Dispute or Disrupt? Desire and Violence in Protests Against the Iraq War

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Abstract

In “Dispute or Disrupt? Desire and Violence in Protests Against the Iraq War,” Andrew Culp suggests ‘queering’ direct action in order to overcome the limits of rhetorical politics. Culp shows how the Bush Administration’s justifications for the Iraq War were incoherent discourses that drew rhetorical opposition into a politics of identification that made them easy to dismiss. An alternative, he claims, are “bodies that mutter” – subjects of desire whose bodily force continues where discourses fail, which he locates in the Code Pink disruption of John McCain’s speech at 2008 Republican National Convention, AIDS crisis-era queer activism, and radical clowning.

Introduction

The movement against the Iraq War was an exercise in failure. The February 15, 2003 global demonstration against the Iraq War was “the largest protest event in human history,” yet it did not prevent the war. A year and half later, the movement was again unsuccessful when the Democratic presidential candidate promising to the end the war lost the general election despite waverling public support for the ongoing conflict. Media attention gave rise to movement celebrities, such as Cindy Sheehan, who demanded that President Bush explain the ‘noble cause’ for which her son died in Iraq, but was unable to secure a meeting with the President. Even after the Democrats had enough political power to end the war, having gained control of Congress in 2006 and then the Presidency in 2008, they only completed full withdrawal in December 2011. In addition to these many defeats, this paper focuses on another: the failure of rhetoric – its inability to dispute official discourses of state violence, and the politics of bodies that fail to achieve rhetoricality. In the former, the paper identifies an impediment to the anti-war effort, and in the latter, the paper finds the constitutive lack of queer desire that overcomes political strategy’s rhetorical limits.

This paper has two parts, a queer critique of rhetoricality and a theory of desire. The first part analyzes rhetorical challenges to state violence, and the second part proposes a ‘queering’ of direct action. To begin, the argument generalizes

a problematic posed by David Halperin, who argues that homophobic discourses function through incoherence and thus refuting them does not impair those discourses’ strategic function. Examining the Bush Administration’s justifications for the Iraq War and its opponents, this paper shows how discourses of state terrorism operate according to a similar incoherence. Through close analysis of Cindy Sheehan’s politics of presidential ridicule and the celebrity narrative of ‘I Told You So,’ the argument claims that rhetorical critiques of state violence can lead to what queer theorist Tim Dean criticizes as the politics of identification, which cedes moral self-righteousness to the opposition without upsetting the political balance of power. The paper finds that anti-war activists fixated on the truth were correct but still unable to produce effects, and instead found themselves in emotional publics that focused on disputing official discourses at the expense of a more diverse political strategy.

To locate an alternative to disputing the discourses underwriting the Iraq War, this paper analyzes Code Pink’s interruption of John McCain’s speech in contrast to the other anti-war direct actions at the 2008 Republican National Convention. Contrary to conventional theories of direct action, this approach does not emphasize the power of bodies as physical impediments that occupy space but the potential for subjects of desire to produce events. This paper finds ‘queer’ forms of direct action that uncover different political potentials and generate disruptive events that subvert the politics of identification. These actions are theorized by way of Dean’s distinction between ‘suave bodies’ and ‘bodies that mutter.’ For Dean, rhetoric is the tool of suave bodies that use a discourse of signs and signifiers that can be easily spoken or written. Bodies that mutter, in contrast, make noises and sounds that are not directly understood because they are vocalizing desire “as something in language but not itself linguistic.” Accordingly, Dean’s psychoanalytic alternative to rhetoricality focuses on bodies that are not analyzed according to their “suasive” power but their disruptive potential—a power that is expressed at the limits of discourse through failed discourses and inarticulate muttering. This paper outlines two effects of subjects of desire: first, how they blur boundaries, which opens up potentials not otherwise available; and second, how they share trauma, which causes disruptions that evade immediate rhetorical dismissal. Through its analysis of the Republican National Convention, the paper finds an unexplored potential in the Code Pink disruption. Rather than proposing their interruption as a model for future political action, it asks what aspects of their disturbance would need to be expanded on and experimented with to develop bodies that mutter into a fully formed queer politics of direct action.

**Justifications for the Iraq War as Incoherent Discourses**

President Bush’s ex post facto justification for the war was quite vague: “that the Iraqi people are much better off without Saddam.” Daalder and Lindsey argue,
however, that the wide berth of this justification relies on the “basic but highly salient fact that there would not have been a war without his argument that Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction posed an unacceptable threat that was both immediate and serious.”

9 Restoring clarity to the Bush Administration’s initial claims about WMDs seems hardly possible, given the incoherence of the discourse through which the justifications for war were presented. As James P. Pfiffner points out, administration officials made WMDs a moving target, with Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz claiming that the verifiable presence of WMDs was not the paramount issue for policymakers while Secretary of Defense Colin Powell was asserting its centrality. Pfiffner concludes that even while President Bush made “few untrue statements” and accepted some widely shared claims, his statements were also systematically misleading, gave false impressions, and defied the better judgment of others.

Sentimentality aided the Bush Administration’s incoherent war on public opinion. The Bush Administration pitched the war as the perfect plan to fill the emotional void left by the September Eleventh attacks. President Bush associated Iraq with 9/11, expanding the targets of the War on Terror to an “axis of evil” – Iraq, Iran, and North Korea – during his State of the Union Address in 2002. And during the one-year commemoration of the attacks at Ground Zero, he formally announced his intentions to attack Iraq. Rhetorically ‘sticking’ the attack in New York to Iraq, he made a promise: “What our enemies have begun, we will finish.” With this full-scale media blitz, the Bush Administration amplified the emotional resonance between 9/11 and his campaign against Iraq, leading supporters to offer over-the-top acclamations, such as “turn Baghdad into a parking lot. You know, blow up the bridges, blow up the factories. Just level it,” or “I’m kind of excited to be here now. Someday we’ll tell our children that we were in Washington when the war started.”

