

## Introduction: On Minorities, Silence, Stillness, and Resistance

Serap Erincin

*At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queers of color and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere. José Esteban Muñoz (1999, 5)*

The call for proposals for this issue of *Liminalities* invited submissions considering stillness, silence, and resistance in terms of performance (broadly construed), performativity, and the performative. A wide range of performances of peaceful protests or silent resistance such as digital video, audio, and multimedia works, essays, documentaries, photo essays, and artists' statements were considered. Of special interest were pieces that explore the significance of stillness and silence in non-western and transnational activist and artistic acts—such as *#NotABugSplat*, a performance site about drone operations that went viral in 2014 (I discuss the project in one of the essays in this issue). The themes

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and techniques of *#NotABugSplat*, such as new tools of transnational resistance, spreadability, digital media, technology, and biopolitics, have become central to contemporary activist performance and emerge in various pieces here.

The pieces in this issue illustrate possible sites of considering silent or still resistance including (but not limited to) global justice movements, online communities, street protests, and works of art performed in public spaces, museums, or in private. Contributing artists and scholars Alexandrine Capolla Beauregard, Andrés Fabián Henao Castro, Erin Fitz-Henry, Hillery Glasby, Jake Kolton, Laura Endacott, Oli Mohammadi, and Rebecca Mercado Thornton create, consider, document, and theorize on sites of silent and/or still, social and/or conceptual, political and/or philosophical performances of resistance.

In December 2013, on the day before the call for proposals for this issue was supposed to go out, performance studies scholar, queer theorist, and arts and culture critic José Esteban Muñoz died. Though he was only 46 when he passed away, José's contribution to performance studies as a writer, theorist, and teacher was paramount. The immediate decision to dedicate this special issue on resistance to his memory recognizes his scholarship—which brought visibility to performances of resistance by minorities and marginalized populations—as an act of resistance against the hegemony of mainstream politics and art in the academy.

The loss of José devastated his colleagues and students, many of whom considered him a friend and family, and touched many others in Performance Studies and related fields who were far from his immediate community, friends, and students. His legacy continues whenever the friends he left behind or those who knew him only through his work discuss his scholarship. Artist-scholar Tracie Morris was one of José's advisees at NYU. Her contribution to this issue, "Muñoz Meditation," elucidates the devastation his loss brought to his communities but also embodies and articulates his legacy for artists and scholars in the world of Performance Studies.

Most of the pieces here share with us strategies of silent/still/peaceful resistance utilized in the work of minorities or marginalized populations, whether they are marginalized in academia, in their country, politically, artistically, or just because they identify as or belong to a minority. I point out this aspect of the issue not to explain the common roots of the projects, nor as an effort to identify a common thread in these pieces—that isn't necessary, since they are joined together within the genealogy of philosophies and sites of peaceful resistance. The fact that they are mostly about the efforts of minorities or marginalized populations identifies the ontology of resistance as social performance. In essence, performances of resistance exist as minoritarian strategies. They need to come from people without the structural power to effect change. Silent/still performances by those who hold institutional power are often

means for oppression, demagoguery, or propaganda. The examples here show individuals or groups asking for change through acts that won't be shut down by the majority and that will invoke collective affective response ... solidarity. The power of minoritarian change is that it doesn't come from a single oppressive authority. It may be initiated or performed by one group or individual but it calls for rhizomatic action. And why consider only peaceful strategies or presences of silence or stillness? Active modes of resistance also matter, but they have a different dynamic of effect and change. They create awareness and sometimes transformation but also conflict. If minorities resist by using tools of the majority rule, they are often overpowered since they don't have equal means. Though conflict is sometimes necessary, it often precipitates the ends of protest movements short of achieving any goal.

The pieces here elaborate on how using peaceful means extends the lives of acts of resistance and how they help evoke affinity with or elicit empathy for oppressed groups. (It's important to note that unless the author identifies as a member of the group they are writing about, the pieces in this journal issue originate from a relative position of power. The affinity or empathy that the authors felt, which inspired them to write about these performative acts, however, increases the presence of minoritarian knowledge in the academy even while displaying the problematic inequality over who gets a voice.) The pieces here depict issues and performances from the East and the West, the North and the South. Contributing artists and scholars from various fields bring together a body of affect theory and, to a certain extent, engage in rhetoric against neoliberal policies while commending and troubling forms of stillness and silence in performance. Though one would expect a narrow selection in an issue with such a specific theme, the articles and performances are rich in their sources. The diversity of content here makes a statement about the productivity of the interdisciplinary nature of performance studies methodologies.

