In popular culture, the figure of the impostor is often a young person who attempts to elevate in social status and attain material wealth. Images of a fabulously wealthy bachelor come to mind, as he gallops toward ‘his’ mansion, where a entourage of beautiful women await him. In *Joe Millionaire*, Evan was taught lessons about manners, horse back-riding, and dinner wear, among other things, so the he could successfully embody the social position of the upper class. Part of the television show’s strategy was to tell the lucky ladies that Evan had only recently inherited his money, thus excusing his working class disposition.

What the producers of the show were hoping Evan would do, was embody what Pierre Bourdieu calls the *habitus* of the upper class. Mike Featherstone offers a concise definition of habitus, which he explains as, “the unconscious dispositions, the classificatory schemes, taken-for-granted preferences which are evident in the individual’s sense of the appropriateness and validity of his taste for cultural goods and practices”.¹ More importantly one’s lifestyle is defined by Bourdieu as the, “capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products”.² This formation of identity is heavily determined by symbols that are perceived as signifiers of class and lifestyle, but it must also be embodied rather than simply put-on. Featherstone writes:

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habitus not only operates on the level of everyday knowledgeability, but is inscribed onto the body, being revealed in body size, volume, shape, posture, way of walking, sitting, ways of eating, drinking, amount of social space and time an individual feels the right to claim, degree of esteem for the body, pitch, tone of voice, accent, complexity of speech patterns, body gestures, facial expression, sense of ease with one’s body…

But if habitus is an unconscious disposition, then what is the impostor? Can the habitus be understood as performative?

If these classifying symbols can be understood as gendered, then gender identity is expressed through the habitus as well. If the impostor can disguise herself in symbols of gender, and successfully embody physical gestures, tone of voice, posture, (etc.) then this formation of identity may be better understood through Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance.

By adopting the ultimate performer, the impostor, as a locus for analysis this paper interrogates Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of habitus as a theory of identity formation. Specifically, I employ the performative gender impostor --in this case a woman disguised as a man-- as my vehicle to navigate the tensions and gaps between Bourdieu and Butler. I am aware that using this term as a subject position is slippery as it may encroach on the definition transgendered person, but I do my best to side step these discursive land mines.

There are three possible blind spots in this paper that I wish to address. The first is that I am assuming Bourdieu’s theory is based on a hetero-normative formation of class, that understands gender as a derivation of sex. Second, I am assuming that the models of perception and classification that define habitus are also hetero-normative, thereby classifying symbols of femininity as female

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characteristics and symbols of masculinity as male characteristics. Third, I am supposing the gender impostor would be recognized as an impostor, rather than be recognized as a transgendered male. I explore these assumptions to point out Bourdieu’s failure to discuss sexuality as a factor that partially determines identity formation, and by the traditional binary terms that Bourdieu uses to discuss gender. By the end of this paper these assumptions are readdressed.

Defining the Impostor

Looking in Webster’s dictionary I found that an impostor is “a person who practices deception under assumed character, identity or name”. For interest’s sake I also consulted some psychoanalytic papers from the 1950s where I found a more elaborate definition:

An impostor is not only a liar, but a very special type of liar who *imposes* on others fabrications of his attainments, position, or worldly possessions. This he may do through misrepresentations of his official (statistical) identity, by presenting himself with a fictitious name, history, and other items of personal identity, either borrowed from some other actual person or fabricated according to some imaginative conception of himself.

The deceptive characteristic of the impostor is crucial to its definition for this deception must extend beyond one’s personal world (self-deception) onto others.

In the example that I am using, a female masquerading as a male, I must construct my character as deceptive, meaning that she *intends* to hide her ‘true’ identity as a women. It is not that she wants to become a man, because she feels she is a man, rather it is for some form of personal gain. In other words, the

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 impostor in this paper understands her gender to be a heterosexual, biological female.

In Greenacre’s paper about the impostor, she points out that the audience of an impostor, “…are not only victims but unconscious conspirators”. The most successful impostors achieve their success, she writes, “because many others as well as the perpetrator [have] a hunger to believe in the fraud, and that any success of such fraudulence [depends] on strong social as well as individual factors and a special receptivity to the trickery”.\(^5\) The audience of the impostor has an investment in their own belief of the impostor’s legitimacy. Greenacre later explains that, “imposture cannot be sustained unless there is emotional support from someone who especially believes in and nourishes it”.\(^6\) This idea will be revisited later in my paper when I discuss the stakes involved when the impostor is found out.

