

The political promise of the performative

AA: Our earlier conversation speaks to the subversive potentialities of dispossessed subjectivities, the possibility of becoming embodied differently. As we have already discussed, performativity is about a differential and differentiating process of materializing and mattering, which remains uninsured and unanticipated, persistently and interminably susceptible to the spectral forces of eventness. The political challenge is thus to engage with points of contestation that have the potential to hold intelligibility open to what you have called “the political promise of the performative.” To open the political to unprefigurable future significations is to always allow for a performative excess of social temporality that resists being totalized and captured by the authoritative forces of signification. As we address openness to political reinflection (including the reinflection of the political itself), however, I would suggest that we think of eventness not in terms of a single, revelatory moment that comes from without, but rather in terms

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of performative exercise of social agonism within norms that act upon us in ways that exceed our full awareness and control; a social agonism that produces disruptive and subversive effects in the normalized matrices of intelligibility. Such an inquiry resonates with questions arising in the context of contemporary agonistic performative politics: for example, how to rethink the possibility of an agonistic democracy in our time, beyond a mere extension of the encompassment of liberalism to “more inclusive” or “more tolerant” directions. Or, perhaps more importantly, how to think and enact political praxis beyond and against its normative reduction to a technique of neoliberal governmentality.

Let me try to concretize this line of questioning by referring to certain suggestive political deployments of performativity. You have discussed, Judith, along with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the singing of the national anthem of the United States in Spanish by illegal immigrants who took to the streets in Los Angeles in May 2006 (see above; chapter 7, p. 85 and n. 7). In publicly reappropriating their disavowal in the national public sphere, the protesters exposed and troubled the modes of exclusion through which the nation imagines and enhances its cohesion. Through their catachrestic singing of the national anthem, they performatively exposed and repossessed the norms of visibility and audibility through which the nation constitutes itself.

Allow me to offer yet another example that draws on my own anthropological work on the politics of the feminist and antimilitaristic movement Women in Black in the former Yugoslavia. Undermining the normative associations of mourning with the feminine and the patriotic, these activists’ silent street actions bear witness

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to, and at the same time disrupt, the normative silencing of injurious national histories and disavowed losses. As Women in Black become responsible for the others who no longer speak (the dead of the other side as silenced and thus doubly dead), the languages and the silences of mourning turn from proper “feminine language” into performative catachresis expelled by, and opposed to, the very intelligibility of the discourses of the political. As the idiom of mourning is conventionally imbued with the nationalistic and heteronormative fantasy of the “mother of the nation,” these activists undermine the normative role that nationalism assigns to women by mourning for the nation’s others, that is, by reenacting the sign of mourning outside the sanctioned boundaries of femininity, domesticity, and national allegiance.

JB: What is very interesting to me in what you remark about Women in Black is the way that their public practices of mourning are not only separated from nationalist projects, but deployed specifically against nationalism. Perhaps also these practices of mourning are separated from their traditional association with the family. So women, presumed to be mothers, who are supposed to produce and mourn the sons who go to die in war, emerge in this situation as antimilitarist public mourners. And they mourn not only for those whom they knew or those to whom they were related, but even for those they did not know, and never could have known. This last seems important to me since it generalizes the grieving at the same time that it makes it more acute. Although the problem of loss is always *this* loss, this person or relative I knew and loved, it is also, especially in the context of war, all those who are injured

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or destroyed by the peoples and nations who wage war. In this way, the individual loss is not absorbed by the more generalized loss; instead they become inextricable from one another. So, for instance, “Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo” are mothers, or those who are affiliating with mothers, but they are also militating against the possibility of forgetting the disappeared during the years of dictatorship in Argentina. That amnesia is a historical reality precisely because of the amnesty rules that took hold as “democracy” arrived. In a way, the “madres” – who include many people who walk with them, including men – refuse to allow the “disappeared” to become the disavowed losses of the nation. But they also give bodily presence to the demand, “never again.”

It is probably worth mentioning that nationalism can function through graphic and hyperbolic mourning for those who were lost in the midst of conflict as well as through adamant disavowal of loss. It may be that the process of making the lost into heroes is a combination of dramatizing and disavowing loss, since the hero status redeems those losses that are irreversible and so to some extent seeks to reverse a loss that cannot be reversed.

AA: This offers a cue to discuss the ways in which frames of dispossession become a performative occasion for various contingencies of individual or concerted actions of political despair and dissent. It is impossible to address current modes of political dissent without invoking, or “naming” (to echo our previous conversation on the vicissitudes of names), their harbingers. One of the most notable was, of course, the self-immolation of Tunisian fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi, on

