

## Signature, Performance, Contention

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August 2019. For nearly six months, residents of Hong Kong have been protesting the introduction of a government bill that would allow for the extradition of criminal suspects to mainland China. The concerns center on the bill, but go beyond it too; this is but the latest assault on the autonomy and democratic desires of many Hongkongers by a censorious Beijing administration. The tendrilled collective moves through the streets of Kowloon's Mong Kok, bodies mobilizing against bureaucratic restrictions, the way they had five years earlier during the sit-in protests dubbed the "Umbrella Revolution" by observers. In the coming weeks and months, police will continue to pepper and gas these participants, mark them with dye fired through water cannons, blind some with rubber and beanbag ammunition, shoot others with live rounds, and disappear so many people that "no-suicide declarations" become a common practice, as protesters succumb to ambiguous, "accidental" deaths. Alongside these intense events, a curious ritual is sometimes seen:

On the fringes of the demonstrations in Hong Kong, one could sometimes observe a bizarre scene over the past few days: an autograph session in which demonstrators dressed in black hold out their goggles or mobile phones to be signed by a tall woman, also dressed in black. They're reaching out to Denise Ho, one of the best-known pop singers in town. (Bölinger 2019)

How do we interpret this symbolic transaction against the background of political contention? Well, to begin: Ho herself serves as a case study for the risks of speaking out against the People's Republic. In 2014, she held a concert in solidarity with the "Umbrella" revolutionaries. Her Cantopop ballads were quickly blacklisted by the Chinese mainland (Anderson 2021). Remember, this is a climate where simply "liking" a photograph of the demonstrations could lead to economic and social consequences for an artist.

But signatures are not reducible to "likes" on social media: they have material and agential aspects that function across a variety of platforms toward differing, imaginary ends. At first, the "bizarre scene" resembles a typical autograph event: a distillation of celebrity into an indexical sign of proximity. Ever since autograph-collecting took on its modern guise in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at least in Britain and the United States, these transactions have involved a fraught economic paradox (Dukes 2021). To sign your autograph dilutes its market value. The gift of a name (and these events are often framed as gifting ceremonies, with the tacit understanding that fandom always accompanies economic investment) creates autographic inflation, weakening the exchange rate of all one's previous signatures. But there is a form of contextually situated (deictic) investment that offsets this loss. When a celebrity signs an autograph in your presence, they are signing it *for you, here, in their presence*—transubstantiating an object into memorabilia resistant to complete liquidation.<sup>1</sup>

The signature's capacity for different endowments of value, its ability to function simultaneously across a range of contexts (as both an icon of assent and a petitionary protest) perhaps explains why Donald Trump's actions on August 29, 2020, were so darkly comic. Nearly a year to the day after Denise Ho's autograph ceremony, the president of the United States visited Lake Charles, Louisiana, in the devastated wake of Hurricane Laura. After a press conference, unprompted, he began signing autographs for first responders and emergency personnel. "Sell this on eBay tonight, you'll get \$10,000," he told one man. "Who's going to get this one?" Trump asked no one in particular, before handing another signed piece of paper in the direction of the audience he had summoned toward him. The third autograph came with a curious gloss: "If I put your name on it, it loses a lot of value, so just sell it tonight on eBay" (Jankowicz 2020). It is difficult to parse why the incident provoked particular outrage in the press

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1. Media archeologists may one day find this quality of the personalized autograph to be a forerunner for the nonfungible tokenization of artworks.

and on social media. The consensus seems to be that federal repertoires of aid-giving do not include recourse to a personal autograph's exchange value. The president should be a figurehead for the government's executive branch, not a celebrity equating his name with its actions.

But there is also an unsettling display of market cynicism: "If I put your name on it, it loses a lot of value." Here the personal gets put aside without a second thought. Or rather, it seems impossible for Trump, in this moment and others, to imagine forms of desire that do not involve enrichment. Interpersonal sentiment inhibits fungibility: the name must remain in circulation for it to be valuable. (There is no sense, for example, that a customized autograph, recognizing the deeds and bravery of Trump's addressee, could be *more valuable* to someone than an IOU for fiat currency.) While it is unclear if the president knows the name of the person to whom he speaks, he knows that their name would depreciate his own. Capital trumps kinship; the phantom of tender makes tenderness impossible. Finally, the imaginary economics of this exchange rely upon infinite demand. Trump denies the principles of oversupply: if every autograph he pens is worth \$10,000, the president could personally prop up the US economy with a Sharpie and legal pad. Instead, his speech act recruits the potential buyer to be a political actor: by paying thousands of dollars for a signature on eBay, you are legitimizing a contentious performance of value creation ex nihilo.

Now observe how the same symbolic object, a signature, takes on an entirely different set of associations in the example involving Denise Ho. In that case, by autographing protective equipment, Ho seems to imbue it with an additional, shielding dimension—as if her name might strengthen the goggles' polymers, intervene between the special administrative region and its discontented populace. The act also implicates the artist in political contention: here the gift of the name becomes a shorthand for culpability. If a person carrying Denise Ho's autograph is arrested, the signed equipment may direct the state's disciplinary authorities away from the protester's family and toward the artist, who cosigned the action. Revising a popular saying by Jacques Lacan, we could say that the letter does not always arrive at its destination, but the postman does.

### Signs of the Self

Both of the examples that begin this chapter sit at a disconcerting intersection between material and semiotic considerations of the signature

as a “symbolic object.” They reflect how, to quote Gardner and Abrams (introduction, this volume), “the cultural or semiotic qualities of symbolic objects become intertwined with their material properties in important and often transformative ways.” The signature is not reducible to writing, for its value resides in a *parasemantic* register: a name’s graphological texture—the loops, stems, and tails, which cannot be easily transferred into typography. The signature’s affective intensity, and in some cases financial appraisal, does not trade on legibility. An autograph need not even consist of letters, as in the case of former US Treasurer Jacob J. Lew’s curlicue scrawl: it only must be recognizable, verifiable, and vaguely repeatable.

