

# WGSS 393: Reading Gender Trouble

Mondays and Wednesdays, 4:00 to 5:15 PM

South College Room E245

Syllabus by Kevin Henderson

**Course Instructor:** Kevin Henderson  
Email: [kevinant@polsci.umass.edu](mailto:kevinant@polsci.umass.edu)  
Office: W406 South College  
Office Hours: Mondays 2:00-3:45 PM  
and by appointment

*Within moments of opening the book, however, I realized I had no idea what Butler was saying. I mean, truly no idea. Each sentence made less sense than the last. To begin with, I did not understand what the word “ontology” meant, and I was not sure that “Lacan” was the name of a person.*

*It was not that I was simply struggling to grasp fully the stakes of the text. Rather, I was deeply mystified. Reading Gender Trouble was like sticking my head into a paper bag that someone was stepping on, and then trying to make the noise into something meaningful. Some sliver of something made sense to me about the melancholic introjection of the lost parental same-sex object, but this understanding kept trailing off into a worry about whether the implications of this were that I would at some point transform into a fast-talking yenta with huge hair. And when I got to the part about female homosexuality and psychosis, I felt my prospects for life – let alone understanding the book – were grim.*

*But I underlined every sentence. Every single sentence.*

-Jord/ana Rosenberg, “Gender Trouble on Mother’s Day”

## Course Description

This course provides an introduction to Judith Butler’s book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. *Gender Trouble* is often treated as a singular text that forever changed the history of feminist theorizing. This course does not take that view. We will, however, treat *Gender Trouble* as an important text that is embedded in long-standing debates within feminist theory as well as intervening in debates in psychoanalysis, sexuality studies, political theory, anthropology, and performance studies, to name just a few—and, in the process, informing feminist, queer, and trans activism.

The course provides conceptual building blocks leading up to a reading of *Gender Trouble*. We will explore terms such as ideology, discourse, reification,

interpellation, mimesis, drag, ontology, iteration, citation, the phallus, Oedipus, performativity, and power. Students will gain an understanding of the similarities and differences between and across a variety of authors that are trying to understand the nature of sex/sexuality/gender. Through an active engagement in texts that informed the writing of *Gender Trouble*, students will be confident to read and discuss Butler's text by the end of course.

## Course Learning Objectives

In this course, each student will be able to:

- Develop critical thinking, self-reflection, and analytical skills.
- Articulate a complex and nuanced understanding of gender, sexuality, and power.
- Confidently read feminist theory and identity similarities and differences across texts.
- Build written and oral arguments in conversation with feminist theory.

## Required Texts (other reading available on Moodle)

- Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*
- Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*
- Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*
- Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*.
- Gayle Rubin, *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Optional but recommended)
- Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*

All texts books are in stock and available for purchase at Amherst Books, 8 Main St, Amherst, MA 01002, (413) 256-1547. Books are also available through the Five College Library system and Interlibrary Loan.

## Structure

The course will largely be discussion based. Class will open each day with a question on the board that you will be asked to respond to in writing. Mini-lectures by the instructor each day will contextualize readings by offering background on debates in feminist theory and by emphasizing key concepts. The class will then be opened up to questions, discussion, and debate. It is imperative that students come prepared to discuss the readings for each class period. Students are expected to be able to have access to readings during our discussions and to reference and cite the text directly when speaking. Students are graded on in-class participation, in-class reading reflections, an in-class midterm, in-class presentation of a final project, and a final project.

**In-class participation (20%):** Students are expected to attend class and participate each day. “Good” class participation does not necessarily mean talking the most. There are many ways to promote dialogue in class, including asking questions, noticing if others are silent and trying to make space for more timid voices, allowing silences just to “be” for a few moments (often silence is not emptiness but rather intense thinking), talking to each other and not just to the instructor, and building off other students’ comments. It is important to remind oneself that the goal is not to be “right,” but to collaboratively work through issues and problems. You are expected to keep a notebook of key concepts from each of the readings and to bring this as well as written questions and comments to every class.