Even if a gender impostor is being deceptive how can the person’s gender be understood through Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance? I believe, that Butler would say there is no such thing as a gender impostor. To be an impostor would mean that one is disguising their ‘true’ or ‘essential’ gender, and misrepresenting their character or identity by performing the ‘wrong’ gender. In her view there is no essential gender but only a stylized repetition of acts and signifiers of masculinity or femininity. In her article “Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions”, she uses the example of female impersonation, or drag, to reveal “…the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience

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\(^5\) Greenacre, Phyllis. ibid. p. 360.
which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexuality coherence. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency”. Through its exaggerated and outrageous performance of femininity, the drag queen points out that there is no original or essential notion of “femaleness”. Butler explains that “gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin”. Since all gender is performative, and gender does not follow from sex, there is no true or original gender that one must consider as one’s fixed identity. Each person can construct their own fluid gender. This may involve a biological female appropriating the culturally understood signs of masculinity such as a suit and tie, or short hair. Perhaps though, there is a difference that must be considered between passing and imposture. While the person trying to pass may look the part she is playing, she does not necessarily lie about it when confronted. The impostor falsely represents herself as the position that she is perceived by others to occupy.

Let’s ask our other theorist, Pierre Bourdieu. In his view, someone who misrepresents her character, or identity, lacks the authority or credibility to speak from that position. The problem with this definition is that we see this sort of thing on a daily basis - usually we just call it talking out of one’s ass. But the further up the cultural capital ladder we go, the more chance there is for legal consequences for misrepresenting one’s identity. In Bourdieu’s view, a

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8 Butler, Judith. ibid. p. 138.
performed identity that masquerades one’s sexual identity would be understood, as what Austin calls a “special variety of nonsense”, because it seeks to be falsely categorized.⁹ Butler actually discusses Bourdieu’s criticism of Austin in her book *Excitable Speech*, in which she quotes Bourdieu from his essay “Censorship and the Imposition of Form”. On Austin’s understanding of performatives he states: “By trying to understand the power of linguistic manifestations linguistically, by looking at language for the principle underlying the logic and effectiveness of the language of institutions, one forgets that authority comes to language from outside… Language at most *represents* this authority, manifests and symbolizes it”.¹⁰ According to Butler, Bourdieu’s view is that only those invested with legitimate power can make language act. One’s habitus gives one the authority to speak from their position, thus the impostor falsely appropriates another social position’s voice.

**The Disruption of Habitus**

This section attempts to answer the following question: If a female can enter the habitus of a male, what does this do to the habitus? By performing “a stylized repetition of acts”, the impostor masters the legitimized ritual of gender. If the impostor can pass successfully, she demonstrates that the unconscious dispositions of habitus can be consciously mimicked. She then fraudulently represents her authority to speak from the position of a biological male, and depending on her success, she can undermine the authority of that position.

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Each judgement, or performative uttered from the impostor’s mouth calls into question the disposition of others who embody the same habitus. For example, if the impostor’s judgements are respected by others, then her action may have an uncertain outcome as it could lead to a lengthy chain of actions such as issuing administrative commands. The authority of the social position she impostures is called into question because the difference between a legitimate authority and an impostor is undetected. The impostor could utilize her privileged position to challenge the appreciative and classificatory capacities of her class. In turn, this could cause practices or products, appreciated in a particular way, to be called into question and reevaluated.

As I mentioned in the prior section, Butler discusses Bourdieu’s understanding of the performative and explains that Bourdieu feels only those with legitimate symbolic power can make ‘language act’. Someone who recites the same act who is not invested with any legitimacy will have no effect. For example, a hobo can pronounce you and a partner ‘man and wife’, but he lacks the symbolic power for this act to be respected by anyone else. Butler calls the illegitimate speaker an impostor. Her example of an impostor is slightly simplified here, as it uses possibly the world’s worst impostor who has absolutely no one convinced of her masquerade. But she does put forth some interesting questions none the less. She asks:

...is there a sure way of distinguishing between the impostor and the real authority? And are there moments in which the utterance forces a blurring between the two, where the utterance calls into question the established grounds of legitimacy, where the utterance,
in fact, performatively produces a shift in the terms of legitimacy as an effect of the utterance itself?\footnote{Butler, Judith. ibid. p. 146-7.}

Butler argues, that when someone lacking legitimacy performs a conventional formulae in unconventional ways it has the “possibility of a resignification of that ritual based on the prior possibility that a formula can break with its originary context, assuming meanings and functions for which it was never intended”.\footnote{Butler, Judith. ibid. p. 147.}

The example she uses is Rosa Park’s refusal to give up her seat to a white man. Butler says, “…in laying claim to the right for which she had no prior authorization, she endowed a certain authority on the act, and began the insurrectionary process of overthrowing those established codes of legitimacy”.\footnote{Butler, Judith. ibid. p. 147.}

According to Butler, Parks was able to change the understanding of the legitimacy required to take such an action and helped galvanize the Civil Rights Movement in the South.