And yet, if signatures are not completely reducible to the vocabulary of semiotics, they are also anything but purely material entities. There is a parasitism to the signature, for its meaning intermingles with the qualities of its medium. As Jacques Derrida wrote, while setting out the principles for cultural graphology, we must consider objects like signatures “not from the point of view of signification or of denotation, but of style and connotation; problems of the articulation of graphic form and of diverse substances, of the diverse forms of graphic substances (materials: wood, wax, skin, stone, ink, metal, vegetable) or instruments (point, brush, etc., etc.)” (Derrida 2016, 95). Ho’s signature on Hongkongers’ protective equipment would symbolize something utterly different were it scribbled on an album cover (see also Selbin’s discussion of El Che’s various reproductions, this volume). And, moving from the material back to the semiotic, the presidential eBay signature can traverse an entire continuum “from the banal to the highly charged,” as Gardner and Abrams describe, depending on a context that has little to do with its material origins.

It makes sense, then, that signatures show up in contentious political contexts, because in many ways, the uptake of this technology parallels the rise of a more individualist politics. Putting a pin in familiar arguments that track back to Giorgio Vasari’s *The Lives of the Artists* (1550), about the transition away from craft guild production toward emergence of the singular, visionary artist, we might consider how the same processes that led to constitutional republicanism and the rhetoric of inalienable rights and liberties helped create the conditions necessary for selfhood to be indexed by a repeatable, yet never identical, signature. While property marks seem to predate the invention of systematized writing (Diringer 1948; Schmandt-Besserat 1992), the signature in its modern form—pegged to a proper name; legally binding, or, at least, interpersonally obligatory—did not appear until thousands of years after the invention of writing. “It

was not until the thirteenth century in England that the signature began to gain acceptance as a valid form of authentication,” chronicles J. Lauer, “but even then it remained subordinate to the seal” (Lauer 2007, 147)—a biproduct of literacy rates, naming conventions, and a yet-to-come formalization of handwriting pedagogy.

Of course, seals, signets, and other technologies of authorization and verification have been used for millennia. And while Roman law recognized *subscriptio*—a handwritten epistolary subscript indicative of authority—it was not linked to graphology in the way we have come to expect: the enslaved and scribal classes could write *subscriptio* for their masters without contradiction (and these “signatures” often took the form of sentences, rather than proper names, due, in part, to a lack of onomastic diversity (Bond 2016)). In her study of Roman legal practices, Elizabeth Meyer describes how the autograph served as a supplement for the seal: “a way of putting yourself in or on a document that grew naturally out of the practice of sealing itself” (2004, 180). This practice continued, with various modifications, for centuries. When Edward III signed his name in a missive sent to the king of Castile, “the autograph confirmed but did not replace the king’s seal” (Harvey and McGuinness 1996, 2). That is, as in Roman times, it remained supplemental. Legal scholars point to the Statute of Frauds Act of 1677 as the moment when handwritten signatures became an officially recognized element of contract law in England, though other experts note that autographs had already gained significant legal power by this era.

This early-modern transition—away from a stamped sign of presence toward a handwritten, indexical scribble as the shorthand for personal assent—marks a seismic, medial shift in the history of bodily techniques. As Béatrice Fraenkel writes, “The use of seals allowed the production of impressions similar in every detail to their common matrix. In order to forge a seal, a false matrix must be made. The signatory is deemed to produce a signature as if he himself were a matrix capable of replicating a form” (quoted in Harris 2000, 183). Consider, for a moment, just how strange this *becoming-matrix* is, when read against colloquial narratives for technological advancement in communication systems. The development of our modern signature is one of the most widely accepted forms of an *internalized* cognitive prosthesis. Whereas most other communication formats *extend* the mind and self beyond the body, offering preservation, visibility, and increased reach, the handwritten signature virtualizes, remediates, and internalizes the seal—a technology that originally had no bodily index, aside, perhaps, from the rough portrait on a signet ring. Writing

externalizes memory; visual representation makes perspectival sight communicable; gramphonic inscription entombs the evaporating voice; and typewriters remove bodily noise from the writing hand. On the other “hand,” the autographic signature makes a seal of the writing hand—a replicable matrix of selfhood. Rather than moving sense perception and memory into a nonbiological device, the lettered signature, as a cultural technique, replaced the hardware of seals, stamps, and maker’s marks, with the looping, confirmational movements of an individualizing script. In doing so, it helped stabilize the self as an unchanging quantity.

### Constitutive Petitions

How did the self arise in its modern guise? A colossal question too unruly for a monograph, let alone a book chapter, but lurking in even the most microscopic present-day signature. Well-known allegories offered by intellectual history involve communication or prohibition of communication between the inner and outer worlds, a barrier crossed when graphologists attribute moral character to handwritten characters. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche (2012, 83) chalked it up to a process of *internalization*: the soul, like an abscess, was engorged into existence by pent-up drives that could no longer be drained at will due to the imposition of monotheistic morality. Michel Foucault turned Nietzsche’s subject inside-out in *Discipline and Punish*—where the soul, like a blister, formed through a “microphysics’ of the punitive power” exercised across the body’s exterior (Foucault 1995, 29). And Judith Butler (2006, 172), while developing a notion of performativity that will be important for what follows, took Foucault’s lashings and made their scars cohere into signifying texts webbed across the skin’s surface: “the soul is a surface signification that contests and displaces the inner/outer distinction itself, a figure of interior psychic space inscribed *on* the body as a social signification that perpetually renounces itself as such.” If all three philosophers connect the self’s origin to a process that lineates the body’s encasing membrane, the signatories on declarations and petitions, who helped birth republicanism in France and the United States, recruited parallel imagery for thinking about the autonomy of citizenship in relation to state power via the collectivizing and individuating mechanisms of the signature, circulating across the surface a body politic in the form of declaratory articles and documents of resistance.

