Judith Butler’s influential work in feminist theory is significant for its insight that sexist discourse in popular culture affects the agency and consciousness of individuals, but offers an inadequate account of how such discourse might be said to touch, shape, or affect selves. Supplementing Butler’s account of signification with a Deweyan pragmatic account of meaning-making and selective emphasis enables a consistent account of the relationship between discourse and subjectivity with a robust conception of the bodily organism. An analysis of the popular discourse surrounding Hillary Clinton in the 2008 Presidential campaign demonstrates why this hybrid pragmatic/poststructuralist account is necessary.

Popular political discourse tends to represent sexism and racism as encapsulated in isolated events with clearly demarcated victims and perpetrators – as in the case of a demonstrator at a 2008 Hillary Clinton campaign stop who held up a sign reading “Iron My Shirt.” Many feminist theorists, on the other hand, maintain that sexism, racism, heterosexism and classism are institutional phenomena for which responsibility and consequences are less than simple to pinpoint. Much recent work in feminist theory has maintained that even when sexism is considered as a matter of discourse, it functions as more than simply hurtful language. Oppressive discourse, feminists have maintained, shapes lives, consciousnesses and bodies – it may even constitute subjectivities.

Indeed, it has become commonplace in feminist theory to claim that language choices matter – whether the concern is with gender-neutral pronouns, or flagrant hate-speech – precisely because words have tangible effects on individuals and populations who are harmed or benefited by them. Nevertheless, it is not obvious how to account for such a relation between linguistic or signifying phenomena on the one hand, and material bodies on the other. In order to explain how language might have effects on individual bodies, it would be necessary to offer an account of the ways in which such discourse operates both to dominate and privilege – and to do so in a way that does not reduce selfhood to textuality, or oppression to a type of utterance. My purpose in this paper is to offer an account of the relationship between discourse and selves with a robust conception of the materiality of the bodily organism, which, at the
same time, allows for a conception of the emergence of differently bodied selves in and through (racialized, sexualized, gendered, classed) discourse. In so doing, I will draw out the implications of a linkage between Judith Butler’s notion of performativity and discursive power and John Dewey’s interactional account of meaning and matter. A thorough analysis of the popular discourse surrounding Clinton both illustrates why Butler’s citational account of embodied signification is necessary, and why it needs to be supplemented by attention to Dewey’s pragmatic discussion of selective emphasis and his interactional understanding of meaning-making. My claim will be that reading Dewey and Butler together both circumvents the problems of “discursification” (with which so-called ‘post-modernists’ are frequently charged), and prepares the way for a theory of the constitution of subjects that has room for the feminist suggestion that language has real consequences.

1. Performativity, Discourse and “Hillary”

By now, the claim that Hillary Clinton was the subject of sexist language in the mainstream media covering the 2008 U.S. Presidential election is commonplace – and yet, few are aware of its extent or flagrance. With this in mind, I want to mention a few moments of what most people would recognize as egregious sexism, with a view to showing why the approach I am offering here is necessary for understanding such discourse’s efficacy as both sense-making and politically significant for populations beyond Clinton. First, I will analyze a representative sample of sexist language used against Clinton using a typical feminist theoretical framework, and then suggest why this would be helpfully supplemented using a pragmatic, post-structuralist approach.

On his MSNBC show, Tucker Carlson famously said of Clinton, “When she comes on television, I involuntary cross my legs,” (Tucker 2007) in conjunction with a segment on Hillary Clinton Nutcracker Dolls being sold online, which featured “stainless steel teeth secured inside upper legs to grip and crack nuts.” (Eagleview USA 2010) Later, commentator Glenn Beck remarked, “There’s something about her vocal range. There’s something about her voice that just drives me – it’s not what she says, it’s how she says it. She is like the stereotypical ... bitch,” (The Glenn Beck Program 2007) while Chris Matthews dubbed the political men endorsing her candidacy “castratos in the eunuch chorus.” (Fortini 2008, 42) In a town-hall meeting, John McCain responded to the query, “How do we beat the bitch?” with the little-reported quip, “That’s an excellent question.” (Tapper 2007) The reiteration of the image of Clinton as a castrating bitch, whose very presence evokes fear or repulsion in men, could be understood, in part, as yet another manifestation of the no-win situation in which women find themselves: be ‘nice’ and appear weak, or be aggressive and be derided as bitchy. And yet, such an explanation on its own is insufficient, for it fails to account for the implicit centrality of the masculinity of the speakers in such rhetorical flourishes that ostensibly take a woman as their object.