Melissa Clarke’s article “Rosa Parks’ Performativity, Habitus, and Ability to Play the Game”, explains how Bourdieu’s theory may account for subversive transgressions. Clark quotes Bourdieu’s article with Loic Wacquant, “An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology”. Clark writes, “Bourdieu says, in fact, that in the case of art, subversive stances are made possible by:

the meeting of the subversive intentions of a fraction of producers with the expectation of a fraction of the audience, thus by transformation of the relations between the intellectual field and the field of power. And what is true of the artistic field applies to other fields. (Clarke’s emphasis)\footnote{Clarke, Melissa. (2000). “Rosa Parks’ Performativity, Habitus, and Ability to Play the Game”. p. 165-6.}
Clarke reads this quote as an allowance “for certain class cultures to make it possible for subjects to performativity [sic] transgress limitations of one social field if another field authorizes it”. According to Clarke, Parks was well aware of other transgressive acts of civil disobedience and defiance occurring during the Civil Rights movement. Parks may have felt she had the authority necessary to remain in her seat for other reasons, such as her upper economic class position, her social position as a teacher, and her empathy for the Civil Rights Movement instilled in her at a young age by her uncle, a member of the Freedom Church. Clark concludes that Parks’ subversive action can be understood better in Bourdieu’s terms than in Butler’s.

In this understanding of Bourdieu, a practice in one field may or may not be a transgression that can be appropriated and applied to another field where it becomes a transgressive. The habitus’ systems of perception and classification may view one particular practice in a certain field as common sense, and it may be borrowed and applied to another field where it may be perceived as a radical gesture. Unlike Rosa Parks, the impostor has the advantage of being undetected so she already has the authorization to speak from her supposed social position. Her performatives may have to remain relatively conservative in order to maintain her rouse. But perhaps if this impostor is politically motivated she could adopt some practices from other fields that may be classified as radical and attempt to legitimize these practices using her authority.

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15 Clarke, Melissa. ibid. p. 166.
Both Butler and Bourdieu acknowledge that someone lacking authority can perform actions that call into question the authority of those who possess it, and can in fact cause transgressions by performing an act without certain acknowledged authority. What Clarke, Bourdieu, and even Butler seem to overlook is how these transgressive actions might be met, embraced or resisted by the other members of a particular habitus. The question of stakes will be addressed in the fourth section of my paper.

The Impostor Evolves

If the imposter can pass as hetero-male, then at what point does she become male? I suppose this would depend on the imposter and her intentions. This question does not fit in Butler's configuration because there is no masculine male, or original idea of manliness, to become. But according to Bourdieu, to become comfortable within a social class is to be confident within that position and comfort is a prerequisite for embodiment. Featherstone has described the 'new petite bourgeoisie', an emergent class fraction, as constantly uncomfortable because they do not quite belong in upper or middle class. To be comfortable Goffman says is to have a 'sense of one's place'.\(^{16}\) The impostor at some point may feel that they belong on the 'other' side of the traditional gender line and over time may come to understand the perception and appreciation models of his

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habitus. Once embodying this habitus he has a sense of himself, as well as a ‘sense of the other’s place’.  

But the former impostor has a tricky question to answer when he asks himself who is ‘the other’? Once coming to embody the habitus of a hegemonically understood masculine man, does the ‘other’ become the feminine female? Does the former impostor have to conform his classifying perception to a dominant male gaze that understands a binary gender system? If he does not completely conform, does he risk being found out? Using psychoanalytic case studies, Helene Deutsch found that one of her patients, a former impostor, became increasingly anxious that he would be exposed as a fraud while leading an honest and successful living. The ex-impostor in her study, “felt like an impostor in his new role: that of doing honest work”. My former gender impostor, who now feels more comfortable as a man, may feel anxiety when realizing that he cannot fully take on all aspects of the dominantly understood male including his systems of classification and perception which might put the subject’s own ‘manhood’ in question. The transgender male, who has never attempted to be deceptive, can maintain a more fluid understanding of performative genders. If the former impostor can never fully conform his capacity to differentiate gender in binary terms, it seems to beg the question, can an impostor ever truly become her disguise? I will readdress this issue in the fifth and final section.