What keeps selfhood stable? Not the body—we change our minds; grow, regress, mature, decay; all the while, our cells refresh. What keeps a

political subject stable before the law? In many cases, a name signed on the dotted line, which points back, faithfully, to an ever-changing and evolving individual. As Peggy Kamuf (1988, ix) discusses,

If every time you sign your name, you deliberately make a significantly different mark, if no two of your signature acts resemble each other, then there is no telling after you have signed whether it was indeed you who signed. After a while, even you may forget having made some particular mark. Here the grounding assumption is that “the subject named” is not only self-identical with itself in the moment of signing but as well remains recognizably the same over time.

Before the law, the signature shores up the discontinuities of selfhood, concatenates every past iteration into an indexical sign. And thus, the signature became a metonym par excellence for a liberal political subject: protected in its particularity, beholden to constitutional universals, ever differing, and always equitable.

Unlike the seal, which carries no “character” aside from the forms etched in negative on its matrix, the signature becomes both the sign of an individual and a reflection of its wider social-political context. “What the semiology of the signature tells us is something about the society responsible for its evolution as a graphic practice,” writes Roy Harris. “It is evidently a society with great respect for the individual, and the gradual extension of the signature as a formal procedure goes hand in hand with the development of the rights of the individual, in both political and economic matters” (Harris 2000, 183). During John Locke’s (1988) section “Of Conquest” in *Two Treatises on Government*, he compares the thievery performed by an unchecked sovereign power to signatory coercion. “Should a Robber break into my House, and with a Dagger at my Throat make me seal Deeds to convey my Estate to him, would this give him any Title?” (Locke 1988, 176). Here the threat of bodily laceration invalidates the quality of a seal’s impression, and marks a burgeoning awareness that the seal’s matrix cannot communicate character—the hand can be forced, but, paradoxically, an authentic signature cannot flow out of duress in an unjust seizure, an image Locke links to “the Consent of the people” when erecting a “new Frame of a Common-wealth” (Locke 1988, 176).

It remains unclear, argues Lauer, why the Declaration of Independence that initiated the American Revolutionary War was signed at all—given the conventions of British Parliament at the time (2007, 151–52). As Pauline

Maier (2012) notes, examining colonial petitions to the King in 1774 and 1775, the individual signatures on the document did not personalize it, but on the contrary universalized the document's message. "By affixing their signatures, the delegates signaled that each of the colonies mentioned supported the petition" (2012). Here the unique autograph of *one* bundles in the assent of *all*. "That was," Maier continues, "they seemed to say, not the work of an inconsequential faction of colonists, as their critics in England so often alleged, but the voice of the American people" (2012). Yet unlike these petitions, which acknowledged royal sovereignty and maintained loyalist rhetoric, signing the Declaration of Independence was a treasonous confession. Here again the semiotics of signature shifted, given a different form of contention: "the signers, by affixing their names to the text, and so making their signatures part of that most hazardous of Congressional papers, mutually pledged to each other . . . their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor" (Maier 2012). If the signed petitions afford representatives the symbolic power to speak for their constituents before the King, the US Declaration of Independence used the indexical autograph to both underwrite this pronouncement and communicate the interpersonal commitments of its founders to each other. Even graphology gets recruited into political action. In one account, after signing the document with "exaggerated bravado," John Hancock—whose name has become synonymous with every American signature—was said to have boomed, "There! John Bull can read my name without spectacles and double his reward of £500 for my head" (quoted in Lauer 2007, 152). This story of John Hancock and John Bull may be, as the names imply, merely cock and bull, but once again we find acts of contention encoded in value-generating graphology. Even before the Declaration of Independence was used "to whip up crowds into a revolutionary frenzy," as Gardner and Abrams recount, its letter forms became containers for similarly stirring sentiment, semantic sense aside.

Signatures were used for analogously flexible political ends during the episodes of contention that arose between the foundation of the National Assembly and the Establishment of the First Republic during the French Revolution. After the National Assembly passed the Le Chapelier Law restricting strikes and organizations by workers in the summer of 1791, the Cordeliers circulated a petition on July 14, protesting the "abjuring chief on the throne" and calling for Louis XVI to recognize the constitution. "Signed first 'Le Peuple' above individual signatures, the protestors declared that, on an issue concerning the entire nation, the Assembly had the duty to consult its opinion" (Alpaugh 2015, 95). This congruency between personal



ascription and collective action had not always been so frictionless. During deliberations of the Third Estate, almost two years to the day earlier, a presiding member cautioned the assembly against signing as individuals. “Instead of strengthening our resolution, signing could weaken it; for once a resolution is taken by the assembly, it is considered to have been adopted unanimously; whereas signing, if not universal shows that the resolution has been adopted only partially” (quoted in Baker 1987, 199). Two years later, the Jacobin Club used the divisive, exposing nature of the signature to argue for royal abdication. If the individual signatures on the Cordelier petition allowed individuals to amass as “Le Peuple” on paper, during a period where physical gatherings were banned, the Jacobin petition inverted Locke’s metaphor, elevating the signature’s constitutional authority over monarchical absolutism: “it is important to decide promptly the matter of this individual’s fate . . . that Louis XVI, after having accepted the duties of kingship and to defend the constitution . . . has protested against this constitution by a declaration written and signed by his own hand” (quoted in Baker, 274). Here the King as a figurehead for the body politic becomes a mortal hand: individual and disenchanted through the singularity of his own signature, dissolved into the masses of “Le Peuple.” As students of French history know and Micah Alpaugh tracks, what may be one of the most widely implemented techniques of peaceful protest—petition signing—led to the Champ de Mars massacre on July 17, after an estimated 50,000 people gathered and 6,000 signed in support of abdication (150).

