

The Limits of the Carnavalesque: Re-thinking Silence as a Mode of Social Protest

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Abstract: “The problem,” Gilles Deleuze has observed, “is no longer getting people to express themselves, but providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say.” Extending this observation about the connections between silence, solitude, and the say-able, this article reflects on two contemporary modes of social protest—the carnivalesque and the silent. The article pivots around two recent protest performances in Ecuador. While the protests were in opposition to substantially different political problems (U.S.-led militarization and oil extraction in the Amazon, respectively), I argue that the silence of the latter, in juxtaposition to the carnival of the first, functioned as an act of charged withdrawal from a public sphere that has become both cluttered and densely forgetful of alternative political possibilities. At a time when, as Deleuze and Guattari pointed out some years ago, repression operates less through silencing than through discursive excess (Deleuze 1980; Guattari 2000), performances of silence provide “little gaps of solitude” in which alternative futures are coming into view. Drawing principally on recent contributions to affect theory (Berlant 2007; Butler and Athanasiou 2015), I argue that this kind of interruption of the dominant spatio-temporal orders of late-modern capitalism will likely become increasingly integral to social protest.



Only someone who knows how to remain essentially silent can really talk—and act essentially.

—Soren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 1846

For more than forty years, at least since the student and worker-led uprisings of May 1968, but perhaps most vividly over the past fifteen, the carnivalesque has served as the central organizing aesthetic of much anarchist-inspired anti-state and anti-corporate protest (Haugerud 2013; Vaneigem 2006; Graeber 2011; 2013; St. John 2007). However, over the past few years, there has also emerged a notable turn toward the silent among a number of broadly anti-capitalist social movements—an emergence that remains largely unexplored in the protest

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literature which continues to focus primarily on the carnivalesque tactics of the broader alter-globalization movement (Juris 2008). While silent protests are not historically unprecedented (one need only recall the remarkable anti-lynching protests in New York City of 1916-1917), my wager in this article is that they appear to be assuming an increasingly prominent place in the repertoires of a range of contemporary activists. Although I do not have quantitative data to definitively prove their increase as a proportion of total protest activities, just a few examples should suffice to illuminate the growing range of movements currently and newly engaged in silent protest: In December 2012, with the primary aim of demonstrating their commitment to serving as a bridge between indigenous, environmentalist, and anti-capitalist social movements, and as a way of dramatizing their fidelity to the well-known Zapatista principle of “leading while following,” some 40,000 Zapatistas marched silently through the southern Mexican state of Chiapas bearing the simple slogan: “With our silence, we have made ourselves present.” As one observer explained: “This silence [of the Zapatistas] is not one of apathy, disengagement or withdrawal but one of strategic refusal to participate in the dominant narratives and frameworks that reinforce violent institutions, a silence where participants are able to reflect and listen to each other’s struggles” (Carmona 2014). A few months later in 2013, a lone artist kicked off what have come to be known as the standing man protests in opposition to Prime Minister Erdogan in Turkey when he began standing silently and without explicit demand in front of the Atatürk Cultural Center in Istanbul. In a public square that had witnessed heated protests between the government and youth demonstrators over proposed redevelopment plans in the preceding weeks, the artist’s immobile body sparked what the media called a “static social revolution,” as hundreds of passers-by later joined him in silent remembrance of those who had lost their lives in anti-government clashes. And finally, 2014 saw both hundreds of young Thai activists responding to the military takeover of that country by silently reading politically inflammatory books like George Orwell in public squares and large-scale silent marches in U.S. cities to demonstrate against systemic police violence against African-American men.

As these cursory examples suggest, the performance of silence appears to occupy an important place in the strategies of a range of contemporary activists throughout the globe—both those fighting the repression of authoritarian states and those more centrally concerned with the disciplining power of free markets and post-austerity politics. Why? What might these performances of stillness tell us about ongoing shifts in political affect under conditions of both late-modern capitalism and 21st century socialism? What are some of the political background conditions against which silence seems to be assuming renewed prominence in the contemporary period and what can we say about some of the emotional-political possibilities that may lurk within it? While recognizing that silence can function in a variety of ways and be directed toward a diversity of

political ends (Hatzisavvidou 2007), what might it be making experientially possible at this moment in history that was perhaps not so acutely necessary in previous periods? In short: What does silence speak and why is it speaking so frequently now?