17 Bourdieu, Pierre. ibid. p. 131.
**The Stakes of Being Found Out**

For each impostor there are different stakes. Joe Millionaire had to choose a woman that he felt strongly about, but then he had to admit to her that he was just an average Joe. His deception eventually paid off, because when the girl decided to stay with him, they won a million dollars. Goffman writes, “When we discover that someone with whom we have dealings is an impostor and out-and-out fraud, we are discovering that he did not have the right to play the part he played, that he was not an accredited incumbent of the relevant status”. An impostor exposed for disguising himself as a doctor, such as the main character in *Catch Me If You Can*, may face a more severe punishment because he has fraudulently misrepresented his authority and experience in a particular discipline that has cultural importance. These roles such as doctor, pilot or lawyer put other people’s lives on the line and are often legitimized by institution education and experience. But what about the janitor who fakes his resume? Do we fire him, or do we judge him based on his performance to date? Has he demonstrated that he has the experience and know-how to do the job, and if so, why would we fire him? This just shows that there different stakes based on the cultural capital of those positions. So how much symbolic or cultural capital is invested in gender?

If the former gender impostor has successfully remained undetected for a period of time, and does come to embody the habitus of his class, we can see him as someone who has destabilized the authority of the biological male to speak from the position of ‘maleness’. “Paradoxically,” Goffman writes, “the more
closely the impostor’s performance approximates the real thing, the more intensely we may be threatened, for the competent performance by someone who proves to be an impostor may weaken in our minds the moral connection between legitimate authorization to play a part and the capacity to play it”.20 By being found out, the imposter’s performance exposes the theatricality of masculinity. By performing a role that the impostor has no authority to occupy, the impostor is in fact reformulating the position. Butler says, “the social performative is a crucial part not only of subject formation, but of the ongoing political contestation and reformulation of the subject as well. The performative is not only a ritual practice: it is one of the influential rituals by which subjects are formed and reformulated”.21 The transgendered male demonstrates that he can be just as masculine and exist as a male without biologically being male thereby reformulating the subject position of male. As mentioned in the first section, the audience of the impostor is invested in the ruse. By exposing the theatricality of masculinity, the impostor destabilizes the classificatory systems of her audience. Bourdieu says, “…that nothing classifies somebody more then the way he or she classifies”.22 The audience, then, loses confidence in its own gender classification and subject formation. It also undermines the confidence of those who share a habitus, who can no longer be sure that each person they encounter can be classified in their rigid hetero-normative system.

But I question how a social position, a subject, may seek to recuperate their now threatened authority, and formation, especially if that position is dominant within a patriarchal system. The film *Boys Don’t Cry*, although dramatized for the sake of a Hollywood audience, serves as a rather extreme example of gender panic. When their buddy Brandon is found out to be biologically female, John and Tom proceed to violently rape him. The two men penetrate his vagina, demonstrating his lack and their presence of a penis, biologically asserting their maleness. Rachel Swan writes, “This assault on [Brandon’s] usurped ‘male’ body aims to punish Brandon for transgressing the long cherished conception of gender as a reflection of sex, and the rapists act as agents of a ‘natural order’”.\(^{23}\) For Tom and John, the act of rape asserts the difference between man and woman, dominant and dominated and declares that Brandon lacks the authority to occupy Tom and John’s position. The two men secure the homogeneity of their habitus, while attempting to recuperate their now destabilized classification model.

The security the men seek is in their discursive ability to classify, not only those that they can call the ‘other’, but also themselves. Bourdieu writes, “The categories of perception, the systems of classification, that is, essentially, the words, the names which construct social reality as much as they express it, are the crucial stakes of political struggle, which is a struggle to impose the legitimate principle of vision and division”.\(^{24}\) The act of rape asserts that Brandon is biologically female, but it also is an attempt to deny his ability to discursively

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describe himself as a man, and thereby be recognized as one. According to Bourdieu, terms that contain an element of uncertainty allow for some elasticity based on how they are perceived through numerous world views, but these words are also the site of political struggle, as classes battle for the ability to determine the legitimate definition. Brandon’s action of self-identification as a man enters him into the battle over the legitimate meaning of that subject formation. Other words that are struggled over, like ‘terrorist’, come to mind. I would like to put forth that the word ‘impostor’ is one of these slippery words.

