On Sirens and Lamp Posts: Sound, Space, and Affective Politics

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Abstract

This essay considers how embodied tactics (re)distribute auditory power in political spaces in order to better understand the practices, subjects, and spaces implicated in protest. Focusing on how listening subjects move through and constitute protest spaces, it draws on participant ethnography at the 2017 Women's March to demonstrate that listening subjects are historically contingent in ways that amplify how protests happen under distinct political constraints. It situates the Women's March in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement in Ferguson and the revolution in Syria to suggest through comparison how political subjects are not universal but constructed in relation to the powers that they protest. The essay argues that the effects of listening, chanting, and marching on the distribution of power at protest events can be evidenced through the concealment or exercise of dissent as listening subjects move through and constitute political spaces.

Around 10:30 a.m., a police SUV rounds the corner at C and 6th St SW, about a block away from the crowds gathered on Independence Avenue for the 2017 Women's March in Washington, DC. Its siren pings high and brittle.¹ My heart leaps for a quick moment and I spin my head around. Its vibrations sear through me, like I have just stuck my finger in an electric socket. I am on the verge of flight mode. But there does not appear to be an incident. I relax. Perhaps the siren is being used to tell us pussyhat protesters the direction in which we should be heading. However, as it is not immediately clear to me why the siren was used, I am a bit annoyed and unnerved by the surplus sound that has charged the crowded intersection. Even before the siren, I had been feeling nervous in such an exposed and overcrowded space.

An hour or so later, I chat with a woman at the same corner. I notice her headwear. Unlike most of the march participants, for whom a handknit pink hat with tufts known as a pussyhat signified a political stance for women's rights and opposition to then-newly-inaugurated President Trump, she is wearing a union cap. An Afro-Latina veteran protester from Virginia, she feels somewhat disaffected by the rookie crowd surrounding her. We somehow get to talking about the police presence at the Women's March. Like me, she was not amused by the siren: "It works people up into a panic," she says. "There's no need to use it. They're just coming through. Instead of beep beep... asshole use of the siren [sic]." I nodded in agreement. I also felt resentful of being hailed by the siren, of becoming a listening subject who could be steered around by the police officer through the audible authority of this emergency signal. Whether the police officer's intended use for the siren was perceived as helpful or an overreach of authority, his siren hailed its listeners. In this sonic encounter, the siren's audible materiality signaled the authority of the police and constructed consensual subjects in a politically contentious space.

¹ Note that this siren was a standard siren and not the "Rumbler" siren (distinguished by a very low frequency of 180–360Hz) used by DC police, among others, to hail policed bodies as such through sonic vibrations.

I had arrived to the Women's March out of personal and scholarly motivations. A Chinese-Jewish cis-gender heterosexual female raising a multiracial family, I felt sharply the political upset of the 2016 presidential election and chose to channel my opposition to the racial and gender politics of president-elect Trump by traveling from Chicago to Washington, DC, to participate in the Women's March. I also felt an ethical obligation to attend the protest after witnessing Syrian protestors participate in the Arab Spring and transform the political and social terrain that I engaged with as an ethnographer of Syrian society and culture. If courageous Syrians risked injury and detainment to call for the dismantling of the authoritarian regime that had governed Syria since 1963, so I reasoned, I felt compelled to follow their example and to protest as a tactic of oppositional politics. I was also keen to interpret this experience ethnographically, attending to the role of sound and the senses in constituting political action. My one-time, casual participation in the Women's March stemmed more from these interests and less an investment in the Women's March as a platform for specific political causes that would later develop into a formal political organization.

Shortly after it took place, the 2017 Women's March was heralded as a "wondrous expression of interwoven resistance and solidarity"² that engendered an "emergent space in which traditionally marginalized and excluded groups could challenge the sexist culture of domination [and build] a platform to voice dissent."³ These ideals reinforced claims of allyship, perhaps aspirational, in which feminists reached across racial boundaries to band together through the politics of gender. Sensibilities of the personal, of politics borne out of passion, of embracing alternative modes of being, resonated throughout the march. These sensibilities privileged what Ghassan Hage conceptualizes as "alter-politics," or the desire to search for political alternatives, rather than "anti-politics," or demands based on oppositional politics.⁴ Yet the march has been widely critiqued for masking the participation and history of black women's activism. Critics claim that by reinforcing the "hegemonic notions of feminine bodies as pure bodies that are racialized as white,"⁵ the march constructed the collective subject of the Women's March as white and feminine.