In her essay, "The Limits of the Carnavalesque: Re-Thinking Silence as a Mode of Social Protest," Erin Fitz-Henry, based in Australia, juxtaposes three sites of resistance—a protest performance from Ecuador about the U.S.-led militarization of that country, another about petroleum extraction in the Amazon, also from Ecuador, and one from Australia about Aboriginal genocide—to discuss silence, as opposed to the carnivalesque, as a means of social protest. She argues protest performances that use silence as their core strategy interrupt the dominance of late-modern capitalism.

Andrés Fabián Henao Castro, a Colombian scholar based in the U.S., theorizes on both silence and stillness in the context of those who have the least political power: immigrants to the United States who entered the country illegally. In April 2010, the governor of the state of Arizona signed into law SB 1070, a bill that criminalized the lack of documents and institutionalized racial profiling as a policing strategy. Those the law sought to disavow led the

challenge; undocumented immigrants with no other voice occupied the streets while wearing t-shirts silently proclaiming “I’m Undocumented.” In this paper, Andrés seeks to understand the kind of political work this public reclamation of the derogatory term “undocumented” does for the subject that it names when that subject iterates the name with a different logic of power using Butler’s concept of mimetic insubordination and also drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière, Michel Foucault, José Esteban Muñoz, and others.

Hillery Glasby writes about the National Day of Silence (DOS), an annual event where participants keep silent for one day to bring awareness to the bullying, discrimination, and violence lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, and queer+ (LGBTQ) youth face in her essay “[ ]: National Day of Silence’s Rhetorical Silence as Performative Rhetorical Activism”. She situates the LGBTQ community as a historically muted group, arguing that the DOS enacts and embodies a rhetorical silence—defined as a silence framed by intention. Furthermore, the DOS’ rhetorical silence functions as a site for meaning-making, presenting those involved with a transformative space for reflection, peaceful protest, and social activism. She also argues that the queer silences of the DOS constitute a distinctive form of rhetorical activism, understood and deployed as counter-logic since they function outside of, and against, standard rhetorical conventions. The DOS’ rhetorical silence is an example of an intentional, organized, and performative withholding. Participants disrupt dominant logos by asking rather than telling, and by making passersby a part of their protest. By drawing attention to the missing voices of the oppressed, participants in the DOS bring them into the fold as an enthymeme; observers are expected to fill the gap to determine not only what is missing, but the source of the void as well. In this way, the DOS utilizes rhetorical activism in order to collectively reclaim and honor the voices and stories that have gone unheard for generations. Included with the article is a video where four participants in the DOS reflect on their participation and what silence means for them.

Persian-American scholar Oli Mohammadi’s ethnographic essay, “The Personal, the Political, and the Public: Performing Hijab in Iran,” tells the stories of three women living in Iran as they circumscribe and complicate the boundaries of body politics. In particular, the women describe making intentional choices on how they practice the legal mandate of *hijab*. Mohammadi discusses the intertextuality of performing *hijab* and argues *hijab* cannot be generalized or essentialized.

In her documentary video and essay “*Mujeres Se Levantan Por Mujeres: The Naked Body and Social Protest in Bogotá, Colombia*,” Rebecca Mercado Thornton documents and writes about her experiences of feminist social protest in Bogotá, Colombia in 2010. She went to Bogotá to collect and analyze local news coverage of a then-recent law, “Ley 1257,” which was established to guarantee women a life free of violence. She worked with a local women’s

organization and attended a pro-choice protest. She documents how protestors use their bodies and sound and how three waves of protesters collided to demonstrate public resistance to a governmental ban on abortion (except for three cases; rapes, badly deformed fetuses, and/or when a woman's life is in danger). These three waves included mimes, a lesbian drummer band, and women wearing nothing other than body paint and tutus. She argues that the images and sound of these three waves work together to publicly undermine paradigms of patriarchy and disrupt the legal and social order in Colombia. She discusses various aspects of these performances of disobedience and solidarity and how they call in to question the absurdity of the government imposing laws on women's bodies.