Without needing to consider the revolutionary claims made by handwriting interpreters with their oracular, divinatory games—such as the graphologist who believed that Jean-Paul Marat’s autograph contained “a rope and dagger,” apropos for “the blood-stained hangman of the French Revolution” (quoted in Harris, 179)—we can consider that signatures are well poised to take on an outsized force during processes such as revolutions, state repression, and interstate conflict, as well as isolated contentious performances such as the inscription of animal bodies to sustain a fantasy of partisan ecology. I will turn to further illustrative cases in time, but first we must consider the “performative” dimension of the signature and how it squares with sociological discussions related to contentious politics.

### Contentious Performatives

During their discussion in *Contentious Politics*, Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow define a *social movement* as “a sustained campaign of claim-making,

using repeated performances that advertise the claim,” which, through said repetition, “cluster into repertoires of contention” (2015, 13). “Repertoire” and “performance” are carefully chosen terms, cementing a theatrical conceit foundational to the theorization of contentious politics. Agents are so commonly referred to as *actors*, for example, that we have lost the figurative thrust of this term. Here loss is two-pronged. On one hand, we are working with what Nietzsche, Richard Rorty, and subsequent linguistic pragmatists might call a *dead metaphor*; Tilly, *per contra*, worries about the potential incongruities between map and territory: that is, the cases of contention where figurative language fails to accurately approximate the political scene.

Unlike the imagined situation of actors on a stage before a darkened house, all participants in contention learn continuously as they interact. . . . [C]ontention affects what happens next because each shared effort to press claims lays down a settlement among parties to the transaction, a memory of the interaction . . . and a changed network of relations with and among the participants. (2008, 15–16)

All the world’s a stage after all, but there is no fourth wall in Tilly’s political theater. Actors and their audience are embroiled in feedback loops of various kinds; all participants *learn continuously* through contention. The traction of theatricality for sociology transcends the figurative. Theories of drama and cultural analysis have been entwined at least since Aristotle connected the cathartic effects of tragedy to representations of power in his *Poetics*. It makes sense, then, to look once again toward developments in dramaturgy and performance studies when trying to sculpt a theory of contentious politics that accounts for the vibrant, agential dimensions of the nonhuman or inorganic world—a boundary typified by signatures and autographs: where the symbolic endurance of human presence relies on the material conditions of writing.

During the same year that Tilly’s *Contentious Performances* was published, Erika Fisher-Lichte’s (2008) *The Transformative Power of Performance* appeared in English translation. Like Tilly, Fisher-Lichte describes a type of performance that refuses to demarcate between spectacle and spectator, thereby troubling conventional semiotic approaches where “a clear distinction between subject and object is fundamental” (Fisher-Lichte 2008, 17). Performances such as Marina Abramović’s *Lips of Thomas* (1975), which implicates the audience in the artist’s self-inflicted harm and allows for

the possibility of intervention (spectators can become actors by terminating the performance), dissolve the clear boundaries between “subject and object, observer and observed, spectator and actor” (Fisher-Lichte 2008, 17). We might here note how Fisher-Lichte’s variations on Judith Butler’s *performativity* parallel Tilly’s ideas concerning contentious performances:

Consequently, the repetition of an act comprises a “reenactment” and a “reexperiencing” based on a repertoire of meanings already socially instituted. Cultural codes neither inscribe themselves onto a passive body nor do the embodied selves precede cultural conventions that give meaning to the body. In a theatrical performance, a text can be staged in various ways, and the actors may interpret and realize their roles within its textual framework. (Fisher-Lichte 2008, 28)

Performances clump into repertoires of claim-making routines that apply to the same claimant-object pairs: bosses and workers, peasants and landlords, rival nationalist factions, and many more. The theatrical metaphor calls attention to the clustered, learned, yet improvisational character of people’s interactions as they make and receive each other’s claims. (Tilly 2008, 35)

In Tilly’s formulation, figurative actors (and sometimes literal ones too, in the case of street theater) perform what the philosopher of language J. L. Austin called *locutionary* and *perlocutionary* acts. The former term indicates the intended content of communication: “the utterance of certain words in a certain construction, and the utterance of them with a certain ‘meaning’ in the favorite philosophical sense of that word, i.e. with a certain sense and with a certain reference” (Austin 1962, 94). The latter evokes “what we bring about or achieve *by* saying something” (Austin 1962, 108). *Locution* is allied to intention and aspiration; *perlocution* to persuasion and consequence. While linguistic treatments of communication rarely make reference to the embodied qualities of textuality (the body noise, as it were, that accompanies the meaning-making of verbal and gestural performances), Fischer-Lichte reminds Tilly that contention often obeys a version of Newton’s third law of motion. To make and receive claims is to act and be acted upon, to alter and be altered in turn. Signatures further complicate this already reflexive process. They are the *bruit* in any academic fantasy of pure transmission. If performances clump into claim-making routines

along the axis of claimant-object pairs, signatures triangulate Tilly's dyad. Though indexical of the self, written signatures also remain by definition *separate* from it, invested as they are with the legal and affective power to act on their referent's behalf, even if that referent is absent or deceased.