The union of multiple contradictory discourses and the politicization of loss is a combination familiar to queer activists. Challenging what losses count as grievable was essential to turning collective mourning to militancy during the AIDS crisis. Describing the transformation, Ann Cvetkovich writes, “the AIDS crisis, like other traumatic encounters with death, has challenged our strategies for remembering the dead, forcing the intervention of new forms of mourning and commemoration.” These forms of mourning and commemoration should not be isolated to queer activism during 1980s and ‘90s, for as Sara Ahmed contends, public responses to events such as 9/11 pose similar challenges to queer politics; or as Bush’s post facto justification for the Iraq War demonstrates, violence can be cast as an act of compassion, such as offering war as a gift of hope to the Iraqi people, which allowed Administration officials to “be full of love in the midst of the violence.” In addition to the use of compassion to conceal state violence, other conservative forms of mourning tap into the basic structure of paranoid fantasies that, in Elaine Scarry’s words, attempts to
connect “disembodied beliefs with the force and power of the material world” through the “massive opening of human bodies.” Foreign policy hawks have repeated a phrase that reveals how this “structure of feeling” motivates the conservative desire for war. The narrative goes like this: “Every ten years or so, the United States needs to pick up some small crappy little country and throw it against the wall, just to show the world we mean business.” The consequence of this violent sentiment is clear: war hawks construct fantasies that bring together pleasure and violence to stoke the population. Queer alternatives to the state rhetoric of public loss, whether clothed in compassion or bathed in blood, thus provide helpful historical and theoretical tools for reorienting activism toward less violent ends.

Sara Ahmed theorizes how incoherent discourses, such as those that justified the Iraq War, can be unified through emotion. Following Derrida, Ahmed explains that emotion fills the disjunction between signification and context. Through repetition, words detach from the context in which they emerge, leaving emotions as symbolic traces of their lost context. Appearing as personal, ahistorical, or natural fact, these emotions accumulate cultural value through associations with words that generate material histories that remain concealed. In the case of Bush Administration’s defense of the Iraq War, grief and aggression stood in for coherent discourse, demonstrating how state violence can use affective force to make politics with contradictory statements.

Outlining the impact of violent discourses on political strategy, David Halperin argues that disputing the lies of homophobia is pointless. His argument is not that homophobic discourses are irrefutable, but on the contrary, that they are endlessly disputable because they are based on series of mutually contradictory double binds. Halperin uses the legal debate over homosexuality as an “immutable characteristic” to illustrate such a double bind whereby if homosexuality is inborn, it justifies medical and legal discrimination on the basis of biological difference, or alternately, if homosexuality is a choice, then medical practitioners and politicians can restrict and punish homosexual behavior as a matter of volition. Theoretically describing this discursive problematic, Halperin draws on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* to argue that since “homophobic discourses contain no fixed propositional content,” they “operate strategically by means of logical contradictions” whose infinite substitutability empowers those discourses while simultaneously incapacitating queers through incoherence. For Halperin, following Sedgwick, the consequence is that homophobic lies are easily falsifiable when taken one at a time, but refuting them one by one “does nothing to impair the strategic function of discourses that operate precisely by deploying a series of mutually contradictory premises in such a way that any one of them can be substituted for any other as different circumstances may require, without changing the final outcome of the argument.” The Bush
Administration’s case for the Iraq War, with its many divergent justifications, expresses a discursive incoherence like homophobia, which frustrates rhetorical attempts to restore clarity to politics. In summary, queer critiques of rhetoricality, especially Halperin’s theory of homophobic discourses, can be used to describe the Bush Administration’s justification of the Iraq War. Furthermore, as we will see with some critics of the Iraq War, rhetorical challenges to state violence can often fail to mobilize an effective political response.

Rhetorical Challenges to the Iraq War

The movement against the Iraq War began with incredible force. At this time, the leading anti-war narrative espoused the strength of a vibrant civil society in opposition to the Bush Administration’s march to war. Riding high from the successes of the alter-globalization demonstrations, most notably a recent European Social Forum, the movement emphasized the importance of global popular opinion as the voice of the people. Numbers swelled, and on February 15, 2003, protest against the Iraq War drew anywhere between six and thirty million people in over 600 cities worldwide. The event was championed as the loudest and clearest message ever sent by civil society. One New York Times columnist was so amazed by the epoch-defining nature of the event that he wrote, “there may still be two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion.” This intervention unfortunately failed to prevent the war. In hindsight, it is obvious that the message was transmitted clearly but did not have the intended effects on those who had their hands on the levers of state power.

Exasperated by the failure to prevent the Iraq War, the previously vibrant anti-war movement took steps to re-unify itself. So at the June 2003 United for Peace and Justice National Convention, a lengthy unity statement was constructed to build a united front to end the war. After Bush was reelected in 2004 and the search for weapons of mass destruction was officially called off, however, a number of groups became increasingly confrontational. The first step in the turn toward confrontation was to construct a line in the sand through a system of identification that ran parallel to Bush’s “with us or against us.” This polarizing identification had two important parts: ad hominem attacks on President Bush’s personality, and an ‘I Told You So’ narrative repeated by movement celebrities. To spread their message, liberals and progressives brought their case against the war before the court of public opinion. A small group of celebrities provided the public face of the criticism, with each wearing affiliations on their sleeves as if to point supporters toward the organization of their choice. Of those media personalities, the most vocal was Cindy Sheehan, whose son was killed while serving as a soldier in Iraq. Her presence at an action at a mass demonstration in the new phase in the anti-war movement in September 2005 is worth describing in detail.
Sheehan requested a meeting with the President to discuss her son’s death in early August of 2005.\textsuperscript{30} During this new phase of anti-war activism, she continued to publicly request these meetings while following the president around the country. Later that September while in Washington for an anti-war demonstration, Sheehan submitted an additional request with The Gold Star Families for Peace, which was flanked by religious leaders who opposed the war in Iraq.\textsuperscript{31} They began by approaching the guardhouse at the front of the White House gates. The guards quickly rebuffed the protestors and delivered clear directions – those who chose to stay next to the White House fence would be arrested. Participants calmly made their decisions, and after twenty minutes, a small string of police wagons showed up and the slow procession of arrests began. This action was the conclusion to a weekend of demonstrations against the Iraq War entitled “Operation Ceasefire.” The events brought together hundreds of thousands of people from around the world to participate in a mass march on Washington, D.C. Many smaller actions and demonstrations punctuated the large-scale events of the weekend, but the civil resistance at the White House was the most notable one. Buoyed by good feelings from the previous events, nearly four hundred people were arrested at the White House on the final day.

