THEOLOGY GENDER THEORY

Deciphering Bodily Citations: The Theoretical Intersection of Judith Butler and Religious Studies

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The publication of **Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler** represents a pivotal moment in the intersection of contemporary philosophy, feminist theory, and theological inquiry. Edited by **Ellen T. Armour** and **Susan M. St. Ville**, this anthology serves as the first comprehensive effort to map the complex terrain where Judith Butler's theories of performativity and citationality intersect with the historical and systematic study of religion. While Butler's seminal works, such as *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), primarily addressed the construction of gender and the materiality of the body within secular and political contexts, the religious dimension provides a unique laboratory for testing the limits of her theoretical framework.

The Theoretical Framework: Performativity and Citationality

To understand the depth of the analysis presented in *Bodily Citations*, one must first master the technical mechanics of Butlerian theory. Central to this is the distinction between **performance** and **performativity**. In common parlance, performance implies a subject who precedes the act; however, in Butler's framework, performativity is the discursive mode by which the subject is produced through the repetitive citation of norms.

The Mechanics of Citationality

Citationality is a concept borrowed from **Jacques Derrida**'s reading of **J.L. Austin**'s speech act theory. It suggests that no act is original; rather, every act is a citation of a prior norm. For Butler, the body does not exist as a neutral biological datum prior to culture. Instead, the body is **materialized** through the constant repetition of regulatory norms. This process is not a one-time event but a continuous, ritualistic citation that conceals its own history of repetition to appear natural or essential.

- Iterability: The capacity for a sign or norm to be repeated in different contexts, which simultaneously reinforces and risks the stability of the norm.
- Discursive Constraints: The linguistic and social frameworks that determine which bodies are "intelligible" and which are "abject."
- The Heterosexual Matrix: A grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized into a binary system.

Core Concepts and Religious Intersections

Religious studies offers a fertile ground for Butler's theories because religion is fundamentally built upon **ritual**, **repetition**, and **tradition**—all of which are forms of citationality. The essays in *Bodily Citations* argue that religious practices are the ultimate sites of bodily formation. When a practitioner engages in prayer, liturgy, or asceticism, they are engaging in a citational act that shapes the physical and ontological status of their body.

Technical Breakdown of Materialization

Materialization is the process by which "matter" is made to mean. In a theological context, this might involve the transformation of the physical body into a "temple" or a "vessel." This is not merely a symbolic change but a material one, as the body's habits, postures, and sensory experiences are reorganized by religious discourse. **Bodily Citations** explores how religious norms act as the "regulatory power" that Butler describes, producing

specific types of gendered and sexed subjects within sacred spaces.

Concept	Butlerian Definition	Religious Studies Application
Performativity	The repetitive and ritualistic citation of norms that produces the subject.	The role of liturgy and ritual in shaping the practitioner's identity and body.
Abjection	The exclusion of certain bodies to define the boundaries of the "human."	The categorization of "heretical" or "unclean" bodies that reinforce sacred boundaries.
Subversion	The possibility of re-signifying norms through "failed" or parodic repetitions.	Mystical or ascetic practices that challenge traditional gender roles within a faith.
Materiality	The effect of power that stabilizes a body over time.	The physical impact of religious law (Halakha, Sharia, Canon Law) on the biological body.

Technical Analysis: The Architecture of the Performative Body

In analyzing Butler's impact on religion, we must examine the technical workflow of how a body becomes "religious." This involves a multi-step process of socialization and physical discipline. The following procedural framework illustrates how the "Bodily Citation" occurs within a structured environment:

1. Instruction: The subject is introduced to the regulatory norms (scripture, doctrine, tradition).
2. Imitation: The subject begins to cite these norms through bodily actions (kneeling, fasting, veiling).
3. Internalization: The repetitive nature of the citation creates a sense of an internal "soul" or "identity" that the body is supposedly expressing.
4. Naturalization: The history of the citation is forgotten, and the religious identity is viewed as an inherent, essential quality of the person.

Mathematical and Algorithmic Models of Identity

While Butler's work is qualitative, we can conceptualize the "Subjectivity (S)" as a function of "Citations (C)" over "Time (t)" within a "Regulatory Field (R)". This can be modeled as:

S = "+ (C × R) dt

Where the subject (S) is the integral of citations (C) multiplied by the strength of the regulatory field (R) over time. If the citation (C) deviates from the norm (C'), the resulting subjectivity enters a state of **subversion** or **abjection**, depending on the field's tolerance for variance.

Comparison Matrix: Traditional vs. Butlerian Theology

The following table compares traditional theological perspectives on the body with the Butlerian approach advocated by the contributors to *Bodily Citations*.