One of the effects of the public perception of the Women's March as largely white and female was the high level of cooperation between authorities of the state and event participants during the march. I had been pleasantly surprised by my experience of a cooperative police presence. The siren was the only instance, that I heard, in which police approached the crowd from a mildly non-cooperative standpoint. When I noticed police and other authorities of the state, such as members of counterterrorism units, they tended to be standing by their vehicles, observing protesters, and generally not interfering. They were not aggressive nor did they posture with their bodies. They did not line up to face protesters. They did not throw tear gas nor hit protesters with batons. They were, in essence, respectful and cooperative with protesters. As journalists, organizers, and participants have pointed out, there were "zero arrests" of white women who have the "privilege to be treated as a delicate, precious possession."⁶

² Pamela Moss and Avril Maddrell, "Emergent and Divergent Spaces in the Women's March: The Challenges of Intersectionality and Inclusion," *Gender, Place & Culture* 24, no. 5 (2017): 614, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2017.1351509>.

³ Boothroyd, et al., "(Re)Producing Feminine Bodies: Emergent Spaces through Contestation in the Women's March on Washington," *Gender, Place & Culture* 24, no. 5 (2017): 711, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2017.1339673>.

⁴ Ghassan Hage, *Alter-Politics: Critical Anthropology and the Radical Imagination*. (Victoria, Australia: Melbourne University Publishing, 2015).

⁵ Boothroyd, et al., "(Re)Producing Feminine Bodies," 712.

⁶ Jess Zimmerman, "The Myth of the Well-Behaved Women's March." *The New Republic*. January 24, 2017, <https://newrepublic.com/article/140065/myth-well-behaved-womens-march>.

Beyond the Women's March, however, strained race relations in the US have and continue to structure interactions between police forces and demonstrators in ways that reinforce stereotypes of black protest subjects as "unruly, lawless, and unpredictable."⁷ A recent example of the abuse of state power at events perceived as majority black are the 2014 protests in Ferguson, Missouri, which demonstrated against the racial profiling, police brutality, and racial inequities implicated in the death of Michael Brown. In particular, demonstrators popularized the "Hands Up! Don't Shoot!" gesture as an act of protest against the racialized politics of police cooperation in street interactions. As Anusha Kedhar writes, drawing on Susan Foster's argument for considering the "tactics implemented in protest itself," this gesture of cooperation was a "tactical perform[ance] of non-cooperation with an unjust and racist state [in which]... 'they refuted in the act of protest the stereotypes on which prejudice against them was rationalized.'"⁸ Or, as Joshua Chambers-Letson notes on Ferguson, "just as performance is a means of reducing a body to flesh, performance can be the means through which the flesh speaks, refusing to be ignored."⁹ The non-violent alter-politics of the "Hands Up! Don't Shoot!" gesture exemplifies how protests are constituted by embodied participation in and as political claim-making, and how much it matters whose bodies performatively realize those claims.

Protest spaces emerge through the tactical bodies that gesture, chant, march, and occupy historically and politically contingent social spaces. Scholars, including contributors to this forum, have attended to the particularly audible ways in which sound-based participation actualizes protest events.¹⁰ However, this literature has tended to focus more on the performative effects of bodies that produce sounds, e.g., protest songs as agents for political change, and less on how such sounds are received by participants. Here, I point to how protests are also contingent on listening and responsorial bodies. I opened this essay with the sound of the siren and its disruptive effect on the soundscape of the Women's March in order to make audible the ways that racialized and gendered listening bodies construct these political spaces. Later in this essay, I draw on my experience participating in the 2017 Women's March in Washington, DC, to convey how, as a protester, what I heard and how I listened shaped my sense of corporeality and how I negotiated the protest landscape. From the interactions of police with crowds to social relations among protesters, listening and embodied practices constitute the emergent space of the Women's March in ways that articulate and solidify the relations of race, gender, and class that engendered this protest space.

