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# Protest Beyond Representation: The Vitalism of Digital Protest Art's Political Aesthetics

## Abstract

The complexities of post-modernity tend to dissolve any facile model of direct cause-and-effect in politics, and yet as a democratic polity, we look for the comfort in knowing that political expression can enact change. Protest art, or acts of creative expression intended to resist dominant powers, forces, and structures, models the potential for political expression to create change that is not immediate, direct, or obvious, but rather "moves the social" through expressivity and aesthetics. While these features lend themselves to an analysis guided by affect theory, this sub-discipline within communication studies has tended to lack the methodological specificity to reproduce or expand applications. Daniel Stern's vitality pentad acts as a heuristic by which to study rhetorical objects; these objects are studied due to their expressivity, rather than their appeal to reason. Stern excludes "still" media forms such as photographs and illustrations; however, by looking at the way in which digital artifacts are imbued with movement in its networked path, we can understand that all digital media are time-based. The objects of study speak to the temporal, vital dimensions of digital protest art: Turkey's Vandalina art collective, which places protest stickers on transit cars, demonstrates how force and scale engender feeling of intimacy in public spaces. Iran's Zahra's Paradise, a webcomic-turned-graphic novel, offers differing temporal environments for the reader and weaves its aesthetics into the narrative to create a sense of space and place. Finally, the images of #HandsUpDontShoot, through their directional pull across digital networks, illustrates social media's tendency to remix aesthetic features of older media forms. Major insights drawn from this research speak to the political importance of subject formation—or interventions therein—and vitality forms as a method for rhetorical criticism, which allows the rhetorical critic to be more specific and methodical in applying affect theory to rhetoric. It also challenges the positivist notion that political expression must result in measurable change in order to be validated. Finally, this project addresses the virtual potentiality of digital data and offers a perspective that sees all digital media as time-based.

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Presented to

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Kate Drazner Hoyt

August 2017

Advisor: Dr. Darrin K. Hicks

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## ABSTRACT

The complexities of post-modernity tend to dissolve any facile model of direct cause-and-effect in politics, and yet as a democratic polity, we look for the comfort in knowing that political expression can enact change. Protest art, or acts of creative expression intended to resist dominant powers, forces, and structures, models the potential for political expression to create change that is not immediate, direct, or obvious, but rather “moves the social” through expressivity and aesthetics. While these features lend themselves to an analysis guided by affect theory, this sub-discipline within communication studies has tended to lack the methodological specificity to reproduce or expand applications. Daniel Stern’s vitality pentad acts as a heuristic by which to study rhetorical objects; these objects are studied due to their expressivity, rather than their appeal to reason. Stern excludes “still” media forms such as photographs and illustrations; however, by looking at the way in which digital artifacts are imbued with movement in its networked path, we can understand that all digital media are time-based. The objects of study speak to the temporal, vital dimensions of digital protest art: Turkey’s Vandalina art collective, which places protest stickers on transit cars, demonstrates how force and scale engender feeling of intimacy in public spaces. Iran’s Zahra’s Paradise, a webcomic-turned-graphic novel, offers differing temporal environments for the reader and weaves its aesthetics into the narrative to create a sense of space and place. Finally, the images of #HandsUpDontShoot, through their directional

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION: THE POLITICS OF SUBJECTIVE TRANSFORMATION

Picture this scene: you are riding to work using a public transit system. At each stop and in each train car, the walls and surfaces are plastered with billboard advertisements selling McDonald's breakfast, Budweiser beer, Nike shoes and other commodities. You take out your smartphone and launch a mobile application called NO AD, which creates an augmented reality through the phone's camera. Observing the world through the screen, this augmented reality replaces the billboards with artwork. Instead of an ad for the latest iPhone model or Paramount blockbuster, you see vividly textured landscapes, pop-art portraits, intricately designed illustrations, charcoal sketches and more. Your commute to work is transformed into a "curated art experience" ("About," 2015) with the help of this smartphone app.

NO AD is just one example of the ways in which media has come to play a more intimate role in shaping our daily routines. As digital media become increasingly mobile, subtle, and ubiquitous, virtual experience has become entangled with everyday life. The seamless introduction of digital technology into the fabric of the mundane has allowed media to act as shaping forces for worldly experience. With the explosion in technological innovations since the dawn of the digital age, media increasingly act as both a lens and a mirror through which we make sense of ourselves in relation to the world.

However, as mediated life moves increasingly into virtual space, new opportunities emerge, along with new challenges. While it can be argued that in this new digital public sphere, “everyone”<sup>1</sup> has a platform to express her voice, the digitization of media technologies has also ushered in the era of the “attention economy,” where attention, rather than goods, services, or information, has become the scarcest and most valued commodity (Davenport & Beck, 2001). And as corporations fight for the attention of the masses, the values, orientations and practices of the marketplace seem to have infiltrated private life.

An example of the ever-expanding reach of neoliberal logic can be seen in the rise of the so-called “grammable moment.” The mobile application Instagram, in which posts consist exclusively of images rendered through customizable filters to maximize visual appeal, has rivaled Facebook as the go-to social media platform for teens and young adults. Users carefully cultivate a personal, visual brand for themselves as they navigate the world in search of “grammable moments,” curating their lives through the lens of Instagram’s platform. As a result, Instagram has shaped the very way that users interact with the world, where every new environment, experience and interaction presents the possibility of adding to one’s brand. Many have criticized the ways in which social media has contributed to the spread of neoliberal mentality, extending the marketplace to every crevice of private life, where one can sell these “grammable moments” within the social media economy of likes, shares and comments.

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<sup>1</sup> Everyone with access and means to emerging technologies living in societies that uphold the right to free speech. In other words, everyone living on a particular side of the so-called “digital divide.”

The extension of marketplace logic to the banal routines of the everyday reflects a more subtle and complex effect in the shaping of compliant political subjects. As media ecologies constitute shaping forces for material experience, so too are the relations between subjects shaped by neoliberal logics. Interactions repotentialize themselves as strategic orientations and become pathways to further commodification, reinforcing the notion of the autonomous—and competing—individual subject. Some describe a “new hedonistic culture” (Bagguley, 1992, p. 34) ushered in by late capitalism, whose emphasis on personal freedom reinforces a dependence upon capitalist structures and masks the “banality of evil” (Arendt, 1963) through a distracting and self-indulgent “expressive politics” (Bagguley, 1992, p. 35). In problematizing the political condition of late capitalism, some have argued that the very process of subject formation has come to be regulated by the state, such that the relations between subjects feed into a political system of production and consumption that reinforce political structures. As Day (2005) explains, “[C]apitalism is a set of relations between human individuals and groups, a reality or way of being in common” (p. 739).

However, digital protest art—which I define as acts of creative expression intended to resist dominant powers, forces, and structures, and is either created through digital platforms or meant to be disseminated through virtual channels—has attempted to seize the ubiquity and remediating potential of the networked image in order to address social ills such as commodification, violence, oppression, discrimination, and inequality by intervening in the constitutive process of subject formation, or the way in which we make sense of ourselves in relation to the world. In light of the intensely personal reach of governing hegemonic forces, it is necessary to clarify the term “protest” within this

context. Specifically, it is important to distinguish the protest practices of the 1960s and 70s, which primarily targeted state institutions and aligned with visions of systemic reform, from today's digitally-mediated expressions of protest, which induce extra-systemic or non-hegemonic resistance to dominating shaping forces meant to produce compliant political subjects.

While the term “protest art” is not new, the means of its enactment certainly are. The speed of information's dissemination through the networked media ecology, the rapid remediating potential offered to audiences, and the unique blend of ephemerality and lasting informational traces all define the unique character of the digital public sphere, or what DeLuca and Peeples (2002) call the “public screen.” Because of the advantages that virtual technologies afford in circulating content throughout the attention economy—and due to digital art's alignment with the postmodern agenda of disrupting conventions surrounding the artistic experience, such as taking art out of galleries and museums and “into the streets”—digital protest art is poised to constitute a unique political force that combines aesthetic sensibility and an activist ethos with the virtual world of the public screen.

Yet, due to these very ways in which emerging digital practices tend to challenge conventional models of what moves the social, it appears that in both popular and academic discourse, we do not yet know what to make of digital protest art. On one hand, we can acknowledge that these types of aesthetic interventions are inherently different than traditional modes of political mobilization because of their focus on sensuous or expressive—rather than rational or discursive—forms of argumentation. On the other hand, measuring political or rhetorical efficacy becomes difficult within an information



ecology that increasingly blurs the lines between art and media, aesthetics and design, form and function, producer and consumer, etc.

A new model is needed to understand the nuanced and complex ways in which these new practices effectuate political change. This project is intended to provide such a model for digital protest art: how to recognize it, how to parse it, and how to evaluate its effects. In acknowledging aestheticized protest as constitutive of a unique process of resistance that differs from the traditionally rhetorical forms of oratory, discourse or manifesto by positing an alternative reality that surfaces tension with one's lived world, I turn to an applied understanding of digital protest art's intensive impacts through three specific case studies. By foregrounding an alternative approach to reading these artworks, I address four key research questions: 1.) what makes digital protest art rhetorical (if not produced through the optics of measurable, systemic change)?; 2.) how can we identify such rhetorical, aesthetic features in digital protest art?; 3.) how do the aesthetic features of digital protest art intervene in the shaping of political subjects?; and 4.) how can we trace those impacts to (re)conceptualize political and social change?

In order to address the first question, what makes digital protest art rhetorical (if not produced through the optics of measurable, systemic change)?, we must expand the object domain of rhetoricity and its implications. An understanding of the unique rhetorical features and contributions that digital protest art provide opens up an appreciation of rhetorical effects outside of the conventional model of rational cognition. Perhaps much protest art does, in fact, gesture to logic and reasonability, but these ideas and messages are carried alongside more expressive and aesthetic modes of delivery; otherwise art's sense of rhetoricity would not wholly differ from traditional rhetorical

objects such as speeches or texts. As will be expanded upon below, these aesthetic features speak to the subtle ways we make sense of ourselves in relation to the world—after all, sensuous experience is an integral part of worldly sensemaking—in order to engender a shift along our subjective contours, producing new kinds of subjectivities. To fully answer this question, I look to theories of rhetoricity borne out of the constitutive and affective turns in the discipline, which speak more to the constitution of one’s sense of vitality as a mode of rhetoricity that has the power to shape worldviews.

The aesthetic features of digital protest art, while vital to understanding how artworks engender subjective transformations, are notoriously elusive and make discursive description—let alone methodological precision—difficult. This poses a challenge for answering the second research question, how can we identify the rhetorical, aesthetic features in digital protest art? To answer this question, one must develop a method by which we can separate out the aesthetic, affective flows of protest art from the content of its messages. To address this challenge, I look to Daniel Stern’s (2010) theory of vitality forms, which offer a method by which the psychoanalyst or art critic can “read” intensities emanating out of disparate modes of human communication. Stern offers a “dynamic pentad” of movement, force, space, time and direction to allow scholars to separate the how of protest art from the what. To apply this not only to the art of rhetorical criticism, but to an affective rhetorical criticism of digital protest art in particular, I look to the theories of remediation and the virtual to understand digital media’s unique “time-based” qualities.

Research question three, how do the aesthetic features of digital protest art intervene in the shaping of political subjects?, offers an opportunity to connect the

answers to the first two questions. First, the significance of aesthetic interventions into the shaping of political subjects should be understood in the context of late-capitalist strategies of governmentality designed to produce compliant political subjects. Foucault's theories of governmentality, panopticism, and "technologies of the self" (1988)—and subsequently Agrawal's (2005) and Massumi's (2009) theories of environmentality—provide a detailed look at how governments induce compliance by shaping the ways in which political subjects interact with the world. As such, Stormer's (2015) theorizing around vitalism and rhetoric provides a means of analyzing how digital protest art responds to these relatively new strategies of governmentality by offering the lens of constant motion—the vitalism of the embodied subject—that is fundamental to rhetoric's effects upon thinking and feeling bodies. Digital protest art, through its particular forms of vitality, engender "the affordance that there is more than this place, more to that thing, more that may be, and the changes that always herald the realization of some of that 'more'" (p. 2). The possibility of "more" interrupts the process of governmentality as a shaping force for compliance by posing radical, material alternatives to the status quo.

Finally, in order to answer the fourth question, how can we trace the material impacts of digital protest art to (re)conceptualize political and social change?, one must first assess what is insufficient about how we think of political and social change currently. The desire to "prove" the efficacy of protest movements has led to an emphasis on structural change—a positivist reaction to the elusive convolution of tracing impacts upon our complex political systems. The problem is, change cannot always be measurable; how does one measure the changes to a subject's relational constitution? To expand the scope of how we consider such efficacies, we must look to more subtle,

material impacts of protest interventions. I offer three such material impacts that work through flows of intensities, rather than measurable changes to the political system: the reshaping of the political terrain, or the means by which protest art affectively encourages new modes of relations within public, social spaces; the constitution of a plural subject, or the emergence of a subjecthood that surfaces “reasons-for-us” rather than “reasons-for-me” (Hicks & Langsdorf, 2011); and modes of ethical witnessing, which can expose historic atrocities by speaking to the subjective, embodied experiences of victims of persecution.

These four questions are not necessarily chronological. In fact, the answers to each one are entangled and dependent upon answers to the others. By working through each of these problematics, a model for assessing the unique features of rhetoricity of digital protest art emerges that can provide insight into the conundrum of how digital protest artworks may “move the social” (Foust, 2017, p. 57).

### **Theoretical Interventionns: Enactment, Affect and the Remediation of the Virtual**

The task of challenging hegemonic models of social change that rely on the metric of structural, systemic modifications is significant. The legacy of reasonability as a wholly cognitive process “liberated” from the contamination of emotion or feeling is still central to dominant understandings of political participation. In order to assess the truly unique material transformations engendered by protest art, we must open up the domain of the political and challenge hegemonic assumptions about what it means to move the social.

### **The Political Productiveness of Feeling**

In a 2010 New Yorker article entitled “Small Change,” Gladwell (2010) derides online activism as lacking in organizational strategy, personal risk and systemic impact. Specifically, Gladwell compares the use of Twitter and other social media technologies within the so-called “Arab Spring” movement to the Greensboro sit-ins that protested segregation laws in the 1960s United States South. While the Greensboro sit-ins targeted a specific set of legislation that represented discriminatory treatment of racial minorities and was enacted using physical, embodied means, the use of Twitter in Arab Spring movements became a means of expression for activists who wanted to report to the international community on the series of events that were unfolding on the ground—these activists, having been silenced by their own governments, saw the connectivity of the digital sphere as an opportunity to give voice to buried stories, narratives and subjectivities. According to Gladwell, however, acts of protest aimed at expressive, aesthetic and subjective intervention rather than direct, systemic change simply act as illusions that dazzle the public into complacency. Gladwell and other skeptics of digital protest implicitly advocate a hegemonically empirical view of political activism, arguing that expressive acts of resistance matter only in terms of how they produce measurable changes to the political system. Within this framework, political impact is measured according to the optics of state recognition and advances a model of top-down change as the optimal path to social progress.

Gladwell’s argument also foregrounds common assumptions about the nature of virtual protest. By expressing doubt about the political consequentiality of digital activism, Gladwell implicitly argues that the virtual is a sphere of immateriality that exists separately—and inconsequentially—from “real” life. This delineation between

what is “real” and what is felt as a potentiality has significant implications for understanding rhetorical and political impact. I argue that Gladwell’s framework advances traditional notions of empirical realism, equating the “visible” with the “real” and dismissing more nuanced, subtle and complex understandings of causality.

What is needed to assess the political potency of protest art is a materialist framework for understanding both the virtual world of the public screen and political consequentiality in general. By this I mean that forces that are not visible to human perception in any measurable way may have real, material consequences that shape political power, such as interventions within the process of shaping compliant political subjects that support the status quo. In order to expand accepted notions of what moves the social, it is necessary to move beyond hegemonic or systemic models of political change. This includes dethroning “state power” as the default target of political protest and thus the only valid metric of change.

### **Problematizing the “Hegemony of Hegemony”**

Gramsci’s conception of hegemony acknowledges both coercion from the state apparatus and consent from civil society as powerful contributors to social transformation as well as social control. However, in practice, the logic of hegemony has been reduced to considerations of institutionalization, implying that only forces that can be visibly measured through their manifestations within governmental structures can be considered hegemonic (Day, 2004). As a result, we often see calls for “measurable change” in proving the efficacy of movements that strive to resist systems of domination.

However, new materialist understandings of political change suggest that not all politics occurs within the articulation of political systems. For example, Day (2004),

problematizes the “hegemony of hegemony,” which he defines as “the commonsensical assumption that meaningful social change—and social order itself—can be achieved only through the deployment of universalizing hierarchical forms, epitomized by the nation-state, but including conceptions of the world-state as well” (Day, 2004, p. 717). These hierarchical forms that we commonly associate with political change include: legislation, policy, governing structure, and international mechanisms such as treaties, accords, and charters, as well as international governing bodies.

Instead, Day advocates for alternatives to the “hegemonic conception of the political,” and looks to “the possibilities inherent in actions oriented neither to achieving state power nor to ameliorating its effects” (p. 724). Similarly, Foust (2010) explores how a “politics of enactment” may dismantle the logic of representation that currently dominates understandings of political change. Within the “hegemony of hegemony,” political change is dependent upon its representation within the dominant political system, which grants recognition to collective identities. Again, these representations are limited to policy or legislation, changes within political structure and process, and symbolic gestures granted from the governing authority. This framework binds the agents of political change to a state-sanctioned collective identity which must be represented either nominally, symbolically, or electorally.

Further, hegemonic discourse that frames political movements within a success/failure paradigm resurrects the functionalist/constitutive debate surrounding social movement rhetoric (SMR) that emerged in the 1980s. While McGee’s (1980) essay pointed out that “social movements,” as we understand them, emerge because of rhetoric that retroactively recognizes collective rhetorical acts as belonging to the social

phenomenon of a “movement,” further developments within the “constitutive turn” make even more room for understandings of SMR beyond the tallying system of success or failure. Rhetoric as a shaping force changes the constitutive makeup of social movements and allows for acts of expressivity to emerge, even when these acts do not line up with predetermined objectives. A constitutive model of social movement rhetoric recognizes shifts along the subjective contours of movement participants as impactful outcomes of collective action. Alongside systemic interventions, social movement rhetoric calls upon a shaping force for the reception of intensive, rhetorical forms that allow us to see the world anew, complete with alternative perspectives on its problematics, associations, alliances and solutions.

Finally, we must acknowledge that any method of measurement that looks to the dominant governing structure for legitimation inherently reinforces that structure’s power. Oliver (2000) describes how models of social justice based on recognition reinforce the Hegelian master-slave relationship: “Even if oppressed people are making demands for recognition, insofar as those who are dominant are empowered to confer it, we are thrown back into the hierarchy of domination” (pp. 188-189). Similarly, critics such as Gladwell who press movements for proof of their political productivity perpetuate neoliberal logics that convert movement participants into subjects of enterprise, contributing to the mentality of a state-run machine “concerned with maximizing the volume, productivity and health of the inhabitants within the state territory in order also to maximize state power” (Gudmand-Høyer & Hjorth, 2009, p. 110). Chapter Two offers the “politics of enactment” as an alternative model of studying social change, looking to the ways in which aesthetic interventions reshape political



subjects and create new ways of being the world—a subjectivity that is, at its heart, resistant to dominant, hegemonic forces.

### **The Aesthetic: a “Grafting Point” between the Affective and the Symbolic**

To flesh out the theories and methods for understanding intensive impacts of digital protest art, I draw significantly upon what is known as the “affective turn.” The affective turn as a philosophical approach to the humanities centers the movement of material forces that impact the sensorium. The affective turn makes room for rhetorical impacts to be shaped by non-discursive, a-symbolic forces which may, among infinite other material impacts, position audiences as feeling together through the creation of a plural subject—a “singularity comprised of multiplicity” who act and feel as one (Hicks & Langsdorf, 2011), transgressing the boundaries of the individual. To posit new worlds, art must play with the unthinkable; we cannot push aside the vitality forms that emanate out of the aesthetic, defined by Barrett (2013) as “structural aspect[s] of the artwork that emerge as an outcome of the grafting of affect to the symbolic through artistic practice” (Barrett, 2013, p. 63). The aesthetic can be understood as a doorway to the realm of excess constituted by affective and intensive forces. However, identifying these aesthetic features poses its own challenge, as humanity’s urge to make meaning out of embodied phenomena often means that aesthetic forces are cast aside in favor of a message’s symbolic content.

### **Media and Vitality Forms**

While Stern’s (2010) model of vitality forms offer a way in which to separate what an artwork’s content depicts from how such aesthetic interventions are delivered, Stern himself explicitly excludes forms of digital photography, design, and illustration

from vitality forms' purview, claiming that his model only applies to art forms that are "time-based." Chapter Three looks at the particular ways in which digital media—and perhaps all media—possess a specific temporal dimension due to the logic of remediation. Remediation, or what Bolter and Grusin (1999) call "the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms" (p. 273), is particularly vital in digital media due to their foundation in binary data. Such dataforms are rife with remediating potential, as images can now be sonified or sounds can be visualized, among infinite other repotentializations. In the virtual world, the process by which media take on new forms is sped up and multiplied due to the connective affordances of the digital sphere. In Chapter Three, I outline a specific method by which to parse the vitality contours of digital protest art—contours that result in radically material outcomes that speak to artwork's interventions in shaping political subjectivities.

### **Digital Protest Art and Intensive Impacts**

Chapters Four, Five, and Six offer particular case studies wherein activist interventions that surface intensive modes of relation between subjects and environments result in such radical, material outcomes. While all three case studies have been covered in popular or academic presses, such assessments look only at the depicted content of the artworks. Such appraisals, however, do not capture the potency of digital protest arts' reshaping of the material terrain or the political subject. To truly capture the unique, rhetorical contributions of these works, I turn to Stern's (2010) dynamic pentad of movement, force, time, space and direction to speak to the specific aesthetic features that offer new ways of understanding social change.

### **The Spatial Politics of Vandalina**

Chapter Four examines Vandalina, a street art collective in Ankara, Turkey, as a powerful example of art that bridges virtual and physical worlds and effectuates change through reshaping the political terrain. Vandalina's palm-sized stickers began adorning trains, windows, doors, poles and other urban architecture in the winter of 2013. Through its strategic engagement of social media, these works awaken the remediating potential of the virtual, where media forms remain fluid, taking on new materialities, eventually bleeding out into the physical world of the streets.

These invasions then remap the contours of the individuated bodies shaped by hegemonic landscapes designed to reinforce the boundaries of the individual. The sudden interruption renders bodies affectively open within spaces that usually produce the effect of shutting oneself off from affective transmission, of retreating into the complacent and cozy realm of "personal space." The stickers also remap the spatial contours between the virtual and the physical, as Vandalina's digital designs materialize and circulate within the physical architecture of the city. Through this remediating practice, the walls of the street, the surfaces of subway cars, the concrete and metal architecture of urban life is repotentialized as a gigantic blank canvas, primed to act as a platform for creative expression.

The case study of Vandalina illustrates that, rather than addressing the state as a fixed and stable entity, digital protest art can be seen as intervening in the very process of becoming for the contemporary political subject. Thrift (2013) argues that "...the move to affect shows up new political registers and intensities, and allows us to work on them to brew new collectives in ways which at least have the potential to be progressive" (p. 58). If we understand the current political system to be contingent upon the shaping of

compliant political subjects, then digital protest art, as a form of resistance that engenders a critical subjective awakening, can be seen as radically political, thus challenging prominent critiques that virtual protest is politically impotent or fallacious.

### **Zahra's Paradise: The Orientation of the Collective Political Subject**

In Chapter Five, I turn to *Zahra's Paradise* (Amir, 2011) as a compelling example of a work of protest art that produces ethical modes of relations not through instrumental utility but through a shared aesthetic experience. This work engenders plural subjectivity through a collective orientation around a “basin of attraction” (Protevi, 2009)—in this case, a physical, geographic location that is both symbolically rich and affectively powerful within collective imaginary. *Zahra's Paradise* is a webcomic-turned-graphic novel created by a Persian author, an Arab illustrator and a Jewish publisher. The comic depicts the disappearance of an Iranian activist shortly after the contested 2009 Iranian election and the frantic efforts of his family to find him as they search throughout Tehran.

While powerful in its symbolic depiction of the events of the election protests and the brutal crackdown by the Ahmadinejad regime, the power of this work exceeds the representational depiction of historical occurrences. The aesthetic features of this work are entangled within symbolic and representational imagery, and yet the affective force of this piece exceeds that which can be captured through symbolism. In examining the work's extra-discursive, aesthetic features, this chapter addresses questions such as: How did the serialized release of the webcomic shape a specific temporal contour of the Green Movement? What does the aesthetic of the comic strip add to the piece's narrative, in its use of etched detail, facial close ups, and black and white storyboarding, which directs its durational passage to unfold in the white spaces between boxes? How might the piece's

intermediality contribute to its potential to engender shifts in subjective encounters? How might we examine the process of its production—a collaborative sharing of risk between three different positional identities—as a performance of collective agency? How did its use of cyberspace as a relatively “borderless” sphere of circulation create a potential for plural subjectivities that identify with the piece not according to nationality, but to affective openness oriented around a catalyzing object? Finally, how does the story’s anchoring within the infamous cemetery remap the collective memory and imaginary in relation to the material landscapes that birthed the Green Movement?

### **#HandsUpDontShoot & Collective Witnessing: A Politics of Enactment**

Chapter Six looks to #HandsUpDontShoot to demonstrate the intensive power of the collective witness. #HandsUpDontShoot is a hashtag movement which consists of digital photographs featuring movement participants enacting the pose that Ferguson, Missouri teenager Michael Brown was believed to have embodied when he was fatally shot by police officer Darren Wilson on August 9th, 2014. The photographs, which were digitally disseminated through social media platforms using the movement hashtag, express the participants’ desire to experience intersubjectivity with the slain, while the hashtag creates collective continuity by linking the participants and the photographs together into a cohesive movement. The hashtag’s connective force between various images relating to the movement parallels the anti-lynching photography movement of the early- to mid-twentieth century in terms of affective intensities. Anti-lynching photography relied on image circulation to engender the recognition of the viewer’s trace within the abject body while disidentifying with the violent, white mobs.

By looking at how the photos of #HandsUpDontShoot became spatially and temporally linked through the use of the hashtag to foreground aesthetic juxtapositions between white police officers and black protesters, this analysis presents the potential to apply Barrett's (2013) theory of the aesthetic as a grafting point between the affective and the symbolic. The #HandsUpDontShoot photos present an opportunity for collective witnessing in surfacing and foregrounding the affective relationality between black communities and white police officers. Oliver's (2000) notion of ethical witnessing as that which primes the body to be affectively open to another's experience in order to testify to her subjectivity—rather than to affirm factual information that historically objectifies these experiences—informs an understanding of the #HandsUpDontShoot movement as a shift away from the forensic objectification of Michael Brown's body and toward a subjective and affirmative apprehension of Black lived experiences.

By using Michael Brown's alleged "hands up" pose to effectuate an intersubjective experience with the body in peril, #HandsUpDontShoot participants demonstrate a politics of enactment. The act of collective witnessing, while not directly aiming for institutional or systemic change, surfaces lived experiences that have been questioned, dismissed, or otherwise marginalized in order to evoke new forms of consciousness. Rather than asking for recognition from the government apparatus, #HandsUpDontShoot participants create a state of recognition within their own bodies as they collectively witness the embodied experience of Michael Brown in the moments leading up to his death.

### **Conclusion: Toward an Aesthetic Politics**

An examination of the current political climate reveals the pervasive feelings of powerlessness that the populace experiences at the hands of panoptic systems of state authority. Much of this nihilism is due to how popular discourse frames top-down, state-recognized outcomes as the only valid form of political resistance, which reinforces the power of political institutions over the body politic. This project provides concrete examples of protest art as producing outcomes and effects that serve as alternatives to conventional politics in the ways that they alter subjectively-felt material realities that go beyond policy or political ideology. Further, in producing research that shows how affects and intensities impact our bodies and subjectivities through a virtual network, I advance a disciplinary conversation on digital media as entangled with, rather than separate from, our material worlds. In exploring how a critical subjective awakening can be understood as a politically important event, this work pushes back against the standards of empiricism that have grown out of the tendency to instrumentalize and capitalize the growing landscape of emerging communication technologies. This epistemic shift in thinking through “political strategy” seeds the potential to empower noninstitutionalized forms of resistance and make room for aesthetic modes of political intervention.

With the understanding that change occurs in multiple registers at once—the transgressive alongside the hegemonic, or the affective alongside the discursive—this project does not seek to deny the rhetorical import of representation or systemic change, but rather, endeavors to re-center previously marginalized understandings of rhetoricity in order to paint a more comprehensive picture of what “moves the social.” It acknowledges that these multiple registers are, at once, in excess of and entangled with

one another. For example, while aesthetic interventions into the shaping of the political subject fall outside the domain of systemic politics, these shifts may eventually lead to more recognizable forms of political change, such as the makeup of elected officials or the implementation of specific policies—just as changes to the political system may also correspond to shifts in subjective identification. However, in recognizing that the lion’s share of scholarship on social and political change has focused on traditional models of progress, this project seeks to foreground the study of more subtle, intensive shifts that have largely been ignored in the discipline, yet still pose significant political potential.



CHAPTER TWO  
THEORETICAL ALTERNATIVES TO FRAMING POLITICS: ENACTMENT,  
AFFECT, AND THE AESTHETIC

When a Banksy street mural criticizing sweatshop labor practices suddenly appeared on a city wall in the working-class neighborhood of Wood Green in London, it reframed public space as a site of potentiality. Six months after its appearance, the Banksy was abruptly removed by a private auction service and sold to a Miami gallery, and the local community responded with its own political expression. The excision of the artwork transformed the suddenly blank wall into a site of aesthetic intervention by community members who used street art to protest the neoliberal forces that deprived the neighborhood of much-needed cultural capital. Within a week of the mural's removal, a large paste up depicting a crying nun appeared at the Banksy's extraction site. Following this intervention, a giant heart dripping with red paint, a stenciled work warning "Danger: Thieves," and another stencil referencing Banksy's precursor, Blak le Rat, appeared, surrounding the weeping nun (Hansen & Flynn, 2015). These expressions of aestheticized guerilla protest continued for over a year and a half, wherein every attempt by the city to paint over the graffiti was followed by new murals cropping up in its place, often riffing on the previous installation, emerging as a resistance movement of multiplicitous, inventional remix.

In disrupting the capitalist logic that commodified Banksy's street art—an art form conceived to resist the neoliberal extension of the marketplace to the streets by challenging the notion of “ad space” and commercial art—Hansen & Flynn (2015) describe the mural's removal as opening up a space for remediation and collective response. The authors turn to Rancière's (2013) “aesthetic protest” to illustrate how

...aesthetic protest can create ‘dissensus’, or ruptures in common sense, and a gap in the sensible, which works ultimately to show that *what we see, according to our usual division of the sensible, could be otherwise*—thus demonstrating the “contingency of the entire perceptual and conceptual order.” (Hansen & Flynn, 2015, p. 899, emphasis added)

By applying this “gap in the sensible” to aesthetic protest, Hansen and Flynn describe how the mural's appearance and disappearance changed the spatial politics surrounding the wall, which continued to be apprehended as a site for subjective expression even after the mural had been removed. In appreciating the potentiality of the wall's transformation into a canvas, the community was able to change its relationship to the spatial architecture in an enduring way.

It's important to note that the emergence of the street-art protests did not prevent the private sale of the Banksy in question; although the piece was removed from auction at the Miami gallery, it was eventually sold for \$1.2 million USD in the U.K. by the same private company that attempted to sell it stateside (Wilson, 2013). What it did do, however, was awaken a novel form of spatial politics, radically changing how Wood Green residents apprehended and interacted with public space, how they defined themselves in relation to those spaces, and how they related to each other as collaborative creators of subjective expression. I argue that these impacts are not only political, but profoundly potent in how they imagine and enact new worlds.

In order to make sense of protest art's impacts, it is necessary to turn to alternative theories of the political. Specifically, when understanding politics as concerned with power, status and systems of governing, it is necessary to acknowledge that these forces flow beyond the domain of the institutional. The focus of this project goes beyond traditionally empirical forms of political outcomes such as policy, legislation or system regulation. It approaches the political sphere as constituted by subjectivities, identities, bodies, and modes of relation, and identifies outcomes of digital protest art's affective impacts, which may serve to expand our understanding of political participation. These impacts can best be viewed through the theoretical turns that have sought to surface and address the so-called "gap in the sensible," challenging conventional beliefs surrounding dominant notions of the empirical, the institutional and the apprehensible. In order to address research question one, *what makes digital protest art rhetorical?*, one must open up the domain of what it means to enact social change—to "move the social," so to speak—looking to first the pervasive strategies of governmentality that intervene in a polity's formation of intimate lifeworlds—and the ways in which aesthetic protest intervenes in this process.

### **Social Movement Rhetoric and the Constitutive Turn**

It is clear that, due to the neoliberal spread of capitalist logic to political institutions and beyond, we can no longer solely look to institutions to enact change upon the status quo. These institutions are invested in sustaining the order that has granted them power and authority, and any hope for revolutionary change cannot be enacted by parties with such investments. Yet disciplinary conventions dictate that articulations

within systemic forms of governance must be the only valid and credible manifestations of political change.

One of the ways in which communication studies as a discipline is pushing past these limitations is through scholarship that explores the politicization or rhetoricity of embodied experience. As an alternative to the “politics of representation,” Foust (2010) offers the “politics of enactment,” a mode of resistance that foregrounds the immediacy of the body to engender moments of “rhetorical-material performance” (p. 24). Rather than critiquing the current system through symbolic gestures aimed at officials who supposedly represent constituents’ interests, the politics of enactment immediately creates new worlds through the unfolding of constitutive processes that dissolve the traditional contours of political subjectivity. These performances allow participants to explore the question of how we, as political subjects, can exist in ways that “exceed citizen, worker, student, daughter, and other institutionally sanctioned subjectivities” (p. 151). In this way, the politics of enactment is uniquely empowering in comparison to the politics of representation because it allows the protester to immediately enact the process of “inhabiting the world in a better way” (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 13), rather than seeking change through a representational intermediary.

Day (2005) creates a similar delineation in his conceptual outline of the “politics of the act” versus the “politics of demand.” The politics of demand continues to look to a central governing body to deliver change, thereby reaffirming the power of the dominant system, a conundrum Oliver (2000) describes in the process of seeking “recognition,” which hands the power of subjective constitution over to the state. Instead, the politics of

the act works through modes of affinity, relations between political subjects that redefine what it means to cohabitate within the political terrain.

An interesting parallel to the rise of affinity politics is in the disruption of economic class as a prominent mode of identification. While the class struggles of early- to mid-twentieth century social movements often targeted systemic mechanisms due to their ability to regulate the economy, new social movements (NSMs) more frequently create affinities through identities that emerge as a result of embodied experience, such as race, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Thus, rather than the state, these movements reaffirm the power of the body to create change.

Enactment politics begins with an understanding that both state power and civil society are upheld through constant performance. That is, the way I move through the world constantly reinforces political systems: when I pay for a good or service with money, this performance upholds the symbolic value of the national currency; when I pull over at the sound of a siren, this performance yields power to the police or other first-responders; when I vote, this performance gives validation to the political system purported to represent my interests. Enactment politics seeks to disrupt these daily routines that have become second nature by issuing rhetorical interventions, which Pezzullo (2001) calls “critical interruptions,” designed to “jolt people out of their customary ways of thinking and acting, and ideally, effect a radical change of subject” (Ervin, 2006, p. 319).

However, despite Pezzullo’s attribution of criticality to this process, these shocks often produce an embodied state wherein reasoning and cognition become delayed or even precluded, a state approaching Kant’s notion of the “aesthetic sublime,” “a dizzying

state in which the subject is suspended in awe” (Kane, 2011, p. 482). The aesthetic sublime re-contours the boundaries of the individuated neoliberal subject by rendering the body affectively open to experiencing subjective entanglement with other beings. The state of the aesthetic sublime encapsulates Eno’s remark that “[t]he decision to stop seeing yourself as the centre of the world, to see yourself as part of the greater flow of things... that is political theory” (Tamm, 1995, p. 91). Thus, the “constitutive turn” in rhetorical studies examines the rhetoricity inherent in how these critical interruptions re-constitute us as political subjects: the new identities that may arise, the new affinities that redefine our relationship to other subjectivities, and the new ways in which we may inhabit the world.