The central contours of my argument are as follows: While carnivalesque tactics like those used by ‘Occupy’ and ‘Billionaires for Bush’ continue to powerfully challenge the atomizing tendencies of the corporate-media state and to scramble the logic of its often militarized responses to dissent (Haugerud 2013), they too closely mirror its form—enacting, though with an altered valence, the significations, logos, and images with which we are continuously bombarded. While inverting, reversing, and re-purposing dominant codes through practices of subversive meaning-making, too often such modalities of protest are simply co-opted by the marketing agents of corporate capital, thereby contributing to what anthropologists Peter Benson and Stuart Kirsch have called a “politics of resignation”—that is, a politics born of the simultaneous awareness of being surrounded by corporate illusions and excesses while at the same time being essentially powerless to do anything about them (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Benson and Kirsch 2010). As Benson and Kirsch explain, post-modern subjects are characterized by a profound cynicism, “profess[ing] disbelief about the legitimacy of the status quo, distrusting the illusory images and ideas that are said to explain realities *while nonetheless continuing to act as though the illusions were real*” (Benson and Kirsch 2010: 467). In contrast to this resigned cynicism born of awareness of the illegitimacy of the status quo but the inability to do anything about it, the silence of growing numbers of contemporary protest movements invites us to explore forms of ritualized political withdrawal that, as critical theorist Lauren Berlant has observed, aim to “remobilize and redirect the normative noise that binds the affective public of the political to normative politics as such” (Berlant 2007: 238). The aim of “performative silence” in social movements, she tells us, is to “interrupt normative strategies of affective orchestration”—that is, to viscerally move spectators into emotional spaces that diverge sharply from the “normative noise” of mainstream politics, spaces where they might begin to experience radically-other democratic possibilities (Berlant 2007: 228, 238). She continues:

Performative silence is...not simply political speech that might as well be spoken. It is also really silence, by which I mean noise: that circulating, transpersonal, permeating, viscerally connective affective atmosphere that feels as though it has escaped “the filter”... (Berlant 2007: 231).

And again:

[Silence] is a minor work of political depression that both demonstrates a widespread sense of futility about slowing the mounting crisis of ordinary life in the present, and still, makes a world from political affect in which practices of politics might be invented that do not yet exist (Berlant 2007: 228-229).

Using as my point of departure this observation about the capacity of that which has escaped “the filter” to gesture toward a form of politics that has yet to be invented, this article is an ethnographically grounded effort to speculate about what might be driving this growing interest in silence among both social movement actors and a range of critical theorists loosely associated with affect theory. By drawing into relief the affective distinctions between two modes of social protest—the carnivalesque and the silent—in relation to two recent mobilizations in Ecuador, I argue that the withdrawal performed by silence moves viewers considerably beyond the short-term time horizons of contemporary capitalism and allows for an openness to futures that are too often occluded by the speed and noise of the present (Virilio 1986). While the carnivalesque has historically sought to destabilize and redirect the dominant signs of consumer capitalism, the silent—through its charged refusal of the present, rather than ironic engagement with its dominant ethos—ushers viewers into far wider spatio-temporal horizons within which to think alternative political possibilities.

The Carnavalesque

Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin has long been heralded as the ideological grandfather of contemporary interest in the carnivalesque. In his pioneering effort to reinsert the raucous, bawdy, folk-humour of Rabelais into the canon of medieval literature, Bakhtin insisted on the importance of the low humour of carnival or what he called, the “people’s second world.” In the Middle Ages and into the early Renaissance, he observed, at a time when Church authorities still wielded enormous power, the “serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonies” were always accompanied by “a boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations” that mimicked and mocked those official ceremonies (Bakhtin 1965: 7). By playfully and often grotesquely riffing on those official ceremonies “for laughter’s sake,” medieval society poked fun at its own rigidities and permitted a kind of controlled critique of the authorities of the day that nevertheless afforded participants a sense of unmediated togetherness that had lasting effects on the social order. As Bakhtin explains:

During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part... As opposed to the official [ceremonies] one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order. It marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. [It was a time] of becoming, change, renewal” (Bakhtin 1984: 7, 11).