### Naming's Symbolic Necessities

To "learn continuously"—as Tilly suggests contentious performers do— involves extracting the locutionary content of a performance, its intended meaning. We can say that the *perlocutionary* aspect of a performance equates to what Tilly calls the *changed network of relations*: the locution's actual, rather than intended, effects, the shifting settlements among those party to a communicative transaction. In Austin's language, locution and perlocution are frequently yoked through causal logic: by saying *x* [a locutionary act] I was doing *y* [the perlocutionary result], intentionally or not. During an elaboration of *perlocutionary acts*, Austin might as well be talking about contentious performances: "convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading" (1962, 108). Here is Tilly offering a similar list:

Contention involves making claims. . . . People make claims with such words as condemn, oppose, resist, demand, beseech, support, and reward. They also make claims with actions such as attacking, expelling, defacing, cursing, cheering, throwing flowers, singing songs, and carrying heroes on their shoulders. (Tilly 2008, 5)

While the notion of "performance" has become deeply embedded in discussions of contentious politics, it is important to note that the term "performative"—despite its continual deployment across cultural studies—is nowhere to be found in core texts such as *Contentious Politics* or *Contentious Performances*. Jeffrey C. Alexander fills this gap in *Performance and Power* through his attempt to craft a sociology more attentive to the cultural dimensions of power politics, those typically neglected in Weberian accounts of force and authority (Alexander 2011). For Alexander (and his collaborator Jason Mast), Austin privileged communication's interactions, *the stage*, and "failed to account for the cultural context out of which particular signs are drawn forth by a speaker," *the script* (2011, 9). In this argument Austin's failings are shared by Erving Goffman, whose sociological dramaturgy cut off "the practice of language from its texts"; by Victor

Turner (1998), who categorized modernity as marking the transition from ritual to theater; and by Clifford Geertz's (1980) theater state (Alexander 2011, 10). Recuperating *parole* from *langue*, speech from text—to borrow the semiotic distinction that Alexander and Mast employ in their engagement with Derrida's well-known critique of Austin—gives rise to a sociological pragmatics that both emerge and diverge from dramaturgy:

Dramaturgy emerges from the confluence of hermeneutic, post-structural, and pragmatic theories of meaning's relation to social action. Cultural pragmatics grows out of this confluence, maintaining that cultural practice must be theorized independently of cultural symbolics, even as it remains fundamentally interrelated with it. (Alexander 2011, 11)

Pragmatics and dramaturgy lay the foundation for questions of contentious politics when focalized through performativity, how a specific kind of utterance navigates power's vertical hierarchy with horizontal acts of affinity, real or imagined. For Alexander, performance is not theatrical because “felicitous performances fuse speaker and audiences . . . and audiences do not, in fact, see actions as if they are performed” (2011, 103). Nowhere is this *fusing* more apparent than in Austin's third class of speech act: the illocutionary utterance.

If for Austin and his successors locution concerns the act *of saying something*, illocution involves the act *in saying something*. This class of utterance changes the social reality of an interpretive community through its pronouncement, bypassing the need for perlocutionary persuasion. Seduction this is not. Common examples here include acts of naming, christening, warning, promising, and gifting. Notably, one of first examples given by Austin (1962, 102) to highlight the differences between *locution*, *illocution*, and *perlocution* involves protest:

Act (A) or Locution

He said to me, ‘You can’t do that.’

Act (B) or Illocution

He protested against my doing it.

Act (C. *a*) or Perlocution

He pulled me up, checked me.

Of course, as Austin quickly admits, illocution often requires locution: to protest something requires saying certain words in many cases. But the *force* of illocution is not solely contingent upon an utterance's content, but something like social context, what Austin obliquely calls "the appropriate circumstances." An illocutionary act involves "the securing of *uptake*" (Austin 1962, 116): it commits both the speaker and her audience, if successful, to a certain course of action. Once a ship has been named and that naming acknowledged, for example, one cannot call said vessel by a different name without *renaming* or *misnaming* it.

But who has the right to name a ship? Here Austin's concept dodges an important political question. To take the most frequently quoted example: Austin describes some low type, who, in the very moment you are about to shatter a bottle across the bow of a ship and slap a name on it, "snatches the bottle out of your hand, breaks it on the stem, shouts out 'I name this ship the *Generalissimo Stalin*,' and then for good measure kicks away the chocks" (Austin 1979, 239). What a revealing example! For Austin, this performative becomes infelicitous because it is uttered by the wrong person, "this low type instead of the person appointed to do it"—"you should first of all get yourself appointed as the person to do the naming and that's what this fellow did not do" (1979, 240). The legitimacy (and legitimizing powers) of nominal regimes remain veiled. What happens if it was not the "low type," but the *appointed namer* who called the ship *Generalissimo Stalin*, to the chagrin of those who appointed her? And what if she is stripped of her appointment after the performative utterance has taken place? Will *Generalissimo* float?

Two recent examples highlight the contentious attributes of naming ceremonies in which objects are forcibly imbued with symbolic qualities. In 2012, the regional assembly of Bratislava held a two-month campaign to crowdsource the name for a pedestrian bridge across the Morava river. A clear favorite emerged: "Chuck Norris," with 12,599 votes. Slovak officials rejected the result and named the bridge "Freedom Cycling Bridge" to honor those who died fleeing Czechoslovakia for nearby Austria under the communist regime. On the other hand, when the British Natural Environment Research Council opened a vote to name a new polar research ship, they initially decided to honor the public's choice of *Boaty McBoatface* as the name for its \$287 million vessel. Despite the Council's subsequent reversal of this decision, opting to name the ship RRS *Sir David Attenborough*, they nonetheless maintained *Boaty McBoatface* for its principle submersible

vehicle. One might choose to quibble over whether or not these government bodies “appointed” the public or merely crowdsourced suggestions. But to get hung up on these designations would be to miss the larger, political takeaway. These “infelicities” (as Austin would have put it) are not abnormal failures in an otherwise functional nominal system. Rather, they also manifest in the case of suspended elections or the invalidation of electoral results through accusations of ballot rigging. Every illocutive act of naming, whether the referents be boats or democratic leaders, involves an inquiry into and a performance of authority, individual or collective.