“Our request was, to our immense shock and surprise, denied,” wrote Sheehan on September 26th, immediately after her arrest.\textsuperscript{32} President Bush was the target of the White House protest, although it was common knowledge that he was not in Washington that weekend – making Sheehan’s “immense shock and surprise” at being refused a meeting with the President at the White House appear disingenuous and prefigured. Sheehan made her request in order for it to be refused, which reduced the potential of her actions to their rhetorical effects. Emphasizing her struggle to generate and circulate her challenge through the rhetoric of public grief, Sheehan noted that she was most disappointed that the capitol guards “wouldn’t even deliver any letter or pictures of our killed loved ones to the White House.”\textsuperscript{33}

The Bush Administration’s strategy of ignoring Sheehan followed a long presidential history of dismissing protest. Richard Nixon had famously declared, “under no circumstances will I be affected whatever” by public opposition to the Vietnam War.\textsuperscript{34} And even though President Bush and his officials had met with Sheehan a few times, once they modified their policy to snub her, she was painted as nothing but a bitter mother. Their approach follows a common narrative that claims that “a refusal to forgive and forget” as strong as Sheehan’s is not worth responding to because embittered individuals simply “recite one’s angry litany of loss long past the time others may care to listen or sympathize.”\textsuperscript{35} The political import of such a condemnation – “you’re so bitter” – has been made clear by feminist scholars who show the accusation of bitterness
is “designed to silence the sufferer” by marking what is “of dismissible interest,” which designates certain losses as not worthy of public mourning.\textsuperscript{36} This strategy of dismissal ultimately succeeded. Although words of righteous indignation filled the streets of Washington and flowed freely from the Capitol Mall to the White House, Operation Ceasefire failed to change the course of the Iraq War. As the feminist scholars insist, emotion itself is communicative. Therefore, the question remains: what was being communicated, and why did it fail?

The Politics of Identification: Or, Bush’s Personality Problem

In addition to critique the incoherent discourses justifying the Iraq War, Cindy Sheehan and the Gold Star Families for Peace sought moral clarity by also going after Bush for the killing of innocents. In doing so, they personalized their rhetoric in the hope that it would dramatize the divide between the anti-war movements message of reconciliation and Bush’s personal “crusade.”\textsuperscript{37} Sheehan had already written that President Bush had shown “arrogance,” had “nothing in his eyes,” and lacked “any real compassion” during a 2004 meeting.\textsuperscript{38} But she was further enraged when, in a speech on August 3, 2005, President Bush said that US troops killed in Iraq had committed a sacrifice “made in a noble cause.”\textsuperscript{39} Sheehan, certain that the causes for the war were ignoble, was confident that the President would be unable to articulate the noble cause when pressed to do so. Despite Sheehan’s message being directed at the causes of the Iraq War, and the fact that the Bush Administration’s strategy of silence was a matter of political calculation rather than personal insult, her approach encouraged additional personal attacks on the President’s character. Consequently, a claim that had already existed at the margins of the anti-war movement became its most popular theme: the Iraq War was the result of a personality problem.

In his book \textit{Beyond Sexuality}, Tim Dean criticizes a politics of identification particular to how identification disputes power through rhetorical exclusion and regulation of “inside / outside or human / abject borders.”\textsuperscript{40} By characterizing Bush as a soulless man beyond understanding, Sheehan founded her rhetorical critique of the war on a deep personal incommensurability that she substantiated even further by publicly connecting her disdain for him through the intense loss of her son. Dean argues that such identification becomes a mechanism for a restrictive, paranoid politics of binarity, especially if subjectivity is treated as a function of one’s self-image rather than the psychic unconscious (which would make it social, historical, and cultural).\textsuperscript{41} In addition to describing Sheehan’s rhetoric, the politics of identification also helps explain the conservative assault on Sheehan, which utilized a double bind within the incoherent discourses justifying the war to turn the criticisms she leveled at Bush back on her. The usual crowd of right-wing pundits – Matt Drudge, Bill O’Reilly, Rush Limbaugh – attacked Sheehan by challenging her integrity as a mother and as an American. Limbaugh, for instance, argued that Sheehan was faking
her case. Drudge went after Sheehan by publicly releasing an email written by a member of her extended family accusing Sheehan of “promoting her own personal agenda and notoriety at the expense of her son’s good name and reputation,” and of standing at odds with “the rest of the Sheehan Family” that “supports the troops, our country, and our President, silently, with prayer and respect.” These attacks share in the political strategy Sheehan herself constructed – she sought to use her position as the mother of a soldier killed in Iraq to undermine Bush and other high profile figures of his administration. Consequently, conservative criticism did not focus on her politics, but the authenticity of her claims, by suggesting that she was an unloving parent politically profiting from the death of her son. This starkly demonstrates the binarist for-or-against structure of the politics of identification; these arguments were nearly the same ones Sheehan brought against Bush – that Bush really lied about the justifications for going to war with Iraq and that he only went to war to profit himself and his friends.