By exposing the political system as dependent upon constant performative maintenance, enactment politics works to destabilize structures that otherwise appear to be immutable realities. The destabilizing power of emergence poses an alternative to the individualized, representational logic of neoliberalism and instead offers the subject of the multitude, “a multiplicity in the Deleuzean sense, that is, as a formation of subjects in ‘perpetual motion’, sailing the ‘enormous sea’ of capitalist globalization in a ‘perpetual nomadism’...something unknowable, untotalizable, ungraspable” (Day, 2005, p. 736). While hegemonic forms of protest may seek to change the *content* of our political system, they do nothing to alter the *form* of power, a force that continues to shape every routine and interaction of our daily lives. The politics of enactment, on the other hand “seeks to remain emergent and unincorporated” (Day, 2005, p. 720).

This alternative approach to protest also recognizes that the logics of emergence and complexity make modelling change—as a one-to-one pattern of cause-and-effect—

an impossibly reductive feat. In order to grasp the entire spectrum of how change reverberates across political ecologies, it is necessary to move toward a more intricate understanding of causality. As “the political today is a complex terrain of overdetermined relations within and between particular identities, states and groups of states” (Day, 2005, p. 725), many new materialist scholars have begun to point to the entangled nature of political agency.

Theories of new materialism offer the perspective that we are more beholden to our material circumstances than conventional neoliberal logic, with its emphasis on autonomous, individuated agency, would have us believe. “[Non-linear logic] encapsulates a basic tenet of complexity theory, that complex interactions give rise to new levels of order (a process called ‘emergence’) that cannot be predicted from the previous state” (Rickert, 2013, p. 104). Performance, as a situated mode of resistance that uses the contingency of the body within its environment, allows political subjects to experience an alternative politics in the here-and-now, rather than betting on a strategy that presumes to predict the inner workings of the complex machine of late capitalism. By redefining or expanding conventional understandings of the political, we may actually find that decentering ourselves as political subjects can be empowering, because it “brings the world to us but in doing so transforms the disposition of our inhabitancy...[t]he world is revealed differently, at least potentially so, in a way that calls for some action” (Rickert, 2013, p. 29).

Opening up the theoretical and conceptual possibilities that lie beyond a hegemonic understanding of political change creates room for more complex models of causality. As Shugart (2001) explains, “Very few acts short of coercion or revolution can

be cited as directly or exclusively, or even primarily, responsible for material change” (p. 111). In other words, to impose a one-to-one model of social change, wherein the collective actions of a movement must perfectly result in clear, meaningful improvements to the political system, is to deny the possibility of more subtle, emergent changes that arise from the reshaping of political subjects or terrain. This paradigm shift speaks to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) conception of roots versus rhizomes. While roots, as a model of causality, are linear, familial and connote a straightforward relationship, rhizomes instead offer a model of emergence as entangled and complex, “connect[ing] any point to any other point, and [whose] traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states” (p. 21, cited in Foust, 2010, p. 17). As “rhizomes work through indiscriminate associations and constant motion” (Foust, 2010, p. 17), this model presents promising alternatives to understanding the emergence of subjective shifts as giving way to social change through destabilizing political structures and forms.

### **The Materiality of Constitutive Rhetoric**

Alongside new materialist directions, rhetoric’s constitutive turn has made room for the emergence of complex formations of subjectivities. By uncoupling the rhetorical model of social movements from the success-or-failure metric imposed by functionalist approaches, the constitutive turn looks beyond rhetoric as a mere tool used to seek a persuasive outcome, and toward an understanding of how movements, relations and subjects may emerge organically from rhetorical forces, acts and events. Althusser (2004) speaks to how rhetoric, by introducing ideological narratives that help us make sense of the world, “has the function...of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects” (p. 698).



Rhetoric, as a social force, shapes the very contours of our subjectivity, influencing not only how we behave in the world, but the types of rhetorical forces to which we are open. This process, which Althusser calls interpellation, creates divisions and affinities among subjectivities: when I recognize that I am being hailed as a subject, it at once creates a sense of unity in my individual personhood, and allows me to separate “myself” from that which is “not-me.” In this way, rhetoric not only “recruits” me as a subject, but transforms my very subjectivity by delineating the “me” that is being addressed from the “not-me” that is excluded from the hailing, shaping the boundaries of the subject. These divisions and affinities occur not only along the lines of the individual, but can also occur among groups through the creation of a collective subject (Charland, 1987).

Similarly, Burke (1950) offers identification as an alternative rhetorical process to persuasion, pointing out that in order to identify with an addressed subject, one must also dis-identify from a perceived external Other: “[T]o begin with ‘identification’ is...to confront the implications of *division*” (p. 22, emphasis in original). Charland (1987) extends Burke’s notion of subjective constitution as division to his theory of constitutive rhetoric, which asserts that the very existence of the subject “is already a rhetorical effect” (p. 133) which is “...ongoing, not restricted to one hailing, but usually part of a rhetoric of socialization.” (p. 138). Thus, if we acknowledge rhetoric as a constant shaping force that constitutes, recruits and transforms the subject, then we must acknowledge that the contours of subjectivity are always changing according to the contingencies of the social terrain, thereby puncturing the myth of the transcendental subject whose internal essence remains untouched by external forces.

If there is one limitation that Charland's theorization of constitutive rhetoric runs into, it is the notion that the transformation of the subject takes place only through symbolic or interpretive means. In addition to Althusser's specific naming of ideology as the source of interpellation—for, he says, it is the ideological framework through which one interprets one's place in the world as a “concrete” subject that centers the individual—Charland (1987) cites Burke in noting that the transformation of the subject is a “representational effect” (p. 139) that functions through textual, narrative form. This is useful in noting that the personae with which subjects identify do not wholly encapsulate the “real,” because “[t]exts are but surfaces; characters are, in a sense, but ‘paper beings’” (p. 139), but it leaves unexplored certain conceptual fragments put forth by these scholars.

The first incomplete fragment in declaring all interpellation as a representational effect is Burke's observation that “...the identifications of social identity can occur ‘spontaneously, intuitively, even unconsciously’” (Charland, 1987, p. 133). Certainly, the interpretation of representational logic can become so embedded within social practices that they can occur below the fold of consciousness—such as when I automatically turn around when I hear my name called—but it does trouble the question of whether there is a force of excess that contributes to the transformation of the subject, yet which cannot be captured by human symbolicity. In other words: can subjective interpellation occur via material embodiment, rather than through interpretation? For example, don't the countless expressions, movements, furtive glances and subtle gestures that mark a white body as different from a body of color—or a feminine body as different from a masculine one—which accumulate over a lifetime, contribute to my subjective constitution?

The answer to which Charland gestures is yes. At the end of his essay on the “Peuple Québécois,” Charland poses an alternative paradigm for rhetoric’s transformative effects on subjectivity:

[Subjective transformation] can proceed at two levels: (1) it can proceed at the level of the constitutive narrative itself, providing stories that, through the identificatory principle, shift and rework the subject and its motives; (2) it can also proceed at the *aesthetic* level of what Williams terms the “structure of feeling” and Grossberg describes as the “affective apparatus.” (p. 148, emphasis added)

Charland leaves room for constitutive rhetoric to operate within multiple registers, yet he ends his article having only expanded upon the specific process that works through representational logic. The second named register—that which occurs on the aesthetic, affective level, operating through structures of feeling—begs further exploration.

Rhetorical effects such as subjective constitution and aesthetic structures of feeling are difficult to map, due to their resistance to empirical modes of analysis. However, Daniel Stern (2010) has created a method by which to parse the dynamic contours of human expression and communication independent of its interpretive content. By outlining a dynamic pentad of *vitality forms*—movement, time, space, force, and direction—that emanate from various modes of human expression ranging from the intimate, emotional bonding between a mother and an infant, to time-based art forms that “stir the soul,” Stern suggests that it is not the *what* of the communicative content that produces structures of feeling from which we apprehend our own subjectivity, but the *how* of its dynamic contours. For example, at a very early age, we begin to perceive various modes of transgression via the tone by which we are addressed by our parents or guardians—there is a sharpness inherent to disciplinary language that differs greatly from

the soft, soothing tones by which an infant is comforted by her caretaker. These dynamic contrasts are paralleled by the disciplinary forces taken up by state institutions in the political realm. In Chapter Two, I discuss the particular ways in which these vitality forms reshape constitutive forces by intervening in processes of governmentality, or the ways in which governments produce compliant subjects.

### **The Affective Turn and the Domain of Excess**

To flesh out an approach to understanding the intensive impacts of digital protest art, I look to what is known as the “affective turn.” The affective turn as a philosophical approach to the humanities centers the movement of material forces that impact the sensorium. While a definition of affect remains inherently elusive, affect is generally understood as a material force that impacts the body. Put simply, to study affect is to study excess: the affective turn gestures to material forces that escape representation within the various structures we use to define human experience, such as language, symbols and representations. Instead, we may look to material forces that shape the way our bodies navigate the world—moods, tones, ineffable gestures—as affect presents the *how* to content’s *what*.

Affect studies is a response to the question of “what else?”. The affective turn in communication studies challenges the fact that structuralism in general and the linguistic turn specifically tend to limit inquiry to the visible and the empirical. These frameworks dismiss the unique and vital features of certain communicative encounters. While we know that arguments and logics persuade audiences through discourse, ideology and narrative, what else moves humanity to seek new worlds? Analogously, we understand that music is so much more than the symbolic notations contained within sheet music,

that its true power comes from the moment of material becoming, whether via performance or recording. Rather than the written notes, affect begs us to pay attention to the swells, the sighs, the pauses and the suspenses—the moments when we can feel new worlds start to take shape.

Although affect studies as a named disciplinary turn is a relatively recent development, the roots of affect studies can be seen in humanist work from the mid-twentieth century—for example, Fanon's (2008) phenomenological account of racial politics in France and Algeria; Tomkins' (1970) psychological approach to affect as the “primary motivational system” and the amplifier of biological drives; and Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) Spinozan derivation of *L'affect* as the capacity to affect and be affected. The unifying thread of these three schools is constituted by a movement beyond the structural forms—language, discourse, narrative, etc.—that have dominated the study of the humanities since the Age of Enlightenment.

### **Affect versus Feeling and Emotion**

Although there is no consensus in the field, there are important distinctions between affect and emotion or feeling. Brennan (2004) believes that, unlike affect, feelings imply a reasoned, deliberative reflection: “[F]eelings include something more than sensory information insofar as they suppose a unified interpretation of that information...I define feelings as *sensations that have found the right match in words*” (p. 5, emphasis added). Feelings imply a focusing of affect into a particular perspective. In the process of naming the bodily state effectuated by affect, that state is personalized and therefore translated into feeling. As such, feelings can be seen as sense-making tools that relate the experience of affective flow to our perceived individuated subjectivities.

To Massumi, the distinction between *affect* and *emotion* is more significant. While affect is “proto-social,” meaning it exists and is experienced before any social relation takes place, emotion depends on a social consensus. I can describe my emotional state using a particular word—“anger,” for example—and others will understand the meaning of anger’s generic category, although not my singular experience of it. This is because we have learned through social consensus what anger is and how to identify it. Like Brennan’s description of feeling, Massumi classifies emotion as falling within the domain of the personal, meaning we as perceived individuals experience them as belonging to us, unlike affect, which swirls around and through us. However, while emotions are ascribed to a particular object or reason of causality—getting cut off in traffic, for example, may be the source of my anger—feelings refer to personal affective states that have no object, an uncanny swirling of physiological sensations. In other words, the environmental leaves traces upon the personal, and vice versa, as “the body...infolds contexts, infolds volitions and cognitions that are nothing if not situated” (Massumi, 1995, p. 90-91). We as social bodies are fixed within certain positionalities and contexts, but as intensive bodies, we remain fluid and unconstrained.

These distinctions can be helpful in tracing the affective impacts of protest art because while emotion and feeling, as personalized embodied states, are filtered through positionality and ideology that allow them to be named and assigned a value (i.e., positive or negative, painful or pleasurable), affect is pre-personal, a collective experience of multiplicity. As such, affect is typically understood and described in terms of directionality—crescendoing toward a built intensity or diminishing into an affective release—rather than an assessment of its value. It has also been described in terms of

*orientation*, as a force which binds agents together or pushes them to the margins (Ahmed, 2006). When thinking about protest art's impacts as fomenting a collective movement, affect allows us conceptualize the plural subject as bodies feeling together—as a source of convergence, rather than division.

### **What Else can a Body Be?**

Significantly, all three schools of affect studies resist the dominant notion of individuation. Individuation, or the idea of a self-contained, autonomous subject, has been a dominant assumption within Western liberal thought, or what Brennan (2004) calls the “foundational fantasy” (2004, p. 12). Simondon's (1992) concept of the preindividual explores the possibility that the individuated self is not a pre-given but rather an effect of hegemonic cultural paradigms—specifically within Western positivism—that privilege cognitive formations over affective, embodied processes. The field of affect studies seeks to disrupt this assumption by entangling the subject within material forces that distribute agency beyond the individual, and even problematize the body beyond the boundaries of the form. Brennan (2004) believes that bodies should be thought of as more porous than the dominant Western paradigm allows for, as subjects imbibing each other via affective intensities that flow beyond the form. Bodies also imbibe the atmosphere around them, wherein “[t]he ‘atmosphere’ or the environment literally gets into the individual” (Brennan, 2004, p. 1).

Our proprioceptive capacities allow our bodies to distinguish between an external and an internal realm as a means of navigating space. Some affect scholars argue that collisions with others let us know where the boundaries of our bodies are. These interactions also render the containers of bodies extremely malleable; Ahmed (2004)

describes pain causing us to shrink in as a means of moving away from the source of it. “[E]motions create the very surfaces and boundaries that allow all kinds of objects to be delineated” (p. 10). Similarly, there are affects and emotions that cause our bodies to expand, rendering them affectively open to other bodies and terrains. Such delineation is seen as contingent upon the material forces that flow around and through bodies.

Often, the process of the body’s becoming can exceed the level of the individual, as affective forces shape “collective bodies” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 15). Some affect scholars posit the body as a “center of indetermination” (Bergson, 2004) and gesture to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of the “body without organs” (p. 150)—a “body” of relations that is shaped by affective forces as opposed to the boundaries of the form. Affect suggests that bodies are temporarily constituted by processes of energetic interchange, drawing upon Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of the *assemblage*, or a fluid organization of bodies, terrains and affects that cohere around a particular function or event but remain emergent.

New forms of protest art may resist forces of domination by challenging the basis of individuated, self-contained subjectivity upon which capitalist modes of production rely; they may also foment the emergence of a plural subject, a “notion of collective individuation around a catalyzing point” (Massumi, 2002, p. 71). Oliver (2000) describes how the circulation of energy shapes the very way we experience subjectivity:

We are connected to the world through the circulation of energy that enables our perception, thought, language, and life itself. In deed, we are conduits for energy of various sorts. Our relations to other people, like our relations to the environment, are constituted by the circulation and exchange of energy. (p. 194)



Likewise, Massumi (2002) describes the ways in which relations oriented around a “basin of attraction” (Protevi, 2009) create the emergence of a plural subject that is constituted by its relation rather than its form. When bodies are affectively primed to work in open relation to other bodies and to the terrain, an artwork can serve as a basin of attraction that constitutes the emergence of a plural subject. All this is to say that, while affect is often overlooked in political and (less so) rhetorical theory, these forces are fundamental to the constitution of the political subject.

### **Affective Terrains**

Because affect is conceived as a material force, it goes to stand that it must have significant implications for the navigation and constitution of space. Again, it helps to think of affect as supplying a framework for considering the *how*, rather than the *what*. Space, like rhetoric, contains a multitude of registers, only one of which can be measured and neatly fit into the category of the “empirical.” Massumi describes space through the distinction of intensive versus extensive space. While extensive space deals with pure matter “as being measurable, divisible, and composed of points plotting possible positions that objects may occupy” (2002, p. 6), intensive space is “filled with...vibratory motion, resonation” (1995, p. 86) and constitutes the foundation of all subjectivity.

Further, the realm of the environmental is never completely outside of the body; rather, bodies constantly imbibe atmospheric affects. For example, Brennan (2004) defines “atmosphere” as an entanglement between the social and physiological, an interaction of externally-felt forces that exist outside of internal physiological states, and describes the intermingling of physical and organic factors that shape atmospheric

energies, producing extreme differences within felt experiences between cities such as Delphi and New York City.

An affective study of space also reveals the ways in which it shapes relations between bodies. Ahmed (2006) describes spaces as constituted by affective economies, or systems of circulating objects to which emotions stick. This system of alignment and misalignment forms a process where borders take shape between subjects and Others. In other words, the affective forces that center certain bodies while marginalizing others begins not within individuals or bodies, but within environments that circulate these affective economies.

Scholars within the affective turn have applied Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of *detrterritorialization* to explore affect as a mode of environmental politics. Deterritorialization is understood as the way in which powers of domination bleed out from traditional institutions and appear in the very terrain in which subjectivities are shaped. Subtle as they may be, these affective terrains shape our lived experience by contouring the way in which we navigate and participate in the social and political order. Protest art that seeks to address the deterritorialized, postmodern political system may root its interventions in disrupting the shaping of political affect produced by dominant powers. This affective impact can be thought of as a lasting form of political change because it shapes the very contours of the terrain that panoptic forces seek to control.

### **The Aesthetic Gap**

The affective turn makes room for the process of subject (trans)formation to be shaped by non-discursive, a-symbolic forces that position audiences as feeling together through the creation of a plural subject—a material entity rather than (or alongside) a

symbolic one. This framework treats the aesthetic as a shaping force that binds subjects together, producing a ripple effect within movements, which emanates outward in ways that cannot be formulated or modeled. Further, the affective turn, in calling for an understanding of how communicative acts exceed symbolicity and representation through material forces, allows the rhetorical critic to foreground the unique expressive features of digital protest art—which Stern’s (2010) model of vitality forms—by outlining a dynamic pentad of movement, force, space, time, and direction—offers in unprecedented specificity. The affective turn in communication makes transmission of intensities not just possible, but the basis of our very subjectivity. This theoretical dimension has significant connotations for studying how protest art shapes bodily intensities that are then taken up in political discourse.

Theories of the aesthetic—similar to definitions of the mere concept of art—have been particularly elusive, due to its parallel nature to affect, which has only begun to develop its own intellectual vocabulary, and whose very nature resists discursive description. Similar to how a feeling is an affective state that has been filtered through the lens of the personal, an aesthetic force can be described in terms of the specific techniques used, a particular style it evokes, or even in how it makes us feel, but at its very basis eludes coded description. As Barrett (2013) describes, an aesthetic encounter occurs prior to a cognitive framing of experience: “Affect and sensation give rise to internal images that are forged through encounters with objects in the world; these images that are born of aesthetic experience, occur prior to the emergence of signs and symbols” (p. 65). The aesthetic is the space wherein the affective becomes entangled with the discursive or symbolic, where “a structural aspect of the artwork...emerges as an

outcome of the grafting of affect to the symbolic through artistic practice” (Barrett, 2013, p. 63). Similarly to affect, the aesthetic flows through and from artworks, but it is still exterior to the object.

The domain of the aesthetic risks supplantation by more utilitarian or functional considerations of art. This can be seen in the fluid, grey line that conceptually separates “art” from “media.” For example, Townsend (2007) notes that “[t]he most effective image of anti-war protest [against the US invasion of Iraq] has not been an artwork, but a pixelated picture of amateur torture” (p. 10), referring to the photos of military personnel torturing and humiliating prisoners at Abu Ghraib, which were leaked and disseminated throughout the networked media sphere. However, he points out that these images sparked the creation of aestheticized subjective responses from the digital public, and that this potential for remediation was encouraged by the affordances of digital technology.

<sup>1</sup> If, in fact, the difference between art and media was formerly distinguished by the presence of subjective and expressive contours, then the issue of emerging technologies that “free the hand” from artistic production (Benjamin, 1973) further complicate this relationship. Although the period of “post-photography” (Hansen, 2004) marked by the development of image manipulation technology has presumably put an end to the photograph as visible and objective “proof” of an event, photography and other

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<sup>1</sup> Although many digitized artworks responding to the Abu Ghraib photos emerged, the digital dissemination of imagery also sparked physical artworks, such as the sculpture *Memorial (Serie Democracia)*, by Spanish collective El Perro, which shows a skateboarder poised upon a pyramid of crouching, hooded figures. This human pyramid is clearly recognizable from one of the released Abu Ghraib photos. Further, the artists of *Memorial* added their own subjective expression by not only implicating the capitalist culture that is complicit to these torturous acts (depicted within the oblivious skateboarder), but by re-embodiment the scene through the chosen material of marble, creating an immovable and affectively heavy presence to this grisly act.

forms of digital imaging still carry the legacy of associations with objectivity and forensic evidence.

Kristeva (1984) attributes this distancing effect to the dominance of the scientific method, which “represses the process pervading the body and the subject” (p. 13). The pervasiveness of objectifying human experience can also be attributed to the spread of capitalism, for “we...think that by codifying [experiences] we can possess them” (p. 13). Barrett (2013) moves to counter this dominant mode of thought with an alternative theory of knowledge: rather than a distanced and objective view of knowledge, she argues for “tacit and experiential knowledge” (p. 64). This type of knowledge can only be produced by immersing oneself within the affective and the aesthetic: “Hence we may argue that affect is ‘knowing’ differently coded” (p. 66)—or even uncoded.

The aesthetic, as a space where intensive forces are grafted onto symbolic objects, offers a mode through which the absurd, the sublime, and the unthinkable posit new worlds and new ways of being in the world. Schiller (2012), Rancière (2013), and Marcuse (1955) all describe the liberating capacity of the aesthetic as a way in which the sensuous exceeds reason as a force that drives new possibilities into being. The aesthetic is the mode in which artistic expression exceeds that which can be encompassed within the “real,” and it is this “gap in the sensible” (Hanson & Flynn, 2015) that seeds the possibilities for change. Bishop asserts that this gap is necessary for the aesthetic to posit a political potency: “the ‘aesthetic regime of art’ ...is predicated precisely on a confusion between art’s autonomy (its position at one remove from instrumental rationality) and heteronomy (its blurring of art and life)” (Bishop, 2004, p. 7). In other words, it is

through the aesthetic's excess of the thinkable and the commonsensical that acts of protest can transgress the seemingly immutable limitations of the status quo.

Drawing upon Reed's (2005) assertion that the politics of protest art is, in fact, bound up in its aesthetics, I posit that aesthetic is not only political, but radically so in the ways that it disrupts dominant hierarchies such as mind over body, objectivity over subjectivity, distance over immersion and empirical knowledge over embodied experience. As Barrett (2013) puts it:

The artwork or aesthetic image ruptures and transgresses the rules and codes upon which naming or the fixing of meaning relies. Its structure or style is polyvalent and opens on to new horizons of meaning by short-circuiting accepted codes and ways of looking. (p. 67)

Inherent in such new ways of experiencing the world is the possibility for new political outcomes, such as the creation of multiplicities or plural subjectivities, or as Kristeva (1984) puts it, "the a-signifying apprehension of a new heterogeneous object" (p. 202). If subjectivity is the very basis of the constitution of a body politic, then new ways of being in the world begin with the forces that shape the subject, and this change is very much political in its capacity to disrupt dominant frames of experience.

This interruption of established modes of subjectivity can be a gateway to disrupting the status quo through shifting the very basis of human relations from one of antagonism to that of plurality. As Bishop (2006) articulates, "The model of subjectivity that underpins [artistic] practice is not the fictitious whole subject of harmonious community, but a divided subject of partial identifications open to constant flux" (p. 79). By becoming less bound up in the supposedly self-contained, individuated subject

valorized by liberal capitalist systems, we may be able to “feel our way” to more collaborative modes of being, which give rise to innovative political solutions:

...all art—whether immersive or not—can be a critical force that appropriates and reassigns value, distancing our thoughts from the predominant and preexisting consensus. The tasks facing us today are to analyze how contemporary art addresses the viewer and to assess the quality of the audience relations it produces: the subject position that any work presupposes and the democratic notions it upholds, and how these are manifested in our experience of the work. (Bishop, 2006, p. 78)

Bishop’s notion of reassigning value has the potential to interrupt culturally-ingrained practices that feed capitalist systems, such as relations based on consumption, antagonism, and binarisms. Bishop names works that surface discomforts such as frustration, absurdity and doubt as productive for engendering an aesthetic impact that is able to “move the social.” The affective turn asserts that aesthetic acts possess political potential not because of measurable outcomes, but because subject formation is a political process in itself.

### **Conclusion: Modeling Vitality**

By positioning the aesthetic features of digital protest art as constituting new worlds, and new ways of being in those worlds, we can better address research question one: *what makes digital protest art rhetorical?* Stormer (2015) looks to the vitality of motion to frame the Spinozan concept of the power to “affect and be affected” (p. 1), which he posits to be an explicitly rhetorical effect:

Mobility presumes any position is impermanent (standing, thinking, feeling), that holding a position takes adaptive effort, and that a range of positions exist only by virtue of movement from, to, and between them ... it can be described through the affordance that there is more than this place, more to that thing, more that may be, and the changes that always herald the realization of some of that “more.” (p. 2)

The aesthetic, as that which gives us a glimpse into the sublime and the unthinkable, is what bestows artworks their power to challenge what is and to push the domain of what is possible. This is because the tension between the “legible” and the realm of excess constituting the aesthetic gives way to new political and social potentials.

Chapter Two outlines digital protest art’s modes of dissemination, which constitute its affective force. This is especially important as new communication and mediating technologies have tended to scramble traditional models of artistic production as well as delineations between artist and audience, production and consumption, and material and virtual. As theories of the virtual ranging from Bergson to Hansen illuminate the virtual’s remediating power, I am particularly interested in protest art that incorporates these “new” modes of aesthetic expression, as they invite new opportunities and insights vis-a-vis the constitution of an audience; the means of dissemination, exposure, and response; and the possibilities of radical world-making.

Chapter Three, for example, examines the political terrain in Ankara, Turkey—specifically, the modes of governmentality that prohibit expressions of public intimacy, rendering women’s bodies a site of political scrutiny, to violent ends. Street-art collective Vandalina’s placement of stickers in sites of social significance ruptures the complicit paths of the everyday by offering new modes of relation between political subjects—including the opportunity for women to tell their most intimate stories to an affectively vulnerable public. Similarly, Chapter Four offers modes of virtual convergence around a site of spiritual significance in Iran—Behesht-e Zahra, the great cemetery where martyrs slain in historic battles of political resistance lie in their graves—as a way in which the webcomic-turned-graphic novel, *Zahra’s Paradise*, engenders a plural subject, feeling



and acting together. Finally, Chapter Five analyzes the parallels in the visual aesthetics of both antilynching photography and the connected images of the hashtag movement, #HandsUpDontShoot, as a way of ethically witnessing the embodied experiences of Black Americans navigating a United States still undergirded by white supremacist structures. These case studies demonstrate the specific rhetoricity of digital protest art by looking at the transformations of subjective contours engendered by each aesthetic intervention into the status quo.

## CHAPTER THREE

### MEDIA AND HUMAN SUBJECTIVITY AS CO-CONSTITUTIVE FORCES

In the spring of 2014, a large-scale installation featuring a portrait of a little girl was placed in a field in northwest Pakistan. The piece was large enough (100 feet by 70 feet) to be seen from an aerial drone. In fact, an aerial view is the only vantage point from which one could make out the portrait's subject: a young girl, her wide eyes projecting an intense but ineffable affect, holding a piece of rubble. The background behind her is composed of a gradient of arranged pixels and dots, allowing us to focus on her profound stare. Perhaps she is in shock: this girl is reportedly an orphan of the U.S. drone war, her parents and sibling having been killed in a drone strike in her village. The piece, titled #NotABugSplat, was meant as a direct ethical interruption to the drone operators who fly their air crafts overhead while piloting them from the Creech Air Force base outside of Las Vegas, NV (Cole and Wright, 2010; NotABugSplat, 2014).



*Figure 1. #NotABugSplat, an outdoor installation designed by a collective of Pakistani and U.S. artists (NotABugSplat, 2014).*

#NotABugSplat—so named because “bug splat” is military slang for the visual phenomena of seeing dead bodies and scorched terrain through the pixelated, aerial view of the drone camera in the aftermath of an attack (Goodman & Gonzalez, 2014)—offers drone operators a glimpse into a subject that is normally hidden from view: the faces of drone strike victims. Although it has been argued that the installation would do nothing to deter a drone operator from carrying out a strike (Pearl, 2014), #NotABugSplat’s image was also captured by satellite imagery, which temporarily made its way onto Google Earth and the public’s screens, allowing it to address a different audience. This ethical interruption punctured the layer of secrecy under which the United States has been conducting its drone war since 2001. As the little girl’s face penetrated the aerial terrain, so too did it penetrate the consciousness of the public. Further, it opened up a virtual space wherein the public was able to see what the drone networks saw, unravelling the

logic of obscurity upon which the drone war has depended to carry out its unrelenting strikes with little subsequent public outcry.

In the virtual space of the networked public—an assembled “body” constituted through relations around a point of convergence—the little girl’s stare punctures our consciousness and constitutes its own collective subject. It signals the presence of a viewer who bears witness to war’s hidden atrocities. We are not there physically to witness this art piece, but that is the point: the optics of #NotABugSplat dictate that the only appropriate vantage point for viewing the installation is through the virtual network, the very infrastructure that may engender, for so many, a state of uncritical distraction, where the material consequences of late capitalism are masked by the milieu of the mundane, the personal, and the complacency of compliant capitalist subjectivities. While its ability to deter a drone strike may be in doubt, #NotABugSplat changes the affective terrain surrounding the counterterrorism activities and policies of our government.

How can it be that this portrait, which the majority of audiences have yet to see in the flesh, has struck such a chord? In the decades since the digital revolution, the line between virtual and physical has progressively blurred. While physical events can be remediated through virtual dissemination, so, too, can virtual unfoldings bleed into our physical terrain. In order to understand the true potential of media, it is important to re-examine past assumptions about what media is, how it functions, and the role it plays in shaping human experience. Such an inquiry requires an understanding of what is “new” about new media and what has always been present as an integral dynamic of mediation.

Finally, an inquiry into media’s potential for shaping subjectivities of resistance must look at the uniqueness of media forms vis-a-vis their aesthetic qualities. This

contingency addresses the second and third research questions for this project: *how can we identify the aesthetic features of digital protest art?* and *how do these aesthetic features engender changes to our subjectivities?* The aesthetic qualities of protest art are what make media and art different than conventional rhetorical forms, such as speeches or texts. However, as humans we are constantly centering the meaning of experience over its dynamics, and thus have a difficult time separating content from form. Stern's (2010) concept of vitality forms—flowing, affective dynamics of not only media and the arts, but of all human behavior—outlines a partial method for parsing these features, but is, by itself, insufficient to fully trace the non-discursive aesthetics of digital protest art to new rhetorical outcomes—which I name as spatial politics, the shaping of the plural subject, and ethical witnessing. Stern's method falls short here because of his imposed limitations on what constitutes “time-based art,” and because his passing reference to vitality's application in the art of rhetoric goes unexplored. In this chapter, I outline a method for analyzing the affective rhetoricity of digital protest art by extending Stern's concept to apply to art and media forms that rely on virtual modes of production and dissemination—forms that I argue are uniquely “time-based.”

### **The Vitalism of Art and Media**

In #NotABugSplat, the very presence of the little girl's portrait is impactful in the sense that it alters the material landscape over which the drones fly—as well as the geopolitical landscape represented by virtual satellite maps such as Google Earth. But an understanding of *what* the piece is would be incomplete without a treatment of *how* the little girl's gaze punctures the perceived remoteness of the public's—and the drone operator's—view. As we allow the liveness of her stare to speak to us, this affective

exchange engenders a qualitative shift in our own subjective contours, highlighting the undeniable power of the visual: “We don’t just look, we sense ourselves alive” (Massumi, 2011, p. 43). These punctures and hauntings notoriously elude discursive description. The aesthetic impacts of digital protest art are “elusive qualities [which] are better captured by dynamic, kinetic terms” (Stern, 1975, p. 54).

In his 2010 book *Forms of Vitality*, Stern attempts to re-center the ineffable dynamics of all human experience. These are not the “what” of experience, but the “how.” The ways in which experiences leave affective traces within us—shaping who we are in relation to others and the world, or our sense of subjectivity—can be best understood through the lens of vitality. Vitality is the sense of aliveness that emerges alongside our experiences; it is what gives each experience its own unique imprint on our subjectivity. The sense that the meaningful events in our lives can never be repeated in the exact same way—that each one has a unique sense of performativity—occurs because these additive dynamics overlap and entangle in an unparalleled, specific way. “The vitality affect contributes a singular quality of liveness to this event. The affective tonality expresses the kind of liveness that is [uniquely] this event’s” (Massumi, 2011, p. 112). When we view #NotABugSplat through the screen of the virtual, we are bearing witness to something that will never be repeated, and it is this sense of liveness that speaks to the core of our very subjectivities.

Movement is primary to an understanding of vitality. The non-permanence of experience—life’s inevitable flow of forces that constantly shift and change material reality—is what makes us feel alive in each moment. Therefore, Stern asserts that movement is the most primary of the vitality forms. This movement can be either the

physical movement of the body or the virtual movement of the mind, and, as both of these processes are constantly engaged at the same time, movement defines “the very small events, lasting seconds, that make up the interpersonal, psychological moments of our lives” (Stern, 2010, p. 6). Because movement, in one way or another, is constant, we are always sensing material forces and attuning our bodies to them: “The felt interval is an emergent attuning to forces in the moving” (Manning, 2013, p. 226). Thus, all subsequent forms of vitality emerge in relation to movement:

A movement unfolds in a certain stretch of time, even if that is very short. There is a temporal contour or time profile of the movement as it begins, flows through, and ends. Therefore a sense of time, its shape and duration, is created in the mind. Movement also brings with it the perception or attribution of forces “behind” or “within” the movement. In addition, movement has to happen in space, so a sense of space is defined by the movement. Finally a movement has a directionality. It seems to be going somewhere; a sense of intentionality is also inevitably added. (Stern, 2010, p. 4)

Stern calls the vitality forms of time, space, force, and direction “the four daughters of movement” (p. 40). Each of these dynamics is additive, meaning that when they combine with other forms of vitality, they create a unique imprint that can never be repeated in the exact same way.

Each vitality form, while originating from a separate modality than the others, is experienced as a whole: “Subjectively, there seems to be a ‘super-Gestalt’ of force, motion, time, space, and intentionality all combined to make emerge a dynamic form of vitality—a basic pan-modal phenomenon” (Stern, 2010, p. 27). The unity of holistic experience is primary here, not just ontologically, but developmentally. It is not known how the primacy of vitality forms are integrated into Gestalt, but research has shown that the right side of the infant’s brain, which is more attuned to integrating a holistic

impression of experience, emerges as the dominant side (Stern, 2010). Therefore, the unity of the vitality forms is a fundamental process to human experience. Since Gestalt theory dictates that it is humans' natural tendency to organize disparate sensations into a continuous whole (Graham, 2008), the unity of existence is phenomenologically primary to us even though vitality forms exist within various modalities.

However, this process of Gestalt is unconscious, a result of an irrepressible desire to make sense of ourselves in relation to the world. Bergson, for example, frames human perception (or any perception) as “[t]hat which is given is the totality of the images of the material world, with the totality of their internal elements” (Bergson, 1986/1911, p. 31). We experience the totality of being as a continuous whole, but only register those elements of experience that suit our internal capacities—in this way, humans register an experience wholly differently than, say, insects. Because the integration of many different vitality forms, existing in many different sensory modalities, is almost instantaneous, vitality forms are best understood as a heuristic reflexively applied to embodied experience in order to parse the subtle, subjective impacts that shape us as beings. “[Stern’s] approach to developmental psychology appeals to amodal perception to explain how a ‘sense of self’ emerges relationally, with the capacity to continue to become” (Massumi, 2011, p. 187). The subject’s becoming is important to the ephemeral, performative role that vitality forms play in shaping us as both collectivities and individuals: “[The] perception of relation is the condition of emergence of the individual itself” (Massumi, 2011, p. 187). We as individual subjects only emerge when our vitality is contrasted with that of an external, other being; our originary, infantile subjectivities first perceive the world as a continuous sphere of vitality.



We learn individuation through social forces that tease out contrasts between an internal world and the external milieu; through disciplinary institutions like capitalism, we are taught to privilege that which belongs squarely within the domain of the “self.” However, these forces of unity do not simply disappear just because our perceptual faculties adjust to accommodate social contexts; that which becomes inarticulable through the do

<sup>3</sup>main of the individual instead exists on a more virtual plane of existence. Theorized well before the advent of the Internet or even the computer, the virtual for Bergson is positioned as that which is material but not perceived; like a prism that contracts the entire light spectrum into the rainbow of rays that our eyes can behold, our bodies contract the richness of all experience according to the perceptual faculties of our sense organs. In this sense, the virtual retains traces of all material existence, and vitality forms afford a heuristic by which to study embodied experience beyond the perceptual limitations we have learned over our lifetimes.

