed by the thinkers I've discussed to come to a more satisfying conclusion about where structures of gender and sexuality come from and what we can do to resist coercive models of heteronormativity and misogyny. She saw feminism's downfall in its attachment to identity, since identity requires that we agree on 'a single or abiding ground, which is invariably contested by those identity positions or anti-identity positions that it invariably excludes' (1990, p. 5).

But if gender is not an identity—that is, a set of attributes and behaviours that belong to a certain kind of person, whether by nature or by training—what is it? Drawing on the terms of language philosophy rather than of mainstream feminism, Butler claimed that gender was an act in the same way that performative language is a speech act. Gender is performative.

In *Gender Trouble*, the book in which Butler first lays out her theory of gender performativity, she relies heavily on Foucault and Althusser to pull her argument together. At the foundation of her discussion is the claim that 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (p. 25). Gender is a discursive structure (in Foucault's words); it is a kind of Ideological State Apparatus (in Althusser's); it is citational and reiterative and has no intrinsic identity of its own (in Derrida's). We are interpolated into gender from birth—the words 'It's a girl,' are in fact a command and a threat: 'be a girl; if you want to be a real subject with a real identity, act out girlness'. Most of the ways to 'be a girl' are implicit within discourse, and others must be explicitly enforced by parents, educational institutions, magazines, and so on. And of course, the most
effective way in which gender is enforced is the fact that it just feels natural to behave in certain ways, ‘as a girl’.

Butler’s central point is that gender performativity is both not optional and not natural. Once a child has been ‘girlied’, for example, with the words ‘It’s a girl’, she is compelled to perform girliness and (or perhaps because) she doesn’t even recognize this compulsion. Gender is performed reiteratively through an array of ‘acts, gestures and desires’ (the girl really wants to be a girl) that imply an essential gendered self. But for Butler, these ‘acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core’ (p. 136, my emphasis). There’s no subject underneath the gender, no universal self. Rather, the self is constructed through its strenuous performance of gender.

Of course, the question all this brings us to is ‘Why’, Butler’s answer is simple: to reproduce normative heterosexuality, which requires that everyone is either male or female, with no gaps and no exceptions. According to the dominant discourse of heterosexuality, everyone is a boy or a girl, and combines accordingly. This is all very well, but as we know there are exceptions: people who desire members of their own sex, people who change gender, people whose physical sexual characteristics (penis, vagina, ovaries) are multiple or partial and can’t be easily attached to a gender, and so on. There’s also always the fear that one isn’t getting it right by being feminine or masculine ‘enough’. Surely these exceptions, failures and doubts would weaken the discourse of gender.

Well, says Butler, maybe and maybe not. In many cases, failure and incoherence strengthen the power of discourse, either through a fear that one’s subjectivity is being compromised (the embarrassment of being called ‘Sir’ instead of ‘Miss’, for instance) or through active punishment of inappropriate behaviours (queerbashing, rape, commitment to a mental institution being among the more violent examples). Too often, subjects blame the inevitable gaps in their successful gender performances on their own inability to live up to the standard; a process that polices the subject through mechanisms of shame and embarrassment.

But there can be times when incoherent gender performativity can expose the constructedness of gender and (hetero)sexuality. Butler lands on drag as a possible place this can happen. Drag is a self-conscious, larger-than-life reiteration of heterosexual normativity. By performing gender in a hyperbolic, stylized way, drag queens don’t simply imitate femininity, they reveal how women imitate femininity as well, and what hard work it is. Through parody, drag can expose the seeming naturalness and effortless-

ness of gender itself; it doesn’t imitate an original, but reveals that there is no original, only layers of performance. Drag says, ‘If you think my pretending to be a woman is hard, think what an effort it must be for a woman to do’.