In this essay, I dwell on the political potential of sound to make audible protest, not only to celebrate politicized noise, but also to politicize sonic phenomena as a means for reproducing social and cultural hegemonies in spaces of protest. To better understand the practices, subjects, and spaces implicated in protest, I also aim to delimit the Women's March as an event engendered through particular performances of dissent and civil (dis)obedience, overlapping yet distinct practices and ideals that shape US politics. To this end, I situate the Women's March in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement in Ferguson and

⁷ Anusha Kedhar, "Hands Up! Don't Shoot! Gesture, Choreography, and Protests in Ferguson." *The Feminist Wire*. October 6, 2014, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/protest-in-ferguson/>.

⁸ Susan Leigh Foster, "Choreographies of Protest." *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 3 (2003): 395–412; cf. Kedhar, "Hands Up! Don't Shoot!," <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2003.0111>.

⁹ Joshua Chambers-Letson, "Twelve Notes on Ferguson: Black Performance and Police Power," in *Law and Performance*, edited by Austin Sarat, Lawrence Douglas, and Martha Merrill Umphrey (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 223, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv346v7v.10>.

¹⁰ Noriko Manabe, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Protest Music after Fukushima* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Benjamin Tausig, *Bangkok is Ringing: Sound, Protest, and Constraint* (Oxford University Press, 2018); Laura Kunreuther, "Sounding Democracy: Performance, Protest, and Political Subjectivity," Talk given at Society for Ethnomusicology Annual Meeting, November 11, 2016; David Novak, "Podcast: The Sounds of Japan's Antinuclear Movement," *Post*, August 13, 2013, http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/251-podcast-the-sounds-of-japan-s-antinuclear-movement.

the revolution in Syria to suggest through comparison how political subjects are not universal but constructed in relation to the powers that they protest.

Embodying Politics

How do listening, chanting, and marching bodies move through political spaces and what are the effects of these embodied tactics on the distribution of power at protest events? Inspired by the global protests of 2011 and 2012, André Lepecki illustrates how social actors negotiate power in emergent spaces of protest through movement.¹¹ He bases this theory of movement on a reading of Jacques Rancière's theories of power and subjectivity in relation to politics and the police, respectively. Rancière conceptualizes the police as that which "produces nothing other than a mere spectacle of its own consensual mobility."¹² Once demobilized as nothing but the appearance of the political, forms of political action are incapable of anything but "a pre-choreographed pattern of circulation, corporeality, and belonging."¹³ Following Rancière, Lepecki maneuvers out of this totalitarian space by finding the possibility of political transformation through movement. He suggests that "politics, by contrast to the police, consists in transforming this space of moving along, of circulation, into the space for the appearance of a subject. It becomes a political subject when it appears away from preassigned modes and spaces of circulation, from excess and unforeseen modes of reclaiming spaces for mobility."¹⁴ To anchor the ways that movement enables policing or enacts politics, Lepecki introduces the terms "choreopolicing" and "choreopolitics." Whereas the former refers to the "highly skilled, and mostly invariable, choreographed presence of police," choreopolitics invites "a redistribution and reinvention of bodies, affects, and senses through which one may learn how to move politically, how to invent, activate, seek, or experiment with a movement whose only sense (meaning and direction) is the experimental exercise of freedom."¹⁵

The concealment or exercise of dissent also occurs through embodied responses to sound as listening subjects move through and constitute political spaces. I have illustrated above how choreopolicing occurred at the Women's March vis-à-vis the hailing effect of the police siren. I will later address the choreopolitics of listening at the Women's March, but before doing so, I make a comparative turn towards Syria, where I have spent the better part of two decades ruminating on the significance of embodied public assembly. In the following discussion of Syrian protests, I show how choreopolitics and the formation of the listening subject function similarly to the Women's March in the sense that listening and the concurrent production of sound are tactics that (re)distribute auditory power in political spaces. Yet attunement to Syria's long history of tactical political performance also suggests how sound in Syrian protest functioned as a form of authoritarianism, that is, that auditory practices may rehearse political obedience and enable dissidence. Listening subjects are historically contingent in ways that amplify how protests happen under distinct political constraints.

