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Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization

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Amy Hollywood

PERFORMATIVITY,  
CITATIONALITY,  
RITUALIZATION

In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler responds to her critics, those for whom *Gender Trouble*'s account of performative subjectivity threatens to dissolve the gendered subject into language and/or marks a return of liberal humanist conceptions of a voluntarist self who freely chooses her or his identity.<sup>1</sup> These critiques are contradictory in ways symptomatic of central theoretical dualisms Butler continually deconstructs in her work.<sup>2</sup> Characteristically, her response to her critics takes the form of an interrogation of the concept of materiality to which many of them appeal and an articulation of the extremely complex relationships between the "materiality of the body" and "the performativity of gender."<sup>3</sup> According to

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), and *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). For one version of these criticisms, see Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 289–95.

<sup>2</sup> One of the problems is the grammatical injunction that there be a subject who either acts or who is fully determined and acted on. See Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, and *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Butler interrogates the concept of materiality without, however, differentiating between different kinds of modes of materiality. For this point, my thanks to Saba Mahmood. For an insightful challenge to the liberatory conception of the subject operating within Butler's work, see Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16 (2001): 202–35.

Butler, neither materiality nor sex are given, but rather, “the materiality of sex is constructed through a ritualized repetition of norms.”<sup>4</sup> She argues that performativity is a kind of “citational practice” by which sexed and gendered subjects are continuously constituted.<sup>5</sup> The gaps and fissures in that citational process—the ways in which repetition both repeats the same and differs and defers from it—mark the multiple sites on/in which the contestation of regulatory norms occurs. Butler grounds resistance not in bodies or materialities external to systems of regulatory discourses and norms but in the processes of resignification through which body subjects are themselves constituted.

Given some of the responses to *Bodies That Matter*, I am not sure that those who thought *Gender Trouble* dissolved the body and the subject into language have been convinced by Butler’s reformulation and careful articulation of the discursive practices formative of materiality, bodies, and subjects.<sup>6</sup> Against these continued critiques, I would place Butler’s assertion that “there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body. In this sense, the linguistic capacity to refer to sexed bodies is not denied, but the very meaning of ‘referentiality’ is altered. In philosophical terms, the constative claim is always to some degree performative.”<sup>7</sup> Yet I think that Butler’s recent focus on linguistic practices (narrowly construed) and psychoanalytic accounts of subject formation might usefully be supplemented with attention to the other bodily practices through which subjects are constituted.<sup>8</sup> Whereas *Gender Trouble* clearly understands “words, acts, gestures,

<sup>4</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. x.

<sup>5</sup> One problem with the term performativity, as Butler shows in *Bodies That Matter* and *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), is the implication, when the theatrical meaning of the term comes to the fore, that the subject intentionally performs. For J. L. Austin, theatrical performance implies utterance without intentionality (or without the intention seemingly indicated by the words spoken). Ritual theorists Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw argue that rituals are actions in which apt performance does not depend on intentionality. The example I think of here is the consecrated priest who performs sacraments without belief or right intention, yet the sacrament is still said to be aptly performed. I would argue that in this case intentionality is objective and communal rather than individual. The point to note is that there are distinctions between theatrical and ritual performance, although we might finally want to put them on a continuum rather than opposing them. See Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual: A Theory of Ritual Illustrated by the Jain Rite of Worship* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); and Stanley Tambiah, “A Performance Approach to Ritual,” in his *Culture, Thought, and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 132–34.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Jacquelyn Zita’s review in *Signs* 21 (1996): 786–95; and Caroline Walker Bynum, “Why All the Fuss about the Body?: A Medievalist’s Perspective,” *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1995): 1–33.

<sup>7</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, pp. 10–11.

<sup>8</sup> Butler claims in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* that *Gender Trouble* does not give an account of the formation of the subject but only of the gendering of the subject. *Bodies That Matter* then might be taken as extending this discussion to the sexed

and desires” as performative, Butler’s reliance on Austinean notions of performativity allows many critics to miss her crucial claim that acts signify.<sup>9</sup> *Bodies That Matter* makes extensive use of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, in which language serves as the master trope for signification. As a result, Butler seems even more deeply invested in the primacy of language as formative of subjectivity. In *Excitable Speech* Butler ostensibly returns to an analysis of the constitutive role of bodily practices, particularly in her discussion of Pierre Bourdieu’s account of the *habitus*. Yet the language of her text tends, as I will show, to conflate bodily practices with speech acts (themselves understood as one form of bodily practice).<sup>10</sup> Because Butler’s primary concern in *Bodies That Matter* and *Excitable Speech* is with linguistic performativity, she does not clearly articulate how actions as well as language signify.<sup>11</sup>

Here I will return to and supplement Butler’s account of repeated actions as performative of gender,<sup>12</sup> extending her analysis from gender to the subject and demonstrating that the subject is formed not only through the linguistic citation of norms,<sup>13</sup> but also by the bodily subject’s encounters with other bodies in the world and by its practical or bodily citations (this would include ritual acts and bodily practices like those analyzed by Marcel Mauss, Pierre Bourdieu, and Talal Asad—modes of

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body. Yet I think that all of these theories have implications for a more general account of subjectivity, one toward which Butler herself continually moves. See Seyla Benhabib et al., *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 133.

<sup>9</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 136.

<sup>10</sup> See Butler, *Excitable Speech*.

<sup>11</sup> I will use “signification” here as an umbrella term for what both constatives and performatives do. Insofar as they can be strictly separated, constatives have meaning and can be true or false, whereas performatives have force and can be efficacious or not efficacious, felicitous or infelicitous. Despite the complexity of twentieth-century theories of meaning and reference, meaning ultimately seems to depend on reference to something outside of or beyond the utterance itself (even if it be something as illusive as “the truth or falsity of the utterance”). An efficacious performative, however, constitutes that to which it refers. On twentieth-century philosophies, both analytic and continental, of meaning, reference, signification, and performativity, see Benjamin Lee, *Talking Heads: Language, Metalinguage, and the Semiotics of Subjectivity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997). Most important for my argument here, Lee describes Austin’s discovery “that language cannot be understood without looking for the interplay between indexicality and meta-indexicality, between signs whose interpretation is tied to the moment of speaking and signs that represent such signs” (p. 11). Attention to this distinction will be necessary for a more complete account of ritual and bodily practices as performative.

<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* (n. 1 above) that gender itself is “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (p. 33).