Carnival, Bakhtin continues, is the time of clowns *par excellence*—a time of inversion when the low becomes high and the high is brought low, when jesters ridicule the staid official languages of monks and scholars, and when partici-

pants of all sorts are, as Graham St. John has put it, “enabled, temporarily, to ridicule authority and perhaps...dispel the cosmic fear of death through laughter” (St. John 2008: 174).

Picked up and transformed by the Situationist International in the 1960s and 70s as part of their well-known practices of *detournement*, Bakhtin’s emphasis on social inversion, universal renewal, and existential mockery came to form a critical, if loosely articulated, part of the repertoire of resistance embodied most vividly in the movements of May 1968 (St John 2008). The carnivalesque performances that filled the streets of De Gaulle’s France during that month in 1968 built on visions articulated by Bakhtin but also explicitly driven by a Debordian commitment to combating the consumerist “society of the spectacle.” Artists and workers staged theatrical performances that both parodied capital and cleared away space for the emergence—albeit temporary—of forms of egalitarian sociality too often undermined by commodity fetishism. Creating what Hakim Bey might have called “temporary autonomous zones,” these performances were intended both to divert through parody the dominant symbols of consumer capitalism and to rupture through inversion the hierarchy of roles most characteristic of the everyday social order. Unlike the strictures of the medieval church hierarchy, the official powers to be resisted for the protestors of May 1968 were the powers of both state and capital, whose alienating forms of post-Taylorist production and relentless exaltation of consumer goods over the human beings who manufactured them were proving as deadening to the student generation of the late 1960s as were the sombre catechisms of the medieval Church to the congregants of the 15th century.

Carnavalesque-inspired protest continued well into the 1990s and beyond, finding most vibrant new life in events like the turn-of-the-millennium “Carnival Against Capital,” held in more than 30 cities throughout the world on June 18, 1999. Four months before the infamous Battle of Seattle in November 1999, tens of thousands took to the streets to register their discontent with the increasingly anti-democratic nature of that “unholy trinity” of global economic governance: the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank (Juris 2009; Peet 2003). Again often explicitly inspired by Bakhtin and Debord, as many of the organizing calls demonstrate, protestors from across the political spectrum arrived in a glittering array of absurd and even grotesque costumes. From butterflies on stilts to faux-policemen padded in bubble wrap, activists at this “protestival” danced, drummed, somersaulted, juggled, and in innumerable other ways attempted to temporarily embody a de-objectified, de-commodified “social ecology” not unlike that of the folk culture celebrated by Bakhtin—a world “without hierarchy, determined by principles of self-organization, direct democracy, conviviality, and noise” (Guattari 2000; St. John 2007: 173). Many of the trade unionists, environmentalists, small-scale farmers, and artists behind these colourful performances of “ecstatic montage” had experienced firsthand the three intersecting processes of psychological homogenization, cultural disintegration,

and ecological destruction identified by theorists like Felix Guattari (one of the most famous intellectual participants in the 1968 uprisings) as some of the most direct effects of corporate-led globalization. Like their counterparts in the late 1960s, though in response to a form of capitalism much more globally concentrated, the aim of this younger generation of alter-globalization activists was to further destabilize the spectacle of capitalism as iconized by the central institutions of global economic governance. More precisely, according to participants like Reclaim the Streets (RTS), the aim was to use the carnivalesque tactics pioneered by the Situationists to interrupt the dominant signifying practices of global economic elites and to counter-act the alienation perpetuated by that elite-driven economy by momentarily staging performance events in which a spirit of less market-mediated community might reign. Although such efforts have routinely been construed by opponents as futile, dated, counter-productive, or insufficiently nuanced, the aim of these activists was to challenge the deadening effects and injustices of corporate-oriented finance-scapes, thereby generating an “affective and pragmatic cathexis” capable of initiating what Merrifield calls, a “resonance of insurgent energies” (Merrifield 2011). As one IndyMedia summarized at the time: “One cannot help but hope that, in New York, as in London, the carnival cosmology will supplant the exchange economy and allow a repossession of the senses atrophied by dematerialized financial transactions...” (IndyMedia 1999).