How do ceremonies of naming, in this argument, differ from the practice of signing autographs? Or, to put the question another way, do illocutive speech acts need a speaker? Austin offers a ludic answer. If a performative utterance is “something which is *at the moment of uttering being done by the person uttering*” (Austin 1962, 60), signatures do not fit the criterion. Shortly after this definition, however, Austin distinguishes between *verbal* utterances and *written* utterances:

- (a) In verbal utterances, by his being the person who does the uttering—what we may call the *utterance*-origin which is used generally in any system of verbal reference-co-ordinates.
- (b) In written utterances (or ‘inscriptions’), by his appending signature (this has to be done because, of course, written utterances are not tethered to their origin in the way spoken ones are). (Austin 1962, 60–61)

Austin’s “of course” in the second example might catch the critical eye as an example of what Derrida described as Austin’s revealing offhandedness. For Derrida, a written signature “implies the . . . *nonpresence* of the signer” (1977, 20). By this he means—playing with the partial homophone between *maintenant* (present) and maintenance—that signatures do not merely refer to an absent presence, they offer an illusory presence that need not be *maintained* by the individual in question. As objects widely accepted as legal proxies for an absent, corporal subject, signatures may thus be employed to imply or evoke an individual or group’s participation (with or without their signer’s consent) in contentious politics. This may be wielded by contentious protagonists or—as we shall soon see—by repressive forces.

### Forged Signatures and Political Repression

If the late eighteenth century saw the signature recruited by networks of revolutionaries to serve as symbolic objects for discrediting feudalism and instantiating republicanism, the nineteenth-century witnessed a retaliation of sorts on behalf of the powerful. During this period, state actors, newspapers, and even forensic scientists recruited novel techniques of interpretation to weaponize signatures against contentious individuals and populations, discrediting their political efficacy and imputing a pretext for victimization. These cases serve as a telling reminder that repertoires of contentious politics involving symbolic objects are as vulnerable to state seizure as the objects themselves.

What we now refer to as handwriting forensics—analytic techniques for matching a signature or autographic text to its issuing body—had its foundations in graphology, a science that promised not just to illuminate denotation, but to extract information from the connotation of script: locating moral character, predicting future criminal behavior, and attributing guilt, all by means of examining the unique patterns of a person's handwriting. This graphological frame shifted the handwritten signature's symbolic potency by declaring the existence of certain empirical techniques that could uncover someone's essence through careful and "proper" analysis of their written words.

During the struggle for Irish Home Rule in the late nineteenth century, one of the Irish nationalist movement's leaders, Charles Stewart Parnell, was accused of the double murder of two of the movement's opponents, Lord Frederick Cavendish and Thomas Henry Burke, thanks to a series of forged letters. *The Times* (1887), which bought the letter after it was described as "an infernal machine guaranteed to blow the whole Irish party into space," functioned as a key part of the anti-independence counter-movement, and as an organ of Prime Minister Salisbury's government, which, as the saying went, sought to kill Home Rule with kindness (Stead 1890, 185). On April 18, 1887, the newspaper reproduced, as part of its "Parnellism and Crime" series, a letter purportedly written by Parnell in the spring of 1882. The signed document (which was followed by several other letters in subsequent editions) appeared to condone the murders, while cultivating a tone of conspiracy (Bew 1980, 100). Even though the handwriting was clearly not Parnell's own, *The Times* declared that the sig-



nature nonetheless matched the politician's. "It is requisite to point out that the body of the manuscript is apparently not in Mr. Parnell's handwriting, but the signature and the 'Yours very truly' unquestionably are so."

For Parnell to clear his name it was not enough to disavow the text of the letter. Rather, Parnell had to carefully dissect the authenticity of his supposed signature, placing "his finger on the S of the signature," and declaring "I did not make an S like that since 1878" (Timothy Harrington, quoted in Bew 1980, 101). Here signatory difference tracks the flux of penmanship, stressed by the focus on the serpentine S, allowing Parnell not only to spot the forgery, but to date it to a version of his graphic self that dissipated before the Phoenix Park murders took place.

In a similar vein to the Parnell Commission, the contentious episode wrought by the Dreyfus Affair (1894–1906) also centered upon finding the author of an unsigned treasonous *bordereau*. The document, written by French officer Ferdinand Esterhazy, was attributed by biased and inaccurate handwriting analysis to the Jewish artillery officer Alfred Dreyfus, sparking a frenzy of anti-Semitic protests and riots. Propelling and underpinning the frenzy whipped up during the Affair, state powers employed the Kafkaesque argument that Dreyfus—though not immediately obvious as the writer of the document—performed a "self-forgery" by purposefully obscuring the identifiable signatures in his own handwriting.<sup>2</sup> The notion was justified by a flawed system of mathematical reasoning that verged on the magical. The French state alleged that a person's handwriting corresponded to the scripts of their parents (Kurland 2009, 61), linking Dreyfus's bloodline to his allegedly seditious inkwell. This framing not only served to justify anti-Semitic movements of the time, but undermined former revolutionary strategies. Where once one might gather thousands of individual signatures and present them under the banner of "Le Peuple," this new framing of the signature balkanized it along imaginary ethnic and racial divisions, potentially detectable through the science of graphology. When state investigators inadvertently *exonerated* Dreyfus by matching Esterhazy's handwriting samples to the *bordereau*, they backtracked, claiming "that the *bordereau* had been written by someone the Jews had trained to imitate Dreyfus's handwriting" (Begley 2009, 99).<sup>3</sup>

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2. The French state utilized Alphonse Bertillon, chief of the Identification Department of the Judicial Police, as handwriting analyst. Bertillon was famous for developing anthropometry—a forensic system used to recognize criminals based upon a complex system of bodily measurements.