<sup>13</sup> As Butler shows, psychoanalysis offers a useful analysis of some of these norms, particularly as they deal with sexual difference and sexuality. For her arguments about the importance of psychoanalysis to contemporary political theory, see *Bodies That Matter* (n. 1 above), pp. 12–16, and *The Psychic Life of Power* (n. 2 above), pp. 1–30, 83–105, 114.

walking, standing, and sitting; sleeping and eating; giving birth; nursing; healing; etc.).<sup>14</sup> I will argue that these encounters, insofar as they are constitutive of subjectivity, are best characterized as sharing in certain structural features of signification; yet signification is not solely linguistic. Performative actions, like linguistic performatives, constitute that to which they refer. Attention to the details of how bodily practices and rituals signify and how they form subjects, then, may work against dematerializing readings of Butler's texts.

In order to understand why readings of Butler so easily slide from a bodily to a linguistic understanding of the performative, and, at the same time, to clarify how speech acts and ritual actions signify, I will begin with Butler's reformulation of materiality as materialization and her identification of this process with ritual.<sup>15</sup> Following J. L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* and Jacques Derrida in "Signature, Event, Context," Butler's accounts of performativity and citationality—of the ways in which language acts—rely on an at first barely articulated analogy with ritual action (actions that signify, according to some ritual theorists).<sup>16</sup> Butler expands the role of "ritual" in her account of the performative in *Excitable Speech*, going so far as to argue that speech acts are themselves rituals, a move rendered ironic by the fact that some ritual theorists now understand rituals as speech acts.<sup>17</sup> Ritual serves to ballast her account of the force of the performative without itself being explicitly defined or theorized.<sup>18</sup> What I want to do here is explore the use of

<sup>14</sup> Psychoanalysis deals with this too, although arguably thinkers like Freud and Julia Kristeva more fully than Jacques Lacan. Butler is most interested in the movement between psychic and material bodies. See *Bodies That Matter*, pp. 72–88.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. x; see also pp. 10, 95, 126, 185.

<sup>16</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962); Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," in his *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 307–30. See, e.g., Edmund Leach, "Ritual," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan, 1966). The distinction is, of course, too simple and, like that made between performative and constative utterances, ultimately breaks down.

<sup>17</sup> This has occurred, I think, because of the problems involved in understanding just how ritual actions signify. See n. 5 above.

<sup>18</sup> While Austin leans his conception of the speech act on an untheorized conception of ritual, ritual theorists have turned to Austin's and Searle's accounts of the performative in order to explain ritual. This is the outcome of the tendency to understand ritual as expressive or symbolic action. Given the bankruptcy of symbolic accounts of ritual, and under pressure to come to an understanding of how the parallel between language and action might operate, Tambiah and others argue that, like illocutions and perlocutions, rituals are not constative but performative. They do not mean but act. See, e.g., Tambiah, "A Performance Approach to Ritual" (n. 5 above), p. 128. Lawson and McCauley point to other theorists, like Benjamin Ray, who use speech-act theory to deal only with the linguistic component of ritual. As Lawson and McCauley argue, any good theory of ritual must deal with its multimedia character. This is precisely what Tambiah attempts to do by playing on the multiple meanings of performance. See E. Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley,

the term “ritual” within the work of Butler, Austin, and Derrida in order to demonstrate the ways in which all three lean their accounts of the force of the performative on ritual. I will ask why this is so, suggest what they mean by the term, and explore the significance of their work for the understanding of ritual. I will argue that Derrida’s understanding of the structures of signification offers useful suggestions for a theory of ritualization—and, by extension, of subject and materialization—grounded in the performative.<sup>19</sup> The result will be both a better reading of Butler and a new account of ritual and bodily actions as performative.

#### RITUAL MATTERS

In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler describes the process of materialization, as I have said, as a “ritualized repetition of norms.”<sup>20</sup> She goes on to claim that “as a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalized effect, and, yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm.”<sup>21</sup> Here “ritual” is interchangeable with “reiterative,” suggesting that the term serves only to highlight the repetitive nature of those practices and citations through which the sexed body is formed.<sup>22</sup> This is important for Butler because it is the temporality of citationality that allows for the slippage between norms and their instantiation; resistance occurs in the space and time interval demanded by repetition.

Later in *Bodies That Matter*, Butler introduces the notion of constraint in proximity to that of ritual, further suggesting that ritual has to do not only with repeated practices but also with power:

Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed

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*Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 51–54. Although I agree that rituals are not referential in normally conceived ways, they are intentional (in the sense of having an end or aim—although that end may not always be the one toward which the actor understands herself as moving) and hence cognitive.

<sup>19</sup> In a longer study, I would like to articulate these theoretical insights through a brief analysis of the changing shape of Christian baptism, a subject of some discussion in Butler insofar as it has to do with naming (see *Bodies That Matter*, pp. 213–18). In early Christianity and some parts of Protestant Christianity, the importance of bodily practices to the ritual of baptism make it inexplicable in Butler’s purely linguistic terms.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. x.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> Butler uses ritual the same way in *Gender Trouble* (n. 1 above): “As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*” (p. 140). Although it is not clear if repetition is all there is to ritual, it is clearly a key ingredient.

by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal conditions for the subject. This iterability implies that “performance” is not a singular “act” or event, but a ritualized production, and ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance.<sup>23</sup>

One might read ritual in this passage as again marking the repeated nature of the performance of gender (as opposed to a singular act or event); it is the reiterative nature of the practice that opens the door to resistance and insures that the repetition of norms is not fully determinative of body subjects. Yet the passage also suggests an association between “ritualized production” and “a *regularized and constrained* repetition of norms” (my emphasis), leading us to ask about the precise relationships between ritual, constraint, and power. In other words, if the performative has the power to act, where does that power or, to use Austin’s and Derrida’s language, force come from? Does it come from outside the speech act? Or is it, rather, internal to that performance?

Butler takes up the question of the force of the performative in *Excitable Speech*. Here she posits a disjunction between Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the performative and that of Derrida.<sup>24</sup> For Bourdieu, force is located within the social context, understood as outside of the utterance itself; “authority comes to language from outside.”<sup>25</sup> Butler reads Derrida, conversely, as claiming that the force of the performative is a structural condition of language and marks the decontextualization necessary to iterability.<sup>26</sup> The antithesis Butler sets up between Bourdieu and Derrida (one implicitly operating in Bourdieu’s text) is crucially tied to the concept of ritual. According to Butler, Derrida transforms ritual completely into linguistic iterability.<sup>27</sup> As a result, “the socially complex notion of ritual . . . is rendered void of all social meanings; its repetitive function is abstracted from its social operation and established as an inherent structural feature of any and all marks.”<sup>28</sup> Bourdieu, in contrast, locates the power or force of the performative in convention or ritual and

<sup>23</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (n. 1 above), p. 95. The claim that repetition is not performed by the subject but constitutes the subject is also important, although it leads one to ask who or what performs. As I will argue below, Butler’s point is that in ritual the performance is itself constitutive of the performer.