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December 17, 2010, which catalyzed the uprising that ousted Ben Ali after 23 years in power; Bouazizi's desperate individual act of public suicide spawned a movement of collective resistance and disobedience. The unprecedented wave of street demonstrations and protest that led to the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions was sparked by an act of desperate defiance in response to a violent act of dispossession – the confiscation of the street vendor's wares – as well as the harassment that was inflicted on him by a municipal official. But one should also mention Fadwa Laroui, the Moroccan woman who set herself on fire, on February 21, 2011, to protest being excluded from a social housing plan because she was an unmarried mother – a death silenced by local and international media. In this context of corporeal citizenship, we should also mention Khalid Said, who was beaten to death by Egyptian security forces in Alexandria on June 6, 2010: his mangled corpse became the object of leaked morgue photos that were printed on banners and posters in the mass protests against police brutality and power abuses, and these protests launched the Egyptian uprising. On the other side of the Mediterranean, one cannot but mention Kostadinka Kuneva, a Bulgarian migrant woman and active trade unionist, who was working as a cleaner for the public transportation system of Athens municipality, and was attacked in December 2008 by two unidentified men who ambushed her outside her home and threw sulphuric acid in her face, also forcing it down her throat. That event illustrated the intersecting powers of racialization and feminization that structure the condition of “becoming precarious.” More recently, on April 5, 2012, a 77-year-old Greek pensioner committed

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suicide in Constitution Square, in front of the Greek Parliament, in an act of desperation and protest. In a note he had left, he spoke of his “inability to survive any more,” and explained that he chose to end his life with dignity rather than ending up searching for food in the garbage and becoming a burden for his child.

The aim here is certainly not to forge an iconography of “exceptional” or “heroic” martyrdom, but rather to think about how relational and corporeal forms of street politics emerged as a result of people’s exposure to, and resistive engagement with, pervasive forms of socially assigned disposability. As street politics today poses questions of dispossession in the form of who *owns* the human and whose humanity is *dispossessed*, my interest is to understand how dispossession maintains an uncanny performative resonance with anti-autocracy fights of our times, fights that seem to occur overwhelmingly through bodily actions.

JB: Perhaps we can also think about hunger strikes in this regard. As we know, those who undertake hunger strikes use their bodies as their resource for political power. The prisoner who continues to eat keeps the machinery of the prison running, so the starving prisoner exposes the inhumanity of that machinery, of those prison conditions, formulating a “no” through bodily actions that may or may not take the form of speech. The hunger strike establishes a prisoner’s willingness to die, precisely because the conditions under which that life is reproduced have made that life indissociable from death. Hunger strikes also appeal to humanitarian moral sentiments and arouse public opinion, whereas the usually shrouded forms of prison subjugation go

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unnoticed. Starving is in this case a form of resistance, and with the help of a media that swarms around humanitarian scandals, it can become a form of public resistance. What is the difference between a public suicide and a publicly conducted forms of death-dealing, either through negligence, incarceration, or enforced isolation? We are asked to consider “death” as what characterizes life under such conditions, but we are also asked, through the hunger strike, to understand the will of resistance. There is no way to be constituted as a subject under one of those regimes (negligence, incarceration, enforced isolation), so the only resistance is through a practice of de-instituting the subject itself. Dispossessing oneself as a life becomes the way to dispossess the coercive and privative force of that form of power.

AA: As we are considering the varied concepts and practices of dispossession, including practices of resistance which involve dispossessing oneself as a way to dispossess coercive powers, I am thinking about the relation of dispossession to disposability, where disposability is understood as a contemporary characteristic of the human condition.¹ I am turning our attention to the theme of disposability especially because pervasive forms of dispossession are posed and countered today through practices that have bodies as their resource for political power. Indeed, the very disposability of bodies operates along racial, gendered, economic, colonial, and postcolonial lines. People *become* expendable and disposable by forces of exploitation, poverty, machismo, homophobia, racism, and militarization. We can understand the politics of disposability as a way of abjecting,

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a way of killing with impunity, a way of producing the human and its inassimilable surplus. This politics of disposability can be traced in various histories of human liminality, from anti-gay violence and the high rate of suicide among LGBTQ youth² to the gendered economies of the border. Regarding the latter, let's consider, for example, the *feminicidios*: recurrent murders of female workers ("las muertas de Juárez"), who have been killed on their way to and from work – electronics assembly plants that supply the US market – in the shantytowns of the northern Mexico border. Over the years, several women's groups have marched across the desert and in the outskirts of Ciudad Juárez where women have been raped, tortured, and murdered.³ As long as bodies are deemed disposable, found discarded, and remain uncounted, the notion of disposability will be associated with the concepts and practices of dehumanization and necropower. We need to ask, then, with Mbembe again: "What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? How are they inscribed in the order of power?"⁴

JB: Yes, these are crucial questions. And I am mindful as we go through these lists that perhaps there is no one word that describes every instance. Are we talking about disposability? Are we talking about precarity? And how do we describe the particular forms of neoliberalism that we can find in several countries, including the United States and Thailand, in which a body is hyper-instrumentalized for a brief period of employment and then arbitrarily deemed disposable, only then to be again taken up for instrumental purposes for another specific employment task and then once again

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abandoned? We have to be able to think about the arbitrary and violent rhythms of being instrumentalized as disposable labor: never knowing the future, being subjected to arbitrary hirings and firings, having one's labor intensively utilized and exploited and then enduring stretches of time, sometimes indefinite, in which one has no idea when work might come again. Subjection to such violent rhythms produces that pervasive sense of a "damaged future" to which Lauren Berlant refers,⁵ but also a radical helplessness in the face of no health insurance and no clear sense of whether permanent shelter can be maintained. This point cannot be captured by statistics that establish who is employed and who is not, since we are talking about new forms of employment that intensify the conditions of precarity that they exploit.