In March 2011, residents of Daraa, a village in southwest Syria, flooded the streets to protest charges of graffiti brought against schoolchildren, who were subsequently arrested. Given that public assembly was and continues to be prohibited under emergency law, protesters risked adversarial, confrontational, and

¹¹ André Lepecki, "Choreopolicing and Choreopolitics: Or, the Task of the Dancer," *TDR: The Drama Review* 57, no. 4 (2013): 13–27, https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00300.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

violent incidents with police and other forms of regime security.¹⁶ Despite the obstruction of *habeus corpus* and brutality of security forces, often hidden in plain sight, non-violent protests surged throughout the country, in town and cities, and across social divisions of class, education, locality, and religion. As I watched videos of protests that streamed through my social media feeds, I was struck by the range of movements through which protesters reclaimed public spaces, from crowds shouting slogans and raising banners to long rows, usually of men, in which people collectively swayed or prostrated themselves on the ground. Choreopolitics swelled into motion, motivated by the reclamation of dignity.

Inspired by the eruption of the “Arab Spring” in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain, protesters decried corruption, repression, and an abuse of power. Fatigued by political and economic uncertainty, they took issue with neoliberal forms of autocracy introduced by President Bashar al-Assad that exacerbated labor issues resulting from ongoing drought in the eastern agricultural regions of Syria, high unemployment, and rising costs of living. True to its coercive and repressive tactics of regime preservation, however, the regime cracked down on the protests with violence: from tear gas and beatings to detainment, torture, and murder. The anti-regime movement militarized in 2012 and clashes gradually morphed into a protracted civil-proxy war that continues at the time of this writing.¹⁷

What is less well known is that there is a long history of political rallies and marches in Syria, albeit organized by the government, that I flag here as “choreopolicing.” Though these events are made to appear as if organized by and for “the people,” in fact they are attended by state employees, union members, teachers, and others harnessed by the state apparatus, which comprised about twenty-five percent of the labor force.¹⁸ They are “rituals of obeisance,” as Lisa Wedeen points out, which generate a “politics of public dissimulation in which citizens acts *as if*”¹⁹ they comply with and adhere to the political logic of al-Assad’s Syria.²⁰ They are also clearly instances of choreopolicing, in which public assembly yields a spectacle of consensus through mass movement on the streets.

The sonic dynamics of these mass spectacles are captured eloquently by Syrian author Nihad Sirees in his 2004 novel, *The Silence and the Roar*. The novel’s protagonist, a writer who refuses to comply with the regime, reveals himself as a dissident through how he listens to and navigates a public march to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of “the Leader’s” ascension to power. Acutely sensitive to sound, Fathi Sheen generally considers noise to be “foul.” He moralizes that the “roar” of state-sponsored marches “eliminates thought.”²¹ Here, roar refers to both the broadcasting technology that amplifies sound and to the signifying content transmitted through “noisemakers.” Sheen isolates the sources of the roar in the megaphone of a student leader and loudspeakers suspended from up high. He also describes disparagingly the particular rhythms and cadences of the chants, slogans, and “inspirational songs...that inspired

¹⁶ Enacted in Syria in 1963 when the Baath party took power in a coup, emergency law endured until its repeal by al-Assad in 2011 in response to demands for reform. Many would attest that unlawful detention, extension of police and security power, suspension of rights, and restriction of speech and expression continues today.

¹⁷ For a detailed account of the Syrian uprising and conflict, see Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto Press, 2016).

¹⁸ Samer N. Abboud, *Syria* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

¹⁹ Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 6.

²⁰ For instance, a state-organized march in 2009 to demonstrate solidarity with Gaza reinforced pro-Palestinian politics as well as Syria’s long-sustained defense against Israel (dating back to Syria’s loss of territory in 1967). Rehearsing these political stances is arguably a tactic for perpetuating the need for national security against the perceived threat of Israel. These marches were and continue to be a strategy for regime preservation.