As opposed to explicating the virtual as a space of absence, Bergson promotes it as a sphere of excess—an overflow of vitality, intensity and flow that cannot be contained within physical forms. For Bergson, the virtual can be understood as “all hidden power” (1986/1911, p. 80) whereby “the part contains the whole” (p. 112). One example of this application of virtuality (which removes the virtual from contemporary associations with cyberspace) is that of memory. Memory manifests in very real material

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<sup>3</sup> The notion of “the virtual” emerged within public discourse as early as ancient Greece. As Shields (2003) explains, at the root of a definition of the virtual is the idea of something that exists in essence but not in form.

changes—for example, when I remember someone who has passed, I may feel their presence, or I may be moved to tears—and yet we do not recognize memory as an actualized event. Stern describes such memorialized, virtual events as “non-conscious past experience,” not just including memories but also “dissociated experiences, phenomenological experience, past experience known implicitly and never verbalized, and in particular ‘implicit relational knowing’ (how we implicitly know how to ‘be with’ a specific other” (p. 11). Although Stern does not address it in his book, these non-conscious experiences can apply to plural ways of being, such as collective, shared memories. Vitality forms offer a way of accessing these non-conscious experiences in order to understand the impacts they may have on our subjectivities as individuals, communities, and societies.

Vitality forms also offer a way to examine how these virtual forces may, or may not, concretize into tangible actions or other more lasting, material forms. Stern, in his theorizing around the “virtual movement of the mind” (p. 22), describes the sensations of the body-mind as anticipating potentialities of movement:

Mental movement also includes imagined movements such as preparing to execute a physical movement or forming an image ... [I]ntentions are mental expressions of directional forces getting ready, even straining to ‘move,’ or already started but still unfolding. (p. 21)

Like Stern, Bergson conceives of the virtual as an infinite realm of possibility which becomes grounded in the present when actualized through the body. “But these virtual sensations themselves, in order to become real, must tend to urge the body to action, and to impress upon it those movements and attitudes of which they are the habitual antecedent” (Bergson, 1986/1911, p. 168).

Deleuze (1988) also conceived of the virtual as a plane of immanence, “a site of generative potentiality that is delineated through actualizations in daily life” (van Doorn, 2011, p. 533). For both Bergson and Deleuze, virtuality is an active shaping force of our everyday lives because it contains traces of the past, anticipations of the future, and is responsible for what Hansen, referencing Merleau-Ponty, calls the “thickness of the pre-objective present” (2004, p. 589). The idea that the present is infused with retentions from the past as well as “protentions” of the future gives the experience a sense of movement, making the present fleeting. Hansen posits that this “thickness” is possible only through “embodied retention”:

The solution of all problems of transcendence is to be sought in the thickness of the pre-objective present, in which we find our bodily being, our social being, and the pre-existence of the world, that is, the starting point of “explanations,” in so far as they are legitimate—and at the same time the basis of our freedom. (p. 607)

The present is where the retention of the past and apprehension of the future converge; these virtual retentions and protentions leave traces on the present, which expand it.

Vitality forms, whether existing in the realm of the virtual as a felt possibility or actualized through bodily performances, fundamentally shape who we are and how we move through the world. This includes the vitality forms that emanate from the media we consume on a daily basis. With the ubiquity of media increasing on an exponential scale, the almost constant visual consumption of media impacts us in ways that may never emerge above the fold of consciousness:

Seeing ... is a kind of action ... with the action appearing in potential. We never just register what's actually in front of our eyes. With every sight we see imperceptible qualities, we abstractly see potential, we implicitly see a life dynamic, we virtually live relation ... An object's appearance is an event, full of all sorts of virtual movement. This is real movement, because something has

happened: the body has been capacitated. It's been relationally activated. It is alive in the world, poised for what may come. (Massumi, 2011, p. 43)

Digital media present a unique object for the application of Stern's theory because of the ways in which they contain potential, virtual movements. The digital image can never be a completely static medium due to its unparalleled capacity for movement—whether this be actual movement, via the circulation and dissemination through the network, or potential movement, via its binary data that primes it for remediation. The embodied affordances of virtual media—the way in which “travelling” around Google Earth awakens our somatic imagination—means that we do not just see the little girl in #NotABugSplat, we feel her presence on a visceral, vital level.

### **The Vitality of (Re)Mediation**

In *Forms of Vitality* (2010), Stern specifically argues that the time-based arts—music, dance, theatre and cinema—are unique in offering perspectives through which to study vitality forms because of the way in which they present a sense of performance, a generative give-and-take with audiences. Stern explicitly does not include so-called “still” media (or “non time-based” arts) within this consideration; however, I argue that still forms of digital photography and illustration can, in fact, incorporate Stern's vitality forms in the sense of offering performative, generative and temporal dynamics in their release, circulation and remediation within the networked media ecology. Digital media's capacity to be repotentialized signals a unique temporal contour precisely because digital media is never a finished product, but a process that is ongoing and continuous.

Through Postman's (2000) concept of media ecology, media can be understood as “dynamic, complex, and interwoven processes beyond the singular control of the human”

(Kember & Zylinska, 2012, p. 8). A concept first developed by Postman, media ecology advances the notion that media play a role in constituting not only our sensemaking and identity, but the very terrains in which we live and navigate daily. Further elevating media's status, Postman proposes that "[a] medium is a technology within which a culture grows; that is to say, it gives form to a culture's politics, social organization, and habitual ways of thinking" (2000, p. 10). Rather than fixed, discrete objects that exist "out there" in the world, Postman offers media as environments through which we navigate daily.

Taking media's non-objecthood further, Kember and Zylinska (2012) distinguish between "media" as forms and "mediation" as a process: "For us, mediation is the originary process of media emergence, with media being seen as (ongoing) stabilizations of the media flow" (p. 21). To Kember and Zylinska, mediation is a co-constitutive process that begs us to understand "to what extent and in what way 'human users' are actually formed—*not just as users but also as humans*—by their media" (2012, p. 9, emphasis added). Mediation's constitutive contributions to sensemaking and identity formation are of particular import here, as "[n]o one today can operate apart from the influences of mediation, because our functional, cultural, social, and psychological identities are, in large part, dependent on the instrumentalities of media" (Gumpert & Cathcart, 1990, p. 24).

Kember and Zylinska's focus on the flows of mediation rather than discrete media forms emphasizes "its liveness (or rather, lifeness), transience, duration, and frequently predicted death" (2012, p. xvi). Hall (2008), as well, ascribes a "temporal and affective performativity of [its] functioning" (p. 274) to digital media. These flows and contours

underscore the notion that all digital media are, in fact, time-based—most notably due to its capacity to be repotentialized across disparate media forms, or what Bolter and Grusin (1999) call “remediation.” Although remediation, or “the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms” (p. 273), predates the advent of digital technologies, the affordances of the digital uniquely prime new media to the repotentializing (and re-actualizing) capacities of remediation. Bolter and Grusin identify two logics of remediation that, on the surface, seem oppositional, but are actually mutually dependent: immediacy and hypermediacy.

In immediacy, we see the desire to efface the medium altogether in order to more intimately experience the “real.” This can be seen in renaissance paintings, for example, wherein the artist seeks to disguise the canvas itself as a window through which the viewer beholds the painting’s subject (Bolter & Grusin, 1999; figure 2). Immediacy has since taken on novel forms: from the automation of photography to lifelike, algorithmically-created digital graphics, the first logic of remediation depends upon the desire for the medium to recede from perception in order to more viscerally experience the “real.”



Figure 2. Raphael's *The School of Athens* (ca. 1510), which is thought to have been influenced by Leon Battista Alberti's manual, *On Painting* (ca. 1440), disguises the canvas as a window.

Hypermediacy, on the other hand, refers to the desire to augment media and reference multiple media forms at once: "The logic of hypermediacy multiplies the signs of mediation and in this way tries to reproduce the rich sensorium of human experience" (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 34). While the terms *hypermedia*, *hypertext*, and *hyperreal* all bear strong associations with the digital age, again, Bolter and Grusin emphasize that hypermediacy is not a new phenomenon:

As a[n] historical counterpart to the desire for transparent immediacy, the fascination with media or mediation can be found in such diverse forms as medieval illuminated manuscripts, Renaissance altar-pieces, Dutch painting, baroque cabinets, and modernist collage and photomontage. (p. 34)

These pre-cybernetic media auto-expand by referencing and incorporating other media forms.

Importantly, Bolter and Grusin frame immediacy and hypermediacy as two sides of the same coin: “Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them” (p. 5). What links these two competing logics inextricably is human desire. We desire immediacy, a sense of “being there”; we realize this through media, and therefore desire hypermediacy as a pathway to immediacy, which of course can never be achieved fully. “Hypermedia and transparent media are opposite manifestations of the same desire: the desire to get past the limits of representation and to achieve the real” (p. 53). Bolter and Grusin position this double logic of remediation as the driving force behind our desire to constantly remediate: the immediacy achieved through our obsession with media will always be imperfect, or at least perceived as an imperfect representation of “the real,” which sparks the quest to innovate a more perfect medium.

These innovations tend to trouble any clear delineation between “media” and “art.” The questioning of artistic value to works made with automatic technology, whether it be mechanical, like the camera, or algorithmic, like computer graphics, raises the conundrum of where human subjectivity lies within these processes. Modernism and postmodernism pose a similar conundrum to the world of fine arts as Baudrillard’s (1983) *simulacrum*, a representation without an original referent, does to the world of media: a self-referential loop that erodes any pretense to fidelity with the “real.” “In many cases, modern painting was no longer about the world but about itself. Paradoxically, by eliminating ‘the real’ or ‘the world’ as a referent, modernism emphasized the reality of both the act of painting and its product” (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 58). As with so many



distinctions that have been dissolved within modernity, the line between media and art—if it even exists at all—is mutable, subjective and fluid.

While the history of remediation surfaces specific media forms that, due to either their popularity and hegemony within historical media systems or the way in which they rendered previous forms obsolete, forced other forms of media to respond to them, there is perhaps no one media form quite as hegemonic as the digital is today. “What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media” (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 15). As Jenkins (2006) describes in *Convergence Culture*, as if in one fell swoop, digital media forced previous forms of media to answer its challenge by adopting digital capabilities, and then proceeded to subsume those media forms, as all content began to flow through digital channels.

Digital media takes up the double logic of remediation in a uniquely amplified way. Many scholars have applied Baudrillard’s (1983) writings on simulacra to the birth of the commercial Internet, in the sense that digitally-created media content is no longer bound to an external referent. Digital media, in this way, augments and speeds up the self-referential loop that blurs the line between virtual and real—a line that has long been contested to begin with.<sup>4</sup> The problematic of the missing referent has, in particular, provoked an expansion of Baudrillard’s *hyperreal* to include the possibility that mediated

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<sup>4</sup> Bolter and Grusin, for example, look to a phenomenological account of media’s “realness” via its material impacts: “the real is defined in terms of the viewer’s experience; it is that which would evoke an immediate (and therefore authentic) emotional response” (1999, p. 53). If we look to material impacts, it is hard to deny media’s realness due to its fundamental entanglement with social and political forces, whose reality we feel on a daily basis as we navigate our postmodern, globalized world. Other scholars focus on the entangled and liminal nature of virtual milieu and material reality (see Hansen, 2004 and Haraway, 1998).

phenomena that have no original referent constitute their own reality in the ways in which they impact the beholder. Within the hyperreal, virtual phenomena can still render very real material impacts.

Following the logic of remediation, one could conclude that all media is time-based; however I argue that digital media is uniquely time based due to its origination as data—a binary string of 1s and 0s that is nothing if not pure potentiality. Hansen (2004) elaborates on this idea: “[T]he act of enframing information can be said to ‘give body’ to digital data—to transform something that is unframed, disembodied, and formless into concrete embodied information intrinsically imbued with (human) meaning” (p. 12). What is new about new media is the way in which pure data can be translated into a multitude of media forms: a data set can be sonified or visualized or rendered haptic in a myriad of disparate ways. Mitchell (1994) argues that digital media “privileges fragmentation, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity and . . . emphasizes process or performance rather than the finished art object” (p. 8). If digital media is never finished, it is because of remediating potential of the virtual, where media forms remain fluid, taking on new materialities, eventually bleeding into the physical world: “Every medium thus carries within itself both the memory of mediation and the loss of mediations never to be actualized” (Kember & Zylinska, 2012, p. 21). The ease with which virtual audiences can manipulate digital media awakens our creative imagination and compels us to draw from the limitless potentiality of the virtual.

Even in “still” digital media, Stern’s forms of vitality are alive and well. DeLuca (2006), for example, offers the concept of modes—intensive, bodily modes—as an alternative means for experiencing digital media—more specifically, the digital

photograph. To explicate this idea, he cites Guattari, as quoted in Deleuze (1995): “The only question is how anything works, with its intensities, flows, processes, partial objects—none of which *mean* anything” (p. 22, emphasis added). Virtual affective flows are contentless—they impact our bodies through intensive forces that alter the contours of our subjectivity as well as our relation to each other and the world. Discursive meaning, on the other hand, “rarely captures [the] rhetorical force” of media (DeLuca, 2006, p. 86). Like Kember and Zylinska, DeLuca turns to the temporal contours of the digital photograph in order to understand its rhetorical potential.

Situating photography within the contemporary digital sphere, DeLuca offers three modes of intensities that address the singular immanence of the photograph: speed, distraction and glances.

Our image world is made possible by, and privileges, speed. In the ceaseless circulation of images in our media matrix, speed annihilates contemplation ... flow drowns moments, distraction disrupts attention, affect eclipses meaning, the glance replaces the gaze, reiteration erases originals ... Speed, distraction, and glances [are] modes of orientation, practices for engaging photographs, modes of intensities. (p. 87)

By looking past the interpretation of the photograph’s meaning and to its modes of circulation, DeLuca offers a method of rhetorical criticism that privileges the immersive capacity of the body rather than the distanced calculation of the mind. Speed, distraction, and glances are modes through which the body apprehends the photograph, where affective entanglements become more (or less) open to new flows of being in the world:

Speed, distraction, and glances suggest not a subject dominating an object, but a relationship of simultaneous becoming. Photographs [are] engaged not as objects of study ... but Deleuzian bodies—modes that introduce relations of speed and slowness into the social and produce affects. (p. 88)

## Vitality Forms of Digital Protest Art

In *Forms of Vitality*, Stern emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between an artwork's content and its vitality affects:

There must be a 'content recording' that registers *what* happened, and in what modality it was received, another recording that registers *why* it happened (the intention), and a third, a 'dynamic recording' that registers the dynamic form of the event, while unfolding *how* it happened. (2010, p. 24, emphasis in original)

While the first register describes the interpretive frame the audience creates cognitively and the second register deals with artist intentionality—a particularly slippery and contentious concept within the field of rhetoric<sup>5</sup>—it is this third register, the dynamic recording, that is most fundamental, existing at the very basis and at the first temporal instant of an event—and is critical to understanding how experiences shape our vitality or sense of “aliveness.”

Stern outlines a dynamic pentad, a series of five vitality dynamics that shape and contour an experience independent of its content: movement, time, space, force and direction. As movement is primary, it constitutes Stern's first vitality form. Because of its ubiquity, movement can be difficult to define verbally, and because it is so fundamental to the other subsequent forms of vitality, it is almost impossible to analyze in isolation. However, Stern does give a few examples of the many forms that movement can take in the arts:

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<sup>5</sup> The rhetor's intentions, while not being entirely dismissed as irrelevant in rhetorical criticism, are thought to be unprovable or unknowable, and therefore not dispositive. See for example Bitzer (1968): “Not the rhetor and not persuasive intent, but the situation is the source and ground of rhetorical activity - and, I should add, of rhetorical criticism” (p. 6), or Perleman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1973): “As another person's intention cannot be known directly it can be presumed only from what is known of the permanent aspects of the person” (n.p.).

Movement is almost everywhere. When we hear music, we experience “sound in motion” (Kurth, 1925). We often imagine specific sounds (from one source) moving in different directions. When we watch dance, but are not moving ourselves, we have the feel of our own bodies in virtual motion because of mirror system activity. When we hear or read language, or let free the imagination, we can experience virtual worlds of forces in motion. (2010, p. 20)

The vitality form of movement is not only defined by extension through space, but also carries an intensive quality. It can take shape in the physical motion of the body or in the virtual stirrings, anticipations, and memories of the mind.

In #NotABugSplat, this movement is virtual. When we see the image of the little girl through the interface of Google Earth—or a photograph intended to represent the view of the portrait through Google Earth’s satellite imagery—the associations with both the interactive digital affordances of the platform and the physical movement through space as satellites capture images of the ground below surface another virtual, imaginary movement: that of the drone operator. While in our viewing there is no operator present, we implicitly understand that our view of the little girl’s gaze is almost identical to what a drone operator would see through her screen at Creech Air Force Base outside of Las Vegas, as she directs virtual movements channeled through the actual movements of the drone. As the virtual movements of our digital navigation overlap and entangle with that of the drone operator, we experience a sense of complicity in the tragedy of the drone strike. These movements stir a realization that “I am the drone operator; the drone operator is me.”

The intensity of movement is shaped by the remaining four vitality forms: time, force space and directionality. Force gives us a feeling of “how much” when we experience bodily affects, which range from subtle to staggering. What makes music

come alive, for example, is not necessarily the scored notation of *what* a particular instrument should be playing, but the dynamic marks that indicate *how* it should be played; these dynamics make clear to our ears that what is being played is done so by a living being. Stern notes that music has created a language to gesture toward the elusive form of force: *piano* or *pianissimo* indicates a softness to the music, while *forte* and *fortissimo* indicate the piece should be played loudly. *Crescendos* and *decrescendos* indicate a rising and falling intensity to the music, while dynamic markers such as *staccato* or *legato* shape the way the notes interact with one another: in the former, notes are to be short and separate, while the latter indicates that the notes should continuously flow into one another.

Stern gives the specific example of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony to illustrate force. It is significant that the opening phrase of the piece—the all-familiar “da da da da”—is only two notes, yet it has captured the public's imagination in such a way as to be an almost universally-understood reference in Western cultures. This is because the dynamics of force that the piece entails plays with the audience's state of arousal:

[Beethoven] takes this four-note dynamic/melodic theme through many variations in intensity, speed, timbre, color, and stress. For instance, sometimes the theme is preceded with a longish silence—isolated. It is then attacked with gusto and force—it stands alone. Arousal is heightened. At other times it is quieter and almost flows out of or into the surrounding sounds. Our arousal shifts downward. It is placed sometimes higher and sometimes lower on the scale, or again different instruments may carry the theme. Beethoven's subject matter is nothing less than the vitality dynamics of music and life. (p. 83-4)

Force as a vitality form brings us in and out of various states of arousal, modulating the affect that flows around and through us.

Though #NotABugSplat is, quite obviously, not a piece of music, we can adapt Stern's vitality form of force to a visual medium by looking at the scale of the piece. First, within the composition of the portrait itself, we can see that the orphaned girl is the clear subject, as her face and upper body constitute approximately 70 percent of the image. Her left eye is located at the intersection of the leftmost and uppermost dividing line according to the rule of thirds (this intersection is also ironically called the "crash point") (Smith, 1797). Further, the background around the girl has been cut out and replaced with a gradient of dots, doubly emphasizing her ineffable stare. Finally, an apprehension of the scale of the installation itself makes her gaze seem larger than life: if this satellite image can capture the portrait so clearly, then the piece itself must be enormous—and in fact, at 100 by 70 feet, the subject of the image cannot be made out from the ground and is only meant for aerial (and therefore, virtual) viewing. In contrast to the tiny buildings, trees, waterways and other landmarks, her enormous eyes hit us like a punch in the gut.

Of course, force does not always stay the same as a movement unfolds; sometimes it hits hard and lets up gradually, sometimes it oscillates between extremes, and sometimes it drones quietly in the background. Time constitutes a movement's durational contour, allowing us to feel changes in force along a stretch of movement. To demonstrate time as a form of vitality intrinsic to the arts, Stern offers the medium of cinema, whose practice and technical requirements are replete with temporal references:

A "frame" is a single still photograph. When a series of (usually slightly different) frames is shown at a rate of one every split second (every 1/24 of a second in most, older, traditional films), it results in a continuous moving image (the "movies"). This moving image is a "shot." Shots last seconds, with an average duration of several seconds, but with great variability in duration. A shot is

usually, but not always, the basic psychological unit of a film (Deleuze, 1969; Metz, 1974; Bellour, 1979). It corresponds to a “present moment,” a Gestalt of many sequential elements lasting usually from 1 to 10 seconds, making up a vitality form that can be grasped in consciousness as one “whole.” (2010, p. 94)

The language of cinema is fundamentally rooted in the temporal dimension, as it is this vitality form that marks humans’ abilities to synthesize a series of still frames into a continuous, moving sequence.

To further demonstrate the power of time in the filmic medium, Stern turns to Bellour’s (1979) “micro-analysis” of the Hitchcock film *The Birds*, “working with units lasting only seconds, using stop frame, replay, fast forward, and slow motion” (Stern, 2010, p. 94). Stern splices his vitality analysis of the film into Bellour’s micro-analysis to illustrate how the vitality form of time is integral to Hitchcock’s signature technique of building suspense and drama:

*Shot no. 68.* Again of Melanie in the boat. One might have expected that the size of her framed image (closeness) would have continued to increase with the anticipated meeting with Mitch and the strength of feelings carried in that. But her image (its framing) has not come closer. [*Is this an interruption in the progression towards meeting? Has the progression been temporarily suspended for some reason?*] ... *Shot no. 70.* We see Melanie's face again, looking. It is now framed as a close-up. The progression of her coming closer has resumed, and with it the force of her presence, and of her anticipation ... *Shots nos 72, 74, and 76.* We see Melanie's face again. But she is not getting closer (i.e. framed closer). The progression has been halted. [*Is something else going on?*] *Shots nos 77, 78, and 79.* A bird swoops down from the sky and strikes Melanie on the head. The alternation between shots of Melanie and shots of Mitch is discontinued. The progression toward their meeting is interrupted. (p. 97-98, italics in original, meant to indicate Stern’s analytical contributions)

Hitchcock’s technique of establishing a temporal flow and then suddenly interrupting it transgresses the audience’s expectations and engenders a sense of alarm, a heightening of arousal. In this way, time entangles with force to create a sense of aliveness to the film.



This sense of interruption—the cessation of the flow of time—is integral to #NotABugSplat’s temporal contour. The interruption engendered by the artwork happens on both a virtual and physical level. On one hand, a virtual interruption occurs as the viewer imagines navigating through Google Earth<sup>6</sup>—or the drone pilot virtually navigating her aircraft through the interface of the control station—and having one’s customary aerial view of building roofs, trees, roads and waterways effaced by the sudden, unexpected presence of the little girl’s large-scale portrait. This interruption is also actualized when this unexpected—and unexpectedly compelling—image shows up in the constant flow of one’s social media feeds. The materialities of the U.S. drone war have been systematically obscured through government classification of information, leading to a complacent silence within U.S. publics. #NotABugSplat’s portrait demands that we interrupt our own narratives of normalization in order to reassess our complicity in the phenomenon of drone warfare, which also parallels how drones violently interrupt the daily lives of the people, families and communities in target areas.

Movements also happen within certain terrains, constituting the spatial form of vitality. Spatial affects engender a type of invisible architecture that shapes the way in which bodies move through spaces. Stern offers the artform of dance to illustrate space as a form of vitality. For example, he draws on the work of Lamb (1965), who created new descriptions and terms to capture the dynamic experience of dance: “He broke movement

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<sup>6</sup> Although the image of #NotABugSplat’s portrait was captured by Google’s satellite technology, it is no longer available through the platform. Further, it would be highly unlikely that a user sincerely stumbled upon this image unexpectedly while scanning the remote fields of northwest Pakistan. Nearly all audiences of #NotABugSplat were directed to the piece from the artists’ own aerial image (figure 1), which was highly circulated on the web and picked up by media outlets.

down into two main categories, namely posture, involving the continual adjustment of all body parts, and gesture, where the action is confined to only a part or parts of the body” (Stern, 2010, p. 87). The interaction between movement, posture and gesture dictates how a space is carved out by the vital contours of the human body:

Lamb also described these two categories in terms of their effort and shape ... Many terms that encompass vitality forms are defined in terms of the merging of gesture and posture, and the matching of effort and shape (e.g. growing, shrinking, spreading, enclosing, freeing, binding, and others). (p. 87-88)

These dynamic movements within a space—including the “making and breaking [of] physical contact between two bodies in spontaneous motion” (Stern, 2010, p. 88)—gives a specific intensive contour to sites of action, a sense that spaces are “filled with ... vibratory motion, resonance” (Massumi, 1995, p. 86).

These “contacts” fill spaces with affective traces of past, present, or anticipated future events. In the case of #NotABugSplat, the fields of northwest Pakistan hold a specific affective contour due to the frequent occurrences of drone activity in the area; residents of drone-targeted areas describe the impact of a drone strike as injecting a sense of despair over the strikes that have ripped their communities apart, and vigilant anticipation of the next strike (Cornwell, 2013). The placement of #NotABugSplat’s portrait is significant here, because it signals a “taking back” of agency over the terrains that have been stolen and appropriated to suit U.S. interests. It allows residents of Pakistan’s targeted lands to leave an imprint of their presence—and their humanity—onto these terrains, which may alter the affective dimensions of the movements through the space, particularly in residents’ daily lives. This imprint allows dwellers to achieve a

sense of ownership over their lands, effectively re-writing the geopolitical dimensions of the terrain.

Finally, movements contain directionality, or a sense of intention—the feeling that the movements are “headed somewhere.” This directionality dynamic parallels Ahmed’s (2006) notion of phenomenology as orienting us toward or away from objects or other bodies based on their affective contours. To illustrate the vitality form of direction in the arts, Stern turns to an “excerpt” of a “dance-theatre” piece by playwright/choreographer Robert Wilson. Wilson was asked in very detailed terms to recall an experience of having breakfast, and was then tasked with making a theater piece from this breakfast experience. Stern analyzes the “script” from this dance-theatre piece according to the vitality form of direction interacting with the remaining four forms:

*The runner makes large circles. This is no longer everyday running. Yet there is rapid enough forward movement. We sense the forward movement, in and for itself. It becomes a presentation of forward movement. It makes you aware of the feel of forward motion. He is not going anywhere, he is just going. And he is not running, he is just moving forward. We are dealing with Dynamic essences. We are watching "moving along," "getting somewhere," achieved through vitality forms. After several circles, the running becomes boring, the level of arousal falls back and the audience's attention is released and moves from the runner to the background which the audience has not yet had time to take in.*

*The runner starts to pick up speed and the circles become even tighter. This change in speed pulls our attention back to the runner. It is the equivalent of an accelerando in music. We get a slight arousal jag. Something is going to happen. He has to be going “somewhere.” The action is building to a crisis. A big crisis? A mini-crisis? A simple resolution? We don't know. The arousal mounts higher. A new vitality dynamic takes over. He stops.* (Stern, 2010, p. 90-1, italics in original, indicating Stern’s analytical contributions)

Direction is tied to anticipation; movement establishes an expectation that it should be “going somewhere.” The fulfillment or transgression of these expectations shifts the audience’s arousal levels, which likewise directs our attention.

The directionality of #NotABugSplat can be best captured by the affordances of the hashtag constituted by its name. Today, in addition to the purposes of archiving the flow of information across disparate media platforms, the hashtag infuses digitally-disseminated media with both subtext and connectivity. Hashtags afford a wide dispersal of circulation as trending topics spread across disparate platforms but also allow rhizomatic threads to converge as a single “body.” Further, the hashtag present in the title of the piece helps to make visible the reverberations of a renewed collective scrutiny of the U.S. drone war, and this collective gaze dismantles the secrecy of these acts. In a parallel process to Stern’s observations on the directionality of Wilson’s dance-theatre, directionality shapes and focuses our attention vis-a-vis the elusive problematic of the U.S. drone war.

These five dynamics constitute Stern’s pentad, giving us a more holistic account of an experience than representational content alone. These vitality forms are additive in nature, each dynamic contributing a complexity that carves out a unique shape in how it impacts embodied experience. Each of these vitality forms speak to aesthetic features of digital media. For example, time can pertain to the timeline of release of various media and artistic artifacts, or, in a more straight-forward fashion, it can pertain to the duration of a video or audio track’s playback, transitions, or rhythms. Space, likewise, describes a work’s dissemination through the networked media ecology and its entanglement with offline, physical terrains. Space and time can be intensively tied to directionality, in that artworks’ aesthetic flows may emanate out of particular events or be intended to leak out into particular spaces. Directionality may also speak to processes of collaboration or remediation in an artwork’s production. Finally, force is the degree to which these

aesthetic features have been “turned up” or muted, and speak to the “how much” quality of its impact upon apprehending bodies.

### **The Rhetoricity of the Virtual**

With an understanding of mediation and human subjectivity as co-constitutive forces, we can extend Chapter One’s response to the first research question of this project: *what makes digital protest art rhetorical?* As answered in the previous chapter, the rhetoric of protest not only has the capacity to be used as a tool to achieve pre-determined ends, it calls into being a specific type of subject—a subject affectively open to the flow of vital forces emanating from resistant, aesthetic interventions into the status quo. But can media or art achieve this sort of subjective transformation? Here, Poster’s (2000) exploration of technology as a process-of-becoming merges with Kember and Zylinska’s (2012) framing of mediation as a constitutive process to the point where media and technology become synonymous:

The question of technology is not about technology per se but about modern humanity's way of being. Technology is fundamental to modern ‘culture’... This relation of technology to culture is always important since *humanity brings itself forth in part through its way of using things, its arts and crafts*. (Poster, 2000, p. 18, emphasis added).

Heidegger touches upon this notion in his writings on technology when he alludes to the Greek *tekhnē*’s originary meaning of “bringing-forth” and “presencing,” which he describes as a type of revealing: “[Humanity’s various uses of technology] let what is not yet present arrive into presencing” (Heidegger, 1954/1977, p. 10). Heidegger sees humans’ use of technology as revealing humanity’s true nature through creation (*poiesis*).

These revealings are what tie human nature to the emergence of vitality forms, for mediation has a way of amplifying the vital forces that surround us. As McLuhan’s

(1964) proclamation of media as “extensions of man [sic]” speaks to, mediation augments our sensory faculties in order to reveal hidden worlds. In this sense, it helps us access elements of virtual experience that may have escaped our sensibilities. Hansen (2004) explains that sensory perception is channeled through the digital network as an embodied prosthesis—not as an entity outside of the body’s subjectivity, but as an expansion of it. Hansen also argues that technological advances in media recording allow humans to expand their perception of their own bodily affectivity, as now our media has the ability to manipulate these recordings to expose aspects of perception that were previously unconscious to us: “... the experience [that new media] broker fosters the interpenetration of technology and perception and thereby extends the scope of the body’s sensorimotor correlation with the universe of information” (Hansen, 2004, p. 77).

In other words, technologically-mediated experience allows us to

zoom in to describe the very small events, lasting seconds, that make up the interpersonal, psychological moments of our lives: the force, speed, flow of a gesture; the timing and stress of a spoken phrase or even a word; the way one breaks into a smile or the time course of a decomposing smile; the manner of shifting position in a chair; the time course of lifting the eyebrows when interested, and the duration of their lift; the shift and flight of a gaze; and the rush or tumble of thoughts. (Stern, 2010, p. 6)

When the body’s somatic imagination is awakened through our use of media, it allows for a closer relationship to our bodies and the affective forces that stir our senses.

In this sense, the stirrings of vitality forms are fundamentally rhetorical, as the shifts along the subjective contours of audience-participants constitute a change in position. Stormer (2015) points out that “the constant change of potentiality to actuality, manifested across different rhetorics, depends on mobility—what ‘is’ can and will move, becoming other than it is” (p. 1). To be other than what one is means to occupy a new

position, a process that is fundamental not only to rhetoric but to vitality itself, as experience is embedded in the constant motion of life. Rhetoric in the affective, vital dimension speaks to the “what else” of virtuality, in the way the virtual reveals worlds previously hidden to us: “As an expression of vitality, mobility ... can be described through the affordance that there is more than this place, more to that thing, more that may be, and the changes that always herald the realization of some of that ‘more’” (p. 2). The question of “what else can there be?” is foundational to the rhetoric of protest—the interruption of the status quo to surface new potentialities, new ways of being in the world.

### **Conclusion: Protest Dynamics their Political Possibilities**

Having addressed the first three research questions—*how can we identify the aesthetic features of digital protest art?*; *what makes digital protest art rhetorical?*; and *how does digital protest art engender changes in human subjectivity?*—the specificity of the fourth question, *how can we trace the impacts of digital protest art to reconceptualized notions of political and social change?*, requires that it be answered empirically. In the pages ahead, I perform close readings of three case studies of digital protest art—that is, three examples of aesthetic interventions to the status quo that incorporate the digitization of media in some way, either through its production or through its dissemination. Through these affective rhetorical criticisms, I identify rhetorical impacts to the subjective contours of audiences. These impacts are unique to the affective register of rhetoricity; they do not occur through appeals to logic, reason or ideology. Rather, by rendering audiences affectively open to new potentialities, they interpellate beholders as activists and co-protesters.

These impacts are: material changes to the political terrain; the constitution of a plural subject; and the presence of an ethical witness—all changes that are rendered through the intentional (and at times unintentional—see Chapter Five) engineering of an artwork's forms of vitality. Rhetors of protest must recognize the ways in which powers of domination have bled out from traditional institutions and now appear in the very terrain in which subjectivities are shaped. Protest art that seeks to address the deterritorialized, postmodern political system may root its interventions in disrupting the shaping of political affect produced by dominant powers. Additionally, new forms of protest art may also resist forces of domination by challenging the basis of individuated, self-contained subjectivity upon which capitalist modes of production rely. When bodies are affectively primed to work in open relation to other bodies and to the terrain, an artwork can serve as a basin of attraction that constitutes the emergence of a plural subject. Finally, when artworks prime us to subjectively entangle with others, creating collectivities and pluralities, this can surface a means to ethically witnessing the plights of others. Ethically witnessing exposes the imbrication of the expanded subject within systems of violence in revealing the ways in which economies of oppression also take root within our own embodied subjectivities.

Protest art, particularly digital works that circulate through processes of remediated potentialities, posit a force that may reach across these boundaries, shake us out of our comfortable, individuated realms, and expand the contours of our own subjectivity. As Bolter and Grusin note, within the virtual,

[t]he borders of the self dissolve, as it occupies the position and experiences the problems faced by other creatures ... Because there is no single, privileged point



of view, the self becomes a series of ‘other’ points of view—the intersection of all the possible points of view that can be taken in a given space. (1999, p. 247)

Our increasingly virtual lives—which, to some extent, have already been colonized by the hegemony of ideology and identificatory factions—may also remove us from our usual perspectival anchoring and render our bodies “dynamic and unstable” (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 253). These virtual shifts have the potential to change our material worlds because they may posit and even constitute new realities: “It is not the eyes and ears, not the forms, sounds and words, but the collision of the bodies, and finally the accident, that will become the *primary indication of reality experience* in the age of simulation” (Rotzer, 1995, p. 124, emphasis added). As the realm of the virtual is pregnant with movement, our virtual bodies circulate along with the affects emanating from these artworks, allowing us to collide with alterity, and positing new political possibilities therein.

By reading specific case studies of digital protest art according to these vitality forms and modes of perception, the rhetorical criticism performed in the next three chapters is guided by aesthetics rather than by content. It looks to the way that protest art moves bodies by impacting their sensorium. If one is to take seriously the idea of media and human subjectivity as co-constitutive forces, then these material impacts have significant implications for the contours of political subjects. Of course, the affects of digital protest art may at some point be taken up in political discourse or ideology, but the primary mode of interaction between the viewer and the artwork should be understood as affective rather than rational or logical—or at least as a grafting point between the affective and the symbolic. This alternative approach to studying protest art’s impacts is

significant, as ideology places boundaries between individuals, factions and parties, whereas aesthetic affectivity can render previously closed-off bodies open and vulnerable, engendering a response to rhetoric's perpetual question of "what else is possible?"

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “HONOR IS NOT BETWEEN OUR LEGS”: VANDALINA’S RESISTANCE TO TURKISH SPATIAL POLITICS

A three-minute video by the Turkish street-art collective, Vandalina, has languished on the organization’s YouTube channel since 2013, amassing a relatively modest 15 thousand views (Vandalina, 2013). The most recent comment on this video was posted in 2014, and it is not clear whether the Vandalina collective is even still active. However, the slick production of the video reveals a compelling account of the organization’s presence in the Turkish capitol of Ankara in 2013. Quick-cutting scenes illustrate the city’s urban textures and the architecture of public life in the capitol: the chrome and red-plastic backdrop in which the transit trains are decorated; the cool metal poles and handles that line the subway cars; and the clear glass walls that partition off public spaces between subway travelers and pedestrians.