<sup>24</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190, quoted in Butler, *Excitable Speech* (n. 5 above), p. 146.

<sup>26</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 147.

<sup>27</sup> I think it is possible to read Derrida more generously here, for although he understands ritual in terms of iterability, this is not necessarily to reduce it to language in the narrow sense. Since for Derrida social meanings are generated by iteration, we can extend this to iterated actions as well as linguistic signs (hence to ritual as well as language).

<sup>28</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, pp. 150–51.

so in social institutions outside of the domain of language and thus closed to the changes made possible by iterability. By denying the temporality of performativity, Bourdieu renders it a fully determinative and determined linguistic practice.

Butler responds to this dilemma by tying the force of the performative neither to the structure of the sign nor to extralinguistic social institutions but rather to the body (of the speaker).<sup>29</sup> She locates the force of the performative in the chiasmatic relationship between speech and the body: "Speech is bodily, but the body exceeds the speech it occasions; and speech remains irreducible to the bodily means of its enunciation."<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Butler argues that the body is itself constituted of and by speech acts. To facilitate this move, she appeals to Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus*, the set of bodily dispositions or embodied practices through which cultures maintain a sense of their own obviousness.<sup>31</sup> As Butler argues, the *habitus* is "formed, but it is also *formative*: it is in this sense that the bodily *habitus* constitutes a tacit form of performativity, a citational chain lived and believed at the level of the body."<sup>32</sup> The *habitus* is the embodied result of the reiteration of norms; it is the result of (or is itself?) a subjectivity constructed through the repetition of the discourses and practices into which we are born and called into subjectivity.<sup>33</sup>

To clarify the relationship between the force of the performative and the body, Butler points to the importance of the body lying behind the threat of hate speech. The language of the body itself, in fact, is part of the speech act and determines its force and how its force is read (i.e., as threat, joke, citation). When asked why speech and the body should be given precedence given the fact that anonymous hate mail is potentially as hurtful as spoken utterances, Butler suggests that even if "performatives cannot always be retethered to their moment of utterance . . . they carry the mnemonic trace of the body in the force that they exercise."<sup>34</sup> In other words, hate mail threatens insofar as it carries the trace of the

<sup>29</sup> Butler argued in a response to this article that she ties the force of the performative not to the body of the speaker but through that body to the conventions governing violence. Yet this position seems in danger of returning to the problems represented for Butler by Bourdieu. Shoshana Felman's analysis of the performative is crucial here. See Shoshana Felman, *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983).

<sup>30</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, pp. 155–56.

<sup>31</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). Butler calls them rituals (*Excitable Speech*, p. 152), although Bourdieu does not.

<sup>32</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 155.

<sup>33</sup> Butler is closer to Catherine Bell's emphasis on ritualization as a form of practice than to Humphrey and Laidlaw's insistence that ritualization involves action. For Humphrey and Laidlaw, ritual is intentional (and hence involves action) but with intentionality divorced from the individual. See Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Humphrey and Laidlaw (n. 5 above).

<sup>34</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 159.



addresser's body and the body of the addressee is then marked by the force of the utterance.<sup>35</sup> There seems to be a certain circularity to Butler's argument, however, for the force of the utterance on the body of the addressee points to the speaking body. Perhaps the materiality of hate mail and of language itself effects this movement from the body of the addressee to that of the speaker.

Butler goes on to argue that the body "is not simply the sedimentation of speech acts by which it has been constituted."<sup>36</sup> She points here to the chiasmatic relationship between speech and the body in which neither is fully contained by or reducible to the other. She is thus able to argue that the body both provides and resists the force of speech. Whereas in Butler's Derridean account of signification, iteration provides the break necessary to resistance, the body protects against the overgeneralization of this break feared by Bourdieu. Yet I am not clear why, in Butler's analysis of the relationship between the body and the performative, the body is understood as produced only by *speech* acts, particularly given Bourdieu's (and as we will see Mauss's) concern for the day-to-day bodily practices that make up the *habitus*. Perhaps Butler understands those bodily practices formative of subjectivity, now interpreted as themselves signifying chains insofar as they are citational, as speech acts.<sup>37</sup> Yet I think it is important to distinguish meaningful action from language that acts, particularly given the need to clarify how action means and language acts and the specificity of these different operations.

Butler argues, finally, that the performative should be rethought as a social ritual, "as one of the very 'modalities of practices [that] are powerful and hard to resist precisely because they are silent and insidious, insistent and insinuating.'"<sup>38</sup> Of course, speech acts are not generally silent—although perhaps the conventions on which they depend are—pointing to a disanalogy between the performative and those bodily practices constitutive of the *habitus*. More important, if, as Butler argues, the performative needs to be read as "ritual practice" and "one of the influential rituals by which subjects are formed and reformulated," then we need a more clearly articulated theory of ritual to make sense of the performative and its force.<sup>39</sup> According to Butler, speech acts are like rit-

<sup>35</sup> One might also argue that it is insofar as hate mail points to a veiled but still material and bodily threat that it carries this destructive force. The veiling of the body behind the threat, in fact, makes it all the more potent because its specific parameters are unknown. This suggests that the tie to the body is crucial and yet can perhaps work more effectively when hidden or veiled and hence only loosely tethered to its utterance through writing and the unsigned text.

<sup>36</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech* (n. 5 above), p. 155.

<sup>37</sup> If bodily practices are speech acts insofar as they are citational, moreover, we are back with Derrida's position in which what makes ritual and language signify *and* act is iteration.

<sup>38</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 159, quoting Bourdieu.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

uals in their bodiliness, their constraining power (derived from that bodiliness), and their iterability. Yet we derive this account of ritual from Butler's analysis of speech acts as constitutive of subjectivity. Within Butler's account, the particularity of bodily practices and rituals is quickly subsumed into that of the speech act, suggesting that ritual remains an untheorized ballast for the force of language. She uses Bourdieu's account of the *habitus* as a way to show that bodily practices shape the subject, only to identify those practices with speech acts. Although I think Butler implies that bodily practices themselves signify, this crucial point remains unarticulated.