Butler’s performativity theory can be seen as a political act, that attempts to deny the symbolic power of the traditional systems of classification by demonstrating they are based on fallacious claims to nature. Performance theory gives agency to the individual subject to create their own gender identity without conforming to traditional classifications. As she says in “From Parody to Politics”, “The deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated… The task here is…to redescribe those [identity] possibilities that already exist, but which exist within cultural domains designated as culturally unintelligible and impossible”. Butler enters Bourdieu’s political struggle over words with the intention of bringing out subject positions that have been excluded, knowing that they may cause “both hope and anxiety”.

25 Bourdieu, Pierre. ibid. p.133-4
Bourdieu says that there are other forces of social organization beyond class such as race, religion and nation, and we can assume sexuality. My use of habitus has been to this point overtly hetero-normative and homogeneous, because Bourdieu does make space for the individual to congregate with different groups of social organization, thereby implying that a queer lifestyle is possible. The queer subject symbolically classifies herself as queer, just as the heterosexual classifies herself as straight. This seems like a practical theory, then, because there exists numerous classificatory terms to differentiate individuals within queer communities. The self-classifying act can be an empowering strategy as it creates a social position for the self to speak from with authority.

This is where the body plays such an important role. The men who rape Brandon Teena assert their masculinity with their penises. In Greenacre’s article she remarks in a footnote, “…the subjective sense of the genitals is important in the establishment of the sense of identity”.28 This may rely on the idea that from genitals, sex is established, and from sex follows gender, an idea that the rapists in Boy’s Don’t Cry agree with. Prior to the rape scene, the two boys wrestle Brandon and pull his pants down to establish, once and for all, his biological sex. Once discovering a vagina, they are satisfied that Brandon is ‘truly’ a woman who now deserves to be punished for ‘her’ transgression. Swan writes, “We may see this rape as the moment in which John and Tom castrate Brandon, thereby

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restoring his vagina as a female orifice”\textsuperscript{29}. To them, their experience with their bodies, and with their penises, has defined their conceptions of the words ‘man’ and ‘masculine’. In their view, the transgendered male can never fully embody the habitus, or subject position, of hetero-masculinity because of a physical distinction. When the transgendered male appropriates the term ‘male’, he is classifying the habitus in such a way that denies that legitimacy is based on experience with the biological male body, and so this definition is met with resistance from the biological hetero male. In part, this resistance may come from the biological hetero-male’s lack of an appreciative vocabulary.

Here we see Bourdieu’s understanding of a political struggle over words become evident. This is an important intersection with Butler, who urges us to reconsider the terms such as ‘male’ that we are currently using. We must now question, what is ‘male’? Can we place the biological, heterosexual, homosexual, transgendered, transsexual, under the umbrella of ‘male’? I believe Butler is calling for a diversification of articulated gender positions and in a sense, asking us to be more specific in our definitions.

**Conclusion**

If we can understand the habitus as performed, rather than as an unconscious disposition, we can see that any habitus, or identity formation, is susceptible to imposture. While performing, the impostor gains the authority of the occupied position, and can then cause unforeseen transgressions by calling into question the audience’s systems of classification. The audience of an impostor has an

invested interest in the impostor’s fraudulence, because once found out, the audience suffers from feelings of insecurity regarding both its classification systems, as well as its own subject formations. In the case of a gender impostor, this insecurity arises from the denial of biological sex as a necessary component of gender. This can be seen as a threat to the symbolic power of those in a dominant position whom have the ability to create the legitimate definition of a subject position. The dominant subjects also have an invested interest as this subject position is the one they use to identify themselves.

By using Bourdieu’s terms, we can see the impostor as someone who is perceived as a thief, or a vandal, attempting to break, take or change the identity of others. In Butler’s terms, the impostor is a valiant figure, possibly even a political rebel, who attempts to radically reformulate the dominant’s control over gender terms. Using Bourdieu, we can see that the context is very important. For example, even the queer subject cannot classify herself without a system of classification for everything else around her. She must decide what class of gender identity she wants to associate herself with. I believe Butler wants these gender identities to expand and articulate themselves, in a sense giving others more choice and expanding its appreciative vocabularies. Following Butler, this may cause some anxiety for those who wish to control the borderlines of these definitions, and some hope for everyone else.
Robert Lendrum
The Impostor: habitus, performativity and perceived identity
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