Throughout this montage, a pair of hands peels stickers off of their plastic backings and surreptitiously places them onto these various surfaces. In one fluid motion, the unidentified subject inconspicuously presses a sticker depicting a crisp white dress stained with blood—or is it a cluster of poppies?—onto the outside of the subway car as she exits the train. As the subway doors close and the car groans out of the station, we see another sticker has already been placed on the lower-righthand edge of the door’s window. Although we have been watching this person place stickers throughout the train

station, the appearance of an already-present sticker is nonetheless startling. A black-and-white vector illustration of a woman holding her face and screaming peers at us above block lettering that says, in Turkish, “Everyone should know” (Vandalina, 2013).



*Figure 1.* Vandalina sticker protesting the sharply rising femicide rate (Vandalina, 2013).

Vandalina is a street art collective in Ankara, Turkey that designs and disseminates protest stickers to be placed in public spaces throughout the nation’s capital. These stickers are dedicated to a different social issue each month; their debut campaign, which focused on the alarming rate at which women are murdered in the country, has generated a particularly significant amount of attention and press coverage. According to one of the stickers, murder rates for women have increased 1,400 percent in seven years

(Güler, 2013). These palm-sized stickers began adorning trains, windows, doors, poles and other urban architecture in the winter of 2012 to 2013, and include a range of designs, some text-based, some image-based, and almost all bearing a black and white palette with occasional splashes of red.

Vandalina runs its campaigns democratically. The social issues covered each month are crowdsourced through social media, and the finished designs are shared to their Facebook page, where users can download the designs, print them on standard sticker paper and disseminate them throughout the city. Through this democratic invitation, the collective's audience is encouraged to take a more active role, affording agency in artistic creation beyond mere spectatorship. In this relationship with its audience-participants, Vandalina awakens the remediating potential of the virtual, where media forms remain fluid, taking on new materialities, eventually bleeding out into the physical world of urban life. This process illustrates the potentiality of digital information to take on new forms: ideas become designs, "likes" become votes, digital designs become printed stickers, and the stickers themselves become a part of the urban textures of Ankara. The affordances of digital, virtual technology allow us to examine the movement and directionality of Vandalina's creative process, as virtual and physical converge and overlap.

Further, Vandalina's undertaking illustrates an approach to resistance based upon spatial politics. Among the hustle and bustle of the crowds boarding and exiting trains, rushing to their next destination and ensconced in their daily routines, the sudden apprehension of a sticker depicting jarring imagery subtly woven into the fabric of urban life engenders an affective interruption of temporal and spatial flow, as new forces are

injected into the contours of the everyday. By repotentializing the cityscape as a network of blank canvases, Vandalina's messages reach people in moments of routine, absentmindedness, and repetition, creating flashes of affective shock and a sudden emergence from the banality of the everyday.

In this chapter, I argue that it is not just Vandalina's message, but also its process and aesthetics that compel the viewer and effectuate change in the political terrain of Ankara. Vandalina's stickers reshape public spaces through aesthetic interruptions. The rising rate at which women in Turkey are murdered, contrasted with the government's dismissals and refutation of these facts (Tremblay, 2014) as well as its inaction in the face of this phenomenon, parallels Adrendt's (1963) notion of the "banality of evil," where the routines and patterns of the everyday mask horrific atrocities. The choice of Vandalina to place their stickers within the very spaces that constitute the everyday routine of the public foregrounds a desire to evoke an aesthetic interruption, an affective shock, where a critical presence invades public space. By tracing the vitality forms of these protest stickers to a remapping of the geo-affective terrain surrounding social spaces—in particular, social spaces where gestures of intimacy have been expressly forbidden—Vandalina offers a response to research question four: *how can we trace the impacts of digital protest art to reconceptualized notions of political and social change?*

### **The Defense of Honor and Violence Against Women**

While, due to complex structural factors, it would be impossible to provide a precise answer as to why the rates of femicide have increased so dramatically, scholars specializing in the plight of women in Turkey—such as Goksel (2008)—have offered valuable insight. Specifically, Goksel points to the materiality of discourses surrounding

the concept of honor—both national honor and familial honor, which Goksel says are intrinsically linked—that circulate throughout both public and private life in Turkey. These discourses of honor, Goksel (2008) argues, “regulate the social relations and the attitudes of individuals” (p. 6) through a network of actors, which then become “reproduced through the media, the state and kinship relations” (p. 1).

Although Turkey, like most countries, has a troubled past, borne out of armed conflict, the murder rate of women in the country hasn’t always been so alarming. In 2002, 66 women were reported murdered in the country; however, within the first nine months of 2009, that number grew to 953 (Jones, 2011). By 2006, the country ranked first among all European countries for murder rates (NationMaster, n.d.). Further, violence against women remains quite prominent; over 40 percent of women living in Turkey reported being subject to physical and/or sexual violence (Tremblay, 2014). This cavalier attitude toward violence against women in Turkey is reflected in normative attitudes as well: domestic and familial violence is seen as a private matter, and in many cases where women were beaten or killed in broad daylight, no passersby intervened (Tremblay, 2014).

Because Turkey’s framing of the concept of honor “begins to function like a code or a mechanism which regulates the social relations and the attitudes of the individuals” (Goksel, 2008, p. 6), the burden of defending honor is extended to the general populace so that “‘stain on family honor’ is turned into ‘stain on [the] honor of society’” (p. 7). Under these circumstances, passersby who exist in the same social spaces as at-risk women are implicated in the quest to promote the country’s honor through violent means. This explains why women have been beaten or killed in broad daylight and no one

intervened: passersby act as extensions of the family unit upon which Turkish civil society is built. Under this structuring, the threat of domestic violence follows women beyond the confines of the home and into social spaces, where the movements and behaviors of others carry significant power to shape public affect.

Specifically, national discourse surrounding honor is about the regulation of intimacy. Governmental policy, Goksel (2008) argues, implicitly suggests that intimacy should be relegated to the domain of the familial only, so the way that women comport themselves becomes a site of scrutiny for the public. The politicizing of women's bodies constrains their movements and conduct, from their outward appearance and dress to their most intimate, personal behaviors:

[I]ntervention with regard to the body, especially the strategic covering of certain body parts in certain public places and not in others, can become an important tool by which boundaries that constitute the public sphere are established and contested. (Cinar, 2005, p. 54)

As such, women's bodies are used as a mediator to uphold certain nationalist optics.

For example, Goksel (2008) argues that the issue of banning headscarves was always about appeasing the West. Upon the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, the Republic's first government explicitly endeavored to implement a vision of a modern, secular republic as a way of appeasing the occupying Allied Powers (Bowering et al., 2012). Even before the emergence of modern-day Republic of Turkey, women were urged to veil themselves "not with a piece of cloth, but with reason" (Sirman, 2004, p. 51)—a nod to the hegemony of Western thought. After the infamous 1980 coup d'etat, the veiling of women in public was banned as part of a political project to solidify Turkey's status as a modern, secular republic ("Headscarf Ban in Turkey,"



2013). Subsequently, women have been framed as symbolic objects—objects due to the emphasis on what they could represent to the world, rather than any agential contributions they might offer to Turkish society—that showcase Turkey’s commitment to modernity and secularism.

The degree of government intervention into political subjects’ personal lives has only increased in recent years, as the ruling AKP (Justice and Development) Party has shifted toward authoritarian tendencies.<sup>7</sup> The AKP, led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was established in 2001 and branded as pro-Western and pro-free market. Recently President Erdoğan has faced countless accusations of interfering with a free press and attempting to stamp out opposition and dissent. For example, Cook’s (2016) account of the Erdoğan administration’s response to the 2016 attempted coup<sup>8</sup> details the extent to which the government attempted to expel its rankings of members with oppositional viewpoints:

In addition to the trials, during which large numbers of officers were detained and civilian prosecutors armed with search warrants entered military bases searching for incriminating evidence, the government arrested journalists, often on specious charges of supporting terrorism; sued critics of Erdogan [sic]; imposed massive fines on businesses whose owners failed to support the AKP; and intimidated social-media companies like Twitter and Facebook to share data on their users. (Cook, n.p.)

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<sup>7</sup> The government implemented sweeping reforms aimed at appeasing Europe in order to pave the way for induction to the EU; these measures have included explicit commitments to gender equality and women’s emancipation, as well as commitments to secularism and the protection and expansion of democratic ideals. However, the turn to authoritarian tendencies began roughly around the same time that Turkey’s bid to become a full member of the European Union began to go sour, and some have speculated that the gestures to social progress, secular democracy and modernizing reforms were merely strategic window dressings necessary for EU consideration.

<sup>8</sup> For more on the failed coup attempt that occurred in Turkey in July 2016, see “Turkey’s failed coup attempt,” 2016.

Additionally, in 2014, national media outlets were integrated into the ruling party's political operations ("Turkish Voters," 2014). As such, the country has made it increasingly difficult to obtain accurate numbers on the rate at which women are killed. "The AKP government came under harsh criticism after the release of this information, so in a last-ditch effort to save its reputation, it started altering the numbers ... after the 1,400% headline, thousands of women were not reported as murdered" (Tremblay, 2014, n.p.).

These authoritarian interventions also surface in the practice of "virginity inspections." This practice, in which girls and women are inspected for the presence of an intact hymen, has undergone a series of bans between 1999 and 2002, but these bans have either been rolled back (such as in 2001) or vaguely codified to the point where the law leaves ambiguities regarding their implementation. For example, in 2002, the Turkish government rescinded a law that allowed schools to inspect female pupils and expel those who were found to be "impure." After the ban, however, the language allowing for expulsion was changed to call for the ejection of female students for "not behaving properly" (Pearson, 2002, p. 663), which could be left open to interpretation by school administrators. Virginity inspections are also still performed "at the request of the police when women are accused of prostitution or of 'abnormal' behaviour in parks" (Parla, 2001, p. 80). Further, in many sectors of society, virginity tests are still implemented on girls and women within state institutions such as prisons, schools, and orphanages (Goksel, 2008)—particularly within the Kurdish regions in the southeast, which frames certain women (particularly the middle class elite) as more deserving of agency over their bodies than certain others (poor, working class Kurds).

The disparity present in the “Kurds versus Turks” rhetoric features prominently in the government’s treatment of women, and these regional inconsistencies regarding the application of laws shape the public’s understanding of honor. The patriarchal forces disciplining women’s bodies intersect with the ethnicist attitudes concerning the Kurdish enclaves in the southeast region of the country,<sup>9</sup> which are painted as backward, uncivilized and undeveloped, as well as classist discourses that separate the elites from the working class. As Goksel (2008) argues, the government makes a deliberate distinction between the image of non-Kurdish Turkish women as “Republican Girls” on one hand, and Kurdish women as “Mothers of the Nation” on the other: “While professional, middle class women were educated, had good family backgrounds, and were depicted as ‘Republican Girls,’ [the] rest of the women were seen as ‘Mothers of the Nation’ and ‘the bearers of tradition’” (Goksel, 2008, p. 17-18). This dual treatment of woman’s image within governmental rhetoric on one hand presents an image of secular modernism to the international community, but also relegates certain women’s domains to the domestic, on the other.

The uneven treatment of women also surfaces in the government’s handling of the problem of “honor killings,” wherein a woman is killed by her relatives in order to preserve the family’s honor. Honor killings have been carried out as a consequence for behavior ranging from refusal to marry to making professional or educational decisions

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<sup>9</sup> The Turkish government has implemented a long-term campaign of suppression against Kurdish culture, identity and language. There have been various massacres and forced mass exiles of the Kurdish people—enough for some human rights watchdogs to classify these clashes as genocidal (McDowell, 2002). The Kurdish language has also been banned in schools, and forced assimilation programs were implemented which resettled Kurdish communities in non-Kurdish areas (Bozarslan, 2001).

about her own life to seeking a divorce. The practice is seen by those who practice it as a purifying one that allows a family whose honor has been tarnished in some way by these “transgressions” to be able to participate in community life once again. Mojab and Abdo (2006) point out that it would be a mistake to reduce honor killings to Islamic practices, as violence surrounding the honor of women can be seen among Latin American, Hispanic, and Mediterranean societies, among nomadic peoples and within traditional Christian societies as well.

The legal and cultural definitions of “honor killing” remain slippery. While an honor killing is based upon pre-meditation and sometimes even coordinated planning between a slighted husband, ex-husband, or partner and/or the woman’s family for the purposes of “restoring honor” to the parties involved due to a perceived transgression of traditional cultural codes (in fact, honor killings are sometimes referred to as “töre [custom] killings”), it is difficult to distinguish between these types of killings and so-called “crimes of passion.” Crimes of passion are defined as “crime[s] committed because of very strong emotional feelings, especially in connection with a sexual relationship” (Cetin, 2015, p. 348), because the cited motivations for these murders tend to be the same. The most common motivations cited for femicides related to both honor and passion in Turkey, according to Cetin (2015), are “demand for separation/divorce,” “refusal of man’s will,” and “woman’s decision about her own life” (p. 351)—all of which are seen as transgressions of traditional gendered customs. In these instances, the only difference between an honor killing and a crime of passion—the latter, it should be noted, being a type of crime that spans various socioeconomic, religious, geographic, and

cultural contexts—is whether the murder was premeditated and/or coordinated, rather than impulsive.

Due to the centrality of the female figure within national discourses celebrating Turkey's modernity, the country's dynamics relating to honor killings are complex. Goksel (2008) explains that the severity of the honor killing issue can often be swept under the rug by the government by attributing the practice to the “backwardness” of Kurdish communities. This rhetoric is reflected in the ways that honor crime is distinguished from “*töre*” crimes—while the former is framed as an individualistic act on behalf of a slighted husband or partner and treated with relative leniency, *töre* killings are framed as “tribal” (a not-so-subtle reference to Kurdish culture) and therefore likened to organized crime and punished more severely (Kardam, 2005). Although honor killings became legally punishable by life imprisonment in 1998, the *de facto* implementation of the law is much more forgiving: Tremblay (2014) describes how cases involving passion often result in reduced sentences. Further, remaining in the penal code is a provision regarding “unjust provocation,” which refer to so-called “improper behaviors” of women as extenuations for the act of honor killings. If an unjust provocation is offered—the definition of which remains vague and therefore up to the discretion of the judge—then the state considers leniency in sentencing perpetrators of honor killings and crimes of passion alike (Goksel, 2008).

The irrepressibility of passion-fueled violence has been linked to certain notions of masculinity. Mansfield (1998), for instance, connects dominant discourses of “manliness” to *thymos*, the Greek word for “spiritedness.” Sloterdijk (2010) interprets thymotic expression as a bubbling over of rage in particular. Further, as Fukuyama

(1992) states, as early as ancient Greece, thymotic rage “emerge[d] as a central factor in political life” (p.169), and continues to do so today: as Fukuyama believes that thymos is about the desire for recognition, thymotic rage surfaces and resurfaces because the quest for democracy is always about this desire, which is never completely fulfilled. This thymotic rage, seemingly sanctioned (or at least tolerated) by the Turkish government in the case of honor killings, is fundamentally about the desire for man’s recognition as dominant over woman. This is why the cited motivations for these killings always center around women striving for some sort of independence: women’s advancement is seen as a transgression of national honor because the woman, acting as an autonomous subject, strips the patriarchal system of its narrative of superiority, which hinges upon the utilization of woman as an object for the international gaze.

The AKP’s policies of environmentality render women’s bodies a political terrain: “In Turkey, public domain [becomes] a site where all secular and nationalist practices are mediated through targeting [the] bodies of women” (Goksel, 2008, p. 33). The women of Turkey are now resisting the panopticism of the state, with one lawyer activist declaring, “It is [time] to take honor out [from] between women’s legs. Honor is not between our legs. The state is locating honor into a special location of the body” (Goksel, 2008, p. 44). Vandalina’s street art works to dismantle the public’s complicity in the state’s placement of national honor onto women’s bodies, and intervenes within these contested social spaces throughout Ankara by aesthetically disrupting the domain of the everyday.

### **Terrains of Environmentality: Spatial Politics, Social Space, and Women’s Bodies**

The placement of Vandalina’s street art is rife with political and phenomenological significance as it relates to Ankara’s spatial politics. While the

collective invites participants to place the stickers wherever they choose, the majority of stickers seem to have concentrated around particular sites of social significance—most prominently, the city’s transit stations and train cars. To understand this significance, it is necessary to situate the movement within the political terrain into which these works intervene.

We can witness the discourses of Turkey’s governmentality—Foucault’s (1991) term for the “art of government” (p. 88), or the way in which governments come to produce citizens best suited to carry out their policies—emanating from the actor-network of families, communities, parliamentarians, local politicians, doctors, teachers, lawyers, judges, architects, city planners, government administrators and the presidential administration itself, which creates a web of norms, codes, taboos and other “technologies of the self” (Foucault, 2012) that Ankara residents must navigate in order to get by. Foucault notes the convergence of enhanced technologies of governmentality and the expansion of governance in the age of late-capitalism, and characterizes this extended reach as constituting a *biopolitical* regime, giving the state the power to control all aspects of human life (thus also greatly impacting non-human life as well), including the power to “make live and let die” (Foucault, 2003, p. 247). Massumi (2009) extends this characterization to consider the ways in which governments and other dominant forces have created the means by which to shape the very terrain that its subjects navigate daily, a “governmentality which will act on the environment and systematically modify its variables” (Massumi, 2009, p. 153, citing Foucault, 2008, p. 271). Massumi goes on to name this phenomenon “environmentality,” a type of intervention “in which ‘action is brought to bear on the rules of the game rather than the players’” (p. 155). In the case of

Turkey, the government's "game board" spans various scopes ranging from the macro to the micro.

Turkey's governmentality surrounding the defense of honor can be observed within the site of choice for Vandalina participants: the Ankara Central Station, which is actually two distinct buildings. The Ankara Railway Station was built in 1937 in anticipation of an influx of traffic as the city settled into becoming the new capital of Turkey ("New Ankara Metro Line," 2014). The art deco building has become a landmark of the city, reflecting the architectural styles and aesthetics of the period. Out of the station flows a suburban rail as well as three subway lines; a two-mile gondola lift with four stations connects the city center to a district a few miles north, so travel is dispersed vertically as well as laterally ("New Ankara Metro Line," 2014).

In 2016 the government completed construction on a larger, newer station dedicated to high-speed trains called the Ankara Train Station. The new eight floor building includes large commercial spaces for restaurants, cafes, cinema, department stores and offices, as well as a five star hotel ("Ankara High Speed," 2016). As such, the Ankara Central Station is seen as the artery of the city, with a diverse population of people from all walks of life travelling through it. The timing of the station's design, construction, and completion is curious here, as the implementation of the project began at the height of Turkey's bid to be fully incorporated into the EU, and was completed after those endeavors unravelled. The station could then be seen as a symbolic gesture toward progress, which then turned into a means to legitimize the increasingly authoritarian regime—a parallel to Mussolini's reference to the "trains running on time" as a legitimation of fascism (Montagu & Darling, 1962). Understanding the symbolic



significance of the station itself, it makes sense that Vandalina targeted the site for the placement of their protest stickers.



*Figure 2.* The older Ankara Railway Station versus the new Ankara Train Station (Hsu, 2008; RailTurkey, 2016).

With the older Ankara Railway Station, the stone bricks that constitute its facade give the feeling of impenetrability and unmoving authority, the vertical orientation and two front turrets simulating a watch tower, imposing a panoptic presence to those who enter. The building's construction can be understood within the rise of fascism gripping Europe in the late 1930s. The Ankara Railway Station echoes features of German expressionist architecture: the tall, rounded turrets, the commanding stone brick facade, and the large, imposing stature all echo the authoritarian overture that the German buildings created through an engineered affect within public spaces.

Ankara Train Station, on the other hand, engineers a different type of affect. The sloped edges of the building give the impression of movement, of forward progress, which makes sense given the building was designed at the height of Turkey's bid for EU inclusion, during which the government underwent major reforms gesturing to Western ideals of "progress." However, the transparent glass facade allows for a much higher degree of visibility—both from inside-out as well as from the outside-in. The many

amenities that attract people to the station allow for the policing of more types of conduct, as government workers can now keep watch over the goings-on in the public, consumer sector. The transparency of the station, compounded with the ever-present scrutiny of women's conduct, echoes Massumi's (2009) environmentality, as the panopticism of the building itself lends the space to the self-disciplining of its subjects apprehending the possibility of surveillance.

In certain cases, however, direct intervention by authorities makes itself explicitly known. In 2013, after surveillance footage captured a couple kissing on the train, a wave of public controversy arose from the transit authority's abrupt announcement ordering passengers "to act in accordance with moral rules" by not kissing or displaying romantic affection in public ("Kissing Protest," 2013, n.p.). Passengers protested the implementation of what they saw as Draconian rules of public conduct and panoptic attitudes toward surveillance, and staged a demonstration shortly after. Couples kissed for several minutes on the train and on platforms, while uncoupled demonstrators held up signs offering "free kisses". The surveillance of, and then direct commentary on, the conduct of passengers enacted environmental impacts independent of the announcement's content: the mere signaling of the surveillance, upon which the government demonstrated willingness to act, changed the affective contours of the space as passengers reacted to the presence of the government's watchful eyes.

Thrift (2013) offers examples in which harnessing—or even deliberately engineering—spatial affects can be used as a political tool—what he describes as "the careful design of urban space to produce political response" (p. 67). Some of these techniques have existed for a long time: we build monuments to engineer feelings of

solemnity, engendering a sense of duty or patriotism that then directs norms of behavior within these sites. In Ankara, two different monumental designs were applied to the Ankara Central Station, and from these designs, we can “read” how the intended effect/affect differs with the two buildings. Of course, with one building having been erected in 1937 and the other in 2016, the styles, materials, and engineering techniques are vastly different, but historical and political contexts also point to how these buildings were conceived as part of deliberate political strategies.

Although the construction of monuments designed to provoke a sense of awe is not a new technique of governance, Thrift notes that technological advancements—as well as the reach of governance in post-modernity—have enhanced the power of authority to shape public feeling from on high: “In the twentieth century ... much of the activity of the design of space was powered up again, becoming entangled with the evolution of knowledges of shaping the body... often in a politics of the most frightening sort” (2013, p. 68). What is so frightening about newer methods of governance, particularly within the postmodern stage of advanced capitalism, is its scope and reach. Governmental forces are now able to tap into a network of diverse actors who coordinate on multiple fronts to shape the political and social terrain:

Government is intrinsically linked to the activities of expertise, whose role is not one of weaving an all-pervasive web of ‘social control’, but of enacting assorted attempts at the calculated administration of diverse aspects of conduct through countless, often competing, local tactics of education, persuasion, inducement, management, incitement, motivation and encouragement. (Rose & Miller, 1992, p. 175)

For the women of Turkey, such coordination on multiple fronts produces a political terrain wherein these discourses mean the difference between life and death.

While it is not clear how the various shifts and reforms in Turkish governance and civil society have translated into the material lived experiences of women in Turkey, what is clear is that women feel an increased threat in the country. In 2010, studies found that women in Turkey fear being victimized by crime at significantly higher levels than men (Karakus et al., 2010). The imminent peril posed by the high rate of violence against women and femicide in the country, coupled with the government's multi-front network of patriarchal discourses and increasing shift toward authoritarianism, follows women through these public spaces as they navigate their way through the city. As such, the patterns, flows, pathways, and even the architecture of public spaces themselves become material manifestations of a country grappling with nationalist interpretations of "honor."

### **The Vitality of Intimacy in Vandalina's Street Art**

Vandalina's protest stickers work as a form of counter-environmentality against the government's web of social control, particularly in the way it dismantles the country's image of honor as necessarily limiting the domains of intimacy. The stickers both share intimate details of women's personal lives—arguably some of the most intimate images surrounding sex, violence, and personal, affective expression—and their scale beckons viewers to come close as these aesthetic interruptions appear unexpectedly within the terrain of the everyday. Berlant (1998) argues that the emergence of the intimate "builds worlds; it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation" (p. 282) in transgressing conventionally-held binaries between the public and private, the professional and domestic, and male and female domains. Vandalina's stickers, in injecting the intimate into the social spaces of public transit, "engage and disable a

prevalent ... discourse on the proper relation between public and private, spaces traditionally associated with the gendered division of labor” (p. 283).

Vandalina’s collective was founded in 2012 by a small group of friends living in Ankara. Their hope was to raise awareness of social issues and concerns in Turkey through the use of alternative media, and they only later settled on the idea of using stickers (Güler, 2015). Their name is a portmanteau of the Turkish words for “tangerine” (“mandalina”) and vandalism (“vandalizm”). ““We actually wanted to be connected to the idea of vandalism when selecting our name,”” said one member of the collective (Güler, 2015, para. 4). The collective’s choice to embrace the label of “vandal” is a political one: the validation of the practice through the rise of the term “street art” as an alternative to “vandalism” “unsettles the dominance of the normative criminalization of graffiti” (McAuliffe, 2012, p. 189). In other words, the artform itself can be seen as a resistance to the culture of policing and criminalizing these acts of self-expression.

Further, the fact that these stickers are embedded within the domain of everyday life highlights their unique rhetorical power, for it is within the tapestry of the everyday that the patriarchal discourses of Turkey deterritorialize, bleeding into the private, personal and even subconscious lives of the Turkish people. Kellner (1995) argues that “images, sounds, and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behavior, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities” (p. 1, quoted in DeLuca and Peeples, 2002, p. 127). These are difficult forces to overcome because often, the everyday becomes a domain that is taken for granted and therefore goes unchallenged. However, Pezzullo (2001) posits that the everyday is also rife with opportunity for what she terms “critical

interruptions,” which “juxtapose the assumptions, norms, and practices of a people so as to prompt a reappraisal of where they are culturally, what they are doing, and where they are going” (Farrell, 1993, p. 258, quoted in Pezzullo, 2001, p. 6). The power of Vandalina placing the stickers within the terrain of the everyday is that this reaches audiences where they least expect to be confronted, prompting a new look at the “taken-for-granted practices” (Farrell, 1993, p. 258) that have previously gone undisputed.

Vandalina’s first campaign, focusing on the issue of femicide, debuted in December 2012. It featured a total of ten sticker designs that highlighted the disturbing 1400 percent rise in women’s murder rates over a period of seven years. Aesthetically, the designs recall Gilles Deleuze’s (1968/1994) seminal book, *Difference and Repetition*: while there were clearly “rules of engagement” to maintain a particular color palette—black, white and splashes of red—the aesthetic and expressive nature of art dictates there be differences in their actualizations.



Figure 3. “Everyone Should Know” Figure 4. “There are five missing. Every day it becomes 5 fairy tales. Did you know?” Figure 5. “Did you know? Five women are killed every day” (Vandalina, 2012).



Figure 6. “Screams” Figure 7. “Every day, five women are killed in this country” Figure 8. “Five missing” (Vandalina, 2012).



Figure 9. “Your mother, your daughter, your sister, your lover, you friend” Figure 10. “5 women were killed today in this country” Figure 11. “Stop murdering women in the streets!” (Vandalina, 2012)

While many of the stickers maintain the aesthetic features typically associated with a graphic or pop-art look—sharp lines, high contrast, and block lettering (Figures 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, and 11)—others use a more photographic (Figure 7) or even painterly style (Figure 6), depicting more shaded areas or grey tones, with the painterly design showing expressive brush strokes and layered textures. Finally, Figure 9’s aesthetics, while graphical, also allude to a glitch art or datamoshing style, wherein the artist purposely compresses the digital data contained in the graphic to produce “glitch” artifacts. Glitch art is often associated with the “hacker” subculture, or the culture surrounding the coordinated act of extracting or exposing private data on the web. In this sense, the array

of Vandalina stickers covers various approaches to expressing or exposing the “banality of evil” (Arendt, 1963) that penetrates social space and public life in Turkey.

The subtle is balanced with the shocking in Vandalina’s designs. Figures 4, 5, and 10 incorporate the “grit” associated with urban textures, hinting that beneath the surfaces to which we’ve become accustomed lies a hidden stain—a stain on the country’s honor due to the very policies and practices that purport to uphold this “honor.” Figures 7, 8, and 9 tell us that even within the clean and efficiently-produced design, something “off” lies beneath—an invasion of red onto a crisp white dress; five women missing from a group portrait; and a sinister force that “hacks” into the surfaces and textures of the seemingly modern metropolis of Ankara. More than the representational content of the designs, though, the vitality and spatial dimensions of the stickers create a presence that seeks to jolt passengers out of their customary ways of moving through and seeing the world.

We can further observe the processual features of the stickers through the lens of vitality forms (Stern, 2010). The design, coordination, production, and placement processes all reveal the stickers’ unique relationship to the space, movement, temporality, directionality and force of life in Ankara, an ever-expanding web of intimate attachments. The unique way in which these stickers play off of their environments and the comings and goings of the public allows for a framing of the campaign as one of counter-environmentality, challenging the the spatial politics of the AKP government and its



deterritorialization into civic life by creating “a drive that creates spaces around it through practices” of intimacy (Berlant, 1998, p. 284).



*Figure 15.* Railway pole with sticker *Figure 16.* Train car door with sticker (vandalinatr, 2012).

Berlant (1998) notes that “[i]ntimacy seen in this spreading way does generate an aesthetic, an aesthetic of attachment, but no inevitable forms or feelings are attached to it” (p. 285). Intimacy, rather than existing through particular formal relationships, such as friend, loved one, or lover—and rather than through associations with positive feelings such as love, warmth, and adoration—can exist within the contacts of social relations, through a shared discomfort or recognition of another’s pain. The aesthetic of attachment in Vandalina’s protest stickers can be observed in Stern’s vitality form of force. The force of Vandalina’s artwork is not grand-sweeping; it does not usher in feelings of intimacy through over-the-top gestures, but rather small, quiet beckonings. Stern (2010) describes the vitality form of force as particularly elusive, because it operates alongside and beneath the content, which is usually foregrounded in humans’ desire to make meaning out of aesthetic experiences: “The experience contains an inferred, subjectively felt force that is experienced as acting ‘behind’ or ‘within’ the event and throughout its course” (p. 22).

Vandalina's work incorporates the vitality form of force most noticeably through its scale. A far cry from the usual mental picture prompted by the term "street art"—many might imagine a large-scale spray-painted or stenciled mural, showcasing bright colors and sizeable cartoonish designs—these palm-sized stickers creep into one's periphery. These stickers cannot be fully apprehended from far away, and yet when one is confronted with the graphic outline of a woman's screaming face from less than several feet away, the impact can be profound. Whereas wall murals beg the viewer to perceive them from a distance, the stickers, placed on subway poles, doors, and windows, beckon viewers to come close and perhaps touch the work—inviting viewers and participants alike to transgress normative behavior in social spaces. The force of the stickers' impact varies significantly from that of typical street art, in that it invites proximity, tactility, and—importantly—intimacy, which in turn impacts the body in an affectively disparate way from the large street art murals to which we are accustomed.

As viewers apprehend Vandalina's aesthetic interventions, the small scale of the stickers—in their intimate beckoning—alter the paths that individual bodies may take, incorporating a closeness to their movements through the space. As Stern explains that "[m]ost mental and physical movements are subjectively experienced as caused and guided by forces" (2010, p. 22), the gentle reminders of the subjective experiences of women in Turkey thus shape movements of relation between passengers. As Berlant (1998) describes, spaces of intimacy are produced relationally, building worlds where the hegemonic image of intimacy's "proper" place can be envisioned otherwise. These intimacies allow for an affective opening where women's personal, intimate stories can

be heard, and where the proper place for these stories is not buried within the confines of the domestic sphere, but shared in social spaces of relation.

Although the scale of the stickers varies greatly from street art murals we typically think of when we think “street art,” Vandalina’s artworks incorporate an dynamic force that is shared by these grander gestures of graffiti murals: the vitality form of time. Like graffiti sprayers, Vandalina’s participants must work quickly and subtly to affix their work onto the surfaces of Ankara’s trains. The necessity of discretion is doubly significant in the spaces of Ankara’s transit cars due to the relentless presence of surveillance by transit authorities. The application of these stickers can only happen during times of movement, when the activist can swiftly escape scrutiny of both other passengers and the surveillance cameras. This act of transgression parallels the kissing protests that occurred after transit authorities intervened into the intimate affairs of non-married couples traveling together: it makes known to authorities that “[a]gain and again, we see how hard it is to adjudicate the norms of a public world when it is also an intimate one...” (Berlant, 1998, p. 282). The small and subtle scale of the stickers, of course, differs greatly from the performative and ostentatious nature of the kissing demonstrations, but it is the layering of the vitality forms of force and time that give Vandalina’s campaigns its specific dynamic contour.

The works’ temporal flows are also impacted in the interruption of the everyday routine of passengers. While transit stations located in the middle of a large metropolis engender a temporal environment of regimented speed—passengers focus on simply getting from point A to point B as quickly as possible—the stickers compel viewers to pause. What once constituted a routine shaped by the constant opportunities to “tune out”

becomes an opportunity for critical reflection, contemplation, or even dialogue: these stickers have the potential to act as Protevi's (2009) "basin of attraction" (p. 7), or point of convergence, as shared affective shocks may entangle strangers within the same moment. These invasions remap the contours of the individuated bodies shaped by material landscapes designed to reinforce the boundaries of the individual. In the flow of the everyday, we tend to frame strangers as part of the crowd; in protecting the domain of the individuated self, we end up effacing the personal identities and experiences of others. We also tend to retreat into the comfortable distance afforded by "personal space," affectively shutting us off from any uncustomary forces we encounter. Vandalina's aesthetic interruptions not only compel passengers to alter their normative routines, but also invite them to alter the way in which they relate to each other through the transmission of affect.

The transmission of affect is, by nature, interruptive, as described by Brennan (2004): "Paradoxically, feelings are sensory states produced by thought, while interruptive thoughts are produced by affects" (p. 116). The temporal contour of the interruption is nothing less than the disruption of stable states of feeling by intruding affect, as passengers jointly apprehend this disruption of their everyday routines. Stern calls this joint apprehension synchrony, and describes its transformative potential:

Synchrony is relevant for amodal perception because the temporal aspects of the interactive flow such as the rhythmic repetitions, the ongoing match of affective states, and the sequential mirroring ... [can be transformed] into a variety of sensory and behavioral modalities that preserve the intensity, shape, and rhythms of the original message. (2010, p. 380)

The sharing and matching of affective states not only imprints passengers with the artwork's plea to apprehend the subjective, lived experience of women in the country, it

also signals an intimacy that transgresses the bounds of the government's normative disciplining.

The form of force also combines with that of space, as Vandalina's stickers counter the spatial politics of Turkey and reshape public spaces through these aesthetic interruptions. The choice of Vandalina to place their stickers within the very spaces that constitute the everyday routine of the public—namely, public transit stations and cars—foregrounds a desire to evoke a critical presence that invades public space. It injects a new potential, a new way of being in civil society by offering the affective as a form of reason. When opinion leaders urge women to veil themselves with “reason,” what they are asking is that they veil their affective energies, their subjective lives, in order to perform “honor” in compliance with the country's norms. In Turkey, dominant discourses surrounding honor equate the concept with modesty, humility, reason (presumably above emotion), poise, stoicism and even submission. In Vandalina's stickers, women scream; they bleed; they demand attention. They perform a number of behaviors not sanctioned by the country's vision of honor. However, they also introduce a new way of being in these public spaces, thus transforming those spaces into sites of affective interchange.

Further, the mere presence of this aesthetic expression may parallel Hansen and Flynn's (2015) observations on the Banksy that appeared in a poor London neighborhood, only to be removed for sale in galleries. Once the surfaces of urban life reveal a potential to be other than what they are, it is difficult for this potentiality to be wiped away. In Turkey's public spaces, where creative expression is particularly not sanctioned for women, the possibility of being otherwise transforms the train's surfaces

into blank canvases. Sloterdijk (2010) notes that pools of thymotic overflow are particularly potent in societies that suppress the freedom of expression; Vandalina's stickers puncture the stoicism imposed on women, offering a channel through which to direct the "rage banks" (p. 65) that have built up over time. Thus, along with the physical transformation of the spatial contours of the transit trains, Vandalina has engendered an affective transformation.