3. In painful irony, any similarity between Dreyfus's handwriting and Esterhazy's may have

### Signing Ceremonies

As symbolic objects used by contentious political actors ranging from dissidents to diplomats, signatures offer particularly rich case studies for contentious politics because they signify across a spectrum of interests, tracking how “the various meanings, identities and narratives that objects come to be entangled with are not always consciously named or recognized but may nonetheless be strongly evoked,” as Gardner and Abrams (conclusion, this volume) put it. Signatures are simultaneously ledger, stylo, and signer. Autography becomes a paradigmatic example of the symbolic protocols, like those theorized by Alfred Gell, whereby objects can act *on behalf of* an absent body. Borrowing C. S. Peirce’s tripartite division of signs, we could say that the signature lends itself equally to iconic, indexical, and symbolic investments. Or, following Sonja Dobroski’s elaboration of Peirce’s “qualisign” in this volume, we might highlight her gloss of Julie Chu and say that the signature too always involves “a semiotic bundling that occurs when mobility necessarily becomes attached to people, places and objects.”

To return to the near past, consider the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), Donald Trump’s renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Trump’s signature made international news, due to a suspicion that, on one of the agreement’s three copies, he signed on the wrong dotted line. The story was perhaps unwarranted, because each copy might have had the North American leaders’ names in differing orders. In photographs documenting the signing ceremony, Trump’s signature looms large, written with his custom Sharpie. Here the controversy and media sensation involve multiple registers of signification.

We do not even need to know the terms of the USMCA to locate the critical discontent: Trump’s signature was the culprit, not the bill to which it was affixed. First there is the critique of deixis: *to what the signature points*. If Trump did, in fact, sign on the wrong line, this mistake could be quickly remedied and would carry no legal authority. The outrage, then, has nothing to do with the validity of an illocutionary act, but its implied subtext: if the president of the United States signs on behalf of a country not his own, intentionally or unintentionally, what stops him from advocating for, or falling prey to, another foreign power?

Second, we find a critique of graphology. Trump’s outsized autograph,

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been a result of standardized state education: “at that time the slanted, highly cursive script was taught at every school” (Begley, 6).

composed of around a dozen distinct lines and often written with a Magic Marker instead of the expected presidential pen, carries a connotation in excess of the signature's performative function. Assessments of exactly *what kind of connotation* will differ wildly among audiences, depending on their personal and political affinities or repulsions, but it remains nevertheless iconic. The symbolic attributes of Trump's signature are by no means arbitrary: the signature *looks* like what it *means* (whatever it means). The audience's interpretation, here, is not separate from the event: it helps form the "feedback" loop identified in Tilly and Fisher-Lichte's work by means of a symbolic inscription linked to the signer's body. For a supporter, Trump's graphology might be the shortest possible paraphrase of his "Make America Great Again" campaign slogan, while the opposition could connect the name's girth and its signatory's bloated, executive power. Symbolic objects' ambiguity does not hinder their role in contentious politics; rather, it is an engine of their potency.

Symbolic objects such as signatures are not *merely* metonymic advocates for human subjects. Trump's signature on the USCMA bill fascinates because of its implied political infidelity. Through its interaction with onlookers, who subject its character (locutive and graphological) to speculative interpretation, the signature both advocates on behalf of Trump, *and* may be used to reveal weakness and uncertainty. A signature can thus turn against its maker's hand in a very real way. As signs of surrogacy, prosthetic symbols of intent, signatures may inherit any controversy surrounding their signatory, but can exceed it too.<sup>4</sup> The signature functions as a symbol of presence and proximity, while its material shape and graphology serve as a storehouse of character and interpretable content.

Both contentious and consolatory, signing ceremonies—held in locked rooms or behind secured barriers, sometimes televised, always reported upon—initially appear to be nothing but diplomatic pomp. If the rhetoric of a signing ceremony champions republicanism, their iconography verges on the feudal: a court filled with statesmen and stateswomen, convening around a document, with each person's handwriting imbued with the symbolic efficacy for national assent. Tilly, Tarrow, Alexander, and others predominantly recruit theatrical vocabulary to describe the performative dimension of contentious politics; the signing ceremony is the epitome of scripted political performance's fixed repertoire. The terms have been

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4. In more formal terms, we could say that signatures are objects that denote and connote controversy simultaneously, modifying Derrida's earlier question regarding the materiality of style.

agreed upon beforehand. All that is left is to sign them into existence. Why, then, the fuss?

In journalistic accounts of signing ceremonies, politics always has the potential to slip into mass entertainment. This remains true even in the context of some of the grandest contentious political phenomena—war and interstate conflict. While these ceremonies have a binary outcome—either the parties sign or they do not—the duration, setting, and performance of the events are often remarked upon. Reporting on the signing of the World Security Charter on June 26, 1945, *The Times*, for example, seized upon the ceremonial duration. “The ceremony began at 6 o’clock, and was not completed until mid-afternoon,” with the “San Francisco printers work[ing] overtime during the week-end” to deliver “the royal blue morocco-bound volumes containing the documents which represent the hopes of 50 nations for a prolonged period of peace and security.” The duration of a signatory event seems to symbolize the prolonged negotiations (months of debate and drafting). The setting also overshadows the legal agreement. *The Times* remarked how the scene “was almost like a Hollywood setting,” a simile that reveals the congruency of contentious politics’ theatrical lexis.