Mary Thomas and Mathew Coleman further problematize the economy of ridicule directed at Bush by providing geopolitical arguments against treating the Iraq War as a personality problem. Rhetorically opposing United States policy by narrowly criticizing Bush, they argue, separates the identity of Bush from the symbolic power that he wields and falls short of challenging whatever geopolitical power extends beyond Bush’s term as President. To tie the Iraq War to Bush, for instance, gives an artificial beginning and expiration date to a complex of power that extends far beyond the office of the President or even the Pentagon. Proving the veracity of Thomas and Coleman’s claims, the anti-war movement was so deeply invested in opposing Bush that it lost most of its momentum when Barack Obama took office. The emotional relief to have Bush gone was made evident when President Obama was given the Nobel Peace Prize simply for setting a “new climate” in Washington. Yet his charismatic approach does not indicate a change in the two-party monopoly that is the foundation for American governance – the War on Terror has continued and the military industrial complex only expanded. In fact, the Obama Administration serves as a case in point of how the liberal and conservative forms of sovereignty share the same structure of authority – while one governs, the other recharges until the pendulum swings in the opposite direction. So, with a nation of people driving around with ‘Obama for Peace’ bumper stickers on their cars, the United States has enlarged its domestic spying practices, continued extraordinary rendition, bombed Yemen and Libya, extended the Afghanistan War, and intensified conflicts through drone warfare.
Capturing Interest: Or, The Narrative of ‘I Told You So’

Much of the anti-war sentiment was expressed in the register of truth and truth alone. For a dramatic example of the anti-war attempt to win the war through truth-statements, consider Michael Moore’s film Fahrenheit 9/11, which was released a few months before the 2004 general election and became the top-grossing documentary of all time.\(^5^1\) In his signature style, Moore combined investigative journalism and folksy outrage to criticize Bush, his handling of the War on Terror, and the media campaign that accompanied the Iraq War. Although Moore’s film was massively popular, it did not focus on political strategy or social movement, but rather a form of consciousness-raising that ‘speaks truth power.’ The political efficacy of speaking truth to power deserves examination. Being ‘right’ or ‘correct’ only has an indirect ability to effect change. Truth alone does not transform reality. Rather, “‘Truth’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. ‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it.”\(^5^2\) Therefore, as crowds of anti-war protests paraded around with caricatures of Bush, they were not standing on the authority of undeniable truths but forging a certain deployment of bodies and signs for a political purpose.

The point of this paper is not to critique the rhetoric of a single person. In fact, analyzing Sheehan as a celebrity and not as a person reveals a wider structure of power. In the summer of 2005, the anti-war movement participated in celebrity culture as much as other protest groups of the time – while Cindy Sheehan began a campout in front of the President’s ranch, Bono and a string of music superstars headlined the Live 8 concerts for Live Aid.\(^5^3\) Celebrity can, in fact, be a site of struggle rather than a dead-end for politics.\(^5^4\) However, as Jeremy Gilbert warns, celebrity is expressive of the anti-democratic nature of capitalism, particularly when the collective identity of a group is dependent on a single individual.\(^5^5\) Yet movement celebrities like Sheehan can be described in terms of what Steve Cross and Jo Littler call “assemblages of emulation,” which “harnesses the potential of people to dream” of a celebrity in a collection of affects that “speaks of connections that can be magnified.”\(^5^6\) Considered in these terms, the role of movement celebrities against the Iraq War becomes clear: they produced and directed subjects who repeated an ‘I Told You So’ narrative in order to share in the pleasure of opposing the Iraq War.

Protest does not introduce truth into public discourse as if the nation is engaged in a single monolithic discussion, but as Lauren Berlant argues, it creates “affect worlds” where people are bound by “affective projections of a constantly negotiated common interestedness.”\(^5^7\) The clearest demonstrations of this
affective projection are slogans over the false pretenses for war, which carried with them strong affective charges of pleasure. On their face, the protest mobilized arguments that suggested that if President Bush and his war planners were proven factually incorrect then the war would become untenable. Yet the most immediate effect of the expression was the constitution of a counter-public based in the pleasure of ‘sharing in the truth.’ As a consequence, the anti-war movement was built on strong affective ties without an immediately comprehensible connection between the strength of its communities and a political plan to end the war. While the movement may have been impaired by a lack of political strategy, even when it was equipped with cogent strategies, the anti-war left found it difficult to translate publics that shared different affective sentiments. Affective pleasure allowed the anti-war establishment to stay the course even after the Republicans defeated John Kerry in the 2004 election by casting his opposition to the Iraq War as the position of an elitist intellectual – for in defeat, members of the peace movement had something to be proud about: they were part of a well-defined group with strong, recognizable voices that knew the Iraq War was a bad idea from the start. Ultimately, the anti-war movement had a lot of emotion that never converted into political force.