In the years since these first “carnivals against capital,” it has not just been “dematerialized financial transactions” against which the spirit of carnival has been successfully mobilized. Indeed, since the late 1990s, the carnivalesque mode of social protest has been less and less exclusively confined to movements in opposition to corporate-led capitalism in the global North. Here I focus on just one example from my own long-term ethnographic fieldwork on an anti-military movement in Ecuador in the mid-2000s. In March 2007, hundreds of anti-U.S. military protestors descended on the small coastal city of Manta, Ecuador to register their opposition to one of the largest U.S. military facilities in the Western hemisphere at the time—a facility tasked primarily with the monitoring of narco-trafficking along the Pacific corridor that runs from the source zones of Bolivia and Colombia to the transit zones of Guatemala and northern Mexico. Outraged both that the facility had never been approved by the 2/3rds congressional majority required by Ecuadorian law and by the fact that the U.S. Air Force had allegedly sunk more than 8 Ecuadorian-flagged fishing vessels in territorial waters, activists from other base towns in Okinawa, Puerto Rico, and Honduras staged a 2-day caravan from the capital city of Quito to the outskirts of the facility at Manta. Although estimates vary, approximately four hundred people, both nationals and foreigners, participated, arriving at the gates of the U.S. Air Force base after walking some three miles from the centre of the city in a spirit that can only be described as festive. Large paper-mache models of the globe being manipulated by the puppet strings of George Bush

were carried high in the air alongside clay sickles painted the colour of the American flag. Trumpeters played melodies that moved soulfully between the exuberant and the funereal. And men in heavily-beaked bird masks beat slow, steady rhythms on artisanal drums, while activists chanted, “We don’t want to be another North American Colony.” However, while this movement was ultimately successful at the national level—largely owing to the electoral success of a far-left populist president committed to “socialism for the 21st century”—these carnivalesque improvisations made little sense to the onlookers that lined the streets of Manta that day. Indeed, not only did they make little sense, but they were a source of ongoing and sustained confusion. What was this all about, they asked me, over and over again? Why had Puerto Ricans come to their city dressed as birds? What had drumming to do with the U.S. Air Force?

It was in thinking about this sustained confusion on the part of local residents that I first began to seriously engage the limits of the carnivalesque. While ritual masking, inversionary parade, and spontaneous dance have served powerful purposes in keeping the media spotlight on issues from gentrification and undemocratic trade agreements to military occupation, they often fail to translate for local publics (Day 2007), who not only do not understand the theatricality of the framing devices, but find the raucous occupation of space baffling or misplaced. So much was this the case in Manta, in fact, that when I returned to the city some three years after the closure of the American base, local residents still lamented all those “people who came from overseas” who had had the nerve to turn their streets into a parade—spraying graffiti on the walls of the tuna factories, blowing over-sized bubbles in the parks, and plastering blue anti-military stickers on some of their most revered icons. What was the point of all that?, they wondered, sometimes with amusement, sometimes with anger. Why had they acted that way? While I am not suggesting that performances of silence would necessarily have facilitated a more welcoming reaction on the part of these locals (they most likely would have been equally confusing for people who by and large supported the American facility), it is clear that the spirit of carnival around which this mobilization was organized (and which has been so widely celebrated by critical theorists inspired by Bakhtin) had precisely the opposite effect on local residents. Instead of facilitating a space of unmediated, un-alienated togetherness that might serve as a counterpoint to the rigid hierarchies and dispossessions of the U.S. military, it served instead to further alienate city residents, who found its theatrical antics silly at best and arrogant at worst.

Building outward from this experiential disjuncture between anti-military activists and local residents in Manta, Ecuador, I want to suggest that the carnivalesque mode of much contemporary alter-globalization protest, while providing important visibility for some of the most pressing political-economic projects of our time, is perhaps already being displaced by, or at least used more frequently in conjunction with, highly politicized performances of silence.

While the carnivalesque continues to form an important part of contemporary protest repertoires in Ecuador, it is now also being used alongside performances of silence that aim to move viewers not into spaces of anti-capitalist *comunitas*, but of contemplation of alternative futures too often dismissed as infantile or impractical. Another recent protest in Ecuador will help to illustrate the point.