#### FROM SPEECH ACTS TO RITUAL MEANING

To understand why Butler leans her conception of the performative on the relatively untheorized notion of ritual and to unpack further what ritual means in the context of these discussions, I would like to examine some of her sources. The proximity of ritual to the performative has its roots in the work of Austin, for whom certain ritual utterances served as prime examples of the performative and the infelicities that plague it.<sup>40</sup> In his preliminary isolation of the performative, Austin differentiates it from what he calls "constative utterances." Constatives are statements that describe a situation or state of affairs and therefore are either true or false. Yet there are also grammatically unexceptional statements that do not describe a situation or state of affairs and so cannot be taken as true or false; many such statements, however, are not nonsense. They therefore require explanation and classification. Austin argues that such statements do something rather than say something. His examples include speech acts drawn from the realm of what, in "ordinary language," we often refer to as rituals, for example:

(E. a.) "I do (sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)"—as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony.

(E. b.) "I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*"—as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stem.

(E. c.) "I give and bequeath my watch to my brother"—as occurring in a will.

(E. d.) "I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow."<sup>41</sup>

In all but the final example, Austin makes clear that the context is essential to the phrase performing an action (ultimately, it will be crucial for the final example too, as an actor making a promise during the performance of a play is not considered to have made a promise—although she is still performing).

<sup>40</sup> See Austin (n. 16 above), pp. 5, 18–19.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

It is in large part the social context of the performative that gives rise to the numerous possibilities for “misfiring.” Austin offers a preliminary schematization of the conditions necessary for a happy or felicitous speech act performance, dividing them into three categories, A, B, and Gamma. A and B concern the procedures and conventions necessary for the adequate performance of a speech act:

- (A. 1) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further,
- (A. 2) the particular person and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.
- (B. 1) The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and
- (B. 2) completely.

Gamma, in contrast, is concerned with the speaker and his or her relation to what is spoken:

- (Gamma. 1) Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts and feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further
- (Gamma. 2) must actually so conduct themselves subsequently.<sup>42</sup>

These conditions are not all of the same type, for failure to meet conditions A and B leads to the misfiring of the performative (it does not, in fact, take place), while failure to meet conditions Gamma, the conditions of intentionality, constitutes an abuse of the performative, which has, nonetheless, taken place. (I have made a promise but been insincere or made a promise and failed to live up to it.)

Only conditions A and B seem, at first sight, relevant to our exploration of the role of ritual and convention in the analysis of performative speech acts; in elaborating the failures marked by A and B, Austin makes the analogy between performatives and ritual explicit. Austin argues that because a statement must be made by the correct person, to the correct persons, and in the correct circumstances for the action to be completed, there are innumerable possibilities for failed performatives. He claims, furthermore, that this “infelicity is an ill to which *all* acts are heir which have the general character of ritual or ceremonial, all *conventional* acts.”<sup>43</sup> This suggests that ritual, ceremonial, or conventional acts, whether linguistic or not, are marked by constraints with regard to the social context

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 14–15.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 18–19.

in which they occur. These constraints, moreover, are the source of the happy or unhappy performance of a speech act, and hence, by implication, of its force.<sup>44</sup>

The move from conditions A and B to the problem of intentionality is, arguably, one away from the understanding of the performative as tied to ritual.<sup>45</sup> Yet as Austin moves on in his discussion of the performative, he increasingly focuses on the issue of intentionality and the role of the assumed sovereign “I” who enacts. At a loss in his attempt to find a grammatical or semantic marker by means of which the performative can be readily distinguished from the constative, Austin argues in lecture 5 that if a certain reduction can be effected on an utterance, it is shown to have performative force. The operation involves determining whether an utterance can be rendered as an explicit performative, in which a verb (of the proper sort) appears in the first person present indicative. (In this way, one could argue, Austin, like Butler, attempts to tether the performative to the body or to demonstrate the ways in which the performative always bears the trace of the body. Derrida, as we will see, conflates this move with claims to intentionality.) Not all statements in this form are performative, nor do all performatives appear in this form; all performatives can, however, be reduced to this form. It is the appropriate grammatical form for the performative, according to Austin, because “actions can only be performed by persons, and obviously in our cases the utterer must be the performer,” and since the speech is an act, the person “must be doing something.”<sup>46</sup> In those cases where the “I” is not explicit in the performative, moreover, she or he is always referred to either “*by his being the person who does the uttering*” or “*by his appending his signature*.”<sup>47</sup> There is necessarily an “I” behind the performative who somehow serves as the “utterance-origin” and hence as the source of the performative’s force.

There is a tension, then, between Austin’s claim that the conventionality of the speech act, like the conventionality of ritual, gives force to the utterance and his suggestion that the utterance-source, the speaking or signing “I,” is the locus of force.<sup>48</sup> In “Signature, Event, Context,” Derrida exploits this ambiguity in Austin’s texts in order to argue for a “general theory” of the mark in which its force is tied to a conventionality, not

<sup>44</sup> “Force” is Austin’s term (see p. 1).

<sup>45</sup> Austin later denies that “purely polite conventional ritual phrases” should be included among performatives (p. 84).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Austin makes this even more confusing when he goes on to claim that illocutionary acts are conventional whereas perlocutionary acts are not. This suggests that in illocutionary acts the force of the utterance derives from convention whereas in perlocutionary acts it derives from the speaker, yet Austin never goes so far as to make this claim. Moreover, he goes on in lecture 10 to raise a host of difficulties about our ability easily to distinguish illocutionary and perlocutionary acts (see p. 121).

of external circumstances, but of the mark itself.<sup>49</sup> For Derrida, all language takes on the character of the performative and of ritual (rather than ritual being reduced to language, as Butler claims). In making this argument, Derrida associates Austin's attempt to tie the force of the performative to the speaking subject with his interest in intentionality as a condition for the correct use of the performative. Although this slide might not be entirely justified (and we might, with Felman and Butler, more usefully tie the force of the performative to the body of the speaker, and hence to that which often escapes conscious intentionality), it is suggestive of the ways in which subsequent readings of Austin's text have attempted to delimit the performative and protect against the erosion of the constative effected within it.<sup>50</sup>

Having cited Austin's claim that the possibilities for misfiring that haunt the performative are also endemic to all "ritual or ceremonial, all *conventional* acts," Derrida goes on to locate the specificity of Austin's claims and make his own generalization: "Austin seems to consider only the conventionality that forms the *circumstances* of the statement, its contextual surroundings, and not a certain intrinsic conventionality of that which constitutes locution itself, that is, everything that might quickly be summarized under the problematic heading of the 'arbitrariness of the sign'; which extends, aggravates, and radicalizes the difficult. Ritual is not eventuality, but, as iterability, is a structural character of every mark."<sup>51</sup> Ritual as iterability, Derrida, claims, is what marks the sign as communicative and performative. Key for Derrida, as for Butler, is the iterability, or repeatability, of the sign; it is this reiterative structure, the fact that the sign is the same and yet also differs and defers (both from possible referents and from other signs), that marks its force (and its power of signification). Butler argues that for Derrida the force of the performative lies in its "decontextualization"; because the mark must be repeated in order to signify, it is always both tied to and divorced from its original context of utterance. This separation, according to Butler, provides the performative's force. Yet I think that this is to forget that iterability is always marked by similarity as well as difference. The force of the mark, on my account, is twofold. It derives from that which is the

<sup>49</sup> Derrida's essay, it should be noted, was performed in the context of a conference on communication presided over by Paul Ricoeur (hermeneutics haunts the piece and is the other pole of reflection on language that runs through it).