Much like the personalized criticism of Bush, the pleasure of the ‘I Told You So’ narrative relied on the binary, paranoid, and defensive quality of a politics of identification. In fact, many self-certain liberals became so dead-set on proving the Iraq War wrong that they became petty policy experts and party hacks with politics no better than those on Capitol Hill. Celebrities played a large part in this cultivation of policy expertise. Martin Sheen took a break from playing a president on television to give the nation policy advice, and Sean Penn, actor turned international peace delegate, took trips to Iraq so that he could speak “on behalf of the American dead and wounded” from personal experience. These self-styled policy wonks enacted a classic politics of performativity, whose aim is to unsettle the nature of mastery and reveal its contingent nature. By imitating subjects of power, such performances aim to dispel belief in the source of that power. The anti-war movement was soon able to marshal its own experts who could mimic and sometimes even out-perform the policy analysts and war planners. These experts usually employed ‘law and order’ rhetoric that lauded law respecting-citizens who were doing their best to hold a renegade President and his cabinet in check. One example was the effort to impeach President Bush, which was launched in earnest with Representative John Conyers filing a resolution in late 2005 to create an investigative committee to consider impeachment. However, as Tim Dean argues, performances of power that aim to rhetorically reveal or critique power misrecognize that power is structured by a very real desire with a material basis that cannot be disputed – only directed or disrupted. Attempts to dispute the official policy behind the Iraq War by being ‘more royal than the queen’ thus ended predictably: movement celebrities
would trot out military reports or international law chapter and verse without suggesting how such policy prowess would end the war. And if anything was certain, it was that the Bush Administration was not soliciting public advice on how to run the war. So, as long as the self-righteous liberals obsessed over the rightness of their policy position, they traded the struggle over political power for the performance of expertise.

To summarize, the Bush Administration’s justification of the Iraq War can be analyzed through queer critiques of rhetoricality, such as Halperin’s theory about the incoherence of homophobic discourses, which help explain why rhetorical opposition was often ineffective. The shifting justifications for the war given by the Bush Administration created a moving target held together by the collective trauma of 9/11 and fantasies that connect pleasure and violence. Rhetorical attempts to dispute administration justifications one-by-one did not build an effective political opposition to the war, in part because of their resulting rhetoric, which cast the war as a result of a presidential personality problem and offered an ‘I Told You So’ narrative. The first rhetoric produced a binarist politics of identification that mirrored Bush’s own divide “you are either with us or against us” approach that impeded a deeper analysis of the geopolitical effects of American power. The second rhetoric produced emotional publics fixed on self-righteous shared truths at the expense of political strategy.

Failed Rhetoricality: Bodies that Mutter

Soon before President Bush left office, he had a pair of shoes thrown at him during a press conference on his farewell journey to Iraq. The thrower was Muntadhar al-Zaidi, an Iraqi journalist upset with the American occupation of his country. In the middle of the press conference, al-Zaidi stood up, yelled, “This is a goodbye kiss from the Iraqi people, you dog,” and threw a shoe at Bush. Before security personnel were able to intervene, al-Zaidi launched another shoe, saying, “This is for the widows and orphans and all those killed in Iraq.” Showing just how unaffected he was by the whole ordeal, Bush later laughed it off by saying, “If you want the facts, it’s a size 10 shoe that he threw,” further shrugging of the protest with the comment, “I don’t know what the guy’s cause was. I didn’t feel the least bit threatened by it.” As a strategy of confrontation, al-Zaidi’s shoe-ing follows Voltairine de Cleyre’s classic definition of direct action as one of the “spontaneous retorts of those who feel oppressed by a situation.” Moreover, it matches the essential characteristics outlined by direct action advocates, being confrontational, public, disruptive, and illegal. Yet it was unable to affect Bush, probably because it was immediately contained by the politics of identification, which raises an important question: can other types of embodied protest disrupt power?
Tim Dean proposes a strategy to break through the strict boundary policing employed by the politics of identification: attend to the signs produced by bodies that cannot be dismissed through signification. To find these signs, he argues for a distinction between “suave bodies” and “bodies that mutter.” As described above, suave bodies are those bodies that inscribe desire as suasive force, which gives way to the oppositional power of signification essential to the politics of identification. Bodies that mutter, in contrast, are an effect of the incommensurability of the body and the subject – this failure produces desire, which they communicate by speaking “almost inaudibly,” “unintelligibly,” and producing signs “that are not immediately legible even as something requiring reading.” Or to say it another way: it is a body that seeks recognition but does not know how to find it. While such a muttering body is usually in pain, there are some interesting examples of bodies employing the effects of this dissatisfaction to politically productive ends. The queer failure of desire haunts the “dualistic economy” of identification that is organized “in terms of oppositions.” These oppositions are inherently unstable, which has been made visible as gender binaries and the opposition between straight and gay identities are deconstructed in increasingly public ways. As Dean notes, the social threat posed through the unraveling of these binaries explains both the cultural campaigns launched to retrench them but also the intensely personal violence unleashed “when this instability becomes too evident.” Psychoanalytically, the violent securing of these binaries is done through signification, which “exceeds expressive intention and consciousness” to restore subjective identification. The consequence is “symbolic alienation” as a subjective condition, which describes the experience of subjective division enforced through the linguistic machine of the symbolic.

How do bodies that mutter change embodied protest? Dean’s answer comes from the queer potential in “the inability of language to say everything.” According to Dean, the rhetorical demystification of persuasion – such as a critique of the persuasive power of advertising to sell forms of sexual and social relations – is less persuasive than the form of persuasion it is critiquing. And because rhetorical critique is unable to “cancel the opposing persuasive form” and often leaves advertising’s suasive power “spectacularly undiminished,” Dean is convinced that confrontations with persuasion must come from something beyond rhetoric. Instead of challenging power at the level of signification – as do the two discursive strategies of personal attacks and ‘I Told You So’ narratives outlined in the first part of this paper – Dean suggests that political strategy should engage with the queerness of the Lacanian Real, which is the aspect of experience where “all words cease and all categories fail,” and is therefore “the object of anxiety par excellence.” While the Real is elusive, its effects can be observed in the mismatch between the body and language. The body, as Dean argues, is a site of encoding – language cuts up and maps the body by dissecting it with grids and networks. Language is “like a net that
settles over the body” that “has a ripple-like effect on human subjects.”77 And as language “hits the body,” he writes, “its impact produces not merely the subject of the signifier but also the subject of desire.”78 For while the body and the symbols that intersect it never really match up, it is those mismatches that generate desire. Good and bad fits between bodies and language abound. Especially bad fits cause striking ruptures, and intense, often uncontrollable flows of desire that make up queerness.79 And while all bodies contain zones of resistance that repel symbolization, queer subjects of desire are an effect of symbolic disruption.80