The Silent

On December 4, 2013, a prominent Ecuadorian environmentalist NGO, the *Fundación Pachamama* (or, in English, the Pachamama Alliance) found itself in the unenviable position of being shut down without warning by the far-left government of Rafael Correa—a neo-socialist who, since his election in 2007, has received widespread support for his programs of progressive economic redistribution and a deeply-felt ideological break with American-led neoliberalism. The *Fundación Pachamama* was a relatively small NGO that had been operating in the country for some 16 years at the time of its dissolution. Staffed by fewer than 10 employees, its advocacy work focused primarily on solidarity actions to support rainforest communities like the indigenous Achuar in zones threatened by oil extraction. Unlike their more radical, anti-capitalist NGO colleagues at *Acción Ecológica* (another Quito-based NGO), the focus of the Pachamama Alliance was primarily on building international support for indigenous communities by spearheading eco-tourism and other “sustainable development” programs throughout the region. However, with the election of Rafael Correa, the Alliance became increasingly concerned about the government’s plans for a number of contested oil blocks in the Amazon, regularly insisting in public forums that oil and mineral extraction in biologically sensitive zones amounted to a violation of the national constitution—an insistence that laid them squarely in the path of an eventual confrontation with the administration.

As reported by NGO employees and numerous IndyMedia sources, on the morning of December 4th, plain-clothed police officers arrived at the offices of the NGO armed with dissolution papers stating that because unnamed members of the NGO had both “threatened the internal security” of the country and engaged in “political meddling,” the organization would no longer be permitted to operate in the country. More specifically, the charge was that members of the group had verbally assaulted a visiting Chilean diplomat who had come to the country at the end of November to participate in the Eleventh Round (Ronda XI) of oil concession talks about a highly contested part of the Amazon. Contrary to the desires of a significant majority of the Ecuadorian public and in sharp contrast to the environmentalist spirit of the 2008 constitution which grants rights to nature, the government had decided to open 13 oil blocks in the Amazon for sale to transnational extractive companies. For years, the six million acres that comprise these blocks had been heavily contested because of the extraordinary biodiversity characteristic of the zone as a whole and the fact that

they are home to at least seven indigenous groups—a reality further complicated by the region’s disastrous history of oil contamination at the hands of foreign companies. (To cite only the most egregious example: Between 1964 and 1990, Chevron-Texaco dumped 18 billion gallons of waste products into unlined pits, allegedly greatly exacerbating cancer and miscarriage rates throughout the region). In late 2013, under pressure to raise revenues for the broad suite of social, health, and educational programs that have come to define Correa’s “socialism for the 21st century,” the government decided that the time had finally come to open these blocks for sale.

At a time when the government of Rafael Correa exercises enormous control over official media outlets (often shutting them down if they oppose what he calls, “the citizens revolution”) and when many Ecuadorians have failed to support the *Fundación Pachamama* because the organization is widely perceived to be either a front for northern imperialism or a thoroughly utopian alternative to the fossil fuel economy, the *Fundación Pachamama* and other environmentalist organizations have increasingly resorted to silent protest. One of the first of such protest actions took place immediately following the announcement of their official dissolution on December 7, 2013. Alongside prominent allies from other environmentalist NGOs, staff members gathered at the organization’s headquarters in the northern part of Quito to stage a performance of silence. Following a brief press conference during which staff members re-stated their argument that the closure was a violation of their constitutionally guaranteed right to free association, they posed in silence with black duct tape plastered over their mouths, sitting on the floor outside their offices beneath the white police signs ordering their immediate dissolution. This duct-taped silence aimed not simply to perform in quite literal ways their own silencing at the hands of the government, but more broadly, to call attention to the increasingly constricted space of political discourse in neo-socialist Ecuador—both temporally and spatially. As activists noted, not only were they being illegally silenced, but perhaps more importantly, the government’s act of dissolving the organization was an act intended to explicitly silence the numerous indigenous communities like the Achuar whose histories with transnational oil conglomerates are too often forgotten, downplayed, or strategically distorted. As noted by the organization’s president, Maria Belén Paéz: “We will not allow this aggression of which we have been victim to divert attention and debate away from the underlying issue. This is a violation of the collective rights of indigenous Amazonian peoples and the rights of nature, for an oil round that is against the will of the rightful owners of the affected territories, through a process of “socialization”, not a consultation” (Pachamama Alliance). The political landscape in Ecuador, these activists continued, is one that is increasingly both constricted and congested, as the airwaves become limited to the broadcasts issued by the government itself, all alternatives to oil extraction are deemed “infantile” or “utopian,” and practices of genuine citizen participation in debate about natural resource