<sup>50</sup> See in particular the work of Searle and the debates between Searle and Derrida: John Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), *Intentionality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), and "Reiterating the Differences," *Glyph* 1 (1977): 198–208; and Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

<sup>51</sup> Austin (n. 16 above), pp. 18–19, quoted in Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context" (n. 16 above), pp. 323–24.

same in the mark and from that which differs; force is therefore subject to multiple deployments.

Butler argues that Derrida is interested in ritual only insofar as it serves as a useful analogy for his account of language as iteration. I would like to follow out a version of that argument here, yet ultimately, I will argue that more can be derived from Derrida's deployment of ritual than he himself may have intended. Embedded within Austin's notion of ritual is the understanding of social context and external constraints as intrinsic to the felicitous operation of its performance. Derrida reads Austin as equating context with intentionality (A and B, with Gamma).<sup>52</sup> It is in this light that Derrida points to the impossibility of ever fully determining context: "For a context to be exhaustively determinable, in the sense demanded by Austin, it at least would be necessary for the conscious intention to be totally present and actually transparent to itself and others, since it is a determining focal point of the context."<sup>53</sup> Yet arguably, this is precisely what is not required for ritual or conventional actions. Within ritual action, the intentionality of the players is often unimportant to the force of the utterance. By focusing on Austin's sovereign "I" as the focal point for contextualization rather than on the question of who is speaking to whom and in what circumstances, in arguing that a condition of the mark is the absence of an empirical addressee, and in emphasizing the structure of the mark over its semantic content, Derrida, as Butler argues, seems to "evacuate the social" from the realm of language and its utterance.<sup>54</sup>

Yet as Butler shows, Derrida never argues that the context is unimportant to determining the meaning and force of an utterance, only that this context can never be fully determined and thus the speaking subject cannot have full control of her meanings. Moreover, the question of force and constraint is crucial to Derrida and is intimately related to the iterative structure of signification (which, I will argue, can occur through both linguistic marks and action). He suggests that in providing a more general theory of language (as writing), a generalizing movement eschewed by Austin, he is able to show the way in which that which seems external to the operation of the performative is also internal to it (and, I think, constitutive of those very social institutions in which Bourdieu wants to locate the force of performatives and ritual). Derrida here points to Austin's exclusion of the citation from his account of performative and

<sup>52</sup> Stanley Cavell contests this reading. See Stanley Cavell, "What Did Derrida Want of Austin?" in his *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida*, Bucknell Lectures in Literary Theory, no. 12 (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 42–65.

<sup>53</sup> Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," p. 326.

<sup>54</sup> This is Butler's phrase. She focuses on the third of these problems, which is her reading of Bourdieu's implicit critique of Derrida. See *Excitable Speech* (n. 5 above), pp. 149–50.

constative speech acts. For Austin, the performance of an utterance in a play or the recitation of a poem is a parasitic or abnormal use of language, dependent on the more primary ordinary language he wishes to analyze. (At issue here, it should be noted, is the question of intentionality, sincerity, and other aspects of the Gamma criteria.) For Derrida, citationality is iterability—rather than being a secondary parasite, it marks the structural conditions for signification itself. The risk of citationality—that the performative cannot be tied to an intending subject—is a risk endemic to signification itself. By clinging to intentionality as a necessary condition for determining the total context in which performative and constative uses of language can be distinguished, Derrida argues, Austin misses the primacy of citationality and the structural inability of any context ever to be fully determined.<sup>55</sup>

For Derrida, then, the force of the utterance lies within the structure of language as iteration. This force, as I have suggested, can work in multiple (possibly endless) ways. In a concise summation of much of his early work on writing and difference, Derrida suggests the duplicity of the force of signification:

Deconstruction does not consist in passing from one concept to another, but in overturning and displacing a conceptual order, as well as the nonconceptual order with which the conceptual order is articulated. For example, writing, as a classical concept, carries with it predicates which have been subordinated, excluded, or held in reserve by forces and according to necessities to be analyzed. It is these predicates (I have mentioned some) whose force of generality, generalization, and generativity find themselves liberated, grafted onto a “new” concept of writing which also corresponds to whatever always has *resisted* the former organization of forces, which always has constituted the *remainder* irreducible to the dominant force which organized the—to say it quickly—logocentric hierarchy. To leave this new concept the old name of writing is to maintain the structure of the graft, the transition and indispensable adherence to an effective *intervention* in the constituted historic field. And it is also to give their chance and their force, their power of *communication*, to everything played out in the operations of deconstruction.<sup>56</sup>

I cannot unpack these lines fully without an analysis of the context of their utterance. They serve my purposes here, however, simply by showing that force works for Derrida in at least two ways. On the one hand, force is the result of a tethering of the mark to the same, its repetition of that which has come before; yet on the other hand, deconstruction attempts to exploit the fact that to be repeated, the mark must always also differ and defer from that which it cites (although, as I will show, the ends

<sup>55</sup> See Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context,” p. 310.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 329–30.

toward which this break is deployed are open). Derrida's analysis of the structural conditions of the mark, and the deconstructive reversal of speech and writing, presence and absence, and ordinary language and citationality, mark a redeployment of the force of the mark toward new ends.<sup>57</sup>

Butler argues that in evacuating the social context from the performative, Derrida denies the historicity of language. Yet for Derrida, historicity is not only the repetition of the same. Against hermeneutic claims, Derrida insists that history is never a fully recuperable presence or materiality but rather is change, rupture, and break (the *repetition* of the same, and hence always different). Paradoxically, the force of this rupture or of the break constitutive of history is what enables the fiction of a universal, disembodied, self-present subject. Derrida refigures or resignifies this break and its consequences, not in order to reinstall a new universalizing authority (as Bourdieu suggests) but rather to mark the alterity of history in and by writing. The universal subject is always a contextual one, regardless of whether that context is erased through a "false break" that attempts to make generalization a total and radical decontextualization (what Butler claims Derrida himself does). The generality of the mark makes it reiterable and generative; yet this generality always requires a context. The attempt to escape contextualization in general (to claim a universality untethered to any context) is a reification of one determined context at the expense of new ones.