The conventional approach to bodies in politics is direct action, which uses their physical presence to disrupt a scene. Al-Zaidi’s “shoeing” of Bush, for instance, instigated a public confrontation through the material power of a person and his shoes. The challenge of direct action, however, is that the political of identification prefigures the response to disruption. So in al-Zaidi’s case, although he clearly stated his motivations (but in Arabic and not English), Bush never became aware of them. This paper thus ‘queers direct action’ by studying how bodies that mutter circumvent the politics of identification by producing subjects of desire, in particular, how they blur the binary boundaries established through rhetoric and unleash a politics of desire based in collective trauma.

“The Ground Noise and the Static”: The Queer Effects of Bodies that Mutter

In early September 2008, thousands of anarchists and other radicals descended on the Republican National Convention in the Twin Cities to ‘crash the party.’81 The protests lost focus after the McCain campaign cancelled the first day of the convention – possibly nervous about the impending protests, even though the official claim was that the cancellation was to wait for Hurricane Gustav to make landfall.82 Confrontations between riot police and anarchists were numerous, but for days, a huge police force outnumbered and outmaneuvered them, and prevented them from being more than a mild nuisance.83 Yet on Thursday night during McCain’s acceptance speech as the Republican Party nominee for President, a series of Code Pink anti-war protestors rose from the gallery and interrupted the event.84 McCain, looking irritated, dismissed the protestor by saying “Americans want us to stop yelling at each other, ok?”85 Another protestor soon interrupted McCain. Subsequently, McCain was so distracted that he stopped his speech to directly address the protests and urged the audience to ignore them. Those protests, along with McCain’s off-the-cuff responses, soon became the most memorable part of an otherwise routine speech.

Beyond Signification: Or, How to Have a Good Time
Strictly speaking, it was the Republican audience that interrupted McCain’s speech and not the Code Pink protestors. Every time a lonely protestor raised their voice, a whole chorus of ‘USA! USA!’ thundered through the convention center to drown them out. In that way, the delegates turned potentially insignificant irritations into event-shaping disruptions. If the crowd had responded as they did the day before, when two Code Pink protestors rushed toward the stage during Sarah Palin’s speech only to be snatched by the Secret Service at the last moment, then McCain would have continued without interruption. Yet it appeared difficult to calm down McCain’s chanting crowd – a group so incensed by the mere presence of a dissenter in their midst that they were compelled to match her verbal outbursts with an overwhelming vocal response of their own. This excessive response is indicative of the paranoia present in a group obsessed with the politics of identification – so anxious to erase an otherwise minor disruption, the intensity of the crowd’s reaction reveals the precarity of the imaginary fantasies that bind together state discourses. Caught within a perspective that structures relations in terms of identity and opposition, the politics of identification leads to an aggressive policing of borders that reacts violently to anything that evades categorization.

Although the Code Pink interruption provoked a massive outburst from the Republican crowd, they showed how bodies could jam political discourse, demonstrating a subversion of the usual politics of identity. The Code Pink interruption elucidates how resistant bodies can cause unspeakable irruptions of the Real and thus makes language sputter. During their interruption, McCain’s speech began to spit and sputter, as he lost his breath and forgot his words. By calling their actions ‘ground noise and static,’ McCain made it clear that he did not know, nor did he care to know, the cause of the protestors interrupting him. Yet in the few short moments when McCain was forced off his script, there was a feeling that anything could happen. Far from any microphone, and then repeatedly shouted down, the protestors were stripped of coherent speech. All the protestors had left were their bodies and whatever howls they could let out while being dragged away. But the relative success of their protest demonstrates a basic point about the connection of the body and politics illustrated at the Republican Convention in 2008, but also in the city streets across the South during the civil rights movement when black and white youth were assaulted by firehouses and bitten by dogs; regardless of all of the new and innovative forms of protest that have followed the boom in social and media technologies of the twentieth century, the body remains the basic tool of protest – especially when is not reduced to its suasive power. Even when discourse breaks down, the body continues to exert force.

A strategy that emerged during summit protests provides a useful example of the power of bodies the mutter. For years, the battle lines drawn by politicians and bureaucrats trying to keep out protestors had led to the worst kinds of

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conflict. At the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas summits in Quebec City in 2001 and Miami in 2003, for instance, protestors were met by fierce police repression. In Miami, in particular, the police used a set of heavy-handed tactics that included “large scale pre-emptive arrests, deployment of heavily armed, sometimes unidentifiable law enforcement officers who infringed protester rights, and the collection of intelligence by police and others on activists engaged in lawful protest.”

When the tactic of radical clowning was introduced, however, police attempts at crowd-control became more difficult. In addition to lightening the mood, clown interventions disrupted the normal boundary-policing that allowed business as usual to continue unperturbed. The Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA), for instance, dresses up in army fatigues and clown gear. At protests, CIRCA has used funny chants and disorder for the purpose of distracting, confusing, and disrupting police lines. By introducing humor and hiccups into the usual modes of identification, clowning disrupts the steely resolve of protesters and police alike. It is not as if the clowns introduce confusion into identification itself, as it is fairly easy to distinguish between the police and someone in a rainbow wig and full face paint. But the clowns therefore exhibit a performance whose effects are not to clarify identity but to disrupt it. Anarchist academic David Graeber has written about a protest where mass arrest seemed all but inevitable. Penned in by the cops, a bandana- and mask-clad anarchist black bloc tried to break through police lines on multiple occasions, but their militant tactics failed. Yet when a group of people dressed up as goats, a group dressed as puppeteers, and the clown army began an impromptu carnival with streamers, horns, and rubber mallets, “the tenor of the whole event” changed, and the police lines gave way and everyone escaped arrest. Therefore, through a series of movements, gestures, and slogans that are not immediately legible, clowning demonstrates the power of mobilizing bodies that mutter.