Feature	Traditional Essentialist Theology	Butlerian Performative Theology
Source of Gender	Divinely ordained, biological, or ontological essence.	Socially constructed through repetitive citational acts.
Function of Ritual	An expression of a pre-existing faith or inner state.	The mechanism that produces the subject and the faith itself.
The Body	A static vessel for the soul or a biological reality.	A dynamic process of materialization under power.
Agency	The capacity of the soul to choose between good and evil.	The ability to re-signify norms from within the system of repetition.
Authority	Scripture and Tradition as absolute, foundational truths.	Scripture and Tradition as regulatory discourses that must be cited.

Practical Implementation: Analyzing Religious Texts

For scholars and practitioners, applying Butlerian theory to religious studies requires a specific methodological approach. This field guide provides a step-by-step procedure for conducting a "Butlerian Reading" of a sacred text or practice:

Phase 1: Identifying the Regulatory Norms

First, identify the dominant norms within the text. What are the rules regarding gender, sexuality, and bodily conduct? Who is the "ideal" subject constructed by the text? Use **critical discourse analysis** to locate the power structures that enforce these norms.

Phase 2: Locating the Citations

Look for instances where characters or practitioners repeat the established norms. Are these citations successful? Do they reinforce the status quo? Pay close attention to **ritualized language** and **bodily postures** described in the text.

Phase 3: Searching for the Abject

Identify the figures who are excluded, marginalized, or labeled as "monstrous." In Butler's view, the "human" is defined against the "abject." In a religious context, this might be the sinner, the infidel, or the gender-nonconforming individual. How does their exclusion help stabilize the identities of the "faithful"?

Phase 4: Evaluating Subversive Potential

Are there moments where the citation "fails"? Does a character repeat a norm in a way that reveals its artificiality? This is where the potential for **political and ethical transformation** lies. For example, how do female mystics use the language of "bridehood" to subvert patriarchal authority?

Case Studies: Failure Modes and Operational Challenges

Applying secular queer theory to ancient or deeply conservative religious traditions presents several operational challenges. Below are common failure modes in theoretical integration and their proposed solutions.

Case Study 1: The Risk of Anachronism

Problem: Applying modern concepts of "gender identity" to 12th-century monasticism can lead to inaccurate historical conclusions.**Solution:** Focus on *practices* and *discourses*of the time. Instead of looking for "identity," look for the "citational practices" that the monks used to shape their bodies (e.g., silence, manual labor, flagellation).

Case Study 2: Theoretical Reductionism

Problem: Reducing religion to *only* a system of power and performativity may ignore the transcendental or spiritual claims of the practitioners.**Solution:**Maintain a dual-lens approach. Acknowledge the performative construction of the body while also examining how practitioners experience that construction as a meaningful encounter with the divine.

Case Study 3: Resistance to Subversion

Problem: In highly regulated religious environments, subversion can lead to severe social or physical consequences (excommunication, violence), making Butler's "parodic subversion" difficult to implement.**Solution:** Look for "subtle subversions"—small shifts in the citation of norms that occur over long periods or within private, marginalized spaces.

The Ethical and Political Import

The contributors to *Bodily Citations*emphasize that Butler's work is not merely an intellectual exercise but an ethical project. By revealing the constructed nature of our most deeply held identities, Butler opens up space for a more inclusive and compassionate ethics. In a religious context, this means questioning the "violent" exclusions that often accompany theological dogmatism.

Broadening the Scope of Religious Studies

By bringing Butler into conversation with religion, the field of religious studies moves beyond the study of "beliefs" and into the study of **embodied practices**. This shift acknowledges that religion is something people *do* with their bodies, not just something they *believe* in their minds. It also highlights the role of religion in the political sphere, as religious citations often underpin national and cultural identities.

Synthesizing the Intersections

The relationship between Judith Butler and religion is one of mutual challenge and enrichment. Butler provides religious studies with a sophisticated vocabulary for discussing the body, power, and identity. Conversely, religion provides Butlerian theory with a rich history of ritual and asceticism that complicates and expands the notion of performativity. The anthology *Bodily Citations*serves as a foundational text for this ongoing dialogue, proving that the body—and the way we cite it—remains at the heart of our search for meaning and justice.

Ultimately, the move to integrate these fields suggests that the "secular" and the "sacred" are not as distinct as they may seem. Both are built upon the materialization of bodies through the citation of norms. Whether those norms are found in the pages of a law book or a holy book, they function in remarkably similar ways to produce the subjects we recognize as ourselves. By deconstructing these citations, we gain the tools to reimagine the body in ways that are more fluid, more equitable, and more profoundly human.

Tags: #Judith Butler #Bodily Citations #Performativity #Religious Studies #Feminist Theory #Queer Theology