The invocation of ritual, as it is outlined by Austin, suggests that constraint comes not from within the sign but is maintained by forces external to it—either convention or the conscious intention of the speaker. If, then, the apt performance of ritual, like that of speech acts, depends on who is speaking to whom and in what context, it might seem that there is something external to the ritual itself that determines this delimited context for applicability and provides the force of its action (this is what Bourdieu, in particular, will argue). Derrida claims, conversely, that Austin ultimately tries to reduce the source of performative force and the total context in which performativity can be discerned to the speaking subject. We might read Austin more generously as claiming that the force of the perlocutionary utterance (which requires the proper outcome follow from it in order to be performative) is dependent on the speaking subject and that of the illocutionary (in which the saying, in the right conditions, *is* the performance) on convention. Yet even the illocutionary always has a signatory—the one authorized to use this form of conventional speech. This leads to the question of who or what authorizes the

<sup>57</sup> Nancy Fraser argues that Butler tends to conflate the break and resignification with critique and positive political change. This valorization of the break is inherited, I think, from Derrida. My reading of Derrida suggests that he, while celebrating deconstruction's break with previous significations, also implies the political and ethical neutrality of the break as such. See Benhabib et al. (n. 8 above), pp. 67–68.



signatory, again taking us to convention and determining contexts external to the speech act itself. Against both these moves, Derrida argues for the primacy of citationality and therefore the inability ever fully to determine context. In doing so, moreover, he suggests how the process of iteration is itself constitutive of those social conventions through which performatives derive their force. For Derrida, the outside is constituted by the inside and the inside by the outside.

I think it is important to remember that, just as Butler's aim in *Excitable Speech* is not to give a full account of the *habitus* as constitutive of the subject, Derrida is not interested in elaborating a theory of ritual in "Signature, Event, Context" but rather in giving a general account of signification. Yet if we accept the claim that ritual is signifying action, Derrida's account of the sign has implications for ritual theory. In *Excitable Speech*, Butler is primarily interested in the linguistic character of signification and so at times seems in danger of conflating signification with language and hence reading Derrida as reducing ritual to language. This runs parallel to the error made by those ritual theorists who claim that ritual is meaningless. They assume that meaning necessitates reference (of a particular sort); when attempts to understand ritual actions as referring to some other reality break down, the claim is made that rituals do not signify.<sup>58</sup> In providing an account of signification not dependent on this kind of reference, Derrida offers a way to reformulate ritual as meaningful without claiming that it refers to independently existing external realities. Rather, social realities are constituted by ritual action. (Hence the move to say that rituals are performative—their meanings are not primarily constative but generated by the action itself.) Rather than reducing the social complexity of ritual, then, I believe that Derrida's analysis is suggestive for understanding ritual as meaningful action, particularly when brought together with Bourdieu's and Butler's attention to the body as speaker and ritual actor. For Derrida, the signifying and constitutive force of the performative is a function of its reiterative structure (both as a repetition of the same and as the break) and its effect.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Often the fact that participants give so many divergent interpretations of the same ritual actions is taken to be a problem for "symbolic" or "expressive" accounts of ritual. Yet the existence of multiple interpretations of a ritual does not mean that it has no meaning, any more than the possibility of multiple interpretations of a text means it is nonsensical. For this mistake, see Humphrey and Laidlaw (n. 5 above). A similar problem occurs if the self-referentiality of ritual is taken as grounds for claiming it is without meaning. For this mistake, see Fritz Staal, "The Meaninglessness of Ritual," *Numen* 26 (1979): 2–22. Lawson and McCauley offer an account of self-reflexive holism to counter these claims. See Lawson and McCauley (n. 18 above), pp. 137–69.

<sup>59</sup> Austin begins by making a clear distinction between constative and performative speech, only to have the distinction blur in the course of his exposition. Finally, what he has described are different ways in which utterances operate, not two radically different forms of utterance. Similarly, ritual actions are both constative and performative—they both signify and do things—although as constitutive acts, the performative comes to the fore.

The very contexts in which the performative operates are themselves products of performative utterances and acts, subverting the distinction between utterance and context on which Austin's analysis (at least provisionally) depends. Ritual can be understood in the same way, for just as speech acts mean as well as do, rituals are meaningful actions. For Derrida, force would lie within the reiterative structure of ritual (as repetition and break) and as an effect of ritual, rather than solely outside ritual as that which enables its performance.

In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler takes up Derrida's emphasis on ritual as repetition, an iterability that is always marked by difference, yet she also suggests that ritual is a "regularized and constrained repetition of norms." At this point it is not clear whether Butler follows Derrida in placing the force of the performative or of citationality within the process of reiteration or whether she wishes to maintain an outside—a social world untouched by the constitutive force of the performative—from which these constraints emanate. The latter seems an unlikely position for Butler to hold given her other philosophical commitments. In *Excitable Speech*, she argues that the force of the performative lies neither fully outside nor within the performative but is tied to the body who speaks (and who is addressed?). I think that this move places Butler closer to Derrida's position than she herself acknowledges, for her emphasis on the chiasmatic relationship of speech and the body functions in ways analogous to Derrida's critique of claims to full contextualization. Speech is of the body and the body speaks and is constituted, according to Butler, by speech acts, yet neither can be fully reduced to the other. Similarly, when Derrida argues against Austin that the citation is not a secondary example of the performative but the revelation of its very structure, of its force and its risk, Derrida does not simply exchange externally for internally generated constraints. Rather, he deconstructs the very opposition between external and internal as he describes the performative's constitutive force and the possibility of its failure. Materialization and subjectification are processes in which bodily subjects are constituted; the possibilities for resistance lie in the endless possibilities for misfiring that structure the performative itself (although the misfiring of particular performatives will depend in large part on the contexts—constituted by hosts of other performatives—in which they occur).