²¹ Nihad Sirees, *The Silence and the Roar* (New York: Other Press, 2013), 14.

enthusiasm and affection for the Leader in the hearts of the masses.”²² What these literary passages suggest is how listening subjects – here, a fictional dissident subject enveloped in outcries of obedience – are constructed through the spatialized and embodied acts of hearing that take place at public demonstrations.

Sirees published *The Silence and The Roar* years before insurgent crowds filled the streets to demand the collapse of the regime. His writing reveals that where vocalic bodies make audible dissent, they also bellow the power of authoritarianism. Moreover, Syria’s body politic suggests that how bodies respond to participatory chants at protests and marches is contingent on the political conditions of consensus and dissensus. When autocratic states such as Syria brutally repress all who might wage dissent, it becomes apparent that the mere presence of Syrian bodies assembled in public performs a singular modality of choreopolitics. In other words, though the aesthetic grammar of Syrian protests may register as somewhat familiar to Western sensibilities, the ontological-political conditions of protest in the Syrian regime are extraordinarily different.

Disruptions

What of the affective relations between and among listening and chanting bodies? How might a sono-sensory approach to protests reveal more about how bodies move in and constitute political spaces? In the remainder of this essay, I want to return to the Women’s March to consider how, through listening acts, bodies may be choreopoliced and choreopolitical in ways that amplify the auditory domain of power. This is similar to what Maria Sonevytsky, in this forum, identifies as the audibility of dissensus, that is, the ways that listening to the soundscape of a political space may reveal a lack of consensus among participants. It is also similar to what Noriko Manabe, in this forum, relates about the policing of sonic subjects in urban Japanese spaces on the basis of the “expected sound” produced by participants of different blocks. Returning to the siren, I frame this event as an instance of choreopolicing enacted through the “audile techniques,” to use Jonathan Sterne’s term, of the state.²³ Not only did the siren signal the audible presence of police authority, I became a subject of the state through the act of hearing. For myself and the veteran protester, the siren’s ping mediated an affective politics of disillusionment and alienation from the here and now. This is akin to the listening experience of Sheen, the fictional character who, unlike his national brethren, felt repulsed by patriotic chants, slogans, and songs.

Prior to the siren, the first moment that I sensed the power of the crowd at the Women’s March was, unexpectedly, when exiting the subway at the Eastern Market Metro station to meet a friend at a Starbucks cafe. Upon hearing jubilant and rousing political chants from subterranean protesters on the train platform (chants of the period and sentence genres discussed by Noriko Manabe in this forum), I realized I had yet to pull out the Zoom H5 audio recorder that I carried for the purpose of collecting field recordings of the march. I hastily unpacked my equipment as the crowd’s force pulled me towards and up the escalators. I noted to myself that this moment shifted my assumptions about the spatial and temporal parameters of the march: by 8:15 a.m. it had already begun from deep under the street level rather than an official 10am start at Independence Avenue and Southwest Third Street. The passionate alter-politics of march participants was made audible by their chants and visible by their creative signs and pussyhats. I pressed “Record” on my Zoom device, realizing that the audible enthusiasm and optimism of participants would propel the

²² Ibid., 12.

²³ Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384250>.

march beyond the appearance of the political into that which is choreopolitical.

Much later during the march, I again observed the choreopolitical in action. People creatively broke through normative uses of permitted protest space by climbing on top of a heap of construction materials to start a chant. During the rally, several protesters climbed trees and perched above the crowd. Others sat on top of media vehicles. Two women climbed a streetlight and led rallying chants from their perch above fellow marchers. Their bodies penetrated the permissible boundaries of the permit-approved (albeit just in time) event, enacting what Maria Sonevsky conceptualizes as sonic occupation. These political acts were perhaps truly political, I propose, because they were moments of rupture to the planned and permitted route, acts that did not conform.²⁴ In other words, these choreopolitical acts reconfigured the spatial boundaries of chanting, marching, and listening such that protesters redistributed the soundscape of the march.