Radical clowning makes up for some of the problems found in rhetorical challenges to the Iraq War. While clowning or the Code Pink disruptions did not derail the war, they show that little things like jokes, gaffes, slips of the tongue, and misfires inevitably erupt when the official story breaks down. And it is these unplanned utterances that haunt the fantasy of state control that paper over its incoherent discourses. In contrast to the self-assured affective world sharing in the ‘I Told You So’ narrative, Benjamin Shepard explains that clowning functions as a bridge between multiple publics. Clowns connect with the general public through pleasure to disrupt the usual barriers put up by the general public, the media, and their opponents. The key mechanism for creating these contact zones is performative irony, which functions differently than simply treating the Iraq War as the result of a presidential personality problem. As L.M. Bogad notes, this produces an economy of ridicule that provokes critical reflection that dissolves the easy binary of a politics of identity. This ridicule visibly appropriates, changes, and recasts discourses to publicly deconstruct them, as
seen in a 2007 rally against the KKK where a group of clowns disrupted the Nazi chant of ‘White Power!’ with ‘White Powder!’ and ‘White Flowers!’ while dancing and throwing flour and flowers in the air. In effect, what radical clowning produces are alternative forms of identities that are ambiguous and therefore “dynamic, shifting and unstable” which challenge boundaries, power relations, and knowledge production. Clowning is only one example of bodies that mutter, however. Tim Dean warns that locating queerness in camp or parody focuses too much on the visible, which reintroduces rhetoricality and the politics of identification through questions of naturalness, realness, and passing. This is not meant as a challenge to clowning, which has proven to be effective in many instances, but as a provocation to study bodies with an even deeper connection to the invisible realm of the Real and whose mutters are that much more subtle.

The Trauma of the Real: Or, Unspeakable Acts

In addition to blurring the categories of the usual politics of identification, the Code Pink interruption of McCain’s speech illustrates another capacity of subjects of desire: to generate events. Unlike many of the other direct actions at the Republican Convention, which were quickly dismissed, the Code Pink disruption caused a specific type of rupture that explains why McCain was compelled to continue addressing what he declared to be a non-event – these disruptions caused trauma. As Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis write, psychoanalytic trauma is “an event in the subject’s life defined by its intensity, by the subject’s incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization.” Therefore, it is McCain’s simultaneous dismissal of and inability to move beyond the interruption that constitutes trauma, and it is this trauma that transformed the protests from mere actions into true events. Consider an example that carries considerable historical weight – Mario Savio’s stirring speech during the Berkeley Free Speech Movement urging others to use their bodies in direct action:

There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can’t take part, you can’t even passively take part. And you’ve got to put your bodies upon the gears, upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus and you’ve got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you’re free the machine will be prevented from working at all.

Against the more traditional interpretation of Savio’s prescription, that bodies should be used to physically clog spaces of power, perhaps we should perform a more psychoanalytic reading – that the suasive power of politics can be interrupted by jamming its symbolic machine with bodies that mutter, which

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frustrate rhetorical attempts to contain the desiring force of bodies through the politics of identification. Moreover, jamming the symbolic machine is not painless, it produces trauma, but it is not the pain of an individual subject but a shared blockage with potentially enormous effects.

Such an incitement to anti-rhetorical protest calls for a redefinition of activism as trauma, or more specifically, of activism as generating and sharing trauma. Douglas Crimp, Ann Cvetkovich, and others have described queer activism during the AIDS crisis this way, yet it is rarely applied to other activism, in large part because of the historical specificity of that moment and attempts to limit queerness to queer identity or ‘the queer community.’ To be clear, this is not clinical trauma but its psychoanalytic version; one that emphasizes the jouissance of trauma as an intense mixture of pleasure and pain that are felt in excessive experiences that evade categorization. Such activism furthermore calls for a distinction between traumatic testimony or the inevitable trauma of being an activist, and actually putting oneself in traumatizing situations in order to cause an upheaval. In contrast to the suasive power of Cindy Sheehan, who gave voice to the trauma of losing a son to the Iraq War, the trauma generated and shared by a body that mutters comes from “the incommensurability between the body and subject.” The queer power of bodies comes from the failure of language to connect their inside and outside; the effect of which is subjective alienation, which is spread by bodies that mutter. “All other sounds and substances emitted by the body’s orifices or at its borders” thus provide the material for interventions that disrupt the false mastery of power through unspeakable acts that draw on resources unique to every body, which upset the official story and make it skip a beat.

Ultimately, this redefinition of protest highlights the failures of the anti-war movement. Although the movement held some of the largest protests ever recorded, their size alone was not enough to end the war. While many feel that the anti-war movement needed more of the same – more people, more demonstrations, more people at demonstrations – protest as sharing in bodily trauma offers a change of course. Rather than looking for more convincing arguments or better ways to cut through the noise, bodies that mutter produce ‘ground noise and static’ to undermine the official story. And even though this form of protest was not the primary focus of the anti-war movement, its limited use still resulted in memorable actions. Furthermore, if disruptions of this kind had been more common, the fragile pretense may have been harder to maintain. But this redefinition of protest has profound and dangerous consequences. On the one hand, it is profound because it promises to redirect desire from private pleasure and suffering – the joy of intimacy or the sadness of losing a son – and transform these private emotions into shared political experiences. Yet there are significant financial, social, and bodily costs that come with this form of activism, with some immediately visible (being beaten by the police) while others are less
so (legal fees, loss of wages, the stigma of criminality, familial disapproval, mental trauma, stress and burnout). But forms of life that seem impossible for some may be necessary for others, for as Sara Ahmed notes, queerness highlights how we are not all free, but more importantly, how we are not all free in the same way. So on the other hand, using trauma as a lever for political change threatens to unleash uncontrollable forces that could possibly open a utopian queer horizon but may also grievously upset the modest lives people have built for themselves. The anxious reality of this proposition is its potential, for bodies that mutter are more powerful and meaningful than the pleasurable politics of identification, but its power is often the result of pain.