The form of space entangles with that of force in specific ways that emanate out of the more representational features of the artwork. Figures 14 and 15 serve as an indication of how, although Turkish civil society constrains the movements, expressions and behaviors of women in public spaces, Vandalina's stickers introduce an affective shock by forcing passengers to come face-to-face with the "body in peril," Harold and DeLuca's term for the intensive power of the abject to viscerally compel those who consume such images (2005, p. 266). Although some of the aesthetics of the stickers depicted in figures 15 and 16 are quite different—exhibiting graphical versus painterly styles—they are shocking enough to elicit a disruption of the banal. They draw viewers close, thereby puncturing the protection of "personal space." Further, they foreground the presence of personal, intimate expression in a social space in which the rules of civility and honor reign, indicating a transgression of norms that are usually dictated by these spaces. In other words, they reshape the affective possibilities within the space, serving as a counter to the publicly engineered affect designed to promote conformity and compliance to both the state and dominant ideology.

As previewed in Chapter Two, digital media constitute their own movement contour in the ways that the virtual compels the remediation of forms of expression. The

vitality forms of movement and directionality can not only be observed in the placement of Vandalina's stickers within public transit stations and cars, but within the production process itself. There is, of course, the observation that the transit cars, with their trajectories and their comings and goings of passengers, bring a sense of movement to the pieces. Each stop recontextualizes the artwork through its rooting in physical space, as well as the ever-changing crowds that experience the work. In this sense, the stickers are being constantly remediated in their physical form through the motion of the trains, as new backdrops and new affective interactions swirl around their placements.

Further, the brainstorming, designing, coordination and submission processes all begin in virtual space, with the collective soliciting ideas or even fully-formed designs from its online community. This process connects strangers and comrades in an act of creative collaboration, with participants working together on design ideas and coordinating site locations for placement (Vandalina, 2012). The virtual flow of this collaboration then moves onto physical spaces, as participants can download and print their own stickers and place them in spaces of import to them. This process embeds the virtual within the physical, material terrain of Ankara (or anywhere in Turkey), offering a sense of potentiality to the established structures of the everyday. The participants—many of them women—move through the city with purpose, emboldened by the opportunity to transgress normative boundaries through Vandalina's aesthetic interruptions. In this process, the architecture of the city is remediated into a series potential sites for further self-expression, rather than segmented spaces designed to engender conformity.

Through this digital connectivity, a sense of intimacy is also built. The creative exchanges of Vandalina's member-participants center around the affective surfacing of emotionally charged events and phenomena. While Vandalina began as a collective created by a group of friends, their network has grown to include participants drawn to the idea of exposing the banality of everyday violence against women in a creative, aesthetic way. Some of these participants may not have even met each other in person, but through the affordances of digital media, they have been able to collaborate on how to artistically express the very weighty issue of femicide. What this digitally-networked exchange engenders, therefore, are enactments of Berlant's (1998) charge to rethink intimacy through

calls ... not only for redescription but for transformative analyses of the rhetorical and material conditions that enable hegemonic fantasies to thrive in the minds and on the bodies of subjects while, at the same time, attachments are developing that might redirect the different routes taken by history and biography. (p. 286)

In other words, Vandalina's collaborative process allows activists to enact, in that moment, new ways of "doing" intimacy—ways that stretch beyond the neat categories of "lover" and "friend." The building of new worlds, through intimacy, unravels the existing one in which women are objectified into submission. The affordances of "sharing" in virtual space echoes how "intimacy ... involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others" (Berlant, 1998, p. 281).

Vandalina's work, while exposing painful wounds that haunt social life in Turkey, does so in a politically productive, world-destroying and world-forming way. In this sense "[intimacy] is ... formed around threats to the image of the world it seeks to sustain" (p. 288).



## **Conclusion: Uncovering “What We Have Come to Ignore”**

Vandalina poses a unique approach to promoting social change in Turkey. Rather than mimicking the imposing and authoritative rhetoric of President Erdoğan, women activists counter the environmentality of the regime with an alternative for engaging with civil society. These alternative worlds get to the heart of this project’s fourth research question: *how can we trace the impacts of digital protest art to reconceptualized notions of political and social change?* Subtle at first, the intimate confrontation of the horrifying reality women face compels viewers not through brute force but through empathy and compassion. Kandiyoti (1988) explains:

Women strategize within a set of concrete constraints, which I identify as patriarchal bargains. Different forms of patriarchy present women with distinct “rules of game” and call for different strategies to maximize security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression. (p. 274)

Vandalina’s stickers do not explicitly call for a response from viewers, but rather engender change by challenging the “rules of game” within social spaces. Within a culture of urbanity and conformity, the stickers gently ask passengers to pause, look, listen and reflect, while also encouraging women to express themselves and tell their stories.

On a discussion board about Vandalina’s campaign on Ekşi Sözlük, a “collaborative hypertext dictionary” (TDN Guest Writer, 2006, para. 1) that has been framed as Turkey’s locally-run version of Wikipedia, user “oguran” (2012) writes:

A new community that seeks to uncover what we have come to ignore.  
We will leave our homes and go into the streets  
While your friend is waiting at the metro gate  
We will see the stickers at the bus stop  
That say “5 women are killed every [day] in this country”

We will think for a moment that we will escape, we will be sick, we will swallow  
I'm already up to my throat, I don't have much to lose  
Apart from the shit in our heads. (para. 5)<sup>10</sup>

“Oguran”'s entry captures the material reality of women in Turkey. The normalization of violence against women has caused these issues to recede into the background, woven into the urban textures of everyday life, to the point where the optics of “honor” has become a “technology of the self” (Foucault, 1988) for the very women whose safety is threatened by such codes. Vandalina's stickers counter the environmentality of the Turkish code of “honor” by embedding themselves within this fabric and intimately beckoning those who consume them to come face-to-face with the abject, and by gently transgressing the dominant norms of public conduct to encourage women to seek opportunities for self-expression and public intimacy.

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<sup>10</sup> Original: “elbirliđiyle üstünü kapamaya çalıştığımız, görmezden geldiğimiz ne varsa sıradışı şekilde ortaya/ koymaya çalışan yeni bir topluluk./ evimizin kapısından çıktığımız anda,/ sokakta yürürken,/ arkadaşımı beklerken, metro kapısında,/ otobüs durağında "bü ülkede her ay 5 kadın öldürülüyor" yazan stickerlar göreceğiz./ bi an neşemiz kaçacak, canımız sıkılacak, yutkunacak ve biz napıyoruz diye düşüneceğiz./ boğazımıza kadar boka battık zaten kaybedecek fazla bişeyimiz yok./ üstümüz başımızdaki boklardan başka...” (TDN Guest Writer, 2006, para. 1).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *ZAHARA'S PARADISE: FRAMING BEHESHT E-ZAHRA CEMETERY AS A*

#### CONVERGENCE OF PLURALITY

Speak through your death, speak through mine! Speak of the end of time, the end of life, speak of the end of Iran, the end of Islam! Speak that the world may know that all of Iran's sons have died and lie dead in you... They think you are dead! I know you're not: you are my son! As long as I can breathe you will never die. As long as I can speak you will never die. As long as I am, you are... Did you not run in this dirt? Did you not play in this dirt? Did you not fall in it? Did you not rise in it? Did you not cry in it? Did you not laugh in it? Did you not breathe in it? Did you not breathe it out? Breathe, my prince of Persia. Breathe, breathe in the name of our prophets, in the name of our poets. Breathe in their every word. Breathe so that all that is dead may come back to life. Breathe for I am dead!... No! Today you may not bury my son! Bury his mother! After all, am I not Zahra, and is this not my paradise?

—Amir & Khalil, *Zahra's Paradise*

In an early scene within the graphic novel *Zahra's Paradise*, a woman named Zahra walks in a public park with her friend, Miriam, strolling along the paths that converge around a statue of renowned 11th century Persian scholar Omar Khayyam. Within a single panel the duo appear in four distinct spaces within the park, reminiscing about the past, when things were simpler, when the two women still had dating lives, and when the children were younger and easier to look after. Characteristics of each of these women appear in the figures of the background characters, as women scattered throughout the park don Miriam's lively patterned polka dots or Zahra's bright white headscarf. Zahra and Miriam are everywhere—and yet they are nowhere.

Zahra and Miriam are strolling through Iran’s great cemetery, Behesht-e Zahra—Persian for “Zahra’s Paradise”—where slain political fighters from the 1979 revolution against the Shah, the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, and the 2009 Green Movement against President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad lie in their graves—some marked, and others, not as lucky, unmarked. These two women, along with Zahra’s son, Hassan, are lost, caught in the web of Iran’s authoritarian bureaucracy as they try to locate Zahra’s other son, Mehdi, who disappeared the first night of the Tehran demonstrations challenging the results of the 2009 Iranian presidential election.



Figure 1. Zahra and Miriam in Behesht-e Zahra (Amir & Khalil, 2011).

*Zahra’s Paradise* is a graphic novel depicting the aftermath of Iran’s Green Movement, where millions of demonstrators took to the streets to voice their dissent against the outcome of the election, and where thousands were subsequently attacked,

beaten, arrested, detained, tortured, and killed by Iran's Revolutionary Guard between 2009 and 2011. The comic was written by Amir and illustrated by Khalil—whose last names have remained secret due to their fears of political retaliation. It was released on the web as a series of installments, and then published as a comprehensive graphic novel in 2011, which was arranged by a Jewish editor, who also chooses to remain anonymous for political purposes (Bressanin, 2014). The comic-turned-graphic novel is an attempt to tell the stories of those who were silenced in the brutal repression of the movement—telling these stories to the people of Iran, to the Persian diaspora, and to the world, whose understandings of Iranian politics and culture are increasingly shaped by the the gaze of Western media.

The convergence of subjectivities depicted in *Zahra's Paradise's* cemetery scene signals the spiritual and cultural significance of Behesht-e Zahra. It is within this site that memories of the past—the past of the 1979 bloody revolution against the U.S.-backed Shah, the past of Iran's prolonged struggle with neighboring Iraq, and the past of the 7th century Battle of Karbala in which the prophet Muhammad's grandson was slain—converge with the materialities of the present and visions of the future. It is in this cemetery that those fallen in the aftermath of the Green Movement lie beside the deceased soldiers of the Iran-Iraq War and the Iranian revolution in the “martyr's section” of the park (Alfoneh, 2007).

In this chapter, I analyze the vitality forms of *Zahra's Paradise* in terms of how the webcomic-turned-graphic novel enacts a convergence of subjectivities—known as the plural subject—through its production, its movement across the web, and the centrality of the Behesht-e Zahra cemetery. The ways in which *Zahra's Paradise* breathes life into the

slain and into the stories of the Iranian people frames Behesht-e Zahra as a site of convergence—a material location around which the subjectivity of the multitude develops. Behesht-e Zahra is not just a site made culturally significant by the burial of political fighters from contemporary history: it is a site that invokes the remediation and rearticulation of Shi'ism's most definitive battle between good and evil.

### **The Green Movement: Echoes of the 1979 Iranian Revolution**

The Green Movement was not only considered the largest resistance movement in Iran since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, it reverberated echoes and traces of the Revolution in the tactics used, the sites of significance, and the affective connections it surfaced. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 marked the end of Iran's 2,500-year history of monarchical rule. The last Shah of Iran, faced with growing dissent, became increasingly militant, brutal and reactionary, leading to what became known as “Black Friday,” when the Iranian military open fired on protesters in Jaleh Square in Tehran, killing 89 (Milani, 2011). By the time the Shah and his family fled Iran in January of 1979, thousands of Iranians had died in the clashes, though the exact number is not known. Those slain in the revolution were laid to rest in Zahra's Paradise, where they were joined soon after by those fallen in the Iran-Iraq War, which plagued the country from 1980-1988 and took an estimated 200,000 lives (Hiro, 1990).

As such, Iran's first decade as a republic was defined by prolonged armed struggles. Yarbakhsh (2014) notes that the collective memory of Iranians never loses sight of the fact that the present state was hard-won through heart-wrenching and bloody clashes. Many of the country's renowned political figures are laid to rest in Behesht-e Zahra, Iran's largest cemetery, which has been framed in cultural discourse as a kingdom

for martyrs. It is in Behesht-e Zahra that the martyrs of the past are met with the martyrs of the present, and as such, the spirit of the Iranian Revolution is kept alive in the commitment to fight for an Iran—or rather, the multitude of Irans—that these martyrs died for. The rhetorical framings, the expressive tactics, and the affective forces of the 2009 Green Movement, therefore, retain echoes of these past struggles.

Iran's Green Movement emerged against a backdrop of the regime of incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose doctrine relied heavily on hard-line religious principles; a confrontational policy toward Israel, the United States and Saudi Arabia; the abandonment of the oil and gas industries in favor of developing Iran's nuclear program, leading to international sanctions; and finally, the deterioration of human rights in the form of repression of dissidents and the brutal treatment of detainees ("UN: Expose Iran," 2011). Ahmadinejad was running against three other candidates, including Mir-Hossein Mousavi, a Reformist candidate who ran on the platform of freeing up the media by wresting it from state control and into private ownership; transferring the control of the police from the Ayatollah (Supreme Religious Leader) to that of the President; and ending the so-called "Morality Police," which was formed under Ahmadinejad's regime and responsible for arresting civilians (mostly women) deemed improperly dressed according to the laws of Islam ("Iran's Presidential Candidates," 2009).

Polls conducted in Iran leading up to the election were considered unreliable due to small sample size, lack of methodological information, and lack of authorship ("Election Polls," 2009), and Western polls, whose results were framed by U.S. media as more comprehensive but just as unreliable, predicted an Ahmadinejad victory (Muir, 2009). Yet the fact that the official election outcome showed a 62% victory for the

incumbent president in what was thought to be a close race raised suspicions of election fraud. Further, reports of more than 100% voter turnout were reported in 30 Iranian cities, including one that reported 141% turnout (Tait, 2009). *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Guardian* all published reports from Interior Ministry employees claiming that the election had been rigged (Black et al., 2009; Keller, 2009; Secor, 2009). Despite the red flags raised and the incredulous public, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini's declaration of support for Ahmadinejad sealed the fate of the election (Amir & Khalil, 2011).

After the announcement of Ahmadinejad's victory, supporters of Mousavi stormed the streets in protest, many wearing the candidate's signature green hue as armbands or signage. The next day the numbers grew, as many protesters adopted the slogan "Where is my vote?" which they shouted in the streets and affixed to signs. The protests swelled in numbers and intensity as tactics escalated from marching and chanting in the streets to boycotting goods advertised on state-run television, attempting to blackout state-run TV by turning on all electric appliances just before the broadcasts to interrupt power, "blitz" demonstrations where a small number of protesters would gather to shout "Death to the dictator!" several times and then disperse before security forces could arrive, and identifying and marking the houses of members of the *Basij*, the Ayatollah's volunteer militia force who were responsible for inflicting violence upon, detaining, and in many cases, disappearing, thousands of protesters (Wright, 2009).

As the protests escalated, so did the brutal repression by the government. Thousands of current and former government officials, journalists, intellectuals and civilian protesters were arrested, and reports of torture and rape in prisons surfaced



(“Post-election Clampdown,” 2009; Dareini, 2009). Many of the arrestees remain in prison today (Bakhash, 2012). The Basij was sent in to disperse the protests, where video footage shows them firing directly into the crowds (omidrstm, 2009; Jackson, 2009; vahidi04, 2009), as well as breaking into the homes of protesters and dorms at the University of Tehran and damaging property (pooyaramezani, 2009). The Iranian government has been accused of media censorship in an attempt to “choke off the flow of news from its capital” (Blair, 2009, n.p.) and of shutting down Internet access and deliberately reducing available bandwidth in an attempt to contain the footage of the protests (Bray, 2009). Further, the families of those killed were subjected to harassment, bureaucratic red tape, a forced signature declaring no complaints against the government as a requirement to release their loved ones’ bodies, and in some cases, a \$3,000 fine, ostensibly for the bullet used to kill the deceased (Fassihi, 2009).

The material developments of the Green Movement protests echo those of the 1979 revolution. During the Iranian Revolution, when dissent against the government was subject to violent suppression, the protesters and revolutionaries began chanting “Allahu akbar” as a tactic to avoid possible accusations of anti-Islamic propaganda, as the Iranian constitution states that “[u]narmed assemblies and marches may be freely organized provided that no violation of the foundations of Islam is involved” (Iran Chamber Society 2009, cited in Manoukian, 2010). In 2009, the Green Movement protesters took up this tactic once again as a way to avoid attracting the scrutiny of the Basij.

By melding together and making inseparable anti-government from Islamic slogans, it became difficult for the authorities to clearly differentiate between protesters and other (non-protesting) participants of Muharram [the sacred

honoring of the first month in the Islamic calendar] ritual events... Thus, the rooftop chanting of Allah-o-Akbar did something more profound than merely recall the 1979 revolution. It effectively stymied the state, as a violent response would expose the hypocrisy of the state's Islamic facade. (Yarbakhsh, 2014, p. 82).

Manoukian (2009) points out further parallels in the “citational” nature of the more nuanced gestures and occupation of public spaces: “People raising their hands stained with blood, photographs and videos of wounded or dead protesters, designating those killed ‘martyrs’ (*Shahid*), and occupation of the public spaces where the revolution of 1979 took place, all are citational practices” (p. 245). The gestures toward the bloody origins of the Islamic Republic of Iran signals a collective ethos of a people committed to the “sacred defense” of their nation (Fromanger, 2012; Khosronejad, 2013).

### **The “Persian Awakening” Under the Western Gaze**

Despite the efforts of the Iranian government, news of the protests reverberated across the globe. However, due to both the lack of reliable sources on the ground and the tendency of Western media to appropriate global events to suit its own interests, much of the coverage included inaccuracies, generalizations, assumptions, and even prescriptive inferences. *Zahra's Paradise* serves as a force of resistance to the Western gaze that defined the international coverage of the Green Revolution; in a way, this work stands in for the Iranian people, a people defined by an unceasing struggle against oppressors.

The inaccuracies and framing of the protest coverage in the Western media coincide with the policies and interests of the Western world. Amir, the author of *Zahra's Paradise*, cites this tendency as a primary motivation for the creation of the webcomic-turned-graphic novel:

You know, you wait for the great men to speak in defense of the rights of the Iranian people, but everyone's focus has been on the nuclear issue. This is my way of saying that there's another side to this that's just as important. It's great to be concerned about what the Iranian government might do ten, twenty years from now, but look at what it's doing to the Iranian people now... When you get news over things like CNN, you're only getting this sliver of the day, or a fragment of something. So I felt that people won't really be able to weave these fragments into a larger story. And it was that larger, deeper story that I was interested in. ("Read This," 2010, n.p.)

*Zahra's Paradise*, therefore, is not only a protest against the brutal authoritarianism of Iran, but against the reductionist gaze of the international press, as well as the imperialist gaze of the U.S. media. The narrative flows of *Zahra's Paradise* illustrate a localized account of the materialities that unfolded in the wake of the 2009 presidential election. The webcomic-turned-graphic novel is a potent force by which the stories of the protests are taken back from the powerful gaze of the West.

Analysis of the U.S. media coverage of the Green Movement protests reveals a tendency to resort to orientalist depictions, broad characterizations that support U.S. foreign policy, technologically deterministic models of causality, and the binarisms of East-versus-West and Good-versus-Evil. These orientalist depictions are powerful because of the ways in which they shape material reality. Walter Benjamin describes how "the conditions in which reality is experienced can be grasped from the relationship among media, art, and politics" (Manoukian, 2010, p. 248). In the case of the Green Movement, the dissemination of images and videos recorded on cell phones might have allowed an international audience to draw closer to the action on the ground by "enabl[ing]...new spatiotemporal coordinates as platforms for sensations" (p. 248), but it also risks being decontextualized, edited and appropriated by the U.S. media under the guise of "objectivity"—a vestigial characteristic ascribed to recording technologies

before the “post-photographic era” (i.e. before the widespread use of image and video manipulation became commonplace). Within the digitized media landscape, the depiction of Iran as an orientalized “community of interpretation” feels more “real,” as videos and images awaken the sensorium.

Said (1978) describes the ways in which non-Western cultures are abstracted, flattened, and contorted through the Western gaze via mediation, which creates imaginary “communities of interpretation” (p. 338) within the West’s collective consciousness. Pérez-Sobrinó (2013) demonstrates how the commonly-used U.S. media trope of “nation is person”—seen, for example, in the New York Times editorial, “Iran’s Day of Anguish” (Cohen, 2009)—homogenizes the Iranian people, which includes both protesters mobilized by disparate motivations and the general public consisting of pro- and anti-regime voters, non-voters, and a multitude of stances in between. Under the broad-sweeping personification of “Iran as person,” the government and the public are collapsed into one homogenous subject,<sup>11</sup> even flattening the personification of the government, which is made up of many actors that exist outside of the presidency, including “the Supreme Leader, the Council of Ayatollahs, the Assembly of Experts, the Guardian Council, and the Parliament (or *Majlis*), among others” (Pérez-Sobrinó, 2013, p. 245) who all have various stances and objectives when it comes to governing.

Further, as media reports tend to echo the foreign policy of their home nations’ governments (Cook, 2005; Dorman, 1986), the coverage of the protests tended to be

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<sup>11</sup> The homogeneity of this orientalized subject is not the same as the plural subject theorized later in this chapter. As will be elucidated, the plural subject depends on the heterogeneity of the multiplicity, and the respect and maintenance of difference.

focused less on the fate of the Iranian people and more on the potential for structural regime change. Western media were generally supportive of the protests, but ostensibly only to the extent that the protests signaled a threat to Ahmadinejad's regime (Certo, 2011; Faraaz & Shirazi, 2013). As Ahmadinejad had defined his doctrine by the anti-U.S. stance reflected in his rhetoric and policy, U.S. media coverage seemed fixated on speculations about the future of his rule, relegating the fate of the protesters and the public at large to relative obscurity (Maiwandi, 2013). As such, much of the coverage overlaid the "revolutionary" spirit of the protests:

A major false assumption of the mainstream U.S. media was that, from the beginning, Iranian youth were fighting (and dying) for "democracy"—i.e., the overthrow of the Islamic Republic. In reality, the demonstrators' motivations may have been as diverse as the number of protesters. Their placards read "Where Is My Vote?," not "Down with the Islamic Republic." This was a movement of young people who legitimately demanded their right to vote as guaranteed in Iran's Constitution—and who will expect transparency in the next election. (Hamedani, 2009)

The U.S. media, however, continued to frame the demonstrations as the beginning of a revolution. The New York Times, for example, published a post entitled "A Green Revolution for Iran" (Mackey, 2009), among countless others that defined the movement as a "revolution."

The media trope that the Green Movement protesters were "fighting for democracy" appropriates the movement to fit the United States' agenda of advancing not simply democratically-elected governments, but rather the Western lifestyle in general:

One of the most common representational patterns evident in many *Time* and *Newsweek* articles in the past ten years is a proposed correlation between Western consumer culture and broader social modernization that exhibits a pro-Western and pro-American sensibility. (Faraaz & Shirazi, 2013, p. 62)

U.S. media clamored to paint the protesters as “young,” “pro-Western democracy” and “tech-savvy,” and went out of their way to describe the Western-style clothing, accessories and technology usage of the protesters and as a way of legitimizing their movement, as if social progress somehow correlates with the conspicuous consumption common in Western publics. These depictions were often contrasted with almost obsessively detailed descriptions of “the beards and black robes of the clerics, the chadors of the women, and the ‘Allahu akbar’ chants” (Maiwandi, 2013, p. 93) of the “bad Iranians” who did not take part in the protests.

Finally, the extent to which the U.S. media jumped to attribute the spread of the protests to (Western-developed) digital technology both stripped the protesters of agency and re-centered the theme of American entrepreneurialism. “Indeed some have been so bold as to label them as the ‘Twitter Revolutions’ or ‘Facebook Revolutions.’ This, however, does less than justice to the media complexities involved” (Cottle, 2011, p. 647). Contrary to reports, Twitter and Facebook played relatively insignificant roles in the spread of the protests, since the Iranian government blocked access to social media and purposely reduced available internet bandwidth shortly after the election (Cottle, 2011). Many protesters did, however, issue on-the-ground reports via text-to-tweet services that bypassed the Internet shutdown and published these updates to Twitter. However, the primary audience for these tweets was in fact the international press, as protesters attempted to tell their stories to the world. The international press—which is dominated by the Western media—then appropriated these stories in an effort to broadcast the “inevitable” toppling of the Islamic Republic and triumph of Western visions of social progress (Certo, 2011).

Amir, the writer of *Zahra's Paradise*, explains that the primary impetus behind the creation of the webcomic was the fruitlessness of trying to raise international awareness of the atrocities occurring in Iran. “[I]t all seemed so useless, like a scream with no sound, and a cry with no echo” (“An Interview,” 2011, para. 3). The webcomic was intended to act “not [as] a message as much as...a mirror...It simply asks [audiences] to witness a reality” (“An Interview,” 2011, para. 4). *Zahra's Paradise* attempts to re-localize collective memories of the Green Movement by anchoring its imagery within the Iranian cemetery that shares the series' same name—Behesht-e Zahra—where many slain anti-government activists have been buried, a place where everyday Iranians go to mourn the loss of their young family members.

#### **Behesht-e Zahra as a Site of Convergence and the Emergence of the Plural Subject**

In the introductory excerpt from *Zahra's Paradise*, which takes place in Behesht-e Zahra cemetery, Zahra, the titular character and mother of the slain Mehdi, undergoes a drastic change in temperament. Up until that scene, Zahra has been quiet, dignified, and reserved as she navigates the authoritarian bureaucracy of Iran in search of her son. Even when she learns of Mehdi's death, she is not overcome with anguish. However, upon seeing the casket and the plot where her son is to be buried, a rage awakens within her. Almost as if by divine possession, she implores Mehdi to speak, to run, to live. Her rage boils over until it is contagious, stirring up the shared affect of others who have gathered in her paradise to mourn the loss of their loved ones. The crowd joins Zahra in giving voice to the rage of a collectivity bound by a lifetime of profound loss, eventually attracting the scrutiny of the *Basij*, who send a young officer over to arrest the agent provocatrice. When the young man instead kisses Zahra's hand and apologizes for the

loss she has incurred, the other officer tries to intervene in order to force Zahra's arrest. Instead, he is pushed into Mehdi's burial plot by the affected mass, who threaten to bury him.

Behesht-e Zahra creates a confluence for the shared rage, despair, and even hope of those who have experienced the loss of a loved one at the hands of the state, as well as a site of communion with the slain. Sloterdijk (2010) describes this phenomenon as the emergence of a thymotic collective, the "spontaneous pluralism of auto-affirmative forces" (p. 20). Such a thymotic assemblage, derived from the Greek *thymos* ("spiritedness"), is characterized by the bubbling over of affect that transcends the boundaries of the individual. Thymotic affects such as rage are always already primed to cohere into a collective, particularly because, as governmental forces advance to further regulate the expression of public affect, there become fewer opportunities to give voice to rage, resulting in the formation of "rage banks" (p. 65). These reservoirs of spirited resistance become particularly reactive in societies where the expression of dissent is suppressed (Sloterdijk, 2006/2010).

The virtually ceaseless series of violent conflicts that have plagued the Islamic Republic of Iran since its birth—from the upheaval of the 1979 revolution to the bloody Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988 to the brutally suppressed resistance movements of 2009 and 2011—have positioned the spirit of "sacred defense" (Fromanger, 2012, p. 47) as a binding agent that unites Iranians along affective contours. Behesht-e Zahra, containing the virtual relief of history, memory and collective experience, shapes the menu of actions possible for thymotic collectives within this site. The shaping of collective agency through surfacing these moral possibilities is key to orienting the formation of the *umma*,



or moral community (el-Nawawy, 2009; Hirschkind, 2006). An important aspect of the moral community is its interdependence with material sites of significance, an element commonly overlooked in the study of social discourse: “To sustain this fiction of a purely self-organizing discourse, this conception of a public builds in a structural blindness to the material conditions of the discourses it produces and circulates” (Hirschkind, 2006, p. 106).

Such myopia to the material dimensions of discourse has been challenged by rhetoricians and argumentation scholars, as the material constraints of these moral confluences shape the menu of possible actions for the thymotic collective, an arguably rhetorical effect. Hicks and Langsdorf (2011) offer a model of affective joint deliberation in which a multiplicity of actors converge to make decisions and act as a single unit—a phenomenon they call the plural subject. “[W]e believe that argumentation theorists’ neglect of, and even resistance to, the affective constitution of a plural subject exercising joint agency is rooted in culturally embedded individualistic conceptions of participants’ identities and their agency” (p. 131). Western thought, as derived from the legacies of Aristotle to Descartes, depends upon a separation of reason from passion, yet Hicks and Langsdorf posit affect as a form of reason, likening the coherence of the plural subject to Protevi’s (2009) concept of affective cognition:

This negotiation is not dominated by conscious, reflective beliefs about the world. Rather, it is motivated by sensations occurring below consciousness as the body orients to its environment... This activity of sensing/reasoning through the potential consequences and possibilities afforded by continual interaction is what we mean by affective cognition. (Hicks & Langsdorf, 2011, p. 132)

When the moral community in Behesht-e Zahra encounters the *Basij*, they must negotiate a course of action out of the realm of the possible. What is remarkable about the

action they take is its steadfastness in the face of the very security forces that have put many of these young people in their graves, and yet they overpower the *basiji* without hesitation. This negotiation is a result of “sensing through the potential consequences” rather than a process that rhetorical scholars following the Aristotelian lineage would sanction as an act of reasoned deliberation.

The constitution of the plural subject is dependent on “shared intention and joint agency” (Hicks & Langsdorf, 2011, p. 131). The primacy of the individual can be seen as a mere articulation of “reasons-for-me” out of the multiplicity of potential reasons, the former of which liberal Western tradition has conditioned subjects to privilege through the practice of logical deliberation. However, the affective process of feeling through these potentialities—particularly in situations where thymotic reserves bubble over and awaken the sensorium—can instead surface “reasons-for-us,” which decenter the individual subject in favor of the plural subject (Hicks & Langsdorf, 2011).

In the umma, such “reasons-for-us” emanate directly from the word of God in the form of a collective moral agency. The umma is formed by subjects who share not only a moral orientation, but collective experiences, memories and visions of the future.

These fragments of buried experience have found new coherence and expression within a contestatory movement focused on the ethical, as the nondiscursive background for an emerging form of public reason, virtuous comportment, and moral agency. (Hirschkind, 2006, p. 122)

Islamic philosophy, with its deep roots in Iranian intellectualism, is less attached to the primacy of individual subjectivity as Western liberal thought, and views the concept of subjectivity as a mediation of the divine. For example, in Iranian revolutionary discourse of the 1960s and 70s, “[t]here was... a constant oscillation between individual subjectivity

and a collective notion of subjectivity...” (Vahtat, 2003, p. 623). Since the community of the umma is distinguished from the *sha'b* of the nation, even the primacy of the political subject is challenged in favor of a more affective and fluid form of subjectivity.

Vahtat’s (2003) concept of “mediated subjectivity,” a process whereby godly attributes such as omnipotence, omniscience, and foresight are surfaced in expressions of human subjectivity, which acts as a mediator of the divine expression of God, speaks to a more ancient understanding of the affective dimension of experience. Surprisingly, this mediated subjectivity finds parallels with ancient Greek understandings of emotion and divine intervention. Thymotic expression in this context was understood as the transformation of the human subject into “a vessel for the abrupt flow of energy from the gods” (Sloterdijk, 2006/2010, p. 8), an understanding that is more in line with the affect theory of today, as these emotive energies were seen as emanating from without rather than from within the individual subject. “Thymos signifies the impulsive center of the proud self, yet at the same time it also delineates the receptive ‘sense.’ Through this sense the commands of the gods reveal themselves to mortals” (p. 11).

Within both of these paradigms, the individual subject is decentered in favor of a more fluid and encompassing model of subjectivity. In the last century or so, a multitude of frameworks have been authored to expose and counter the social conditioning of individualism. Simondon, for example, offers the theory of the transindividual, or “the systematic unity of internal individuation (psychic) and external individuation (collective)” (1992, p. 314). Simondon conceived of two different processes of individuation whereby the transindividual centers its subjectivity between the oscillating poles of the individual and the collective. Further, Simondon cites communication—

understood here not as a transactional model by which a message travels from sender to receiver, but rather the communion of two or more vessels of energy—as a necessary precursor to the formation of the transindividual. Simondon’s influence can be seen in Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) understanding of the assemblage—itsself a temporary process of communion between beings and material forces—and Brennan’s (2004) affective contagion, in which the affective energies of atmospheric sources can be thought to permeate the boundaries of the individual.

The idea of transmission is also seen in Harold and DeLuca’s (2005) theorizing of the abject, wherein bearing witness to violence can engender a subject’s communion with the body in peril through the exchange of affective energies. These themes surface frequently in *Zahra’s Paradise*. In Zahra’s thymotic soliloquy in Behesht-e Zahra, she sings: “Speak that the world may know that all of Iran’s sons have died and lie dead in you!” (Amir & Khalil, 2011, p. 215). The communion with the abject illuminates the power of Behesht-e Zahra as a site of convergence: through the pain of bearing witness to the deaths of Iran’s young people, the living give life to the dead.

Behesht-e Zahra then becomes the field of emergence for the plural subject, “moving toward a notion of collective individuation around a catalyzing point,” (Massumi, 2002, p, 71). Massumi’s extended metaphor of the game of soccer illustrates that the plural subject, comprised of many subject-parts working together to engender the ephemeral performance of the sport, not only includes, but relies upon for its constitution, the material terrain—in this case the field. Just as the game of soccer simply cannot exist without the field upon which it is played, Behesht-e Zahra is the driving force behind the constitution of the plural subject. Protevi (2009) calls such a site a “basin of attraction,”

or “[t]he areas of phase space surrounding attractors” (p. 6). Such phase space is understood as a site where a multitude of potentialities may unfold. So Behesht-e Zahra—being a material field where the potentialities of the past, the present and the future combine with the affective communion between living and dead (and where this affective interchange envelopes subjects who feel and sense together)—can be understood as a basin of attraction necessary for the constitution of the plural subject.

Such theorizing of Behesht-e Zahra as the basin of attraction for the formation of a plural subject is also contextualized within the cultural and spiritual significance of martyrdom in Iran. The figure of the martyr draws constant references to Hosayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who was killed in the ancient Battle of Karbala: “Indeed, it is Hosayn...who stands as the paradigmatic martyr, upon which all successive martyrdoms are modelled...*Thus, in every age there is a Hosayn, representing the forces of good and fighting on the side of God...*” (Yarbakhsh, 2014, p. 78, emphasis added). The casualties of the violent clashes that have dotted Iran’s contemporary history are framed as remediations of the original “martyrological confrontation” (Cook, 2007, p. 3) or “reactivation of the Karbala paradigm” (Yarbakhsh, 2014, p. 80).

Since Behesht-e Zahra has become the de facto site for the burial of victims of political violence, and because martyrology figures so prominently in the collective identity of Shi’a Iranians, the cemetery is regarded as a site of political contestation. One of the first acts of newly-elected president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was to visit the site, an act that many Iranians criticized as “a conspicuous, but ultimately misguided, attempt to bestow legitimacy on a government beset with controversy from the very outset” (Yarbakhsh, 2014, p. 80). Further, Ahmadinejad’s reference to the rabble of protesters as

“dust and dirt” (Manoukian, 2010, p. 245) not only renders the authenticity of his visit questionable, it likens the crowd to the *homo sacer*, ancient Rome’s “accursed man” who, having been stripped of all life except for the basic, biological definition of it, can never be considered a political subject (Agamben, 1998). In Iran, claiming martyrdom for the dead is an act of great power, as testifying to the sacrifice of a victim differentiates the death from that of the *homo sacer*, who cannot be sacrificed.

One final critical feature of the plural subject is the maintenance of heterogeneity and a respect for difference, a constitutional makeup that approaches Hardt and Negri’s (2001) concept of the multitude, or Deleuze’s (1966) multiplicity. This multiplicity can be understood as “a complex structure that does not reference a prior unity” (Roffe, 2010, p. 181): the subject-parts of the assemblage were at one point considered autonomous from one another. Hicks and Langsdorf’s (2011) theorizing of the plural subject reminds us that this subject is to be considered a “a singularity comprised of multiplicity” (p. 131), meaning that this convergence maintains the differences between individual subjects while acting or feeling as one unit. Hardt and Negri (2001), speaking on their vaguely-defined concept “...emphasized the multiplicity of the concept of *the multitude* in contrast to *the people*, which tends to reduce multiplicity to unity” (p. 242, emphasis added). Finally, the plural subject’s necessarily *temporary* constitution also requires an understanding of the differences among individual subjects, particularly their origins, backgrounds, identities and trajectories. This treatment significantly differs from the Western media’s reductive depiction of the events in Iran, where these differences were collapsed in favor of a broad categorization of the Iranian people.