extraction are rendered impracticable by an administration more and more committed to centralized decision-making. Against this backdrop, the silence of the Pachamama Alliance was intended as a refusal of the very terms and forms of political discourse in Ecuador, inserting a pause into the machinery of the State apparatus that might allow onlookers to contemplate futures less wedded to the short-term time horizons of oil-based development.

While the foundation's strategy of resistance was driven both by speech (the press conference) and by silence, it was the startling images of performing silence that ultimately proved most strategically generative, migrating rapidly into other segments of the environmentalist movement in Ecuador. In just a few short months, these silent performances have already established a trend in social protest that has been incorporated by other mobilizations. For example, a large youth-driven movement known as *Yasunidos* was born in August 2013 when the government announced that it would open still further blocks of oil in the region, particularly in the formerly protected area of Yasuní National Park. Yasuní is a global biodiversity hotspot that the government had also promised to protect from oil drilling if (but only if) the international community agreed to pay Ecuador some 3.6 billion US dollars—less than half the revenue the country expected to receive if it instead opted to drill. Hoping to rally the kind of international support garnered by the *Fundación Pachamama*, *Yasunidos* has used strikingly similar protest tactics—a fact that should not be particularly surprising given the overlap in membership between the two groups. When the government refused to admit the validity of the thousands of signatures they had collected that would have allowed them to hold a national referendum on the issue in the summer of 2014 (thereby violating the government's explicit commitment to "citizen participation"), these youth activists again used the tactic of staged silence, photographing themselves being silenced by green duct-tape that bore the words, "YASUNIDOS" (United for Yasuní).

Working in close alliance with members of both the *Fundación* and *Acción Ecológica*, again and again they photographed themselves for international observers being dramatically silenced in this way. From the squares of the capital city of Quito to the newly constructed roads into and out of the zone in question, they posed in unmoving silence with duct-tape that read "YASUNIDOS" over their mouths. It was, and remains, an impassioned silence intended not just as a demonstration of their own silencing by the government, but again, as a far more radical rupture with the extractive and anthropocentric politics of Rafael Correa's "socialism for the 21st century" which, according to protesters, is dependent on spatio-temporal scales that are excessively short, given the rapid dwindling of fossil fuels that we are witnessing globally. Theirs is a political refusal that works by means of a highly visible retreat from the terms of the conversation as they have been set by the government—a way of saying an emphatic 'no' to the short-termism of the politics of extraction that are rapidly coming to define the Andean region as a whole (Bebbington and Bury 2013).

Such acts of “aggressive passivity,” as Lauren Berlant has put it, “always seek to expose the corruption of, or toxic noise within, political speech, as well as to measure the perverse relation between ideals of the political and the practice of politics. However, the gesture of performative withdrawal always goes further than that too, inducing, as if electronically, new sensual routes for political potentiality from the place where conscience meets knowledge” (Berlant 2011: 229). One of Yasunidos’ most recent manifestos makes this “political potentiality” particularly clear:

We invite society to reinvent democracy, democracies, which like the biodiversity of Yasuní are multiple and mega-diverse, because the necessities of the Ecuadorian population are diverse...We call upon the whole society to rethink our country. *We don't believe in saviours or strongmen, and even less in those who lied offering us 'revolution.'* We invite all Ecuadorians to form not just one democratic, popular assembly, but dozens, even hundreds of popular assemblies,...where we can sketch the new pathways along which Ecuador should move...

Too often, these silent protestors point out, mainstream political discourse in Ecuador actively silences those who contest dominant narratives of extractivist economic development and criminalizes those who insist on alternative resource futures. Against this backdrop, silent protest serves as an assertive withdrawal from the “toxicity of political speech” as already-configured, clearing the way for the emergence of a collective re-thinking of the nature of the political that looks beyond ever-narrower policy interests which too often take for granted the link between oil extraction and economic development.