This is not to say that drag is inherently subversive. In fact, it can reinforce heteronormativity in several ways. First it can burlesque the idea of successful imitation by the ‘inappropriate’ gender, by appearing ridiculous. A mainstream reading of stereotype of the swaggering butch or effeminate queen does not expose gender as much as it restates the lines between identity and behaviour: men and women aren’t supposed to act that way. Similarly, comedic half-baked drag by ‘obvious’ men – like Robert Preston in a dress in Victor/Victoria – tells us ‘real men can’t help but be masculine, even in women’s clothes’. On the opposite end of the spectrum, drag can also obscure gender’s constructedness by focusing on the supposed ‘original’ and fetishizing it. A man performing ‘woman’ can romanticize and naturalize ‘womanhood’ as much as a ‘real’ women can.

But, says Butler, drag can get us out of the sense of inevitability that surrounds gender performativity. It can show that even though our gendered options might be limited, we can apply and combine them in a wide variety of ways, attaching behaviours to discordant bodies. Drag is about repeating heterosexual constructs in non- (or anti-) heterosexual contexts, challenging the primacy of the supposed heterosexual ‘original’. It can also point out the intimate links between gender, race and class, and that certain gendered performatives require specific racial or class identities to go along with them. But there is a hitch involved. Drag self-consciously denaturalizes gender only if it is self-conscious and its agenda, or the agenda of its audience, is antiessentialist.

**Performance, performativity, excess and shame**

One infelicity that Austin dismissed early on, but that has important applications for the theories of gender performativity that grew out of his work, is the possibility that the performative is being performed for performance’s sake, on a stage or as part of a conscious masquerade. An example of infelicity he gives is the ‘mockery’ in which ‘there is no accepted conventional procedure; it is a mockery, like marriage with a monkey’ (p. 24). Contemporary lesbians and gay men have performed mockeries of marriage, both as a joke and in earnest, between two or more women or men for a variety of reasons. One has been to highlight the fact that marriage is
Sedgwick hardly sentimentalizes shame, but she does see shame as a pivotal tool in the struggle to rethink the coercive power of gender. What if the things we’re supposed to be the most ashamed of, the things we’re supposed to hide (our failed, or perverse, or incomplete, or mismanaged gender performances) are thrust front and centre? Can there be liberation in shamelessness, which does not mean a neutralization of shame (as pride tries to do), but a celebration of the things we’re supposed to be ashamed of? Sedgwick picks up on Butler’s suggestion that a way out of gender performativity might be an exaggerated performance of the norm when she picks her ideal gender performer, the drag movie star Divine.

Divine was the alter ego of Baltimore actor Glenn Milstead, brought to life by director John Waters. She was not just enormous fat (over 300 pounds), she was deliciously trashy, starring in films like *Mondo Trasho*, *Female Trouble*, *Pink Flamingos* and, more respectably, *Hairspray*. Divine’s characters were invariably tacky in fluffy high-heeled shoes and garish makeup, doing revolting things (things she should have been ashamed of. . .) like cannibalism, incest, and, less dramatically, like being a big queen, being fat, being vulgar. Divine performs extravagantly all the shameful things about bodies that we’re taught to eradicate or at least cover up from sight. Divine is sleazy, trashy, a hyperbole of womanhood even as she’s impossible to believe as the way we imagine ‘real’ women. But Divine’s performance is as believable as the gender performances of any woman. On her they’re as ‘natural’ as the performance of normative womanhood (which is to say, not at all) and as seeming moored to her body. As Sedgwick and her co-writer Michael Moon point out, ‘Divine’s performances forcibly remind us. . .that “drag” . . . is inscribed not just in dress and its associated gender codes but in the body itself: in habitual and largely unconscious physical and psychological attitudes, poses, and styles of bodily relation and response’ (1993, p. 220).

Here Sedgwick and Moon manage a kind of alliance between the coercive aspects of gender performativity and the extreme theatricality possible in drag. Divine’s genius is in bridging the gap. She thinks she’s just citing the performative rules of gender, and she acts ‘natural’ doing it, but to us it’s so far from normative gender that it’s grotesque (or delightful, depending on your taste). Divine makes a virtue out of her shame, shaking her viewers out of their acceptance of similar feelings. We can’t choose shame, just as we can’t choose our gender, but Divine transforms that coercion into an embrace.
But is it a choice?