Laura Endacott, an artist-scholar from Canada, considers the role of silent resistance and the stillness of art objects as she discusses her creative process in making conceptual art in her essay/web installation "Locating Motherhood". Endacott describes sculptures and performances she created using motherhood as a metaphor. She builds her pieces using movement and objects in various locations in a project that resists traditional ideas of motherhood. Her photo essay sheds light on the productivity of the collaborative process between participants in conceptual pieces, theorizes on building community, and considers her performance as a meditation on solidarity.

Jake Kolton, a Midwestern filmmaker and artist based in New York, originally developed his virtual photo exhibition, *Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner*, and the accompanying artist's statement, while taking a Performance Studies course I taught at NYU. He wanted to create a visual project to capture the unspoken violence inherent in the mores of Midwestern life that he found oppressive and exclusionary. After deciding to use the metaphor of organized dinner tables featuring traditional Midwestern meals, he experimented with various methods to disrupt their perfection while illustrating violence. I was struck by how powerfully the warped silverware in his photographs captures his narrative. When I conceptualized this issue on silent/still performance, I asked Jake to submit this piece for review. Jake's silent protest of his upbringing through the images of meals marked by the presence of twisted everyday objects speak volumes through their stillness.

Alexandrine Capolla Beauregard, another inter-disciplinary artist from Canada, contributes an artist's statement and performance video, *Imaginary Self-Immolation*, about the self-immolation protests in response to the atrocities in Tibet. Since the 1950s, Tibet has been under Chinese occupation, causing its inhabitants to flee into exile or suffer widespread injustice and brutality. The fate of Tibetans who stayed in their homeland was later referred to in the western world as cultural genocide. In the spring of 2012, news reports on the unrest in Tibet showed cases of people who set themselves on fire in public places. Since 2009, well over a hundred Tibetans have resorted to this incredibly

violent method of suicide. One self-immolation in particular, committed in March 2012 by a 19-year-old student, profoundly upset Alexandrine and sparked a reflection upon her own situation as a young student from an entirely different world. What kind of personal dreams did this Tibetan girl willingly give up for the greater cause of Tibet's political independence? Could an act of self-immolation ever be more than mere suicide? Beyond the horror of the sacrifice, can such a violent act transcend the collective despair from which it came and become an urgent call for recognition, a plea for human rights, a cry for peace? Questions like these became the center of an inquiry into the mindset of the immolated, as well as the material for a performance. Borne out of a desire to protest alongside the people of Tibet, the work *Imaginary self-immolation* can be seen as a personal attempt at understanding the act, even though such an act will always resist comprehension.

The art, protest, and scholarship this issue brings together are in no way a comprehensive representation of ideas or peaceful performances that use silence or stillness in creating acts of resistance. Neither the works here nor this introduction discuss the history of nonviolent acts or civil disobedience performances that use stillness or silence as a means to an end, such as the Salt March led by Mahatma Gandhi—they also don't focus on genealogies of civil disobedience to point out, for instance, how Henry David Thoreau's ideas on civil disobedience inspired Gandhi's politics, and how Gandhi's struggle against colonialism influenced Martin Luther King's leadership in the civil rights movement. Nor do they focus on similar contemporary social movements incorporating peaceful strategies such as *Occupy Wall Street* or *Black Lives Matter*. In fact, the sites and ideas in this issue comprise a tiny fraction of the body of art, social protest, and scholarship that inhabit this intersection of the field. Yet, together they exhibit the richness of possibilities silence and stillness afford different groups and individuals around the world in creating acts of peaceful resistance.

The engagement that happens among people based in different countries working on a special project is often marked by the silence and stillness of written communication. Written communication is marked also by the absence of the other party. Every word weighs more when spoken in silence through writing, alone in conversation, and followed by stillness. Over a couple of years, through little notes exchanged over lengthy work emails and documents, you get introduced to lots of matters that take place in your correspondents' lives; people give birth, suffer losses, diseases come in to their worlds that afflict them, their partners, or friends, they move to different cities or countries, get married, finish degree programs, move in the world with the work they do, carry it with them to different stages and points in life. Resistance and thoughts of resistance that they write and research affects their social life and perhaps how they deal with personal problems or change. Here is to hoping that, the concepts and examples

in this issue will remain in the lives of its readers and viewers helping blur the boundaries between identity, activism, art, and scholarship through praxis.

### **Works Cited**

Muñoz, José Esteban. 1999. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.



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