Regarding the sonic dimensions that enveloped each of these choreopolitical moments, I was taken with how listening and chanting bodies crafted spatialized tactics that positioned themselves sonopolitically. Each chanting and rallying body extended the topographical dimensions of the march beyond the permitted space of the streets to encompass objects of the protest landscape: train platforms, escalators, construction materials, trees, media vehicles, streetlamps. The redistribution of sonic bodies also affected the spatialized dynamics of my listening experience. In addition to the horizontality of listening to chants in front and behind me at the March, my listening took on a vertical directionality. Protesters climbing trees and lamp posts delivered chants from above to below, from elevated spaces to street spaces. This verticality both diffracted and intensified the pleasures of my listening experience, while making me more viscerally aware of the disruptive choreopolitics of the march.

How do spatialized and affective experiences of listening shift when we turn our ears away from the choreo-sono-political space of the Women's March and towards other emergent spaces for popular politics? I have already detailed the political constraints of protest in authoritarian Syria as a discursive and affective counterpoint to legalized forms of protest in the United States. It is less vocalic bodies, per se, that disrupt political spaces in Syria, as chanting is often a political script engineered by the regime. Rather, choreopolitics emerges when unscripted bodies assemble together in public, performing dissent through their collective presence. In contrast, the Women's March was largely celebrated as a poetic and powerful testament to feminist traditions that have historically contributed to building the nation. Though the Women's March engendered political disruption through tactics of movement, chanting, and listening, the Women's March was not generally perceived as disruptive. Rather, disruptive acts enfolded into and as a public sentiment of cooperation.

Contrasts between political spaces of protest also resonate domestically, where police cooperation at the Women's March stands in stark disparity with police-protester interactions at Ferguson, one among many protests that have coalesced into the Black Lives Matter movement. Demonstrations affiliated with the Black Lives Matter movement have often been rendered as "disruptive" in mainstream media narratives, which sensationalize protests as performances of violence by those who embody blackness, irrespective of the extent to which physical violence actually takes place. Like the choreopolitics of the Greensboro sit-ins, where protestors "positioned their bodies in a space that was prohibited to them,"²⁵

²⁴ For a study on how these protest techniques are traceable to historically specific grammars of protest aesthetics, see contributions to this forum, especially that by Noriko Manabe.

²⁵ Meghan Quinlan and Natalie Zervou, "Moving in Solidarity: Thinking through the Physicality of Recent Protests," *The Dancer Citizen*, no. 4 (2017), <http://dancercitizen.org/issue-4/meghan-quinlan-and-natalie-zervou/>.

Black Lives Matter protestors stage cooperation as a form of disruption because consensual understandings of cooperation between the state and the citizen in everyday life are denied to black communities nationwide. The distinction between disruption as cooperation (Women's March) and cooperation as disruption (the Black Lives Matter movement) is arguably racialized. Moreover, the racialized experiences and conditions of protest events are revealed through their contrasting choreo-sono-politics.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have attended to the spatial politics of sonic bodies, that is, how people position themselves spatially as they generate and respond to sonic phenomena in political spaces. I suggested that we listen historically to the vulnerable and precarious bodies that chant, dance, and march in authoritarian and repressive states such as Syria where emergency law enables a state crackdown on any motion of public assembly. Black Lives Matter protests force us to consider the power of choreopolitical tactics that disrupt and expose which forms of political action are considered consensual and which are not. At the Women's March, the state's silence, or the absence of sonic authority, served as a mode of cooperation that amplified the racialized and gendered hegemonies at play during the event. Together, these case studies not only indicate the parallelism of choreo-sono-political grammars of protests, but also highlight the appearance of difference between and among these grammars.

Sustained ethnographic engagement with affective, sonic, and sensory experiences in spaces of protest helps us to better understand the distinctive affective intensities of protests across time and space. Participation in protests, as an ethnographer and outraged citizen, reinforces the need to study protest as it happens under particular constraints. These dual methodological approaches to sound, space, and affective politics are crucial for considering not only what bodies do as people listen, sing, chant, march, but under what socio-political conditions these embodied actions take place, and how these conditions shape the affective experience of these political acts.

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