This clearly coincides with Butler's understanding of the possibilities for resistance in *Bodies That Matter*. Her account of the chiasmatic relationship between body and speech in *Excitable Speech*, however, at times leads to another reading, one that claims resistance is grounded in the body insofar as it is irreducible to speech acts. This move might suggest that Butler has come to distrust her own deconstructive impulses and wishes to reinstall "the body itself" as site of resistance. This reading is clearly in tension with Butler's account of the body as constituted

through the performative repetition of norms that makes up the *habitus* (although Butler, as I have shown, is unclear about the relationship between speech acts and ritual actions in this process and tends to conflate ritual with speech acts). Butler suggests the irreducibility of the body to speech in order to create a space for resistance to the social and discursive norms through which subjects are constituted—a resistance she believes is foreclosed by Bourdieu's assertion that the formation of the body by these norms is completely effective. What should be emphasized here is not the irreducibility of the body to speech (as if we could somehow get to that body) but rather an account of bodily practices as themselves performative acts subject to the same misfirings and slippages Austin and Derrida locate in speech acts and signification in general.<sup>60</sup> Recent ritual theory similarly argues that outside and inside are indeterminate and that, as Butler argues, “social positions are themselves constructed through a more tacit operation of performativity.”<sup>61</sup> As Derrida and Butler suggest, it is the process of ritualization that constitutes social beings, social worlds, and the constraints through which identities are maintained and differences enunciated.

#### FROM RITUAL TO RITUALIZATION

Ritual, understood as a specific kind of action or as action opposed to thought, is conceptually articulated within the modern Western study of religion, for which Protestant Christianity is hegemonic.<sup>62</sup> Talal Asad uses entries in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* to argue for a fairly recent change in the understanding of ritual. Whereas the entries from 1771 to 1852 define ritual as a book containing the script for religious ceremonies, in the new entry for 1910, ritual is universalized and attention shifts from the script to the action itself. As Asad explains, “A crucial part of every religion, ritual is now regarded as a type of routine behavior that symbolizes or expresses something and, as such, relates differentially to individual consciousness and social organization. That is to say, it is no longer a *script* for regulating practice but a type of practice that is interpretable as standing for some further *verbally definable*, but tacit, event.”<sup>63</sup> Crucial to this move is the claim that rituals as expressive serve some psychological or sociological function—they symbolize meanings that have their real field of operation within the realm of the mind or the so-

<sup>60</sup> Once again, I think that the confusion in Butler's account stems from her emphasis on speech acts and inattention to the other bodily practices through which subjects are constituted. More attention is given to such issues, however, in *Gender Trouble* (n. 1 above).

<sup>61</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 156.

<sup>62</sup> See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), esp. chaps. 2, 3, and 4; and Bell (n. 33 above).

<sup>63</sup> Asad, p. 57.

cial group. For Asad, the move is one from text to “behavior, which is itself *likened* to a text,” a text to be read by the anthropologist or historian of religion.<sup>64</sup>

To this conception of ritual as symbolic action, Asad opposes an understanding of “rites as apt performances” and “disciplinary practices,” a view he argues can be seen in medieval Christian conceptions of the monastic life.<sup>65</sup> Through an analysis of aspects of medieval monasticism, Asad argues that injunctions for the monastic life prescribe actions and rites “directed at forming and reforming Christian dispositions.”<sup>66</sup> Asad’s understanding of ritual as “disciplinary practice” is indebted to the work of Michel Foucault and to that of the sociologist Marcel Mauss. To undermine further the modern distinction between symbolic and technical actions, he makes use of Mauss’s conception of bodily techniques. According to Mauss, “The body is man’s first and most natural instrument. Or more accurately, not to speak of instruments, man’s first and most natural technical object, and at the same time technical means, is his body.”<sup>67</sup> It is through bodily practices that subjectivities are formed, virtues inculcated, and beliefs embodied. Mauss first introduced the notion of the *habitus* (probably best known from the work of Bourdieu) to describe the “techniques and work of collective and individual practical reason” that shape embodied experience.<sup>68</sup>

Unlike Mauss, Asad wishes to assimilate ritual, at least outside of the modern Western context, with bodily practices. Mauss, on the contrary, is interested in those bodily practices that are, he argues, shaped by cultural as well as biological and psychological factors yet do not stand clearly within the realm of formalized, ritual, or ceremonial activity. His analysis begins with the problem of what to do with those miscellaneous phenomena such as gait, athletic styles, manners of sleeping and eating, clothing, birth and nursing patterns, and so forth, that are marked by cultural styles yet do not seem to warrant the designation of ritual. Asad suggests that

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 58. For Asad, this reduction of action to textuality is problematic in that it reduces action to discourse. Yet to see action as meaningful does not necessarily mean to engage in Western imperialist anthropological enterprises, as Asad seems sometimes to suggest. (See his critique of Clifford Geertz.) On the contrary, the problem with the expressionist conception of ritual seems to me not to be the claim that actions *mean* as well as *do things* but rather the insistence on reading the “discourse of actions” in terms of psychology or sociology. It is the search for hidden, symbolic meanings that is the problem, for it obscures the semantics of ritual action itself. On this issue, see Daniel Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism*, trans. A. Morton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); and Lawson and McCauley, pp. 37–41.

<sup>65</sup> Asad argues that rites as apt performances presume “a code” but claims that it is a regulatory as opposed to a semantic code (see Asad, p. 62).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>67</sup> Marcel Mauss, *Sociology and Psychology: Essays*, trans. B. Brewster (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 104.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

outside of the modern Western context, these kinds of regulated bodily activities are continuous with the more constrained activities of what we would call the ritual life.<sup>69</sup> Thus there is no clearly marked differentiation between symbolic and technical activities; the distinction is instead between those activities (or aspects of activities) in which bodies are the objects and means of transformation and those in which other tools are employed to other ends.

Asad's assumption of the continuity between bodily practices and ritual actions is congruent with Catherine Bell's argument that historians of religion and anthropologists might usefully move away from a concept of ritual to one of ritualization. Bell refuses to define ritual as a static entity:

Ritualization is fundamentally a way of doing things to trigger the perception that these practices are special. A great deal of strategy is employed simply in the degree to which some activities are ritualized and therein differentiated from other acts. While formalization and periodization appear to be common techniques for ritualization, they are not intrinsic to "ritual" per se; some ritualized practices distinguish themselves by their deliberate informality, although usually in contrast to a known tradition or style of ritualization. Hence, ritual acts must be understood within a semantic framework whereby the significance of an action is dependent upon its place and relationship within a context of all other ways of acting: what it echoes, what it inverts, what it alludes to, what it denies.<sup>70</sup>

Although the formalization of actions—their limitation to certain times, places, contexts, ritual agents—is one of the techniques used to mark off some practices as having a special significance within the life of the community, Bell insists that the ways in which ritualization occurs are specific to individual groups and communities; in other words, ritualization works and must be understood contextually (even if the total context can never be fully determined).