From the Carnavalesque to the Silent (or, from ‘exuberance to quietness’)

While the carnival of the 1960s and beyond has productively sought to address the alienation of commodity fetishism under high capitalism by making visible the “society of the spectacle” through spontaneous “events” of non-commodified being-together, the silence of growing numbers of contemporary social movements can be seen as a rejection of the domain of normative politics altogether—both capitalist and, as in the case of Ecuador, neo-socialist. As growing numbers of critical theorists like Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou have pointed out, such protest might fruitfully be read as a rejection of a socio-political space that, in regimes both capitalist and socialist, has become deafeningly constricted by ever-narrower and ever-more-short-term policy interests. Instead of serving as an antidote to capitalist alienation (or, in the case of the 2007 protests in Manta, to the kind of militarization that has everywhere accompanied capitalist modernization), silence effects a rupture that encourages observers to stand outside those signifying systems altogether. The critical task for many contemporary activists is no longer exclusively or even primarily a matter of puncturing the “society of the spectacle” or re-signifying dominant

codes so that they can be re-directed toward more human and humane ends. Too frequently, as even proponents of the carnivalesque recognize, that sort of re-signification has been re-appropriated by and for capitalist interests. Instead, it is a matter of a much deeper ontological puncturing, a puncturing that allows both participants and as-yet un-mobilized audiences to put down roots—if only temporarily—in far wider spatial and temporal horizons than are usually admitted in contemporary political discourse. In other words, it is a matter of coming into visceral relationship with forms of democracy anchored by very different spatio-temporal coordinates—for example, in the case of Ecuador, collective assemblies on natural resource extraction. It is precisely by coming into contact with the political refusal of stillness that we might, think critical feminists Butler and Athanasiou, learn slowly to discern altogether novel political languages. Reflecting, for example, on recent protests in Zuccotti Park and Tahrir Square, they observe:

“It is the ordinary and rather undramatic practice of standing, rather than a miraculously extraordinary disruption, that actualizes here the living register of the event. *The very practice of stasis creates both a space of reflection and a space for revolt*, but also an affective comportment of standing and standpoint. It is such a corporeal and affective disposition of stasis that derails, if only temporarily, normative presuppositions about what may come into being as publicly intelligible and sensible in existing polities.” (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 150-151).

It is no longer, they tell us, primarily by means of “extraordinary disruptions” that social movements are making alternative potentialities visible; no longer primarily the *dramatic* mode of the carnivalesque that most startles and challenges. Instead, it is simply by standing still that these movements are able to enact a stasis sufficiently disturbing for both participants and onlookers to be able to think their way toward those “multiplicities of democracy” that only become palpable in the presence of “a corporeal and affective disposition of stasis” (2013: 151).

This is an observation echoed—if in a somewhat different register—by performance theorists like Andre Lepecki. Despite the different context of his observations, his insights into the transformative power of stillness are as relevant to these environmental activists in Ecuador as they are to the dancers on the stage for whom they were first formulated. Writing about the experiential possibilities of stillness in contemporary dance, Lepecki explains:

Stillness operates at the level of the subject’s desire to invert a certain relationship with time, and with certain (prescribed) corporeal rhythms. Which means that to engage in stillness is to engage in different experiences of perceiving one’s own presence...Standing still against the busy background of historical agitation, the dancer does not betray dance, but proposes another dance, one under which time expands immensely, awakening discarded

memories to flood, allowing sedimented yet necessary gestures, thoughts, feelings, sights, to emerge once again in the social surface (Lepecki 2001:3).

Just as the stillness of the dancer's body opens up a new relationship to time, allowing "discarded memories to flood," so, too, the stillness of these environmental activists in Ecuador, when juxtaposed against the "busy background of historical agitation," was intended to move observers toward an experience of greatly expanded time—and more specifically, through this provocative gesture of renunciation of the present, toward an experience of distant futures that would surely be eclipsed by the government's decision to engage in oil exploration in the Amazon. A retreat from the busy congestion of the excessively present-focused public sphere, the foundation's silence sought, like the body of the still dancer, to awaken viewers to political possibilities long discarded or neglected by the short-termism of the contemporary Ecuadorian government.

