

Sedimentation and Embodiment in Theorizing Performativity

Lisa Weems
Miami University

Claudia Ruitenberg provides a scintillating treatment of the notion of performativity as conceptualized by Judith Butler. She argues that the analytic force of the concept has been “undermined” or “weakened” by the tendency to conflate *performativity* with *performance*. I share her concern that this conflation has resulted in reading performativity as a form of voluntary action authored by individuals with predetermined meanings. While I generally concur with this treatment of the concept of performativity, I want to point to two places in the essay where Ruitenberg’s writing might approach humanistic constructions of autonomy and universalism. I call attention to these two points less as a way to “correct” the author and more as a way to illustrate the tensions within post-structural theorizing on subjectivity and social change. Specifically, I would like to further open and complicate our discussion by exploring two of the conceptual “rubs” in deploying poststructural theories of performativity: the implications of discursive sedimentation and embodiment.

With regards to the first point, discursive sedimentation, Ruitenberg foregrounds how performativity is discursively produced. She writes: “Discursive performativity means not that I, as autonomous subject, “perform” my identity the way an actor performs a role, but rather that I, as subject, *am performatively produced* by the discourse in which I participate.” Later, she follows with “As I wrote earlier, discursive performativity means that a subject is *performatively produced* by the discourse in which he or she participates.”

Ruitenberg argues that the distinction between performativity and performance lies in the ways in which subjectivity is *discursively produced* (emphasis in original). Yet these two statements suggest that discursive production can be characterized by “participation” of the individual. In both instances, Ruitenberg ends the claim that subjects are “performatively produced by the discourse in which [he or she] *participate[s]*” (emphasis added). The term “participates” takes on significance in these passages because it is in this word that one might follow multiple interpretive trajectories. If we understand participation in its most common usage, it connotes the kind of voluntarist autonomy against which Ruitenberg writes. However, if we look toward a more subversive connotation we might overlook this slippage and argue that participation is a function of the subject’s agency in shaping, if not determining, the discursive communities in which she acts. Ruitenberg use of participation reflects the latter interpretation, as evidenced in the example she uses in the end of the essay wherein the subject articulates a subversive retort to the comment, “that sweater’s so gay.” Here Ruitenberg underscores the subversive potential in “speaking back” to power and thus highlights participation as a function of agency. But what if one does not share the desire to read against the grain?

The agentic potential of the second speaker's speech act loses its veracity, however, if we focus on how the subject came to be a subject in that particular encounter. Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation suggests that the speaking subject only becomes a speaker through the process of being hailed through subjection to the authoritative discourses on sexuality and the rules of its operation. The second speaker has been hailed *vis a vis* homophobic speech that is authorized by the school system; thus subject formation must take into account the context and the subject positions produced with it to understand the possibilities for disruptive reading. In other words, yes, the speaker does take action in speaking an "utterance"; but in responding, "Really? This is a boy sweater that has sex with other boy sweaters?" the speaker defers to the discursive rules of formation (regarding sexuality) that render this retort (however witty and clever) politically neutral in countering the force of the "threat" or accusation of gayness. In Foucaudian terms, the encounter itself must be understood in terms of how the subject positions become possible and desirable in particular discursive contexts. Indeed, Ruitenberg points to sedimentation in stating, "Although it generally takes many repetitions for a significant change to sediment, change is possible and does occur, and this iterability, this possibility for changes in the repetitions of discourse, can be used strategically." Yet, the author neither returns to nor develops her argument regarding how agency can "overcome" sedimentation. Thus, Ruitenberg privileges strategy over sedimentation in theorizing performativity.

However, the author is not alone in this theoretical conundrum. Much writing under the sign of poststructuralism wrestles with this tension between sedimentation and strategy in interpreting the subversive potential of particular speech acts. For the sake of argument, let me elaborate a position that privileges sedimentation and backgrounds strategy, a position that marks Butler's association between historicity and performativity. It is not just that discourses (language) produce(s) the subject, but that discourses (language and sedimented relations of power embedded in particular discursive formations) *authorize* the intelligibility of particular speech acts as they are embodied and deployed by differently situated subjects. Another way to say this is that discursive practices utilize the subject as much as the subject utilizes them. What this means for our current analysis is that the question of whether and how one participates in discourse is always already a function of interpellation, thus constraining the potentially subversive effects of particular speech acts, regardless of intention. Furthermore, if there is a sense of accountability against homophobic discursive acts or the intelligibility of counter discourses on homophobic acts, it appears more likely to me that a retort (such as the one posed earlier) could be read as *effectively* subversive. In other words, schools that have established and enacted policies against bullying or hate speech might provide the real and imaginary conditions necessary to read the subversive effects of counter-discursive acts as intelligible and politically viable. One example of this is the recent case where an entire school was sued for allowing a culture of bullying to take place despite their anti-bullying policy.¹ The juridical power gives force to the discursive possibility of a subject resistant to harassment.

My second and final point regarding multiple trajectories in interpreting performativity as a politically viable construct concerns the importance of theorizing embodiment as it is related to speech act and discourse theory. To return to Ruitenberg's example of "the young man, who when told by a classmate that his sweater was 'so gay'": Who is this young man? Who is the classmate? As it is written, I easily read into the example that the young man was gay and the classmate was straight. I assumed both students were white since they were racially unmarked. What if the classmate was gay and the sweater-wearing student was straight? What if both were African American? What if the classmate was an African American gay student and the "young man" was a straight white girl? How does one interpret the meaning of the particular speech acts and the interaction altogether? Does it matter? I think it does. Like speech, bodies are discursive productions, which are both positioned by and position systems of language and power.

The term embodiment as it has traversed through queer and feminist circles refers to "an incorporation of the interrelationships which constitute experience into the constantly evolving body."² To suggest that the speaking subject is embodied does not restrict subjectivity to the realm of essentialized identities. It does, however, suggest that bodies (however discursively produced yet multiply intelligible) are effected by and effect physical and affective dimensions of the self and others. To quote Butler's famous phrase, we must examine and interrogate the performativity of "bodies that matter."³

For example, Mollie Blackburn's work with young African American queer youth demonstrates how speech that might be considered homophobic and racist (if not inflammatory) is strategically used to create group solidarity among members who are discursively marginalized in multiple ways. Like Blackburn, I am not suggesting that such discursive acts are inherently liberatory or oppressive. Rather, it is precisely through thick description of the context, speakers, and contradictory effects of these interactions that Blackburn illustrates the ambivalent nature of discourse, embodiment, and performativity.⁴

In conclusion, I applaud Ruitenberg's instructive analysis in clarifying the conceptual distinctions between performance and performativity. Her essay provides an important contribution to an informed understanding of poststructuralism in educational theory. Yet, in applying Butler's notion of performativity to understand bullying and hate speech Ruitenberg's analysis recounts the tensions endemic to poststructural theory and writing (including my own). I argue that we must actively consider two points: (1) how easy it is to slip into liberal notions of the sovereign subject given the phallogocentrism of the English language, and (2) how subjects are differently situated within particular discursive spaces in terms of embodiment, intelligibility, and political efficacy. Otherwise, the notion of performativity can be too easily reinscribed within universalist theories of subjectivity, autonomy, and social change.

1. "Protecting All Students," *New York Times* (February 24, 2007), A14.

2. Anne Cranny-Francis, Wendy Waring, Pam Stavropoulos, and Joan Kirby, *Gender Studies: Terms and Debates* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 83.
3. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
4. Mollie Blackburn, "Agency in Borderland Discourses: Examining Language Use in a Community Center with Black Queer Youth," *Teachers College Record* 107, no. 1 (2005): 89–113.