These differences are crucial because the plural subject must contain a vast myriad of potentialities in order to shift the material terrain it occupies, as the multitude of actors protesting the 2009 election had, “[b]y their presence...effected a transformation of the political landscape” (Manoukian, 2010 p. 244). “Given their heterogeneity, gatherings on the street always exceed the process of naming they undergo, pointing to trajectories that open up different usages, what Gilles Deleuze called ‘lines of flight’” (p. 242). Through their “forceful assertions and diffused character” (p. 245), the crowd appeared to act as one, yet individual subjects emphasized the heterogeneity in its subjective constitution:

Many of us are not even Muslims and do not believe in God, but Allahu akbar does not refer only to our being Muslim. This now is just a sign to call one another, Muslim, Jewish, Zoroastrian, faithless or faithful; many of us do not believe in God, but we come and call God for the rest, for those who died, for me, for you, for Iran. (Manoukian, 2010, p. 256)

Ultimately, *Zahra’s Paradise* is as much for the dead as it is for the living.

Through its affective interventions—in the way it stirs up memories and virtual, material connections to Behesht-e Zahra for both Iranians and members of the Persian diaspora who have lost loved ones in violent clashes—the webcomic-turned-graphic novel positions the great cemetery as a gateway to the dead and martyred. The final section of *Zahra’s Paradise* is dedicated to those slain in the violence that has haunted the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran:

The men and women named on these next pages are now all citizens of a silent city named Omid [Persian for “hope]. There, victims of persecution have found a common life whose substance is memory. Omid’s citizens were of varying social origins, nationalities, and religions; they held diverse and often opposing, opinions and ideologies. Despite the differences in their personality, spirit and moral fiber, they are all united in Omid by their natural rights and their humanity...If you wander around through this city, you will realize that, through

their common ordeal, the citizens of Omid have created another Iran, an imaginary Iran: a democratic polity, pluralistic and diverse, where citizens posthumously enjoy their human rights. Visit Omid, meet its citizens, and, by doing so, bring them back in memory. Let them challenge our conscience so that in the future we will prevent this kind of tragedy from happening again. (Amir & Khalil, 2011, p. 257)

This dedication frames the dead as a subject united by the virtual affects that connect it to the living, injecting it with a sense of vitality. Heterogeneity is not just accepted, but an essential component within the plurality, indicating it is not the ideological identities that unite the martyrs, but a material connection to the terrain that is framed as the gateway to an imaginary heterotopia (Foucault, 1971). This virtual Iran is kept alive both through memories of the slain and what they fought for as well as the affective teleology of hope. The dedication ends with a call to action, an invitation to “visit Omid.” This call is issued to all readers of *Zahra’s Paradise*, whether they be Iranians currently living within the country; members of the Iranian, Persian, or Muslim diaspora; or non-Iranian, Persian or Muslim-identified readers. The call should be seen not as a literal invitation as much as a virtual beckoning to open oneself up affectively, to listen to the stories of the Green Movement from the perspective of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice for political dissent, and to break through the orientalist gaze of Western hegemony.

### **The Dynamic Contours and Temporal Convergences of *Zahra’s Paradise***

Among the more intimate coverage of the Green Movement, there have been calls for a more expressive, aesthetic and affective understanding of the events unfolding on the ground, an approach to covering the movement that punctures the distanced, “objective,” and self-interested gaze of the international press. As Manoukian describes:

[T]raditional political categories are inadequate to describe the forms of what is happening and capture the existential dimension of the [Green Movement]



protests... a perspective is needed that analyzes the current situation together with its particular expressive forms. (p. 239)

*Zahra's Paradise* answers this call. With its intimate depictions of an ordinary Iranian family attempting to navigate the chaos that reigned in the aftermath of the protests; its detailed illustrations that capture not only the shifting affective states of those caught in the chaos, but the material terrain that shapes such affective experience; and its methods of circulation as it calls on members of the Iranian diaspora to anchor their memories within physical sites of convergence, the webcomic-turned-graphic novel creates “a network that links a heterogeneous ensemble of institutions, discourses, and techniques—capturing gestures, behaviors, and words of human beings and engendering processes of subject formation” (Manoukian, 2010, p. 239). Indeed, an examination of the crowd-subject that formed in the wake of the 2009 election indicates that these material networks are not just included, but constitutive of, the formation of the plural subject.

This collective subjectivity was extended to the vast readership of the webcomic as it circulated beyond national borders and particular positionalities or identities. Amir conceived of the webcomic as a force that would transcend nations and languages, as well as a call to answer the collective desires of this transnational community. Quoted during *Zahra's Paradise's* serial run, Amir states: “We draw a cartoon and it's in eight languages. You spend years and years trying to say something, and the doors are often shut. And now suddenly, I can. It's happening because people want it to happen” (“Read This,” 2010, n.p.). Amir also names the transnationalism of the movement as his reason for publishing the comic online, attributing credit to the network of internet activists pushing for the free exchange of information. “There are a whole band of techies around

the world who made servers available so voices in Iran could be heard. It's a global movement. Iranians are everywhere" (n.p.). Whether "Iranians" here refers to individuals who are actual expats of Iran, or those who temporarily align themselves within an Iranian frame of reference and perspective in expressively navigating this story remains unclear, but Amir does recognize the convergent affordances—and the affective impacts therein—of the webcomic's virtual circulation: "The internet combined with a graphic novel allows us to break down all the barriers of time and space" (Bressanin, 2011, n.p.).

The vitality form that undergirds the dynamic experience of *Zahra's Paradise* is time. The convergence of martyrs who gave their lives in historic battles spans centuries, allowing Iranians to apprehend *Behesht-e Zahra* as a site of spiritual significance—a doorway to the kingdom where the deceased wait for the emergence of a just and equitable Iran. However, it is not just the representation of such temporal convergences that makes the webcomic-turned-graphic novel come alive; it is also the ways in which readers temporally experience the work. In describing the piece's temporal dimensions, Certo (2011) references both frenetic speed and stilled contemplation: "The reader skips eagerly across the pages to discover the fate of the characters and their desperate search, returning only later to appreciate the sometimes stunning imagery" (Certo, 2011, n.p.). Indeed, both the narrative and the illustration are equally compelling in that one is torn between pressing on to discover the Mehdi's fate and pausing to admire the detail and expressiveness of the intricate spreads scattered throughout. Pages (for the graphic novel) and chapters (for the webcomic) that are heavily sliced with smaller storyboard frames offer the affordance of speed, as these frames are more narrative or dialogical in nature,

urge the reader to press onward, and usually do not have the detail of the pages or storyboards that are composed of only one large frame.



Figure 2. Hassan's nightmare (Amir & Khalil, 2011)



Figure 3. A mass of protesters march in the streets of Tehran (Amir & Khalil, 2011)

A scattering of scenes in Zahra’s Paradise engenders a “temporal disjuncture” (Manoukian, 2010, p. 239) as the reader’s narrative journey is suddenly frozen, and she is faced with the painstaking details and sweeping landscapes of the Iran’s political terrain. These scenes represent either the narrator, Hassan’s, fantasies (and sometimes nightmares) (Figure 2), or sites of political, cultural or spiritual significance in Iran (Figure 3). Both of these types of scenes represent “phase spaces” (Protevi, 2009, p. 6) where—due to either the traces of remediated historical events or the affective virtual charge of fantasy or nightmare—a multiplicity of potentialities may unfold. In addition to the Behesht-e Zahra scenes where Zahra first is comforted by her friend, Miriam, and later gives voice to her rage and grief, exemplary standouts of this aesthetic technique include a full two-page spread depicting the immense size and density of the protests as

they eclipsed entire city blocks, and a fantastical, nightmarish spread depicting the inner workings of Iran’s brutal authoritarian bureaucracy (Figure 4):

Full-page illustrations of the demonstrations in Tehran, for example, pitted against a depiction of Iran’s justice system—a conveyor belt of prisoners fed into the maw of a giant mechanical mullah and shipped off to various undesirable fates—vividly illuminate the scope of both the ambitions of the revolution and the machinery arrayed against it. (Certo, 2011, n.p.)

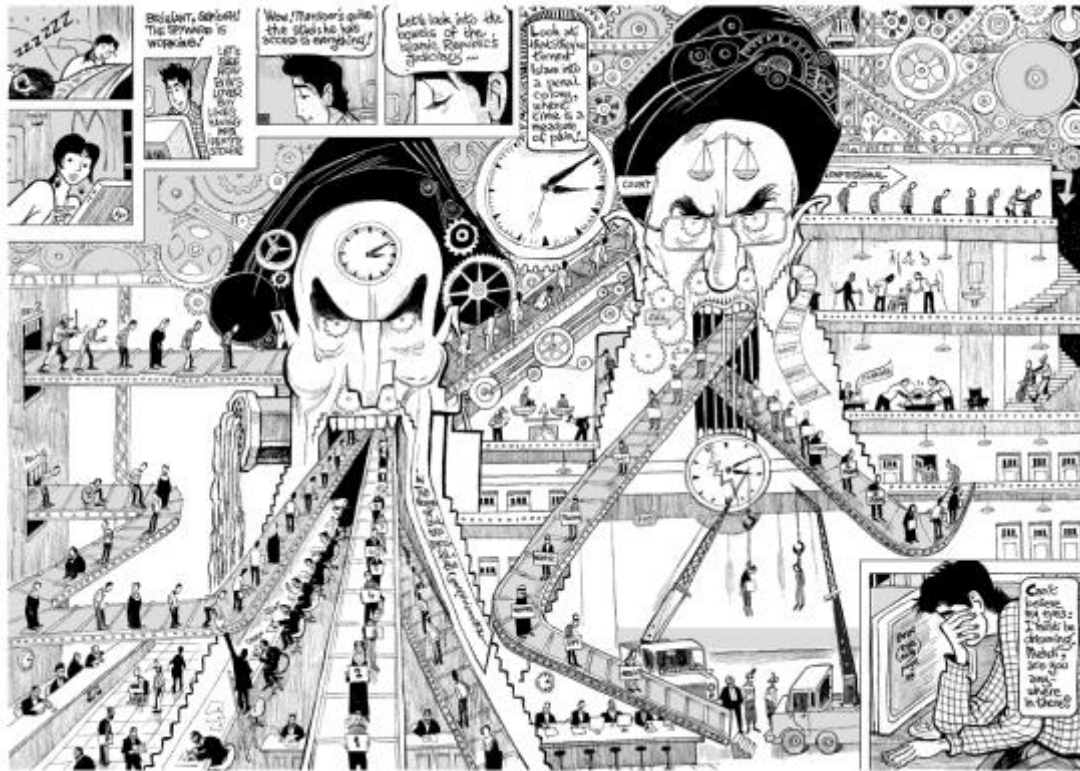


Figure 4. A fantastical, nightmarish scene depicting the authoritarian bureaucracy of Iran’s justice system (Amir & Khalil, 2011).

Of course, most of the full-page spreads featured in *Zahra’s Paradise* center around the great cemetery as a condensation site for Iran’s rich history of “sacred defense.” Each moment of resistance contains traces and echoes of each “reactivation of the Karbala paradigm” (Yarbaksh, 2014, p. 80) that came before, uniting past, present and future in the “thickness of the pre-objective present” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 433).

These depictions gesture toward a present that is fluid and elusive, always changing and shifting as phenomenologically affective experience breathes with new life—a convergence of the virtual memory of the past and the unstable potentialities of the future (Agamben, 2009).

The utilization of historical forms of protest reveals a kind of ‘split vision’ at work, a vision that is at once past, present and future... Although fixed in a particular time and space, martyrs reference past martyrdoms (stretching back to Hosayn, and including martyrs of the 1978/1979 revolution, and those of the Iran–Iraq war) while also being sacrificed in the cause of an undecided future. (Yarbakhsh, 2014, p. 82)

These depictions sit in stark contrast to the flattened characterizations of the Green Movement offered by Western media reports, and instead reveal the dynamic richness of daily life in Iran.

In addition to the detailed representations of Iran’s material terrain, the full-page spreads also shape the reader’s temporal experience, as their rush to discover Mehdi’s fate is ground to a halt by the sheer density of detail and artistic care found among these pages. The serialized releases of the original webcomic extends the duration of the narrative, paralleling the achingly slow process of tracking down one’s slain, arrested or detained loved ones, a process that, for some families, continues to this day. This halting engenders a parallel phenomenological experience to standing in the middle of a vast maze, searching for an opening—an affective confluence with Hassan, our narrator, and a subjective interchange with Zahra. Through this temporal dynamism, the reader feels Zahra’s sense of dread as she presses onward in search of Mehdi’s fate, as well as Zahra’s bubbling over of rage in the face of grave injustice and inarticulable loss. Further, temporality of the spaces between the serialized releases shape the force of the narrative’s

impact, as chapters within Hassan and Zahra's harrowing ordeal may at first act as an affective punch to the gut, while the pause that follows allows time for reflection as the reader navigates her daily life, allowing this story to seep into—and give new perspective to—the terrain of the everyday.

It is the temporal contours of *Zahra's Paradise* that surfaces Behesht-e Zahra as a basin of attraction; were it not for these historic convergences, the great cemetery would not have the very spatial affects that engender the emergence of the plural subject. It should be noted that all the scenes that take place within Behesht-e Zahra are handled with extreme care. As mentioned above, these large, page-sized panels are rendered in meticulous detail, signaling a desire to anchor the story within the virtual site of convergence where those bearing witness to the violence are united with the dead. The virtual space of memory—both individual memories of the site's personal significance, and the collective memory of each new chapter of the Karbala paradigm—surrounds these depictions, ready to be remediated upon the next “martyrological confrontation” (Cook, 2007, p. 3) to unfold.

It is in Behesht-e Zahra—specifically within Chapter Twenty, entitled “The Furies”—where we see the multiplicity emerge. The viewer is treated to detailed closeups, wide, sweeping landscapes, and aerial illustrations of the great cemetery. We are invited to view it and peruse it at a multitude of angles and perspectives. We also see Zahra's thymotic rage spill over beyond her physical form until she herself becomes a multitudinous being (Figure 5). In her soliloquy at Mehdi's funeral, she is at once depicted as young, vibrating with rage and full of vitality, and—within the same frame—old, weary and overcome by grief. In this space, she is not just Zahra, mother of the slain

Mehdi, she is also Fatima Zahra, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad and mother of Hosayn, the third Imam of the Shi'ites and whose death in the Battle of Karbala is remediated through the successive martyrdoms that follow. Zahra is the confluence of all the mothers who have witnessed their children's deaths at the hands of those who falsely purport to act on behalf of Islam.



Figure 5. Zahra's rage Figure 6. The terrain of Tehran (Amir & Khalil, 2011)

Further, the illustrations also situate Behesht-e Zahra within the vast terrain of Iran. When Zahra asks the plural subject who have cohered in the great cemetery if this space isn't, in fact *her* paradise, the perspective zooms out and we see the expanse of the sacred burial ground situated within the capitol city of Tehran. Page 221 of the graphic novel depicts an aerial view of the cemetery, flanked by Hazrat-e Zahra ("The Presence of Zahra") Boulevard as it cascades into the distance, until it ultimately reaches Kahrizak detention center, where countless political prisoners lost their lives and freedoms (Figure



6). Behind this scene the immense Zagros mountain range looms, and while they dwarf the terrain of Tehran, Behesht-e Zahra is still centered and visible in this configuration, emphasizing not only the size of the cemetery but the intensity of Zahra's plea, to which all who occupy this space must answer—occupants who span decades and centuries.

Time also entangles with the vitality form of movement in very particular ways, and there are several lenses through which to analyze the comic's movement: one is the way in which the piece was disseminated and circulated across both virtual and physical time and space; another is the movement of the illustration itself as it directs the reader through its narrative. Although the conventional form of the comic dictates a storyboard layout that follows a linear path, *Zahra's Paradise* frequently breaks this form by including in its unfolding vertically-oriented panels, panels framed by curved lines, and, as mentioned, large, full-page spreads that break up the narrative flow. These panels mark various affectively-charged moments in the story. For example, the vertical orientation of a panel in the prologue, which serves as an allegory for the story to follow, depicting a litter of puppies in an enclosed sack being thrown to the bottom of a river (Figure 7), is mirrored later in the story when Hassan sees the bodies of two protesters hung from construction cranes (Figure 8). These parallels reinforce the affective shock of the Iranian government's disregard for life—human or otherwise.

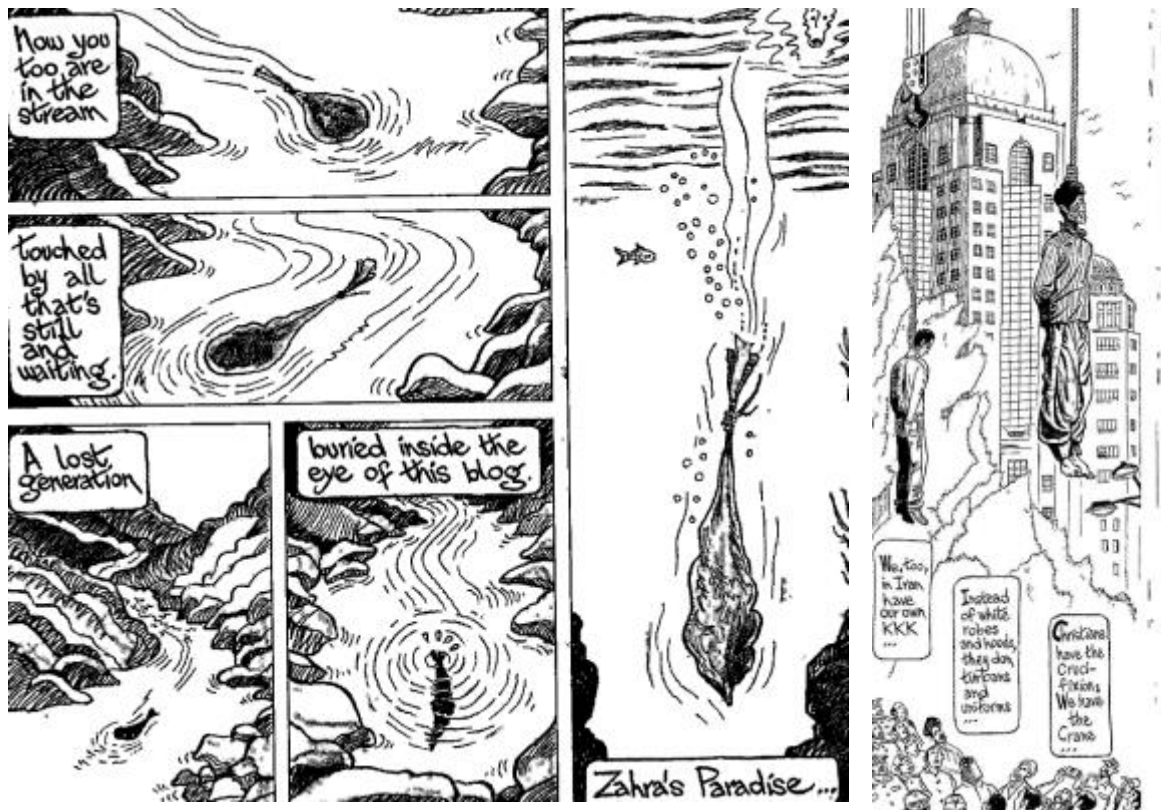


Figure 7. Scene from the prologue; Figure 8. Protesters hanging from construction cranes (Amir & Khalil, 2011).

Further, the curved panels appear within moments when the death of a martyr is discussed. In the first instance, Hassan discusses the watershed moment of the death of Neda Agha-Soltan, a young student of philosophy and music, who was shot dead in the streets during the protest (Figure 9). Agha-Soltan's death was captured on video, constituting "probably the most widely witnessed death in human history" (Mahr, 2009, n.p.). Agha-Soltan's death activated the collective thymos of the protesters, with her image being used as a symbol for the multitudinous martyrdoms of the Green Movement. Similarly, in *Zahra's Paradise*, the curved panels reappear when Hassan first learns and shares the news of Mehdi's death. These curved lines drag the reader's gaze out from beyond the frame as they sweep around the events that follow, as if death were a shroud

in which individual subjects are swept together in convergence that splices the events of the present with historic “Karbolic encounters” of the past (Figure 10).

(Amir &



Figure 9. Neda's death Figure 10. Medhi's death (Amir & Khalil, 2011)

Finally, the directionality that the piece's intermedial production engenders is not even represented among its pages. The process of creation of *Zahra's Paradise* is quite remarkable: the book was written by a Persian author, illustrated by an Arab artist, and arranged by a Jewish editor (Tossell, 2010). This process not only serves to articulate the potential of decentering one's attachments to individual identity in service of a larger movement, it once again signals a shaping of an audience that reaches beyond the Iranian diaspora. This respect for the diversity among readers while anchoring them within the site of locality shapes the possibility of a plural subject even among the scattered readership. This anchoring unites opposing positionalities beyond the historic battles that previously marked their differences—a trans-temporal yoking of former antagonists.

Further, the process of creation was one that flowed from the virtual to the physical, from serially-released webcomic to paperback book. The reach of the virtual web through which *Zahra's Paradise* was initially released allowed readers who had never stepped foot in Behesht-e Zahra to anchor their virtual locality within its point of convergence. Hansen (2004) notes that by “removing experience from its bodily anchoring in the physical space of the ‘actual’ world” (p. 160), virtual experience can render us affectively open to experiencing phenomena severed from our individual identities. Although these experiences are fleeting, their memory may color our experiences when navigating our physical worlds. While the webcomic had extraordinary reach, being simultaneously translated into Persian, Arabic, Dutch, French, Spanish, and Italian upon the release of each serial installation, the hardcover novel has ultimately been translated into sixteen different languages, indicating a more lasting desire to physically hold onto the stories that emanated out of the Green Revolution.

### **Conclusion: From “Green” to “Jasmine”**

*Zahra's Paradise* concludes with the revelation that Mehdi's girlfriend, Yasmin, has given birth to a baby girl, Mehdi's daughter. The figure of Yasmin giving birth to a new generation of political resisters symbolizes the spread of the uprisings from Iran to Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria—to name just a few. The virality of these uprising has moved many to point out the similarities between the spirit and tactics of the Green Movement and those of the uprisings in Tunisia and beyond (Cottle, 2011)—a movement dubbed by some as the “Jasmine Revolution.” That the character Yasmin's name is in fact the Persian pronunciation of “Jasmine” is not a coincidence, but a

deliberate artistic choice: *Zahra's Paradise* articulates these parallels within its glossary at the end of the book (Amir & Khalil, 2011).

With regard to the subsequent spread of resistive energies and activities throughout the Middle East—a phenomenon misleadingly labeled “the Arab Spring”<sup>12</sup>—these movements were promptly colonized under a Western hegemonic perspective in the international press. Not only were Western-based pundits and scholars clamoring to analyze and measure the successes and failures of the movement(s), the overwhelming majority of these assessments relied on the metric of structural changes resulting in Western-style democracy (Bellin, 2012; “Democracy’s hard spring,” 2011; Sadian, 2012; Spencer, 2012; Wiarda, 2012; Wagner, n.d.), going so far as to broadly generalize the movement as a sweeping failure with the coining of the phrase “Arab Winter” (Maguire, 2012). These generalizations once again illustrate the tendency of the Western media to collapse all differences across various diverse nations, demographics, and communities.

Despite these defeatist categorizations, the figure of Zahra remains alive through the practice of remediation. The Vote4Zahra campaign launched in 2013 and remained active until Iran’s most recent election in May 2017, and featured Amir & Khalil’s Zahra as the first female (and virtual) candidate for the Iranian presidency (Figure 11). Through this continuation of the *Zahra's Paradise* narrative, Zahra has given voice to the dissent that, while still present, remains hidden in the shadows for fear of violent suppression.

“She has called Iran’s forthcoming presidential elections a ‘farce,’ has a friend who says

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<sup>12</sup> The term “Arab Spring” not only erases ethnic minorities living in Arab countries affected, it falsely groups affected countries that are not Arab or Arab-majority (i.e. Egypt, Algeria, and Lebanon) with those that are, and miscategorizes Iran’s Persian-majority demography or negates the role that the Green Movement played in activating mass resistance movements.

the country's clerical leaders are 'clowns,' and is a perpetually caustic critic of the government" (El-Shenawi, 2013, para. 1). Although Ahmadinejad's successor, Hassan Rouhani was re-elected by an easy majority, and although female political candidates are still not allowed in Iran, virtual citizens were encouraged to "vote" for Zahra by visiting the newly-resurrected (but now removed) webcomic, sharing her stories, and voicing their views in a survey conducted by the fictional candidate, which asks the visitor's views on women in government, political prisoners and education (El-Shenawi, 2013).

"Zahra, in essence is much more real than the current presidential candidates," says Amir (United For Iran, 2013, n.p.). Zahra's realness comes from the fact that she is free to express her voice, to tell her story, to speak openly about her criticisms of the Iranian government, whereas the state-sanctioned political candidates<sup>13</sup> are highly regulated in terms of which topics they publicly discuss and why (El-Shenawi, 2013). Further, Zahra serves as a condensation symbol for all Iranians whose views have been suppressed by the state—particularly those who paid the ultimate price to voice those views. Although the buzz and critical acclaim for the series and subsequent graphic novel have died down since its release,<sup>14</sup> the spirit of "sacred defense" lives on in her, and her vast network of followers may see her as an embodiment of hope—specifically, a gateway to the silent city of Omid ("hope")—for the heterotopic Iran of their dreams. The

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<sup>13</sup> The term "Arab Spring" not only erases ethnic minorities living in Arab countries affected, it falsely groups affected countries that are not Arab or Arab-majority (i.e. Egypt, Algeria, and Lebanon) with those that are, and miscategorizes Iran's Persian-majority demography or negates the role that the Green Movement played in activating mass resistance movements.

<sup>14</sup> *Zahra's Paradise* received a vast and positive critical reception, being nominated for an Eisner Award for Best Digital Comic, garnering many accolades for the release of the graphic novel, and being compared to the Academy Award-nominated *Persepolis* as well as Joe Sacco's *Palestine* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*.

continuation of Zahra's vitality signals a powerful connection among readers, a communion with those killed for voicing dissent, and perhaps a potential site for reawakening the work's plural subjectivity.



Figure 11. Zahra declaring her candidacy for president of Iran (United for Iran, 2013).

## CHAPTER SIX

### #HANDSUPDONTSHOOT: CONNECTIVE IMAGES AND ETHICAL WITNESSING

On August 25, 2014, a little more than two weeks after the shooting death of Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, the Twitter account for 21st Century Wire—a news platform that bills itself as delivering “News for the Waking Generation”<sup>15</sup>—posted a photo ostensibly depicting a scene from the local protests that ensued in the wake of Brown’s death. Captioned “Has a #PoliceState already arrived?” (21st Century Wire, 2014) and including the additional hashtags #Ferguson and #HandsUpDontShoot, the photo shows a male protester of color, his back to the camera, facing a cadre of police officers dressed in military gear and pointing assault rifles directly at his person (figure 1). In this alarming juxtaposition, the protester appears particularly bare and vulnerable in his jeans and tshirt, armed only with what appears to be a small, lightweight backpack—more fashionable than functional—slung over one shoulder. Further attesting to the vulnerability of the protester is the fact that his bare hands are held high in the air, exposing a clear path from the assault rifles to his vital organs, as well as the fact that he has no weapon to aid in his defense. Looking closely at the image in question, one can see that the protester’s figure is slightly out of focus,

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<sup>15</sup> The credibility *21st Century Wire* has been questioned vis-a-vis its categorization as a conspiracy website on Opensources.co, a project that “navigates fake and otherwise misleading ‘news’ websites” (Zimdars, n.d.). However, the credibility of the platform is not the focus of this essay; rather, I attempt to look at the aesthetic features of the #HandsUpDontShoot imagery through the connective affordances of Twitter.



placing emphasis on the six officers who menacingly point their weapons in the protester's direction. The vulnerable protester, therefore, is meant to bring the brutality and threat of the police force into stark relief.



21st Century Wire @21WIRE · 25 Aug 2014  
Has a #PoliceState already arrived? 21stcenturywire.com/2014/08/25/no-... via @21WIRE #Ferguson #HandsUpDontShoot  
pic.twitter.com/oWSNjSMOW0

Figure 1. “Has a #PoliceState already arrived?” (21st Century Wire, 2014).

The contrast between the aggressive militarization of the police and the vulnerability of the protester is emblematic of the ethos behind #HandsUpDontShoot, a hashtag movement borne out of Brown’s shocking death on August 9, 2014. The phrase “hands up, don’t shoot,” acts as a rhetorical device from which multiple meanings emerge. One one hand, the phrase speaks to the highly debated circumstances of Brown’s death, asserting that the young man of barely 18 years had his hands up and was unarmed when Officer Wilson shot him six times, with the final fatal blow entering the top of his

head (Apel, 2014). On the other hand, the phrase also refers to the stance that the protesters found themselves taking when confronted with an unnecessarily militarized police force decked out in full riot gear—the protesters’ posture a conciliatory stance meant to de-escalate the rising tension between law enforcement and communities of color, as well as a gesture of solidarity with the slain Brown. Finally, a third meaning speaks to “hands up, don’t shoot” as an everyday material reality for persons of color navigating an American landscape embedded with historic legacies wherein communities of color are unfairly policed, disciplined and suppressed.

Alongside the multiple meanings emanating from the hashtag live the affordances presented by this digitally-mediated phenomenon. As affordances are embedded features of media technologies that encourage or discourage certain human behaviors (Norman, 1999), we can look to these affordances of the hashtag to understand how it guides digital users’ aesthetic experiences of digitally-disseminated imagery. Hashtags perform two functions: while they serve to index—and therefore group—online content through the process of hyperlinking to a “live” catalogue embedded within participating media platforms, they also serve to shape the meaning of content (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Hashtags may be topical in nature, alluding to the subject umbrella under which content may fall (also known as a “tag”), or they may be rhetorical—asserting a particular point of view, narrative, or affective state. Hashtags may be used ironically or humorously, indicating an affective subtext to be read beneath the actual text itself, and they may also be subversively appropriated to assert a counter argument to the original intention of the hashtag.

In Twitter's incorporation of multiple media forms, which combines text, hypertext, image and video, a peculiar phenomenon surfaces when sifting through the images indexically connected by the use of the #HandsUpDontShoot hashtag. As Apel (2014) likewise found, "[#HandsUpDontShoot] represents one of two dominant kinds of images in response to the police killing of Michael Brown: Black protesters with their hands up in the posture of surrender and police in riot gear, sometimes aiming weapons at the protesters" (n.p.). The contrast between the images of vulnerable protesters with their hands up and those of aggressively militarized police units surfaces an affective shock. These juxtapositions, which can be described as neither intentional nor unintentional due to the fact that they are collective formations of individual posts, end up surfacing a more visceral, embodied advancement of the third discursive meaning of the #HandsUpDontShoot hashtag: that of describing the material reality of communities of color as they navigate the network of White supremacist ideology that continues to frame civil society in the United States.

In this chapter, I trace the aesthetic features of the #HandsUpDontShoot images—particularly those images posted within one month of Brown's death—that foreground these shocking juxtapositions to what I see as the hashtag's historical analogue: antilynching photography. As antilynching photography was meant to counter the photographs' intended purpose of asserting White domination over "animalized" Black figure by foregrounding the barbaric White mobs over the abject Black body, the rhetorical force of #HandsUpDontShoot images appropriates the power of antilynching photography to likewise fight the systematic subordination of communities of color. By analyzing these images through the lens of Stern's (2010) vitality forms, I illuminate how

Twitter's connective affordances shape viewers' aesthetic experiences of #HandsUpDontShoot and its subsequent affective pull to engender an opportunity for ethical witnessing.

It's important to note that by "aesthetic" I do not refer to the term's perhaps more common understanding of being "concerned with beauty or the appreciation of beauty" (OED, n.d.). The mass subjugation of human beings on the basis of race—or any other identification—is never a thing of beauty, nor should it ever be considered as such. Rather, I call on the term's secondary meaning as "a set of principles underlying the work of a particular artist or artistic movement" ("Aesthetics," n.d.) to note the features surfaced by the various practices of antiracism work. Coleman (2013) offers an understanding of the aesthetic that "describes that which can be considered emotionally stimulating on the level of the imaginative, not merely the sensual" (p. 2).

Because commonalities in the creative expression of the hashtag movement images are discernable and speak to an engagement of the senses rooted in collective memory, the images speak more to an artform than it does a piece of "objective" media. We can see that the images are significant in that they communicate a subjective expression of their authors' lived experiences and identities; they do not attempt to "objectively" capture an event in order to disseminate a report—after all, the constant environmental affects that surround the fear, hostility and tension experienced between Black communities and law enforcement officials cannot be condensed to a singular event. These images speak to a desire for creative self-expression in order to surface an affective engagement with issues such as racially-motivated police brutality. Therefore, by exploring these aesthetic features—and by including difficult and heart-wrenching

examples of both lynching photography and hashtag images that depict the Black body in peril—one can note the principles that direct the composition and contextualization of relevant images. These features surface a number of affective engagements, including horror, revulsion, and anguish—the very antithesis of pleasure experienced by the senses. In this analysis, I note how #HandsUpDontShoot’s parallels with antilynching photography illuminate the power of the aesthetic to advance antiracist rhetorics and actions.

**“They Left His Body in the Street to Let You All Know This Could Be You”:**

### **Policing Communities of Color in the 21st Century**

With the mass proliferation of personal recording technologies embedded in smartphones, the issues of racially-motivated police brutality and the systematic targeting of bodies and communities of color have been brought to the forefront of public discourse in recent years. However, to think that these issues are in any way novel simply because bystanders suddenly have the means to digitally capture these evidential incidents would be ignorant of the intervening decades after the civil rights era up to the present day, when law enforcement’s role in upholding White supremacist ideology may have been written out of the explicit word of the law, but remained within both the spirit of the law and underpinning beliefs and attitudes. From shockingly explicit events like that of the Rodney King trial, where four police officers were captured on tape brutally beating and kicking the then 25-year-old King as he lay on the ground—only to result in an acquittal for all four officers—to the more subtle, behind-the-scenes passage of mandatory drug-sentencing legislation that disproportionately affects communities of color, the legacies of Jim Crow continue to course through the veins of the American public. As a case in

point, in early 2017, reports were released that the FBI has been quietly investigating ties between White supremacist groups and law enforcement officers, with some cases dating back to the early nineties (Speri, 2017).

Nevertheless, the ocular-centrism of our mediated culture forced a confrontation with these explicit incidents recorded for posterity and disseminated throughout vast digital networks. One of the first incidents to result in an outpouring of social media engagement—as well as a hashtag movement—was the 2012 shooting death of unarmed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin by neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman. When authorities initially failed to charge Zimmerman with a crime, protesters took to social media to express solidarity with the slain Martin—and to expose the absurdity of some opinion leaders' claims that Martin's death was justified because the hoodie he was wearing could be classified as “thug wear” (Mirkinson 2013)—via the hashtag movement #HoodieSunday. This movement called on supporters to change their social media profile pictures to self-portraits of themselves wearing hoodies, the optics of which would refute the suggestion that Martin was “asking for it” because of his choice of apparel.

Although Martin's death was not video recorded, in recent years scores of videos depicting the death of unarmed people of color at the hands of the police have been captured and disseminated to the public. Such proliferation of personal recording devices has seen a shift in the cultural framing of the medium of video in recent years. As Mitchell (1994) describes, we now live in an era of post-photography, where the prevalence of video-manipulation technologies suggests that photographic and videographic media no longer present us with the “objective” truth. While the objectivity of these media has long been contested due to the fact that the act of taking a recording in

itself requires framing, perspective and determining a hierarchy of importance for the content, the post-photographic era has surfaced the critical question of how to interpret video or photographic evidence of police brutality. Further, many point out that in the police brutality cases where unedited, raw video footage has been used in court as evidence, the overwhelming majority of defendants are still acquitted, indicating that, “[l]ike words, images are open to interpretation...[a]nd whose interpretation wins out will always say more about who is in power than who is in the right” (Vertesi, 2015, n.p.). Towns (2015) also asserts that not only do cameras not protect victims of police brutality—nor do they aid in the prosecution of the perpetrators—they may also “go a step further to create new venues to spectacularly consume antiblack violence” (p. 1), leading to the normalization, and even the commodification, of images depicting the abject Black body.