Bell also argues that ritualization, in giving special significance to certain practices, does so not because these actions refer to or symbolize meanings external to them but rather because social subjects and their relations are engendered through the bodily practices of ritual life. Against common functionalist theories of ritual, which understand it as an attempt to forge social solidarity, to resolve conflicts within the community, or to transmit shared beliefs, Bell argues that ritual involves "the production of ritualized agents, persons who have an instinctive knowledge of these schemes embedded in their bodies, in their sense of reality,

<sup>69</sup> Asad uses Benedict of Nursia's *The Rule of Benedict*—the foundational text for Christian monasticism—to make this claim.

<sup>70</sup> Bell, p. 220.

and in their understanding of how to act in ways that both maintain and qualify the complex microrelations of power.”<sup>71</sup> To questions about the relationship between ritualization and power, then, Bell argues that power and its dispositions are generated and regulated through rituals themselves, rather than lying outside them as that which constrains or otherwise marks these activities off as special.

Bell's account of ritualization, then, can be rendered consonant with the understanding of ritual we have drawn out of Derrida's reading of Austin. For both Bell and Derrida, ritual is like language not because it is a text whose symbolic meanings must be uncovered or deciphered but because rituals are actions that generate meanings in the specific context of other sets of meaningful actions and discourses. Meaning is generated through the iteration and differentiation of signs. Signs refer to other signs within the signifying chain rather than to external realities. Although linguistic signs can and do refer to extralinguistic realities as well as to other signs (a question with which Derrida seems to be concerned in his recent work on names), in the realm of signifying actions (such as bodily practices and rituals), the distinction between signifying chain and external reality is more difficult to maintain. In other words, ritual actions are—not surprisingly—more like performative speech acts than like constatives. Meanings are constitutive and generate that to which they refer.<sup>72</sup>

Methodologically, Bell stresses the importance of the total context to understanding what counts as a ritual within a particular community, whereas Derrida emphasizes our inability ever fully to delimit the context and thereby to fix the meanings or ritualized nature of any activity. (This may give rise to the very un-Derridean tendency in Bell's work to separate the performer of an action from the action and its effects. In my Derridean account, the two are inseparable, for actions themselves constitute performers.) Through repetition, the movement whereby actions or marks are repeated in another time and place, subjectivities and relations between them are generated. The openness of Bell's understanding of ritualization might usefully be augmented by a crucial insight from Derrida, for repetition (at some level) is the one constraint on ritualization—the one bit of formalization that is constitutive of the process of ritualization itself.<sup>73</sup> This also suggests the aspect of ritualization that

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 221.

<sup>72</sup> Do rituals and bodily practices then constitute the object of belief as well as its subject? And if so, can we distinguish between fictions and other kinds of realities?

<sup>73</sup> Of course, every account of ritual I have ever read includes some discussion of repetition, at the very least as an identificatory criterion. Derrida's work enables us to see what is at stake in ritual repetition and how it is tied to ritual force and meaning. See Jonathan Z. Smith (“The Bare Facts of Ritual,” in his *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982], pp. 53–65) on the power of routinization.

establishes continuity between bodily practices and more fully ritualized activities, for both depend on iteration and hence generate meanings and constitute realities. The meaning is the constituted reality, thereby rendering ritual actions more like illocutions (in which the doing or saying, in the right conditions, is the performance) than like perlocutions (in which the proper outcome must follow from the saying or doing for it to be counted a performative). The *habitus*, in the sense used by Bourdieu and Butler, is made up of bodily practices and rituals (and the distinction between the two is itself a fluid one).

Bell's conception of ritualization and its relationship to power is directly influenced by the work of Foucault, particularly his reconceptualization of power. This helps explain the agreement between her analysis of the ambiguities of subjectivization and that of Butler. Against those theories of ritual that see it as the field in which the power of an elite is wielded and maintained over the populace, Bell argues that ritualization involves the (often very unequal) circulation of power among all the players within the ritual field: "Ritual mastery, that sense of ritual which is at least a basic social mastery of the schemes and strategies of ritualization, means not only that ritualization is the appropriation of a social body but that the social body in turn is able to appropriate a field of action structured in great measure by others. The circulation of this phenomenon is intrinsic to it."<sup>74</sup> Like other discursive formations generative of subjectivity, ritual is productive of the subject and marks the possibility of that subject's resistance to the very norms and rituals through which it is constituted.<sup>75</sup> Against those theorists who stress the conservative nature of ritual, Bell argues that ritual mastery "experiences itself as relatively empowered, not as conditioned or molded."<sup>76</sup> In a similar way, Margaret Thomson Drewal argues that ritual involves repetition but

<sup>74</sup> Bell (n. 33 above), p. 215. For examples of the theories against which Bell argues, see Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (n. 31 above); and Maurice Bloch, *Ritual, History and Power: Selected Papers in Anthropology* (London: Athlone, 1989). For more nuanced historicized accounts of the relationship between ritual and authority, see Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual and Classification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 53–74, and *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). Lincoln makes a useful distinction between authority, persuasion, and force. Persuasion and force are potentialities implied by authority, "but once actualized and rendered explicit they signal—indeed, they are, at least temporarily—its negation" (Lincoln, *Authority*, p. 6). If we understand authority as that which is generated through ritual (in keeping with Lincoln's fluid account of authority and my own account of the generative capacities of bodily practice and ritual), then ritual actions mark the participants' complicity in legitimizing authority. However, as with hate speech as analyzed by Butler, the force of the speaker's body (or of the state or army or other body that legitimates authority) always implicitly stands behind authoritative discourse.

<sup>75</sup> See Butler, *Excitable Speech* (n. 5 above), p. 5.

<sup>76</sup> Bell, p. 210.

always (as does all repetition) repetition with a difference (it has to occur in a different time and place in order for it to be repetition). The room opened for improvisation (which differs in different ritualizations) within the ritual space marks it as a site of both domination and resistance.<sup>77</sup>

Austin argues that the right conditions are necessary for the successful performance of an illocutionary speech act; absent those conditions, the performative misfires and does not, strictly speaking, take place. Derrida and Butler, together with ritual theorists like Asad, Bell, and Drewal, help us to think about the misfiring of the performative in new ways. In changed conditions, performatives constitute new kinds of subjects and communities. Seen in this way, misfiring looks less like a danger than a possibility, one that opens room for improvisation and resistance within the very authoritarian structures (e.g., of child rearing, education, and religion) in which subjects are constituted. We do not freely choose ourselves or our communities, nor are the worlds into which we are born absolutely determinative ones in which no new meanings can be performed. Instead, subjects and communities are created and sustained by the complex interplay of sameness and difference constitutive of repetition itself.

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<sup>77</sup> Margaret Thomson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 1–11.