**Conclusion**

The incoherent discourses that justified the Iraq War were not politically ineffective; to the contrary, they trapped opponents in rhetorical disputes that failed to upset the war effort. The personalized ridicule of President Bush and the ‘I Told You So’ narrative behind Cindy Sheehan’s opposition to the Iraq War confirm that rhetorical challenges to state violence often fall into traps like those set for disputing homophobic discourse. Treating the Iraq War as the result of a personality problem, anti-war rhetoric created an economy of ridicule that failed to engage larger questions of geopolitical power and furthered a politics of identification that dismissed criticism before its claims could be evaluated. The ‘I Told You So’ narrative created an emotional politics of shared truths that helped produce large publics critical of the Bush Administration, yet they developed greater commonality through celebrity and amateur policy expertise rather than a political plan for ending the war.

While direct action did not end the war, the Code Pink interruption of John McCain’s acceptance speech at the 2008 Republican National Convention revealed a disruptive power of bodies that lies outside their rhetorical suasion and thus the politics of identification. The queer theory of a politics based on this disruptive power is similar to direct action, in that both are centered on bodies, but it relies on bodies as subjects of desire rather than their objective ability to blockade space. Following Dean’s distinction between suasive bodies and bodies that mutter, the paper finds that subjects of desire can evade dismissive categorization. The politics of bodies that mutter blurs boundaries, which uncovers potentials not otherwise available, and introduces shared trauma, which produces events by disrupting the symbolic machine of power. This politics was not widely used in the opposition to the Iraq War, but it builds on other activist practices, such as queer militancy and radical clowning, which have shown the power of disruption. Ultimately, what the Code Pink disruption shows is that direct action will not be queered by adding more glitter or being more fabulous, which would further the politics of identification, but the productive failure of desire that escapes easy categorization through the

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5 Dean, 2000, p. 203.

6 Dean, 2000, p. 175.


10 Pfiffner, 2004, p. 44.


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29 Arundhati Roy’s Come September speech is a modern classic on this topic. Channeling Mark Twain’s maxim, “Loyalty to my country: always. Loyalty to my government: when it deserves it,” the veteran of the alter-globalization movement powerfully mobilizes an anarchist analysis to pick apart the binary logic of nationalism. Her target is not just Bush’s rhetoric about the Iraq War, or even Indian nuclear saber rattling, but the whole of twentieth-century militaristic


33 Sheehan, 2005.


40 Dean, 2000, p. 193.

41 Dean, 2000, p. 189-192. The unconscious for Dean, following Lacan, is linguistic and transindividual. Moreover, it is not Jung’s collective unconscious, which is a collection of transhistorical archetypes, because Lacan’s unconscious is “thoroughly historical, both conceptually and for the subject” (p. 6). The most popular of Lacan’s formulations of the unconscious is the dense phrase, “the unconscious is the discourse of the Other.” A clearer description might characterize the unconscious as public discourse with the caveat, however, that it “may be registered only as it disappears,” as it is “neither psychological nor strictly culture” (p. 9).


Murray, 2011.


Dean, 2000, p. 68-72.


Dean, 2000, p. 83.

Dean, 2000, p. 84.

Dean, 2000, p. 83.

Dean, 2000, p. 83-84.


Dean, 2000, p. 174-176.

Dean, 2000, p. 175.


Dean, 2000, p. 59.

Dean, 2000, p. 197.

Desire is no doubt the topic of the paper, given its appearance in the title and its introduction early on with Williams’s “structure of feeling.” To outline the specific contours of desire is not only beyond the scope of this paper, but would also violate Dean’s insistence on maintaining what Lacan calls the “polymorphous perversity” of desire. The study of desire is immanent in the paper, however, as unconscious desire can be analyzed through its effects, most notably instincts, which reside in the body and produce signals like hunger that are felt and interpreted, which are themselves not linguistic but still influenced by cultural tendencies that can be articulated.

Dean, 2000, p. 59.

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Dean, 2000, p. 51, 201. Against certain readings of Lacan, Dean insists that the Real may be a limit to the Symbolic and the Imaginary, but that limit "is generative, not simply constraining" (p. 30). Moreover, while that limit may be described as "a recurring impossibility or blockage," it designates resistance and not emptiness (p. 30).


Interestingly, Cindy Sheehan was an active member of Code Pink at the time of the RNC, however, the protestors in this action were Elizabeth Hourican and Nancy Mancias.


Dean, 2000, p. 192.

Dean, 2000, p. 209-213.


Dean, 2000, p. 68-72. Dean’s distinction between suave bodies and bodies that mutter is in part of response to Butler’s theory of drag, which functions as a dialectic between realness and parody. The limits to mimesis and misrecognition Dean finds in Butler’s work may also exist in radical clowning and other forms of political parody.


Savio, Mario. (1964). Speech on the steps of Sproul Hall, Berkeley, CA.


Dean, 2000, p. 110-111.

Dean, 2000, p. 200.

Dean, 2000, p. 200.

Alex Callinicos, for instance, argued that “scattered, localized direct actions” were distracting from larger mass demonstrations. For more, see Callinicos, Alex. (2005). “Anti-war Protests Do Make a Difference.” Socialist Worker 1943, March 19. http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=6067.


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