While it is clear that there is reason to question the utility of on-the-ground video evidence of police brutality, it is also clear that, for members of the public wishing to fight the systematic targeting of bodies of color by law enforcement, recording these moments still holds immense value. In December 2015, the ACLU released its series of state-based mobile applications, called Mobile Justice, intended to make recording police activity more accessible within a smartphone’s interface, and to protect the footage by automatically sending the video to the ACLU’s database—of particular use if the user’s phone is confiscated by police (“Justice,” 2015). Mobile Justice CA, for example, premiered in the iTunes app store as the 81st most popular photo and video app in the United States (“Mobile Justice,” n.d.). Another exemplary incident of video technology usage in the case of police violence is the death of Philando Castile, whose fatal shooting

by St. Anthony, Minnesota officer Jeronimo Yanez was streamed live to Facebook by Castile's girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds (Furber & Pérez-Peña, 2016).

In such cases where videos portraying the fatal use of force by police against unarmed persons of color prove futile in the prevention and prosecution of these deaths, one may question the value of recording an incident of police aggression. I argue that the real value of these videos is not in their utility but in their expressive capacity. While a video may not convince a grand jury of an officer's violation of the law or of human rights, it seems important for communities to bear witness to the deaths of their members, deaths which police units many times attempt to obscure, bury or distort. The crux of understanding the value of these recorded deaths comes down to the difference between acting as an eye witness within a juridical context versus bearing witness within a religious or spiritual context—the latter of which creates shifts along the subjective contours of witnesses, as the pain of the abject body resonates on a deeply visceral level with the viewer.

The difference between witnessing as a means of delivering legal testimony and witnessing as surfacing a subjective awakening can explain the controversy behind the #HandsUpDontShoot movement. The events leading up to Michael Brown's shooting on August 9, 2014 have been highly contested: some reports indicate that Brown and Wilson struggled through the police car window (Bosman and Fitzsimmons, 2014) while others maintain that Brown was 35 feet away from Wilson at the time of the shooting (McLaughlin, 2014). Reports also indicate that Brown had stolen cigarillos<sup>16</sup> from a

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<sup>16</sup> Newly released video evidence appears to show Brown visiting the same store earlier that morning exchanging goods in a brown paper bag—believed to be marijuana—with the store clerk in exchange for



liquor store shortly before the encounter with Wilson (Berman and Lowery, 2014), but information was soon released revealing that Wilson had no knowledge of the robbery when he apprehended Brown; rather, when Wilson stopped Brown for jaywalking, it was unrelated to the earlier alleged robbery (Lopez, 2014). However, the most highly controversial account of that day was that of Brown's friend Dorian Johnson, who stated that Wilson shot Brown while the victim's hands were held in the air (Cornish, 2015). Subsequently, more than 50 percent of witnesses stated that Brown had his hands in the air when shot by Wilson (Santhanam & Dennis, 2014), but these witnesses were deemed not credible by the Department of Justice because such testimony contradicted forensic evidence (Eckholm & Apuzzo, 2015).

As such, the #HandsUpDontShoot movement has been widely criticized to have perpetuated a misrepresentation of Brown's death (Capehart, 2015; Gass, 2015; Ye Hee Lee, 2015). However, if we understand the rhetorical entreaty of "hands up, don't shoot" as advancing a more visceral understanding of the material experiences of persons of color attempting to navigate entrenched White supremacist assumptions of Black guilt, then it appears that the draw of the #HandsUpDontShoot movement is less evidential than it is expressive. It acts as a means through which participants bear witness to the affective state that surrounds communities of color as they are forced to constantly assert their innocence—while being systematically targeted in spite of these assertions.

Brown's death continues to haunt the local community in other ways. After the shooting, Brown's body was left in the street for over four hours, at first completely

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the cigarillos, and then leaving the cigarillos with the clerk for safekeeping, challenging the interpretation of the later footage that Brown had robbed the store (Hannon, 2017).

uncovered and then only partially covered by a White sheet (Hunn and Bell, 2014). The timeline of events between the shooting and the removal of Brown's body were not consistent with standard procedure according to Dr. Michael M. Baden, the former New York City chief medical examiner who was hired by the Brown family's lawyers to do an autopsy, and the delay in having the body removed made even some members of the local police force uncomfortable (Bosman & Goldstein, 2014). Photographs of Brown's corpse laying in the street, a stream of blood flowing from his head, were also widely disseminated on social media, tagged with the now familiar #HandsUpDontShoot hashtag (Hafner, 2016). The effects that this carelessness – intended or unintended – had on the community eerily paralleled the ways in which lynchings in the early twentieth century came to signify the control of Black communities by the White power structure: “They shot a Black man, and they left his body in the street to let you all know this could be you,” one Ferguson resident mused (Hunn and Bell 2014, n.p.). Patricia Byner, a Ferguson committeewoman, also stated, “It...sent the message from law enforcement that ‘we can do this to you any day, any time, in broad daylight, and there’s nothing you can do about it’” (Bosman & Goldstein, 2014, n.p.).

The idea that images of the Black body in peril can be used as a mechanism for control and domination over communities of color dates back to the turn of the nineteenth century, when lynching photography was widely disseminated among both pro- and anti-lynching movements. These images of the abject were disparately contextualized according to the rhetorical perspective of the party doing the disseminating. Antilynching movements subverted prolynching photography's instrumentalization of the Black body in peril by recontextualizing, remixing, and juxtaposing the imagery to surface an

“against-the-grain” read of Blackness—aesthetic techniques now commonly associated with digital media practices.

### **The Figure of the Abject: Lynching Photography and Ethical Witnessing**

For publics on either side of the lynching debate in the first half of the 20th century, the visual power of the abject Black body was understood as a means to advance a rhetorical pronouncement either in favor of or opposing the practice of lynching. These extra-judicial killings were supported by White communities who saw the legal emancipation of African Americans as failing to adequately keep people of color in their “proper place.” While in many states, lynching was considered illegal, incidents of lynching were almost never prosecuted by authorities (Wood, 2009). Further, lynching depended upon a highly visible and spectacularized gaze: “As such, these lynchings were most about visibility, about spectacularizing White supremacy and the cohering of White subjectivity through and against ‘the spectacle of the dead Black other’” (Raiford, 2011, p. 39). The optics of lynching, therefore, depended upon the presence of photographers and the dissemination of the resulting images thereafter.

These optics also depended upon the cultural framing around the photographic image. At the time, photography was understood to reveal a kind of “objective” truth that is normally indiscernible by the subjective fallibility of the human eye. The camera was seen as a “neutral” mechanism, which “made manifest interior truths about the essence of racial character” (Wood, 2009, p. 85). As such, White communities paraded these images around as supposed “proof” of White superiority.

For Black communities, these images were interpreted as a warning. Lynching photography would eventually reach Black audiences through publication in local

newspapers or sale in local shops—or worse, the body left hanging for days after the lynching would eventually force Black domestic servants to chaperone a family trip to the site, where White families, including children, would gather to have their photo taken with the corpse (Wood, 2009; figure 2). Black viewers would be forced to bear witness to the unspeakable violence committed against their race, “‘knowing full well that one Negro swinging from a tree [would] serve as well as another to terrorize the community’” (Allen et al., 2000, quoted in Harold and DeLuca, 2005, p. 269). The role that these images played as warnings to Black communities parallels the way in which local communities in Ferguson saw Brown’s body being left in the street for hours as its own



warning: “At worst, [the Brown case] continues the legacy of American lynching in which White supremacists left murdered Black bodies exposed as warnings to members of the Black community to ‘stay in their place’” (Apel, 2014, n.p.).

*Figure 2.* A white family poses around the corpse of Rubin Stacey (Sorene, 2014).

However, Black communities were not the primary intended audiences for lynching photography. These images “depended on controlled and limited viewership” (Wood, 2009, p. 77), and were highly posed, carefully engineered, and methodically curated. The barbaric violence leading up to the lynching—where White mobs would transport the victim to a visible site in town, subject him or her<sup>17</sup> to hours of public torture, and kill the victim by either hanging, shooting or burning at the stake—would pause as White participants collected themselves around the body and posed calmly and confidently for the camera. “These conventions of lynching photography—keeping the actual violence outside the frame, the mob’s posing for the camera—became instrumental in creating and perpetuating images of orderly, respectable mobs” (Wood, 2009, p. 86). The point of these photographs was to contrast the ostensible “White emotional restraint” with the “presumed savagery and moral depravity of their victims” (Wood, 2009, p. 88).

Further, pro-lynching photography was intended for local circulation only. Local photographers were often called to the scene ahead of time—frequently by the very law enforcement officials charged with intervening in the illegal practice—and were allowed to keep the negatives so they could develop and peddle further images “through newspapers, in drugstores, on the street—even...door to door” (Raiford, 2011, p. 38). These images were imbued not only with monetary value, but with social and cultural capital as well, as they were framed as souvenirs from the event and served as reminders

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<sup>17</sup> While the overwhelming majority of lynching victims were men, one of the most significant historic injustices is the erasure of Black female lynching victims. These women were often lynched as a proxy for the alleged male offender, or for intervening on behalf of their male loved ones (Owen & Ehrenhaus, 2011).

to the White community of their supposed superiority and dominance over the abject, Black Other. The collection of souvenirs was not exclusive to photographs: after the killing, White mobs would fight over various paraphernalia from the lynching, as well as the clothing and even body parts of the victim (Wood, 2009). We can see parallels of this shameful practice even in contemporary times: in 2016, George Zimmerman auctioned off the gun he used to kill 17-year-old Trayvon Martin for \$138,900, although his previously unsuccessful efforts to sell the firearm were met with a high bid of \$66 million (Owen, 2016). The “souvenirs” from the killings of persons of color have proved to be a highly charged site of contestation, as these practices across eras continue a legacy of White society commodifying Black subjugation and pain.

When the NAACP began collecting and disseminating lynching photography nationally through its magazine, *The Crisis*, it forced isolated White communities to confront the optics of these practices on a national level:

[T]hat these images might circulate outside their community was particularly troubling, for what were consumed as celebratory souvenirs of White triumph... would most certainly become icons of disgrace, ‘bad publicity,’ outside it. [Community] elites recognized that new contexts changed the meaning and significance of the images entirely. (Wood, 2009, p. 182)

Antilynching movements, noting how the images’ national exposure forced White city officials to distance themselves from, and in some cases condemn, the lynchings, enacted a campaign to deliberately recontextualize the photographs in order to shame these communities nationally. As such, the optics of antilynching photography feature the practices of remediation, juxtaposition, and contrast—aesthetic features used prominently in today’s digital and remix cultures.

**“Do Not Look at the Negro; Look at the White Children Who Gaze at this  
Gruesome Spectacle”: The Aesthetic Features of Antilynching photography**

Antilynching movements, observing the shame that was forced upon White communities when lynching photography was circulated beyond localized networks, seized upon this opportunity to expose the barbarity of these White supremacist practices through the subversion, recontextualization, and appropriation of prolynching rhetoric:

Prolynching rhetorics produced, circulated and utilized a defiantly malevolent gaze that both articulated and enforced racial hierarchy. Antilynching rhetorics appropriated that gaze in order to expose and denounce the hatefulness, sadism, and self-assurance that were hallmarks of White supremacy. (Owen & Ehrenhaus, 2011, p. 107)

Much of the reframing of these photographs depended upon removing the image from cultural assumptions of historical objectivity and surfacing a more subjective, visceral read of its contents. Barthes (1981) refers to the dual forces of photography as the *studium* and the *punctum*: while the *studium* looks at how a photograph presents historical facts—facts that beg to be interpreted and analyzed—the *punctum* is the affecting, haunting, and “wound[ing]” (p. 27) impact the image has upon the viewer, forcing a qualitative shift along her subjective contours and arresting interpretation. For antilynching photography to be effective, the image must be removed from its connotations of factual historicity, its meaning which begs to be interpreted and analyzed, and be apprehended by its affective force, its sense of vitality—in Bolter and Grusin’s words, its sense of immediacy, or the sense that what is apprehended is not a representation but a live event for which the viewer is present and in which she is implicated.

Antilynching efforts subverted the rhetoric of prolynching photography by drawing attention to the pain and torture of the Black abject body—thereby refuting the prolynching movement’s framing of such debasement as proof of Blacks’ animality and therefore inferiority—and by extension, the barbarity and inhumanity of the White mobs:

[Antilynching movements] represented White mobs as savage threats to American civilization, a representation that held particular force in light of the United States’ international role as a beacon of democracy. In turn, the Black media projected themselves, and by extension all African Americans, as the true defenders of American law, order, and justice. For many African Americans, the power of the lynching image helped to construct an alternative social identity that not only defied prevailing stereotypes of Black men and moved beyond passive victimhood but also rendered them active critics of White hypocrisy and rightful participants in American democracy. (Wood, 2009, p. 184)

By shifting the focus of these images, Black Americans were able to construct their own countermemory by recentering their contributions to American history and solidifying a collective identity as the embodiment of true American values.

This remediating technique relied on two tacks: a deliberate, curatory selection of the photographs published for circulation, and the editing techniques of cropping, captioning, compositing, and strategic recontextualization through layout. Although the NAACP clamored to gather as many lynching photographs as possible, the organization paid special attention to any images that punctured the prolynching strategy of leaving the actual act of violence out of the frame. For example, after the 1937 lynching of Robert “Bootjack” McDaniels, accused of murdering a local White merchant in Duck Hill, Mississippi, lynching opponents got their hands on a series of uncanny and now-infamous photos of McDaniels in the midst of his torture and suffering (figure 3). When the NAACP published these photos in *The Crisis*, the lynching made the front page in newspapers and magazines across the country, with some outlets reproducing the



disturbing images. Further, when news of the lynching reached Congress, who was in the midst of a contentious debate on a proposed federal antilynching bill, one senator, in support of the bill, displayed a poster depicting two of the images on the Senate floor (Wood, 2009).



*Figure 3.* Robert “Bootjack” McDaniels before his death (“The lynching,” 2015).

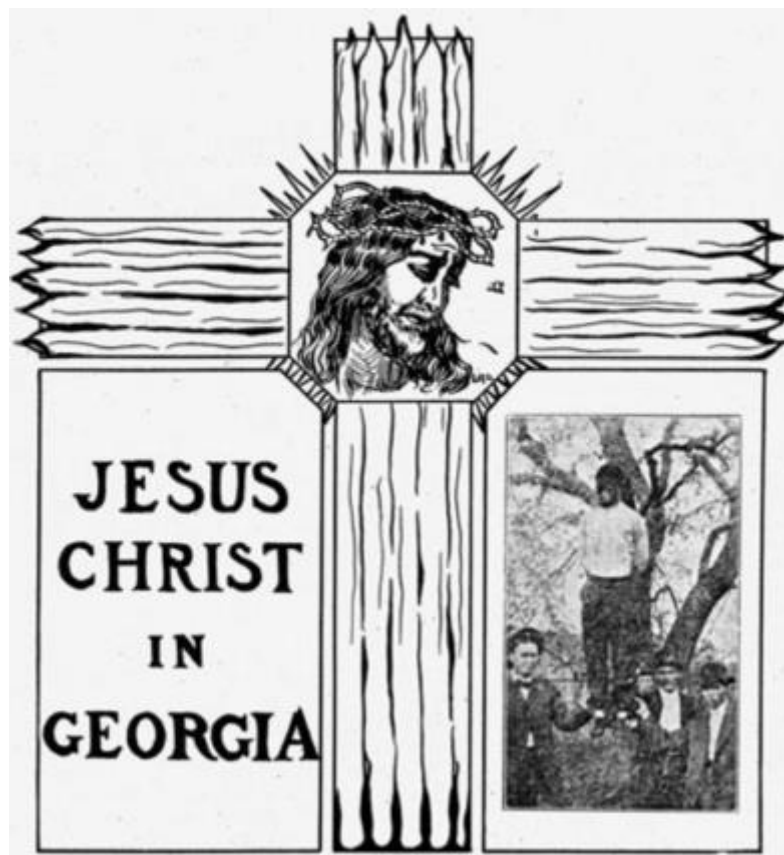
Scholars have noted the power of the abject body to serve as affective interruptions to rationalization. In describing the haunting images of the slain 14-year-old Emmett Till, killed in Money, Mississippi for allegedly whistling at a White woman—images that Till’s mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, released and circulated after her son’s funeral—Harold and DeLuca (2005) note: “But even before the haunting, this face—that was momentarily impedes thought, confuses, belies detachment, interrupts civilization, and kicks us in the gut...As many have attested, it provokes a physical response that

temporarily precedes and exceeds ‘sense’” (p. 274-5). The impact of these images is immediate, preceding—and perhaps delaying or even precluding—any sort of rational cognition, instead impacting the witness’s embodied subjectivity and relationship to the world. Further, witnessing to violence provoked a subjective change to those who consumed it within these contexts—whether it be live and in-the-flesh, or via media dissemination (Harold & DeLuca, 2005).

This change depends on whether the witnessing subject attempts to exile the abject from her impenetrable conception of autonomous subjectivity, or whether she embraces the abject as containing traces of her subjectivity, and further recognizes the traces of the abject within herself. Harold and DeLuca note that images of the abject body may blur the boundaries between subjects: “This blurring is not necessarily the result of a detached reflection, or contemplation of the viewer, for the force of the image is too strong...As Butler rightly notes, the abject is necessarily within each subject” (2005, p. 281). Of course, this blurring of subjective boundaries wholly depends upon the positionality of the viewer. Antilynching activists probably had no illusions of changing the views of White communities that actively participated in these horrific practices; their intention was to shame these communities by exposing their barbarity to a—hopefully more receptive—national audience. “Antilynching activists’ employment of photography made available and discernible other ways of interpreting Blackness in which the Black body is read ‘against the grain,’[and] in which alternative meanings of Blackness are asserted” (Raiford, 2011, p. 35).

The power of the abject Black body is also discernable through the editing and compositional techniques deployed by the antilynching movement. One editorial spread

in *The Crisis*, by editor W.E.B. DuBois, was published under the title “Jesus Christ in Georgia,” and featured an illustration of Jesus Christ on the cross, gazing down in anguish at a cropped image of a hanged lynching victim with his murderers posing proudly around his body (Wood, 2009; figure 4). In this editorial, the lynching victim is depicted as a Christ figure and also serves as the affective connection between opposing the barbaric practice of lynching and a pious fidelity to the Christian faith. Because the image of the abject Jesus plays so strongly in Christian religious iconography, the hope was that viewers would transfer such pathos over to the Black lynching victim and—by extension—the African American community.



*Figure 4.* “Jesus Christ in Georgia” (DuBois, 1911, in Wood, 2009).

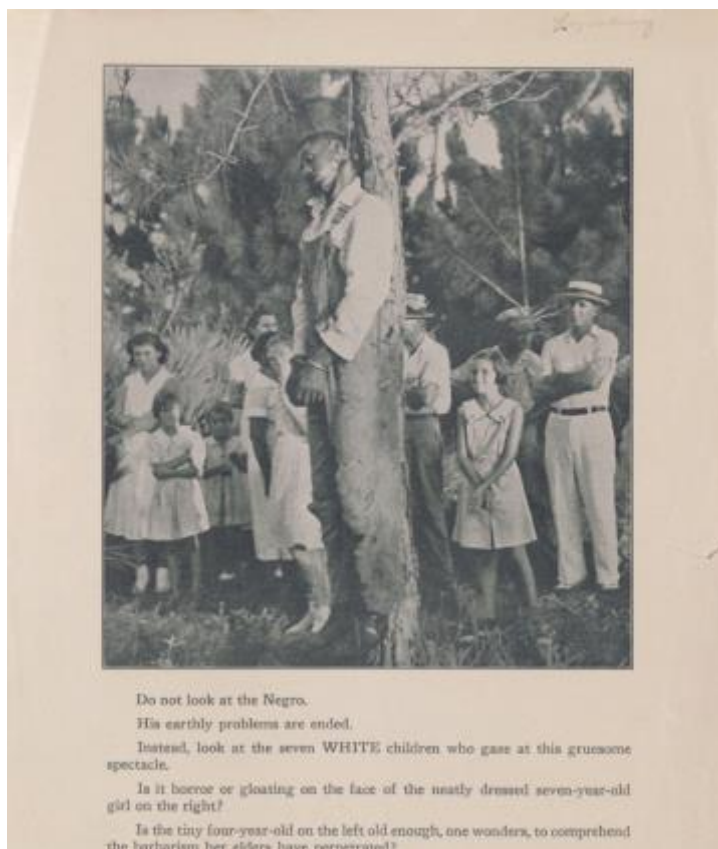
However, in the majority of the antilynching movement's editorial techniques, the focus was deliberately pulled away from the debased Black body and placed onto the barbarity of the White mobs. Because photographs of the mobs in the midst of enacting violence were hard to come by, much of this was achieved through the techniques of compositing, captioning and contrasting. For example, in 1927, the *Chicago Defender* published a "composite photograph" depicting "the actual lynching and burning at the stake of John Carter by a crowd of the most prominent White citizens of Little Rock, Ark., on Thursday night, May 5" (Wood, 2009, p. 192; figure 6). The "photograph," which was most likely composed of parts of other photos and illustrations, depicts White citizens in the act of lighting the pyre upon which Carter was burned, and was meant to function more like an editorial cartoon, as "the *Chicago Defender* clearly was not using the photograph to illustrate with graphic realism the report of Carter's lynching" (Wood, 2009, p. 191). Instead, the paper hoped that by combining the creative license afforded by political cartoons to depict White violence with the cultural assumptions of objectivity afforded by the photograph, the composite would highlight the perverse inhumanity of these White mobs on a more visceral, affective level.



Figure 6. “How White Citizens of Little Rock Burned John Carter” (“A Composite Photograph,” 1927, in Wood, 2009).

Antilynching newspapers would also direct the viewer’s focus through strategic captioning. In 1935, *The Crisis* published a photograph from the lynching of Rubin Stacey, hanged in Fort Lauderdale, Florida for allegedly “threatening and frightening a White woman” (Wood, 2009, p. 196; figure 7). Importantly, this image also featured several White children staring up at the corpse, while several White men and one Black woman—most likely the nanny, who is also the only figure facing away from the body—look on. The caption reads:

Do not look at the Negro.  
 His earthly problems have ended.  
 Instead, look at the SEVEN White children who gaze at this gruesome spectacle.  
 Is it horror or gloating on the face of the neatly-dressed seven-year-old on the right?  
 Is the tiny four-year-old on the left old enough, one wonders, to comprehend the barbarism her elders have perpetrated? (NAACP, 1935, in Wood, 2009, p. 196)



*Figure 7.* “Do not look at the Negro” (NAACP, 1935, in Lindsey, 2014).

This rhetorical entreaty functions in several ways. Firstly—and potentially most significantly—it draws the viewer’s attention away from the debasement of the Black body and onto the depravity of the “family portraits” that became a ritualized practice in the wake of a lynching. Secondly, the caption serves to counter the prolynching movement’s justification of its practices by claiming to protect women and children from the “hypersexualized and predatory Black male” (Owen & Ehrenhaus, 2011, p. 106) and the supposed violence that this myth posed. Clearly, by bringing young children to the site of a perversely violent act, White men had no intention of shielding these vulnerable young people from violence. Finally, it should be noted that another strategic tack for the antilynching movement was to appeal to moderate Whites, who may not be moved by the

plight of the abject Black body or the threats to Black humanity, but may be moved by the possibility that these spectacularized events pose psychological harm to White youth.

A final editorial technique of the antilynching movement was the strategic placement of content in order to surface juxtaposition and contrast. In 1936, after a contentious debate, the Senate decided not to vote on the proposed federal antilynching legislation. Meanwhile, lynchings continued, including that of Lint Shaw, hanged eight hours before he was to stand trial for attempted assault in Royston, Georgia. *The Crisis* published a two page spread, where the headlines of each page were meant to be read together: “Mobs Act, While—U.S. Senators Talk,” it read, depicting a photograph of White men posing around Shaw’s hanged body on the left page, and a story about the stalling of the antilynching bill on the right (Wood, 2009, p. 198-201). This juxtaposition was meant to contrast the aggression of the White mobs with the passivity of the Senate to do anything about it. The spread also posed another rhetorical intervention: surfacing the complicity of White bystanders who pose with, but do not participate in the killing of, the abject Black body. “[T]he caption assumed that to pose for a lynching photograph was to join the mob, a mob that continued to ‘act’ even after its victim was dead” (Wood, 2009, p. 199). In this way, antilynching rhetoric positioned bystanders as not only enablers of the violence but as active participants.

Through these rhetorical moves, antilynching activists “effectively used lynching photographs to overturn the rhetorical claims of White supremacy and to position African Americans and their allies as the true defenders of civilized morality” (Wood, 2009, p. 202). In doing so, they also implored viewers of the photographs to act as witnesses to the (extra)systemic brutality and terrorization of Black Americans. By subverting the cultural

framings associated with the medium of photography, these campaigns invited viewers to ethically witness this ugly stain on U.S. history by playing on the tension between the dual functions embedded in the figure of the witness. Witnessing, in many of these cases, meant looking beyond the simple facts depicted in the photographs. Instead, it was framed as a apprehension of the embodied, material experiences—and therefore human subjectivity—of the abject, Black figures in order to recognize the lived truths experienced before the moment of the snapshot.

### **“The Whole Nation Had to Bear Witness to This”: The Dual Logic of Witnessing**

As explicated above, lynching as a practice was highly dependent upon the spectacularization of the act as a means to promote White domination over the racial Other, and therefore relied on photography as an integral component. However, as newspapers and magazines began to incorporate photographic images in their publication, the medium of photography itself underwent a process of remediation. The publication of a photograph alongside editorialized, written content, along with a growing awareness of the processes of cropping and layout, began to shift cultural assumptions about the supposed objectivity of photography. However, the historic legacy associating photography with removed objectivity was hard to shake:

Since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century, photography had been vitally linked to modern rationalism and empiricism, which invested vision with an unquestionable capability to uncover truth and validate knowledge... The ideological certainty that White southerners imposed on these images rested on these assumptions about photographic objectivity. The photographs provided seemingly indisputable graphic testimony to White southerners' feelings of racial superiority. (Wood, 2009, pp. 75-6)

Indeed, the associations of photography with verifiable “proof” have proved sticky even across decades and centuries: in today’s post-photographic era, despite widespread social



awareness regarding the ease of digital manipulation techniques, photographs are still taken to be more reliable forms of evidence than, say, oral testimony. The cultural frameworks around which we tend to favor more “objective” methods of witnessing—in which embodied subjectivity is considered a contamination of efforts to seek capital-T Truths—speak to the disparate notions associated with the act of witnessing.

Almost three years after Brown’s death, the trope of framing “hands up, don’t shoot” as a myth, a lie or a hoax continues to be shared prominently on social media. The intensity behind critics’ dismissals of the entire movement are based upon the fact that forensic evidence and the Justice Department’s judgements on witness credibility suggest that Brown did not have his hands in the air when he was shot by Wilson (Ye Hee Lee, 2015). However, the rhetorical force of #HandsUpDontShoot is evidenced by the fact that the hashtag still sustains significant affirmative usage on social media. In the years since Brown’s death, the rhetorical fragment has undergone a shift in meaning. Rather than being solely applied to the circumstances surrounding Brown’s death, communities of color have appropriated the phrase to communicate their lived experiences navigating a society still teeming with (newly emboldened, it seems) White supremacist rhetoric. In other words, “hands up, don’t shoot” may or may not have applied to the forensic circumstances surrounding Brown’s death, but it still carries the embodied truth of those who live it day in and day out.

Oliver (2004) points out that witnessing carries two connotations: the “juridical connotations of seeing with one's own eyes [the eye witness], and the religious connotations of testifying to that which cannot be seen, or [the idea of] bearing witness” (Oliver, 2004, p. 197). She also makes the distinction between witnessing and

recognition. Recognition entails integrating an encounter within one's already-held positionality and ideology; in other words, recognition appropriates an experience within the terrain of the already familiar. Pro-lynching movements used their photographs as evidential "proof" to confirm their already-held beliefs about Black inferiority of by positioning the object of the Black body at a distance from their own subjectivity. Similarly, those determined to defend the killing of Michael Brown point to the supposed forensic impossibility of "hands up, don't shoot" to refute the entire claim that his death was unjustified, because suggesting that officers do not have the right to kill an unarmed Black teen who does not comply with the police does not fit comfortably within already-held beliefs and ideologies.

The idea of "eye-witnessing" remains firmly planted within the juridical context of assessing the experience of another in order to make a judgement about the validity or veracity of her claim. Eye witnessing leaves the autonomy of the individualized subject intact, integrating the witnessed "knowledge" into the domain of the familiar. As Scarry (1985) describes, White supremacists documented lynchings to testify to the "incontestable truth" of White domination, as if freezing the imagery in time would preserve the systems that work in conjunction to subordinate people of color. Bodies frozen in time in this way—as simply a means to demonstrate a supposed historical fact—are thus objectivized, or rendered objects.

Ethical witnessing, on the other hand, requires that the subject undergo a change in perspective at the very least, if not a change to her understanding of her own subjectivity. Oliver suggests that ethical witnessing produces an affective shock that disrupts the terrain of the "already known" (Oliver, p. 181). Testifying to that which

cannot be seen, but rather can be felt on a deeply visceral, embodied level occurs when that which is witnessed leaves traces within us, and our material identity is never the same. Such testimony cannot be written down in history books or legal records, for its impact is beyond discursivity. Anti-lynching photography, therefore, speaks to this form of witnessing as a way of bearing testimony to the subjective experience of the abject body, to its pain and torture. It serves to reconfigure the boundaries of witnessing subjects; rather than freezing experience in time, it works to move those who visually consume the images to resist these patterns of injustice.

This is why the images that Mamie Till-Mobley released of her horrifically disfigured son at his funeral moved the nation in such a way: “The brutalized, fragmented body of a teenage boy visually testified not to the absoluteness of White supremacy but to its fraudulence” (Harold & DeLuca, 2005, p. 283). Antilynching photography worked to surface the piercing *punctum* of the image over the *studium* that concerned itself with historical accuracy. This is why *The Chicago Defender* did not concern itself with accusations of false evidence when it published its “composite photograph” of the lynching of John Carter: the facts of each lynching may change but the images spoke to a larger, more haunting truth about life in the American South (and North) as a person of color. Similarly, #HandsUpDontShoot participants care little about the forensic accuracy in their use of the hashtag, because the phrase reveals the hidden truths that people of color live every day.

To testify in the legal sense means that the contours of the subject remain unchanged so that the testimony can remain “objective”; but to testify in the spiritual sense means that the witnessed encounter has fundamentally changed one’s subjectivity.

The contentiousness surrounding the circumstances of Michael Brown's death surfaces "the tension between eyewitness testimony and bearing witness, between historical facts and psychoanalytic truth, between subject position and subjectivity, between the performative and the constative" (Oliver, 2004, p. 197). In this sense, bearing witness means testifying to *oneself* of another's experience; this is inherent in Oliver's insistence that ethical witnessing requires a "response-ability," for the the ethically witnessing subject must undergo a moral reckoning. As Harold and DeLuca describe of the impact of the Emmett Till casket images:

Till's body forced a reconfiguration of the self along different lines. The utter horror of his death for some who witnessed his corpse surely punctured a sense of a safe, complete self...[T]he boundaries of the witnessing subject were, in some sense, transformed. (Harold & DeLuca, 2005, p. 280)

To bear witness to the horrors that lynching photography depicts is not to analyze its contents to determine the factual contours of those atrocities; it is to witness that which cannot be seen or represented in the photo. The ethically witnessing subject sees not the debasement of the Black body present in the photograph, but the abject pain that occurred before the instance of death, a pain that bonds subjects across time and space. Nor does she see the triumph of the White mob as they assuredly stand to mark their domination over the Black body, but rather the animalistic cruelty that came before the moment of the snapshot. She sees the complicity inherent in the White men, women, and children posing alongside the body, who may not have physically laid a finger on the victim, but are nonetheless participants in the unspeakable horrors of race lynching, equally accountable for the heinousness for which they were present. "To look at these

images and to respond with horror,” writes Wood, “was to move from the position of spectator to moral witness” (2009, p. 199).

### **Aesthetic Features of #HandsUpDontShoot**

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, the occurrences of lynchings were too raw and the advent of the film photograph too new for the viewer to fully objectivize the photograph as an historic relic. Antilynching photography seized upon the liminal placement of the photograph between historic documentation and expressive media form to invite viewers to bear witness to the hidden yet undeniable undercurrents of American politics. Much of this was achieved via the same aesthetic techniques of today’s digital and remix cultures. For example, the recontextualization of these images forced a new understanding of the photos as “souvenirs” when the NAACP would run a lynching photograph without any identifiers as to the date and location of the event, in order to thwart any potential rationalization or justification of the act and force viewers to gaze upon the heart-wrenching depiction (Wood, 2009).

The recontextualization of images is a common feature of digital cultures, including the images of #HandsUpDontShoot. For example, as an analogue to the NAACP’s “Mobs Act, While—U.S. Senators Talk” spread, which contrasted the aggression of White mobs with the passivity of Congress, many images tagged with #HandsUpDontShoot contrasted the disparate treatments afforded to Black men carrying anything construed to be a weapon versus White men carrying actual assault weapons (figure 8). In a similar manner to how the NAACP subverted the photographs of the confident White mobs posing with their victims, this post subverts the carefree swagger

of the White men strolling with their assault rifles casually draped over one shoulder to surface a critical interruption of such optics.

Figure 8. “Anybody seen JUSTICE?” (Swan, 2014)

The techniques of contrast and juxtaposition also draw parallels between the campaign launched by Mamie Till-Mobley when she chose to have an open-casket



Bishop Talbert Swan @TalbertSwan · 26 Aug 2014  
Anybody seen JUSTICE? Still looking #WhereisJustice #supportdamarwilson #Ferguson #MikeBrown #HandsUpDontShoot  
[pic.twitter.com/UDFy0SRIP](http://pic.twitter.com/UDFy0SRIP)

funeral for her son, and that of a hashtag campaign related to the #HandsUpDontShoot movement. Till-Mobley chose to attach a Christmas photo of her son to the casket, “making the corpse all the more horrible in contrast” (Harold & DeLuca, 2005, p. 273) as viewers looked upon the image of young Till’s beaming face and sparkling eyes, representative of the precocious youth’s hopes for the future. Similarly, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown is hashtag movement intimately related to #HandsUpDontShoot, which protests the media’s use of photographs that depict Black victims of police brutality as thugs and gang members, rather than the usual graduation

photo commonly afforded to deceased White young people. These posts draw contrast to the two very different images of Black teenagers awakened within the public imaginary (figures 9 and 10).



Figure 9. Michael Brown’s picture in a tweet about and NBC news story ( NBC, 2014);  
 Figure 10. “#IfTheyGunnedMeDown they’d say I was a thug” (Griffin, 2014).

One final parallel between antilynching efforts and the images of #HandsUpDontShoot is the recontextualization of quotes. “Editors...commonly juxtaposed images with language that derided White southerners’ claims to moral superiority, often by using the words of lynch mobs or their defenders against them” (Wood, 2009, p. 202). For example, in covering the 1938 lynching of C. C. Williams, the *New York Amsterdam News* ran a front-page photograph from the scene with the headline, “Then We Rammed a Red Hot Poker into Him,” a quote from one participant, meant to draw attention to the glee and pride the White mobs took in enacting horrific violence upon their victims. This technique draws parallels to an image from the

#HandsUpDontShoot posts, wherein a Ferguson city official's statement of "We are just glad that no one was hurt" is contrasted with the facts surrounding Brown's death and the



contentious aftermath (figure 11).

*Figure 11.* "No one hurt? Really?" (Hughes, 2014).

These visual techniques are rhetorically engaging because they expose racist rhetorics by forcing viewers to read photographs and images differently in light of surrounding events, circumstances, environments, systems and domains. While they may pull images from its original context, perhaps attracting a charge of decontextualization, they also recontextualize them within the lived experiences of those living on the political



margins. While the examples given above indicate an intentional surfacing of these juxtapositions and contrasts, much of the aesthetic experience of perusing the #HandsUpDontShoot images consists of viewing images algorithmically grouped through the connective affordances of the hashtag. It is difficult to say whether these groupings constitute intentional or unintentional aesthetic choices, because, while users might be aware of how their choice to tag a photo with #HandsUpDontShoot will play against other similarly tagged photos, individual users have no control over how their posts will show up within Twitter's "live" hashtag catalogue.

These tensions, contrasts and juxtapositions create collective feelings in the ways that they approach viewers, unravelling the the complacency that the digital public often experiences by way of "distance" from flesh-and-blood atrocities. It is not simply the content of these images that surfaces calls to act in resistance to the violent policing of Black communities, but rather, the dynamic ways in which they stir our apprehension of the body in peril. There is a "liveness" inherent in the fact that the affective contours surrounding so many of these posts by Black Americans seem to converge in a way that makes them come alive before us; there is something emotionally stirring about both the contrasts and the convergence of these portraits that makes them difficult to ignore. In order to explore such dynamic features surfaced by this somewhat unique feature of the virtual world, I parse Twitter's #HandsUpDontShoot catalogue through the lens of Stern's (2010) vitality forms.