**In-class reading reflections (10%):** Students will respond to a question written on the chalkboard each day. The reflection should be at least half of a piece of paper and will be collected 5-10 minutes after the start of class. Reading reflections will be graded according to how well one engages the question of the day and demonstrates that one has read and thoughtfully reflected about the text. If you are late to class, you have missed the reflection for that day and cannot make it up.

**In-class midterm (30%):** An in-class exam that will have both short answer questions and longer essay questions. Students are expected to use and cite the course texts. Please bring the course texts to the midterm exam.

**Final Project (30%):** Students will consult with the instructor about their final project. Students are expected to write an 8 to 10 page paper that uses the course texts to analyze an object or political phenomenon. This object could be a film, an art exhibit, a piece of literature, another theoretical text, a political demonstration, a performance piece, a television episode, a piece of legislation or law, etc. Students will apply course themes and concepts to generate critical questions about the object. The final project will be graded according to content, structure, mechanics, syntax and grammar, and creativity. The final project will be due during finals week.

**In-class presentation (10%):** Students will present their final projects during the last week of class. Students are expected to give feedback and to offer questions in order to improve each other’s projects.

## Course Policies

**Academic Honesty:** Academic dishonesty, in any form, will not be tolerated and you are responsible for educating yourself about the University’s official policy on academic honesty. Academic dishonesty includes cheating, fabrication, and plagiarism. You can read the academic honesty policy in full at: <https://www.umass.edu/honesty/>.

**Disability Accommodations:** Disability Services on campus keeps documentation on file of physical, psychological, or learning disabilities and provides services to

students with disabilities. Their website is <http://www.umass.edu/disability/>. They also act as a liaison between students and professors. If you need accommodations related to disabilities, please contact Disability Services and me within the first two weeks of the term (before the add/drop period ends) so that we can work together to meet your learning needs. It is your choice whether to disclose your disability to me; you can simply access services through Disability Services and ask me to work with that office to provide appropriate accommodations. *A letter from Disability Services is not sufficient excuse for late or missed work or absences.* If, after consulting the syllabus, you anticipate missing classes or think you will need alternative formats and timelines for assignments, please communicate with me in person during office hours so that we can make mutually agreeable arrangements.

**Names and pronouns:** There is a long history of dialogue and activism around how we address one another, with respect to both names and pronouns. Students should be referred to by the name they prefer and with the proper pronunciation by faculty and other students. I will gladly honor your request to address you by the name you prefer and gender pronouns that correspond to your gender identity. Please advise me of your name's proper pronunciation and any name or pronouns not reflected by the record in Spire early in the semester so that I may make appropriate changes to my records.

**Communication:** All students are required to have a UMass email account. Please check your email regularly because email will be used for all correspondence for this course. A UMass email address and registration for this course will also provide access to Moodle. Supplementary course materials will be available on Moodle.

**In-Class Recordings and Selling of Notes:** The University has seen a growth over the last couple of years in external vendors (i.e., StudySoup) and other outlets who recruit and pay students for their notes from a class which is then posted for any other student to purchase and use. We have also seen this extend to in-class video recordings of class lectures. Students can only use the notes they take from class for their own personal use. You cannot share or sell these notes via an outside vendor or entity without the faculty/instructor's permission. This pertains to in-class recordings as well. Usage of the notes or in-class recordings in this way without the faculty member's permission is a violation of the faculty member's copyright protection.

**Course Schedule:** This is a working course schedule and is subject to change with advanced notice. For example, readings may be added or substituted at the instructor's discretion. The readings listed under each day are what will be discussed that day. Please read the listed material before coming to class.

## **Week 1**

### **January 22: Power, Desire, Anticipation, and the Law**

Introductions

Franz Kafka, "Before the Law"

### **January 24: The legacy of *Gender Trouble***

Jord/ana Rosenberg, "Gender Trouble on Mother's Day," *Avidly: LA Review of Books*:  
<http://avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2014/05/09/gender-trouble-on-mothers-day/>

Judith Butler, "A 'Bad Writer' Bites Back," *New York Times*, March 20, 1999:  
<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=950CE5D61531F933A15750C0A96F958260>

Judith Butler, "Preface (1999)" in *Gender Trouble*.