In all her work on gender performativity, Judith Butler sounds one chord over and over: gender is not a choice. Gender is not constructed by a single act, but by a process that only seems stable, a process of reiteration that produces the effect of identity. As she maintains in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), 'gender performativity cannot be theorized apart from the forcible and reiterative practice of regulatory sexual regimes...and in no way presupposes a choosing subject' (p. 15). In part this is because it is so hard to see outside gender performativity. After all, how can we know what alternative options might be if we could choose them? If our subjectivity – our sense of ourselves in every way – is constructed through the process of citing gender norms, and the attendant fears of failure, how could we possibly imagine life outside those norms? But even if we could, it is almost impossible to separate and choose individual gender behaviours from the larger system of gender performativity, or to separate them from an oppressive regime of heteronormativity.

But what about those people who change sex? Wouldn’t going through the process of having to unlearn one set of performances and pick up a whole new set provide adequate space in between to see the gaps and fissures in gender? Not to say that such insight is inevitable – plenty of energy has been spent so that transsexuals can feel unself-conscious about performing their new genders, so they can feel like ‘real’ women and men. But there is a portion of the transsexual/transgender community that has tried to use that in-between space as a place to undo gender.

Kate Bornstein is a major voice in this movement. As a man, and later as a woman, Bornstein was painfully conscious of the coercive elements of gender performativity: ‘I was always acting out something that everyone assumed I was’ (1995, pp. 8–9). In her discomfort with being a man and identifying as a woman, she underwent genital surgery and hormone treatments, going from Al to Kate. Ironically, under the pressure of having to perform femininity, she went through another profound transformation into a lesbian-identified feminist. Having had to unlearn masculinity and learn femininity, Bornstein embarked on the project of unlearning femininity as a woman. For Bornstein, feminism provided the place to look at gender critically; finally she could recognize the ways in which she had had to exert a huge amount of effort to acquire and maintain her gender identities in order to be a meaningful subject in her own eyes as well as the eyes of others.

In her writing and performance art, Bornstein has tried to imagine ways to reimagine the terms along which we cite gender. Unlike Butler, Bornstein feels quite comfortable with the language of choice and affiliation – she believes it is possible to see outside the binary of heteronormativity, even if we don’t know what’s there. The metaphors that Bornstein uses for binary gender – a cult and a class system – are telling. While cults enforce membership by a delicate combination of coercion, threats and rewards, they are, at least at the beginning, voluntary. On the other hand, class may be something one is born into, but it is not biologically bounded in the same way we think of gender.

Bornstein asks what it would be like to belong to a gender in the same way one might belong to a sports team, or a religion, or a fan club, or a political party, or a fraternal organization. Each of these modes of belonging bring with them slightly different levels of choice, faith, activity and enjoyment: most people join a religion for a set of reasons quite unlike the reasons others join an amateur soccer club. But all those memberships require a certain set of behaviours and performances that are both conventional and at least in part voluntary. After all, joining a sports team requires that you play by the rules, but doesn’t force you to carry those rules into all elements of your life – only when you’re playing. Bornstein does not deny the conventional and ritual elements of gender. Rather, she wants to refocus gender performativity as pure ritual. In a perfect world, being a woman would be about performing womanliness rather than having to accept an ideological package along with it.

And perhaps the central phrase here is ‘in a perfect world’. Bornstein is unembarrassed about the utopian quality of her theory. After all, she acknowledges that she still feels coerced by gender to perform her womanhood adequately, to be a convincing ‘she’. Like Sedgwick and Moon, she does not underestimate the role of shame in the regime of heteronormative gender. Misperforming or being misperceived in her gender can still humiliate. More importantly, it’s not clear from her writing how we could even achieve her goal of ‘gender fluidity’. Accepting that gender is an imitation of a copy of an act ad infinitum is not necessarily the same as extricating oneself from its regulatory grip. Affiliative gender is a great idea, but her reader is left with a sense of its improbability, if not impossibility.
How to do things with gender

The most pressing question that comes out of gender performativity as a theory is: but what can you do with it? That is not to say that all theory has to have an immediate practical application, but gender performativity is so deeply entrenched in our sense of self, and the theories that have arisen to explain it are so rich and suggestive, that it’s not surprising that activists have searched for ways to use the theory to help us talk back to the regime of gender.