In yet a different idiom, philosopher Gilles Deleuze gets at something similar about the power of silence by way of an allegory of an uncomfortably silent couple. His observations, while not formulated directly to describe modes of contemporary social protest, are worth quoting in full:

We sometimes go on as though people can't express themselves. In fact they're always expressing themselves. The sorriest couples are those where the woman can't be preoccupied or tired without the man saying, 'What's wrong? Say something...,' or the man, without the woman saying..., and so on. Radio and television have spread this spirit everywhere, and we're riddled with pointless talk, insane quantities of words and images. Stupidity's never blind or mute. So it's not a problem of getting people to express themselves but of providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say. Repressive forces don't stop people expressing themselves. What a relief to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing, because only then is there a chance of framing the rare, and ever rarer, thing that might be worth saying (Deleuze 1990: 129).

While repressive forces in many parts of the world do, in fact, continue to stop people from expressing themselves, the insight here, and one that is beginning to be developed by growing numbers of movements engaged in silent protest, is that politico-economic discourse in the contemporary period does not so much need to be re-signified or redirected in the spirit of the carnivalesque, but quieted, slowed, or interrupted altogether so that "rare...and ever rarer" political possibilities might begin to make themselves felt. It is not enough, these movements suggest, to continue to participate in the proliferation of "insane quantities of words and images," no matter how subversive, ironic, or explicitly formulated to de-naturalize that which is taken for granted under contemporary conditions of economic globalization. Instead, there is a more urgent need to withdraw altogether from the ceaseless clatter of contemporary political discourse which stands in the way of our capacity to develop what Michel Serres

has called, “long-term thoughts.” In the case of Ecuador, activists from the Pachamama Alliance and *Yasunidos* have pointed out, these “long-term thoughts” principally involve being able to think beyond the narrow policy prescriptions of an extractivist, oil-based administration that is more committed to short-term electoral success than to long-term environmental sustainability.

A very short conclusion

My wager in this article has been that the festal spirit of carnival may be losing some of its potency because the public sphere in economies both capitalist and socialist has become so heavily congested with images, brands, and logos (or what Deleuze called, “insane quantities of words and images”) that it is difficult for observers to experience carnivalesque protest as the kind of critical counterpoint that it may once have been. At a time when the political itself has arguably become more and more carnivalesque, observers like those in Manta are finding it challenging to make sense of the raucous, playful, inversionary tactics of activists like the anti-military group I described in the first part of this article. In response, growing numbers of social movements with otherwise different aims, beliefs, solutions, and commitments—from the Zapatistas in Mexico to the standing man protests in Turkey—are making productive use of performances of silence. While silence can always gesture toward a range of possibilities and accomplish very different political work (after all, the Zapatistas with whom I began this article are not *Yasunidos!*), it has nevertheless found renewed political life over the past few years in ways that cry out for more sustained comparative consideration. I have attempted to begin this conversation in relation to two recent protests in Ecuador.

Instead of inverting the valence of capitalist signs and messages as their alter-globalization colleagues have continued to do, environmentalist groups like the *Fundación Pachamama* and *Yasunidos* have used performances of silence to demand a viscerally novel relationship to both the present and the future. Both have aimed to unsettle the fabric of the political by refusing its habitual rhythms and by urging onlookers toward a more expansive relationship to time than is usually acknowledged by state policy makers. These performances of silence do not serve primarily to denaturalize or render unstable the ethos of consumer capitalism (as do performances in the carnivalesque mode) but instead to dramatize a much more thoroughgoing refusal to participate in the short-termism of the State and its dominant economic allies. Silence, then, is both a provocative refusal of the political status quo and a kind of haunting place-holder, reminding viewers of that which could be radically other-wise—of futures not tethered to the demands of oil and of democracies more intimately related to practices of communal decision-making. By gesturing toward that which has not and perhaps cannot yet be spoken using pre-fabricated political vocabularies, these movements are working to clear away a terrain within which civil society might

build as-yet unknown environmental futures that challenge not just commodity fetishism, but the very coordinates of the political. This is a performative task that remains urgent.

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