### **The Vitality of Brown's Figure through #HandsUpDontShoot**

Because of the force of the cultural and historic hauntings between the images of #HandsUpDontShoot and those of lynching photography, it is impossible to fully

untangle the affective from the discursivity present in the photos. Therefore, I look to Barrett's (2015) understanding of the aesthetic as the "grafting point" of "affect to the symbolic through artistic practice" (p. 63). While the images of #HandsUpDontShoot are visually arresting and affectively poignant in their own right, such affective force is steeped in historic meaning, particularly for those who are familiar with the disturbing imagery of lynching photography. I also look between individual posts, whose aesthetic features are composed in a more explicitly deliberate manner, and the cascading collage of imagery algorithmically gathered through Twitter's hashtag index in order to note how even within Twitter's individualizing platform interface, an enactment of distributed agency may surface as users become aware of how their tagged images might play against the sea of imagery populating the hashtag index.

A primary feature of the #HandsUpDontShoot imagery's vitality forces of movement and direction rests in the contrasts and juxtapositions not only present within a single image or frame but across posts as they are compiled through the connective affordances of the hashtag. As described previously by Apel (2014), across the sea of imagery arranged through Twitter's hashtag index, two themes emerge: solemn protesters of color gazing at the camera with their hands up, and overly militarized, aggressive police units, frequently with their weapons poised. As the eye moves across these images, the contrast between these two themes becomes apparent. Just as lynching photography sought to shift the focus to the savagery of the White mobs in order to surface an "against-the-grain" read of the Black body in peril—one that would make apprehensible the figure's pain, suffering and humanity—these juxtapositions enhance the brutality of the menacing police units against the poised passivity of the protesters.

For example, algorithmically arranged through the index appears a collage of images, five of which depict #HandsUpDontShoot protesters (figure 12). In all but one of those images, the protesters have their hands up in the referenced conciliatory pose, and in some, the protesters are even sitting. In the images of the protesters standing, they are gazing directly at the camera; one's eye is especially drawn to the young man dressed in a plaid shirt at the center of the top-left photo, his eyes particularly wide as his brows raise up on his furrowed forehead. This expression is remarkably universal across the various photos—a mixture of shock, beseechment and fear. Contrasting these expressions is the bottom-left photo depicting a squad of police officers standing over a dark figure lying on the ground. One officer has his assault rifle trained on the figure while the others stand poised with their hands on their gun holsters. When the eye moves from the top-left photo of the wide-eyed college students in poses of surrender to the bottom-left image and back again, both the pleas of the students and the casual violence of the police force are thrown into stark relief. Further demonstrating the ethical witness's abandonment of factual evidence and historical documentation in favor of the arresting moment of bearing witness, two additional collages further highlight this sense of movement as illustrations of police violence end up pointing their weapons at more nonviolent demonstrators (figures 13 and 14).



Figure 12. A “found collage” contrasting police violence with protester passivity (author’s photo, 2017).



Figure 13. An illustrated police tank “trained” on non-resistant Black protesters (author’s photo, 2017).

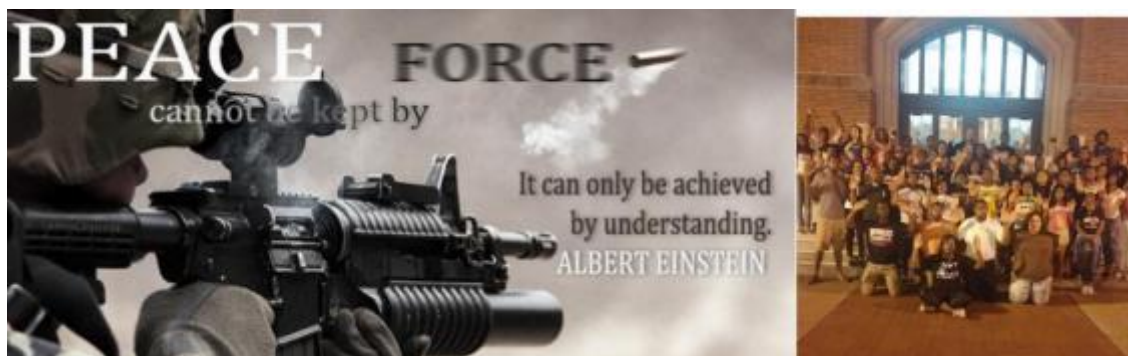


Figure 14. “Peace cannot be kept by force”—algorithmic collage (author’s photo, 2017).

Further, the vitality form of movement also appears within single portraits of #HandsUpDontShoot protesters. Speaking to Oliver’s bearing witness as “testifying to that which cannot be seen” (2004, p. 197), the viewer imagines the movement that took place before the photo was taken, as the figure moves to expose her chest, behind which beats the very bed of her vitality, the heart, which arrests any attempt at rationalization. The viewer is lost in the gaze as it pierces the very media forms of image, network, and screen when this affective beseechment achieves immediacy. This gaze works to envelope the viewer in a sense of complicity, a force that—for some—is powerful enough to move her to action. At the very least, if the viewer is affectively open enough to achieve this sense of immediacy, the gaze surfaces a moral reckoning, leading to a material transformation of the viewer’s subjective boundaries. At once, both the abject and the instrumental force of racial violence appear as traces within the subject.

Stern’s vitality form of force also strikes the viewer via the sheer volume of posts. Further, the number of persons of color depicted gazing somberly into the camera with

their hands above their head—seen particularly in figure 15, as a vast sea of countless bodies enacts the “hands up” pose—holding signs that relate Brown’s experience to their own, or demonstrating in the street acts as testimony to the undeniability of “hands up, don’t shoot” as a lived reality for people of color. In these images, it is unnecessary to see explicit evidence of the Black figure’s debasement and terrorization by law enforcement, for it is written in the gaze of the subject, present in the punctum that rises up to pierce the viewer’s apprehension. The affect behind these gazes works to disarm the viewer. The passivity of the stances and the facial expressions at once counters the still-present trope of persons of color as animalistic criminals, while also belying hints of weariness, exhaustion, steadfastness, and imploration, forcing the ethical reckoning inherent in Oliver’s concepts of bearing witness.



Figure 15. “SC State supports #HandsUpDontShoot” (Rawse, 2014).

Further, the prominence of women and children in these photos is significant in the ways in which the affect emanating from the vitality form of force combines with the historic and cultural connotations of these subjects. Being mindful of essentializing gender, it is undeniable that the female figure still holds historic, rhetorical force—after all, the protection of the “gentler sex” and the innocence of childhood was the rhetorical premise behind defending the practice of lynching. It also became an opportunity for antilynching movements to expose the hypocrisy of this claim, particularly when photographs showing women and children present at the grisly scene of a lynching came to light. Therefore, the prominence of women and children in the #HandsUpDontShoot photos parallels those same optics in the way that the cultural implications of the “women and children” figures comes to an aesthetic “grafting point” (Barrett, 2015; Certeau, 1984) with the affective force of these figures’ gazes and poses (figures 16 and 17). The passivity both associated with the motherly gaze of the female figure and the innocence of children becomes a further point of contrast against the military aggression of the police forces (figures 18 and 19).



Figure 16. “Peaceful rally at the Capitol” (Whitehouse, 2014) Figure 17: “Stop killing us” (K, 2014).

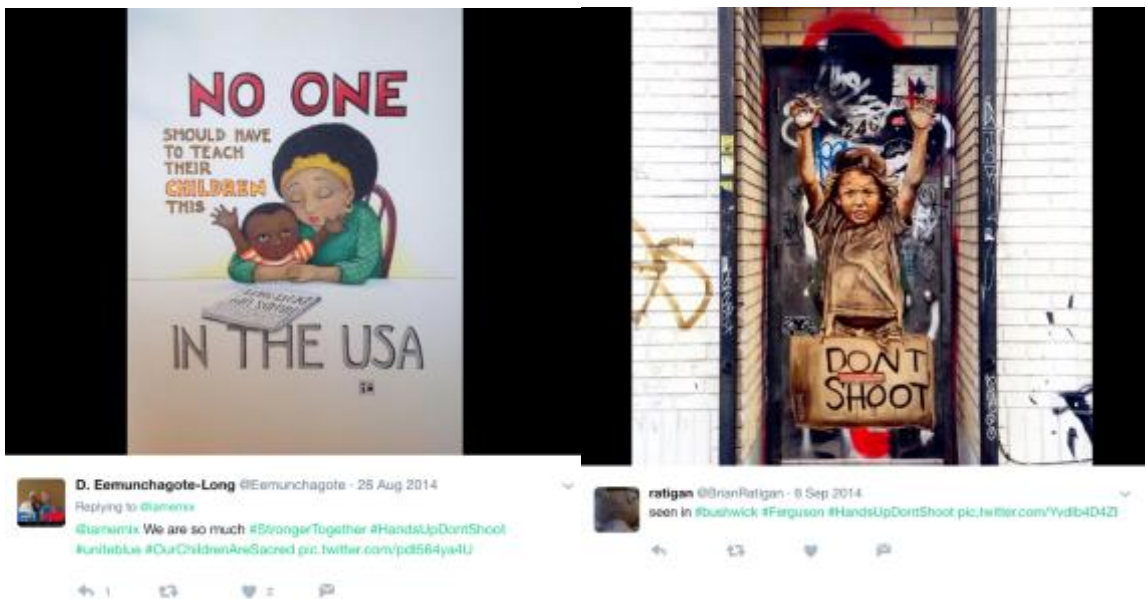


Figure 18. The motherly gaze (Eemunchagote-Long, 2014) Figure 19: “Don’t shoot” (Ratigan, 2014).

The vitality form of time emerges in the interplay of time’s enactment and its representation. The cascading deluge of images is compiled in backwards chronological order, leading down to the moment of Brown’s death. This enactment of time pulls the



viewer back in the direction of the catalytic event, so that even in the images where Brown's reference is not explicit, traces of his death remain. At the top of the index lies a domain of potentiality, as the past-present coalesces with the uncertainty of future posts that will ultimately be added to the flow. Whether these posts will reveal further incidents of police brutality against racial minorities, the expression of lived experiences by protesters, or—very likely—further posts critiquing the supposed forensic inaccuracy of the phrase, the very “liveness” itself of Twitter's index adds a vitality dimension to the collection.

The representation of time in other posts temporally pulls the viewer further back to an epoch before the Civil Right Act and federal antilynching legislation, where the historic parallels with today's disturbing and continued pattern of police brutality against racial minorities brings the inevitability of progress into question. A photo illustration depicting flashes of Michael Brown within the figure of historic civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer posing in the surrendering gesture after being beaten in prison crystallizes the temporal connections between the plight of the Black community across decades (figure 20). Other connections to the Civil Rights Era remain present in Black-and-White historical footage and mock-ups critiquing the explicit bias conservative media exhibit in their coverage of the protests (figure 21). Again, these eerie parallels call into question the idea of progress as a taken-for-granted narrative surrounding the myth of the American Dream, and their editorializations of history through seeking openings through which to connect users' own subjectivities speaks to a desire to bear witness, rather than

produce an historically accurate eye-witness account, to the historic suffering of racial minorities in the United States.



Figure 20. Echoes of Fannie Lou Hamer’s arrest (I Love Ancestry, 2014) Figure 21. “If Fox News was around in the 1960s” (GodlessLiberals.com, 2014).

Finally, the aesthetic features that speak to the vitality form of space can once again be read at the intersection of the affective and the discursive, as spatialized enactments gain intensity through understandings of space and place. A remarkable feature of the #HandsUpDontShoot protests is the liminality of its origin: it is unclear whether the first instantiation of the rhetorical claim was enacted online via the hashtag or physically through the embodied stances of the street protesters. What is clear is that the two spaces of protest continually play off one another in a convergence between the virtual and the physical. When protesters pose for photos in the “hands up” stance, these mediated images spread the optics of the protests across geographic boundaries, resulting in protesters far and wide taking up the stance in their own demonstrations. Further, the connectivity of the hashtag brings together poses taken in both public and private spaces,

coalescing to show how the assumed criminality of the Black figure haunts members of the Black community in their everyday lives and follows them like a shadow wherever they go (figure 22). Both of these networked patterns implore the viewer to let go of the factual details that distinguish one instance of racialized targeting from another and instead bear witness to the connective thread that unites across difference (figure 23).



*Figure 22. #HandsUpDontShoot traversing public/private and spatial/temporal boundaries (author's photograph, 2017).*



HeLive 🇺🇸 @MBzLive · 23 Aug 2014

Hear No Evil. See No Evil. Speak No Evil...#HandsUPDontShoot  
[pic.twitter.com/3vXxvU7dIC](https://pic.twitter.com/3vXxvU7dIC)



*Figure 23.* Emmett Till, Trayvon Martin, and Michael Brown united in illustration (HeLive, 2014).

### **Conclusion: The Response-ability of Bearing Witness to White Supremacy**

Just as lynching photographs were a contested site of cultural meaning—offering disparate interpretations according to the sympathies and positionalities of the viewer—so too are the images of #HandsUpDontShoot depicting solemn and composed Black protesters with their hands up never enough to convince entire publics that the Black community is undeserving of the brutal treatment they receive at the hands of police. As Harold and DeLuca (2005) state, “It is tempting to say that bodies at risk call out to an

innate human empathy, but even the most cursory review of the historical record belies any such comforting notion” (p. 267). Not only have the #HandsUpDontShoot movement and its constitutive imagery been heavily criticized on the basis of the forensic evidence presented at the Justice Department’s investigation, but the spirit of the campaign has been mocked by unsympathetic White social media users. A common refrain in this area is the appropriation and transformation of “hands up, don’t shoot” into “pants up, don’t loot,” which infers that the Black community is using the unrest caused by police shootings to riot and loot stores, and disparages Black protesters for their choice of attire, perceived once again to be “thug wear.” These subversions echo the mocking tone of the signs that White mobs used to hang from the bodies of lynching victims, such as one, hung from the foot of the slain Charlie Hale in 1911 Oklahoma, saying “please do not wake” (Wood, 2009, p. 94).

The aesthetic features and their affective impacts emanating from these images are not forceful or arresting enough to transcend positionalities, identities, and attitudes that are diametrically opposed to Black liberation; perhaps no affective force can ever move an entire public. Further, the 2016 United States presidential election proved to be a chapter that exposed and emboldened the still-flowing White supremacist undercurrent of American culture and politics, and the crisis of its “fake news” revelation has further complicated virtual communication surrounding contentious events. However, with the ever-increasing mass of events whose details may differ, but whose affective pull connects narratives that span time and space, there is further possibility that these competing details may fade away until one can gain sight of the connective thread, a thread that speaks to a visceral, transformative witnessing. For those who are willing to

“bear witness to that which cannot be seen,” the #HandsUpDontShoot movement’s connections across time and space and its contextualizing traumatic events within alternative visions of American genealogy are a call to testify to *oneself* to the embodied truth of our history, and to confront a moral reckoning of the complicity for which we all find ourselves response-able.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONCLUSION: AESTHETIC PROTEST IN THE ERA OF EVERYDAY (MICRO)FASCISM

This project seeks to better understand rhetoric's place in aesthetic interventions that attempt to interrupt normative practices of discipline by the state. As strategies of governmentality expand to encompass more nuanced and specialized ways of shaping compliant political subjects, so too have the tactics of protest expanded to encompass more creative and expressive modes of resistance. These tactics, however, are not conventionally recognized within theories of social change because they explicitly do not seek to directly alter the structures of power through systemic transformations. Rather, they seek to disrupt the process of political subject formation implemented by the state, and offer new means of political expression. The lack of structural change, however, does not signal a lack of material impact. The preceding pages seek to answer a series of research questions, from: *(1) what makes protest art rhetorical?* to *(2) how can we identify the aesthetic features of digital protest art?* to *(3) how does digital protest art intervene in the shaping of political subjects?* and finally *(4) how can we trace the subjective impacts of digital protest art to new conceptualizations of political and social change?*

These questions aren't necessarily ordered in a naturally chronological way, but rather entangle to answer each other by bouncing back and forth between their insights.

In answering the first research question, *what makes protest art rhetorical?* I've outlined ways in which to expand rhetoricity to consider how vitalism creates new worlds, and in turn, new possibilities of being in these worlds:

As an expression of vitality, mobility ... can be described through the affordance that there is more than this place, more to that thing, more that may be, and the changes that always herald the realization of some of that "more." (Stormer, 2015, p. 2)

The vitalism of protest art's aesthetic disruptions engender a subjective shift in position by offering the possibility of something "more." Spaces where conformity is disciplined through "technologies of the self" (Foucault, 1988) are punctured by new potentials to be otherwise, to transgress normative behaviors and compartments, or to seek new forms of relation with others. "In particular, the constant change of potentiality to actuality, manifested across different rhetorics, depends on mobility—what 'is' can and will move, becoming other than it is" (Stormer, 2015, p. 1).

Digital protest art achieves this rhetoricity by intervening in the process of subject formation, a process that is increasingly managed and regulated by the state, effectively responding to the third research question, *how does digital protest art intervene in the shaping of political subjects?* Whether these state interventions occur through the incessant panopticism of state surveillance, engendering the practice of such technologies of the self that occur upon the apprehension of the government's watchful eye; through the disruption of engineered spatial affects, which compel occupants to enact small but radical transgressions in their behavior and compartment; or through new modes of relation between political subjects that expand beyond the domain of the individuated



self, the emergence of the political subject as resistant to forces of domination is primary to new ways of understanding protest in post-modernity.

However, in order to make this leap from digital protest art to interventions in subject formation, we must understand what is unique about protest art's rhetoricity, and what makes the domains of the digital and virtual particularly potent. To answer research question number two, *how can we identify the aesthetic features of digital protest art?*, I turn to Stern's (2010) research on forms of vitality that emanate out of not only artistic expression, but in all human communication at large. These dynamics, which speak to artworks' specific movement, spatial, temporal, directional and force contours, impact audiences below the fold of conscious, cognitive thought, but are more material in its impacts. They speak not to the content of an artwork's message, but to the ways in which this content is delivered. In this sense, Stern's vitality forms offer a specific methodology for parsing the aesthetic, affective features of protest art so that scholars may understand the value of these expressive interventions unique from more conventional forms of rhetoric, such as speeches or text.

This unique value speaks to the heart of the fourth research question, *how can we trace the subjective impacts of digital protest art to new conceptualizations of political and social change?* Although material impacts that do not directly produce structural changes may not seem tangible enough to constitute "real" change, the preceding case studies demonstrate how affective, material impacts offer the potential of creating new worlds, and new ways of being in these worlds. In the case of Vandalina's protest stickers decorating the transit cars of Ankara, the transformation of social spaces haunted by constant government surveillance and norms of conduct prohibiting women from

enacting subjective expression and public intimacy are engendered by the transgressive presence of the stickers. These aesthetic interruptions of the everyday prompt a confrontation of Turkey's 1400 percent rise in femicide rates over a seven-year period (Güler, 2013) and the public's complicity in participating in the public scrutiny over the image of women's "honor," seen as a reflection of national honor in the optics presented to the international community. By intimately beckoning its audience to come close and examine the palm-sized stickers, these artworks alter the material paths that individuated bodies take within the routines that constitute the everyday, opening up a possibility for public intimacy and the empathic apprehension of women's material experiences of violence.

Such transformation of social relations is rife with political possibility. Amir and Khalil's (2011) graphic novel featuring the illustrations and narrative of their 2009 webcomic *Zahra's Paradise* was circulated not just within Iran, but throughout the Iranian diaspora and the international community at large. The graphic illustrations exposed the lived experiences of Iranians living in the crossfire of the government's brutal suppression of dissent and protest against what many view as fraudulent results of the 2009 presidential election. Further, the webcomic did more than just depict the series of events that unfolded in the wake of the protests; it also rooted its aesthetic intervention in the country's site of political significance: Behesht-e Zahra cemetery, where generations of political activists lay buried after political fights resulted in their deaths. In this space where the martyrs of the past entangle with the martyrs of the present, the narrative of the Battle of Karbala—wherein the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hosayn fought to his death—is remediated time and again as each generation of modern-day

Iranians seeks to free themselves from oppressive rule. The way in which memory, identity and material existence is, for many Iranians, rooted in Behesht-e Zahra engenders the emergence of a subject that apprehends these ghosts and apparitions together, subsequently feeling and acting as one: a plural subject. Within the domain of the plural subject, histories are rewritten that witness and honor the deaths of the slain and allow for a communion with the martyrs that haunt the country's cultural history.

Finally, such an affectively potent subject, which permeates the boundaries of the individual, has the capacity for ethically witnessing atrocities of the past. The case of #HandsUpDontShoot, in its remediation of Michael Brown's purported pose upon his shooting death by police officer Darren Wilson, offers an example of how images of the abject body may engender the collision of subjectivities across time and space. Such a communion with the body in peril is surfaced through aesthetic features that parallel historic anti-lynching photography from the early 20th century. By compelling the viewer to look past the abjectness of the black body and focus on the contrasting barbarity and depravity of the white mobs, lynching photography serves as a precedent for the way in which the connective affordances of the hashtag forced a juxtaposition between the composed, nonviolent black protesters and the aggressively militarized police forces. Through these connective affordances, a means to ethically witness the circumstances surrounding Michael Brown's death—a witnessing that looks not to the forensic analysis of the coroner's or Justice Department's reports, but to #HandsUpDontShoot as an expression of the lived experiences of Black Americans—is revealed, entangling digital audiences in its web.

These material impacts occur alongside these artworks' representational content, as forms of vitality engender a liveness that affectively reaches audiences through unique dynamic contours—this liveness makes us feel that what we are witnessing will never again be repeated in history. The vitality forms of movement, time, space, force and direction all layer upon each other in a unique, non-repeatable way. These contours render us affectively open to the flows of aliveness that course through the artworks' veins.

The contributions of such analysis to the fields of rhetoric and media studies are twofold. In the discipline of media studies, the particular affordances of digital media advance an expansion of Stern's concept of vitality forms, which the author posits as unique to what he terms "time-based media," and which he explicitly excludes from the domain of photography and illustration. However, by looking to the special way that digital media—with their basis in the indeterminacy of binary data—compel viewers toward remediation, we can understand that all digital media have a specific temporal contour. This exposure expands the object domain of possible applications for Stern's vitality forms.

Further, the method enacted in this project outlines a specific analytic treatment of affect that can be further applied within the scholarship of affective rhetorical studies. While the discipline of rhetoric has undergone an "affective turn" in recent years, with many scholars looking to the intensive flows that occur beneath or alongside representational content, the theorization of affect studies remains elusive to discursive description. Stern's vitality forms, when applied to an expanded field of object domains, creates a vocabulary for assessing the intensive contours of human expression and their

rhetorical impacts. Movement, time, space, force and direction create a specificity and precision that affective rhetorical criticisms have previously lacked, further allowing rhetorical scholarship to explore the impacts of expressive enactments on our very subjectivities, and outlining modes in which creative expression can alter the way that we relate to ourselves, each other, and the world. The development of such a method for affectively and aesthetically reading protest art may be even more significant in light of recent political developments, which have led to a rebirth in the spirit of protest.

### **Protest's Renaissance in the Post-Trump Era**

2016 marked a significant year for the optics of protest. The candidacy and subsequent election of Donald Trump to the office of United States President sent a shockwave through progressive, and even moderate, publics. Although Trump's unapologetically brazen rhetoric—replete with xenophobic and misogynistic dog whistles wrapped in a thin veneer of right-wing “populism”—had affectively primed the public to the power of his pull and influence as a public figure, Trump's election victory was, nonetheless, shocking. As political transgression after political transgression (errors in judgment that would, for any other candidate in any other election, prove fatal) only seemed to buoy the real-estate mogul-turned-reality television star's bid for the most powerful seat in the country, many Americans grappled with the question of whether the United States' political terrain had been irreversibly transformed.

However, parallel to these unsettling developments, the spirit of resistance underwent a process of re-awakening. The then-candidate's political campaign had been plagued by protests as progressives attempted to interrupt the normalization of Donald Trump both as a figure and as an embodiment of violent rhetoric, and these efforts only

intensified after the election. These protests took on various forms—while many of these were demonstrations and marches, various aesthetic enactments of resistance have surfaced, whose political utility may be called into question in light of the continued prevalence of dominant framings surrounding protest efficacy and the politics of representation.

For example, in May of 2017, artist Robin Bell installed a projector across from the exterior facade of the Trump International Hotel in Washington, DC, which circulated a series of arguments critiquing the president’s alleged violation of the Constitution’s Emoluments Clause as well as Trump’s multiple transgressions regarding the provision of highly classified information to Russian officials. Above the main entrance of the hotel, various phrases appeared in eerie white-blue block lettering: “Emoluments Welcome,” “Pay Trump Bribes Here,” and the entire text of the Emoluments Clause from the U.S. Constitution (Estatie, 2017; figure 1). While Trump’s alleged violation of the Emoluments Clause was quickly buried under new, subsequent scandals, and while the investigations into Trump’s potential collusion with Russian nationals has, as of July 2017, not yet resulted in impeachment charges, the installation demonstrates an understanding that Trump’s success is built on his image and brand. By transforming the material terrain surrounding the properties that Trump uses to cultivate an image of luxury and success, the projections puncture a key feature of the Trump brand.



*Figure 1.* A projection installation on the exterior entrance of the Trump International Hotel in Washington, DC (Gorman & Bell, 2017).

Further, the projections extended beyond representation in the way that it altered the paths of foot traffic around the property, speaking to the vitality forms of space, movement, and direction. The projections were large, practically eclipsing the grand arches that constitute the hotel's entrances, and so the best read of them was from afar. Pedestrians who wished to visually encounter the installation in a meaningful way were forced to traverse from the opposite side of the street, literally carving up striated space around the building. From the street, flows of subjectivities spatially aligned according to the desire—or lack thereof—to visually consume these messages. For some this imposed an alteration of the material practices that constitute everyday routines, or a temporal interruption of the constancy of the banal.

Similar—if perhaps more prosaic—impacts can be seen in the production and manufacturing of toilet paper featuring the likeness of Donald Trump upon its sheets (figure 2). The Mexican business venture exploits an oversight in the Trump brand’s trademark, which fails to cover what’s referred to in Spanish as “hygienic paper” (Associated Press, 2017), and offers its product as a way of subverting the most banal practices of the everyday in order to further promote the spirit of resistance.



Figure 2. Trump toilet paper allows for a resistive performance of micropolitics (AP, 2017).

Given the deluge of revelations surrounding Trump’s private conduct, it makes sense that enactments of ethical witnessing have also been brought to the foray. In the wake of the release of the now-infamous Access Hollywood tapes, wherein the now-president was recorded bragging about his ability to sexually assault women by “grab[bing] them by the pussy” (Bullock, 2016, n.p.), student Aria Watson released a series of photographs depicting Trump’s words about women painted onto women’s bare bodies (figures 3 and 4). While the campaign, titled *Signed By Trump*, offers



representations of the embodied impacts of the president's words and deeds, it also extends beyond the domain of the symbolic. The very process of being photographed nude with an explicitly political message—a message that was bound to provoke ire among Trump's vociferous supporters—entails subjecting one's body to extreme vulnerability, a process that may parallel the traumatic theft of one's agency over one's body, though differences in both kind and degree certainly abound. This vulnerability is afforded by the spatial and directional contours of digital and social media—speaking to Stern's (2010) vitality forms of movement, space and direction, these works circulate beyond the smooth virtual spaces of progressivism and into contested digital sites, thereby surfacing the subjects' embodied susceptibilities. By offering one's vulnerability in service of bearing witness to these words and deeds, participants opened themselves up to subjective transformations when they themselves became targets of Trump's brand of violent masculinity. Through *Signed By Trump*, these enactments entangle with representations of how sexual violence leaves traces and scars within the victim's body.



*Figures 3 and 4. Two photographs of the Signed by Trump photo campaign (Paling, 2016).*

Despite the prominence afforded to the post-election spirit of protest, enactments of the plural subject are difficult to trace. For example, the Womxn's Marches, in which an estimated 3.3 to 4.6 million people marched in locations across the country and the globe to protest a variety of political and social positions represented by the election of Donald Trump, were marked by controversy even among the U.S.'s progressive contingent. Much of the backlash ensued well before the march took place, when the

event was first billed “Million Women March,” a reference to both the 1963 March on Washington and the 1997 Million Woman March—both historic events organized by people of color, despite the fact that the Womxn’s March organizers were almost exclusively white (Cauterucci, 2016). For many women of color, trans women and other woman-aligned identities positioned outside the dominant figure of the white, middle-class woman, the inclusionary efforts of the organizers were seen as too little, too late. In a comment posted to an editorial written by Jamilah Lemieux (2017), a Black woman, titled, “Why I’m Skipping The Women’s March on Washington,” Jamyle Acevedo (2017) writes: “My personal opinion as it relates to this March is that every person is marching for their own unique reasons” (n.p.). The Women’s March, while a massive collective effort, failed to constitute a collective surfacing of “reasons-for-us” (Hicks & Langsdorf, 2013, p. 130).

These discussions present an opportunity to contemplate the nature of American protest politics in the 21st century. A former Occupy Wall Street activist, noting the tidal wave of protests in 2017, was quoted as saying: “Back with Occupy Wall Street, they said we didn’t have a purpose. Now, suddenly, we have too many purposes” (Knefel, 2017, n.p.). Does the fragmented condition of our postmodern society prohibit the formation of the plural subject on a grand scale? Does the contested nature of identity politics, with all its complexities and intersectionalities, reinforce the primacy of individual positionalities and therefore prevent the convergence of subjectivities into an acting and feeling plurality? Do the historical mythologies upon which the United States was built contain too many unaddressed atrocities, too much buried suffering, to allow subjectivities to converge across difference?

Perhaps, yes. Yet the spirit of the Womxn's Marches, wherein individuals broadcasted their personal reasons for demonstrating resistance against the Trump administration on signs and placards, differed significantly from the nationwide airport protests that occurred just one week later, when thousands gathered in major metropolitan airports like New York's JFK International to not only protest Trump's executive order banning travel from seven Muslim-majority countries, but to help those detained in the crossfire:

Some protesters make last-minute signs with pizza boxes. At one point, a car pulls over to hand curbside protesters a box of Dunkin' Donuts hot chocolate through the window. Throughout the day and into the early morning, lawyers volunteer to provide any assistance they can. Sofie Syed hunches over her laptop in Terminal 1, drafting a habeas petition to challenge the legality of CBP's detention of her client. At Terminal 4, where most of the action is happening, Alexandria Rizio stands at the arrival gate with a sign that reads, "Immigration Lawyers. Do you need help? Do you have information?" (Knefel, 2017, para. 10)

All accounts of the protests indicate that the convergence of thousands was relatively leaderless, meaning that the coming together of individuals for a shared cause occurred somewhat organically, perhaps united around a shared memory of one's or one's family's "coming to America" narrative. Of course, the only contingent without such a narrative is that of the historically-marginalized Native American community, whose members were nonetheless present at these protests, carrying signs that read "No Ban on Stolen Land" (Monkman, 2017). What made this gathering different from the Womxn's Marches was the fact that the protesters who gathered at airports were compelled through service to (one) another, rather than a desire for individuated self-expression. An analysis of the potential for instantiation of the plural subject in the wake of the 2016 election is a compelling future direction for this research.

This direction would be particularly useful in the wake of calls for efficacy assessments on anti-Trump protests—calls that still point to systemic change as the primary indicator of success (Brown, 2017; Chenoweth, 2016; Lopez, 2017; Thorpe, 2017). Do these protests need to result in policy or even regime change to be legitimate? Obviously, for those whose lives and survival are implicated in the reverberations of Trump’s policies, structural change is of utmost importance, and the study of aesthetic protest cannot deny the gravity of these implications. However, such structural changes are proving frustratingly difficult, if not near-impossible, as each issue, no matter how grave, tends to devolve into partisan power plays and political infighting.

Therefore, one can observe two separate parallel battles at play: one that resides in the domain of policy, and another that lives in the spirit and in the hearts of the American polity. While the former is frustrated by bureaucratic, partisan power grabs, the latter may be equally daunting: research shows that hate crimes increased by 20 percent in the months since the election, reversing a previous trend wherein instances of hate crimes had been going down in recent years (“U.S. Hate Crimes Up,” 2017). These are material realities that the most vulnerable among us are required to navigate daily, a problematic that rightly leads to questions of: What do these small signs of resistance do on a cumulative level? What is their value? How do these attempts to keep the spirit of resistance alive propel communities forward?

The answer may lie in the observations about the nature of fascism’s rise to power. While the categorization of Trump under the label “fascist” has been contentious, with various pundits championing assessments either for or against this classification (Davidson, 2017; de Grazia, 2017; Smith, 2015; Walker, 2017), even mainstream

journals like the Washington Post concede that Trump is “semi-fascist: more fascist than any successful American politician yet, and the most dangerous threat to pluralist democracy in this country in more than a century, but—thank our stars—an amateurish imitation of the real thing” (McNeill, 2016). Whether Trump is a full-blown fascist, a proto-fascist, or simply a reactionary conservative, the nature of authoritarian forms of hypernationalism makes itself known through subtle, everyday encounters, or what Karatzogianni and Robinson (2013) refer to as “microfascisms”:

[S]econd-order significations embedded in everyday representations, through which a simulated lifeworld is created, in which people live in passivity, creating their real performative connection to their conditions of existence and bringing them into psychological complicity in their own repression. (p. 11)

The mediatization of Trump’s image across various media outlets—some created for the sole purpose of legitimizing and evangelizing his presidency—as well as the theatricality and performativity of his conduct and rhetoric speak to Baudrillard’s (1983) simulacrum, wherein the “true essence” of Trump may very well live *within* such mediated optics, these simulated lifeworlds.

The value of the many forms of protest that have cropped up post-election may be that these scattered-yet-continuous aesthetic expressions directly address the “automatic micro-functioning of ideology” or “normal, ‘everyday’ fascism, whose most noticeable feature is how unnoticeable it is” (Negri 1998, p. 190). Many political pundits have asserted that the real danger Donald Trump poses to the United States is the normalization of his unapologetic debasement of the political system (Cole, 2016). Foucault’s (1977) conceptualization of normalization in late capitalist societies was based upon a system of rewards and punishments for adhering, or failing to adhere, to idealized

norms of conduct. We can see this pattern in Trump's proclivities toward cronyism and nepotism (Kang, 2017), as well as his solicitations for pledges of loyalty (Schmidt, 2017).

These protests' intrusions into the everyday fabric of Americans pose aesthetic interruptions to this process of normalization, exposing the subtleties of everyday microfascisms and acting as catalysts for encounters with resistant subjectivities. Though these subjective formations may be temporary, their affective legacies may be woven into material terrains, such as the "Fearless Girl" statue installed defiantly in front of Wall Street's famed "Charging Bull" (figure 5). While not explicit in its stance against the Trump administration, the statue was erected on International Women's Day, which itself was marked with unparalleled political demonstrations, against both Trump himself and the misogynistic policies he has promoted through his political platform (Segar, 2017).

While the "Fearless Girl" was meant to be installed for only one week, a groundswell of support rose up out of the public's affinity for the symbol of female power and resilience she represented, and the statue's permit has been extended to February, 2018 (Wiener-Bronner, 2018). The statue's presence not only spurred discussions about the need for gender diversity in the financial sector and other positions of leadership (including within State Street Global Advisors, who commissioned the work and yet include only five female directors out of 28), it has been framed as a "role model" and source of inspiration for coming generations ("Fearless Girl," 2017), with young girls travelling to the financial sector to have their picture taken in the same defiant stance as the statue (figure 6). While the statue certainly evades facile classification as a catalyst for broad-sweeping female empowerment, it may in fact lie in

the liminal space between an expression of public support for female leadership and a site of convergence for similarly defiant subjectivities.



*Figures 5 & 6. “Fearless Girl” poses defiantly in front of Wall Street’s Charging Bull, and with a young admirer (“Fearless Girl,” 2017).*



The affective impacts of protest art are not conveniently cut-and-dry, nor are they easily assessed through conventional metrics in terms of success and productiveness. We cannot trace the efficacy of protest art through simple cause-and-effect models, which is perhaps why aesthetic expressions of resistance are met with ambivalence by many. However, in expanding models of causality to encompass material traces within lived terrains, sites of communion, and ethical encounters with the other, we can observe protest art's impacts upon apprehensible worlds of becoming. These felt worlds do not constitute stable, permanent structures, but rather are awakened in the performativity of everyday life. It is in the mundane routine, the domain of the prosaic and banal, that our subjectivities are shaped, rendering us either affectively open or viscerally resistant to certain external, social forces. Such a model of causality may be less satisfying for some, and less empirically observable, but its value lies in how the figure of the protester is remediated and reimagined across the very subjectivities that shape our interactions with the world.

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