Against a back-drop of pale blue stood the flags of the 50 nations, and the documents lay upon a huge round table on which powerful lights played. In the galleries many news-reel cameras recorded in picture form the signing by every delegate. Most of the delegates spoke a few words into the microphone. (“Ceremony of the Signature,” *The Times* 1945, 4)

The words are not recounted—they do not need to be. We can contrast the United Nations charter ceremony to the peace deal signed five years earlier between France’s General Charles Huntziger of the Supreme War Council and General Wilhelm Keitel, Adolf Hitler’s chief of staff. As the *Sunday Mirror* reported, the ceremony took place in the same railway dining car where Ferdinand Foch, the Supreme Allied Commander during World War I, dictated his Armistice terms on November 11, 1918. There the duration was also remarked upon. Unlike the United Nations signatory event, this ceremony “took only two minutes” (“French Sign!,” *Sunday Mirror* 1940, 2). The length of the event has no bearing on its outcome, as Gertrude Stein might have been tempted to say at the time. But a hasty autograph comes to symbolize the scale of attrition, the depth of defeat. It

retains connotations of the dining car's pervading history: we are reminded that something like this happened before, in the very same place. While diplomatic signing ceremonies attempt to exclude dissent through repertoires of compromise, the signature, as we have seen, offers a symbolic vehicle for the return of repressed, political content. When leveraged as a tool of protest, the signature's duration, graphology, and proximity form the building blocks of veiled social dissent.

If the World Security Charter signing resembled a Hollywood movie, during the subsequent decade, Hollywood signatures became repositories of political resistance. During the struggles between members of the American Left and state authorities during the US Red Scare, signed letters became an important means of rebuffing repression attempts. One such case can be found in Katharine Hepburn's signature on a 1950 letter addressed to Dr. G. G. Killinger, chairman of the U.S. Board of Parole. Hepburn wrote as a character witness for Ring Lardner Jr., an American satirist and one of the Hollywood Ten, a group of screenwriters, producers, and directors who refused to answer questions posed by Congress about their possible communist sympathies. Lardner was a man with a colorful character (A 1963 obituary in the *Chapel Hill Weekly* described him as "an alcoholic, suffering from heart disease and incipient tuberculosis, alternating between cocaine and caffeine, sick, weak, sad, sometimes crying over his typewriter, sometimes falling asleep over it."). His political views had made him a scapegoat for the California Un-American Activities Committee (1941–1971) headed by Jack Tenney, a Republican senator from Los Angeles, whose playbook Joseph McCarthy borrowed from for his reign of paranoia and terror. Charged with contempt, Lardner was imprisoned and then professionally blacklisted.

While Hepburn had also been suspected by the committee, it was Lardner's visit to the Soviet Union, which he thought represented "the only true attempt to rebuild a new world," and his outspoken support for the US Communist Party that landed him in hot, authoritarian water (Horne 2006, 135). "All the most beautiful girls in Hollywood belong to the Communist Party," he once proposed with tongue in cheek, for the Party's recruitment slogan (Starr 2002, 289).

Hepburn's signature serves as a nuanced political object because it is affixed to a letter that performs nonpartisanship. "This letter is written in behalf of an old friend [of] whose political views I know nothing, but whatever they are I believe they are sincere, although they may differ radically from my own," it concludes (US National Archives 2014, 9). It takes

some cognitive contortion to decipher how Hepburn can simultaneously claim ignorance of Lardner's politics while maintaining that his beliefs are sincere. How many old friends remain unaware of their acquaintances' beliefs? How can one separate *sincerity as affect* from *sincerity as coherence between belief and action*? And how can Hepburn intimate that Lardner's politics differ from her own without knowing what they, in fact, are? Here the signature functions again like a protective proxy. It performs its illocutive duty—Hepburn's fame and reputation vouch for Lardner—while maintaining a certain locutionary ambivalence with regard to the actress's knowledge. The signature, in some sense, knows more than Hepburn by design. Just like Denise Ho's autographs on Hongkongers' goggles, Hepburn's signature does not avow Lardner's innocence or promise reform. Rather, the signature speaks for itself, on behalf and in place of Hepburn. Such a case foregrounds the power of signatory acts of support beyond the confines of their denoted referent's professed agenda.

#### Conclusion: Trumping Nature

By drawing on a range of case studies abreast of historical moments of dissent, memorialization, and consolidation, I have argued that the signature represents a particularly tricky class of symbolic object, requiring a chimeric theoretical apparatus derived from sociological theories of contention, dramatological treatments of performance, and forking paths in the philosophy of language. If, in the wake of structuralist accounts of signification, symbols are often dissolved into signs—arbitrary relationships between the word-image and its signified content—autographic signatures reintroduce the body into contentious, symbolic contexts, recoupling the hand, as it were, to its imprints. While Tilly and Fischer-Lichte both invoke the figure of a feedback loop to describe how repertoires of action structure and make porous distinctions between political subjects and objects, an actor and her audience, signatures and signed objects exploit these blurred borders by serving as a triangulating agent. Ultimately, I have tried to demonstrate how the same protocols of substitution both shield political actors and become graphological sites for finding and deriving dissent.

Perhaps, bearing in mind Fredric Jameson's imperative to always historicize, I might step outside of the formal register of academic writing and comment on the conditions in which I am composing this chapter. It is timely, tragically so, that an edited collection on symbolic objects and contentious politics would appear in the wake of the greatest display

of sedition in recent American memory. During the period of collective mourning following January 6, 2021, a strange headline caught my eye—perhaps you saw it too. It describes the discovery of a West Indian manatee in Florida, whose back bore an inscription scraped in the algae on the animal's skin: TRUMP. There has been some debate about whether the creature was harmed in the process—luckily, little physical damage seems to have been done. But the symbolic import of this signatory event touched an already raw nerve in the public psyche. Having faced near extinction several decades earlier, the manatee is now vulnerable not only to climatological precarity, but also, apparently, to symbolic appropriation. And while (as far as we know) the president of the United States did not sign the animal himself, his signature has been weaponized against the more-than-human world. Of course, here the sign is closer to a hotel placard than an authentic, graphological autograph. Yet the very real violence of inscription demonstrates the necessity of taking such things as the signature seriously in contentious politics, even when they might initially seem the stuff of orderly administration.

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