It can be argued that some people are already playing with gender performatives: butch/femme lesbian couples, for example re-enact the conventions of heterosexual pairing only to turn them on their head. For a femme to perform femininity for the benefit of a woman she must read gender directives against the grain, citing the identity of woman, but citing it out of context. Likewise, the butch plays out masculinity to a tee, even a kind of hypermasculinity, but is under no illusions that she is a man. She is a butch, a very different kind of identity, an identity that — like ‘femme’ — undoes normative heterosexuality by showing that one can perform the style without embodying the content.

This raises some knotty questions, though. Butch/femme by definition is a relational identity. Without the butch, how can we read the femme beyond the codes of ‘woman’, for example? One response might be that, given the power of heteronormativity, all gender is assumed relational: to be a woman is to be in sexual relation to men, not to women. Butch/femme explicitly undoes the regulatory link between gender performance and sexual identity, not replacing one identity with another, but reducing (or expanding) identity to another set of carefully constructed rituals.

The power of gender performativity is that you don’t even realize you’re doing it. It just ‘comes naturally’. Butler, Bornstein, Sedgwick and Moon all suggest ways in which we might make gender feel unnatural and strange. This is a huge challenge: even for those people who feel completely alien to their genders (which includes most people at one point or another, however fleeting) it is hard to make the step from feeling distanced from one’s gender to actively working for that feeling of distance. While we may recognize that gender is coercive, it is familiar; it is ourselves. The naturalizing effects of gender mean that gender feels natural — even the understanding that it is performative, that our subjectivities themselves are constructed through its performance, does not make it feel any the less intrinsic. Our identities depend upon successful performance of our
genders, and there is an entire cultural arsenal of books, films, television, advertisements, parental injunctions and peer surveillance to make sure those performances are (ideally) unconscious and successful. So suggesting that gender is not an essential part of the self can be experienced as an attack on the integrity of the subject; baldly speaking, it makes people uncomfortable and they don’t like it. Moreover, if activists want to focus on gender performativity, they will have to convince others that heteronormatism is neither inevitable nor good: an enormous task given the centrality of the heteronorm in our culture.

Perhaps it is inevitable, then, that the incursions against the regime of gender will almost always be partial, difficult and even dangerous. But they will happen. And change may occur, however fitfully. RuPaul’s success was remarkable not just because he made explicit the links between drag and gay male culture, nor because he insisted that RuPaul was both the supermodel and the black gay man (something Glenn Milstead could not manage) but because he made gender liminality so cuddly and appealing. Why wouldn’t one want to challenge norms of gender performativity when RuPaul made it look so fun? RuPaul’s transformation was not from real man to fake woman, but oscillated between sensitive, political queer to grand blonde diva — explicitly performed identities. And RuPaul’s motto, ‘You better work!’ reminds his viewers that gender is hard work, work that we should give ourselves credit for rather than erasing in shame.

Gender is work and, as Butler argues, gender performativity is always on the edge of failure. It takes courage to jump over that edge, and jump with your eyes open. It might be that the best way to do things with gender is to know what gender is doing with us, and then work it.

References


Further reading
Waters, John, *Female Trouble, Multiple Maniacs, Pink Flamingos* and other films (widely available on video).

T
This chapter is a brief overview of the state of transgender studies. It examines some of the tensions in the field and how they have emerged over time.

**Jay Prosser**

It is time for us to examine how these tensions came to define the field of transgender studies. In turn, the history of gender critics have been redefined in terms of its role in the context of the debate. In turn, these categories have been redefined in terms of its role in the context of the debate. In turn, these categories have been redefined in terms of its role in the context of the debate. In turn, these categories have been redefined in terms of its role in the context of the debate.

**Tense definition**

The term 'transgender' was coined in the 1990s by Joanne Rapp. 'Crossdresser' adequate for those who cross-dress as women, nor 'transgender'. The term does not entail reconfiguration of gender. Some genderists crossed themselves, others were the subject of their own bodies. The subject's femininity was at times donned and doffed - and then redefined. Transgenderism...