## **Week 2**

### **January 29: Reification and Commodity Fetishism**

Karl Marx, "Chapter 1, Part 4: The Fetishism of Commodity and Its Secret," in *Capital Vol. 1*.

### **January 31: Interpellation**

Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses":  
<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>.

## **Week 3**

### **February 5: Psychoanalysis**

Sigmund Freud, "Female Sexuality" in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*.

Joan Riviere, Excerpts from "Womanliness as Masquerade."

Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholy."

### **February 7: The Phallus, Alliance, and Gift Exchange**

Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage."

Jacques Lacan, "The Meaning of the Phallus."

Claude Lévi-Strauss, small excerpts from *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*

## **Week 4**

**February 12: One is Not Born A Woman**  
Guest lecture by Verónica Zebadúa Yáñez

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (excerpts).

**February 14: Sex/Gender Systems**

Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex.”  
Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality.”

## **Week 5**

**February 19: No class (President’s Day)**

**February 21: Phallogentrism and Mimesis**

Luce Irigaray, excerpts from *Speculum of the Other Woman*  
Luce Irigaray, excerpts from *The Sex Which Is Not One*

## **Week 6**

**February 26: Lesbians are not women?**

Monique Wittig, “Paradigm” in *Homosexualities and French Literature*  
Monique Wittig, “The Straight Mind” and “One Is Not Born a Woman” in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*.

**February 28: Wittig, Universal or Particular?**

Monique Wittig, “The Point of View: Universal or Particular?” and “The Mark of Gender” in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*.  
Judith Butler, “Wittig’s Material Practice,” *GLQ*.

## **Week 7**

**March 5: Midterm**

**March 7: Genealogy and the Repressive Hypothesis**

Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History."  
Michel Foucault, Parts 1 & 2, "We 'Other Victorians'" and "The Repressive Hypothesis" in *History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (pp. 1-50).

**(Spring Break: No classes on March 12 & 14. Catch up on reading *History of Sexuality* over spring break.)**

## **Week 8**

### **March 19: The Sexual Subject**

Michael Foucault, Parts 3 & 4, "Scientia Sexualis" and "The Deployment of Sexuality," in *History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (pp. 51 – 132).

### **March 21: Biopower/Bodies and Pleasures**

Michel Foucault, "Right of Death and Power over Life," in *History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (pp. 133 – 160).

## **Week 9**

### **March 26: Sex in Public**

Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex"  
Gayle Rubin with Judith Butler, "Interview: Sexual Traffic"

**March 28: No Class (Kevin at WPSA). Begin reading *Herculine Barbin*.**

## **Week 10**

**April 2: No Class (Kevin at WPSA).**

### **April 4: One's True Sex?**

Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*

## **Week 11**

### **April 9: Gender as Necessary Drag**

Esther Newton, excerpts from *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*.  
(Bonus points to students who come to class in drag – drag as broadly defined.)

Optional Evening Activity: Viewing of *Female Trouble*, directed by John Waters.

Warning: film contains violence, strong language, and depictions of domestic violence and child abuse.

**April 11: Performativity of Language**

J.L. Austin, excerpts from *How to Do Things With Words*.

Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context." (Will highlight important sections)

Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," *GLQ*.

**Week 12**

**April 16: No Class (Patriot's Day Holiday)**

**April 18: Gender Trouble**

Butler, "Preface (1990)" and "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," in *Gender Trouble*.

**Week 13**

**April 23: Gender Trouble**

Butler, "Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix" in *Gender Trouble*.

**April 25: Gender Trouble**

Butler, "Subversive Bodily Acts" and "Conclusion: From Parody to Politics" in *Gender Trouble*.

**Week 14**

**April 30: In-Class Presentations of Final Project**

**May 2:** Reading Day, Kevin will hold open office hours to discuss your paper and will also be available on skype.

**May 9:** Final Paper due