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Mona Lilja

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Dangerous bodies, matter and emotions: public assemblies and embodied resistance

Mona Lilja\textsuperscript{a,b}

\textsuperscript{a}Department of Social and Psychological Studies/Sociology, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden; \textsuperscript{b}School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

**ABSTRACT**
Departing from Judith Butler's ground-breaking book *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, this article will explore why extra cultural meaning is attached to resisting bodies that are involved in demonstrating assemblies. Across the globe resistance is played out by bodies that occupy pavements, streets and squares. The participants in public assemblies, are taking part in various emotional processes while coming together to struggle against, for example, disenfranchisement, effacement and abandonment. In embodied, coordinated actions of resistance the gathering itself signifies something in excess of what is being said at the event; there is a distinction between forms of linguistic performativity and forms of bodily performativity. By bringing in the concepts of emotions and matter, this paper will explore how and why resisting bodies signify something else/more than the vocalised or linguistic demands that they are making.

1. Introduction

In 2015 Judith Butler published her ground-breaking book *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, which reveals some interesting dynamics of public assemblies in the light of current economic, material and political conditions. Across the globe people gather to carry out resistance against the practices and frameworks of neoliberal global policies. By analysing these assemblies as plural forms of performative action, Butler broadens the theory of performativity beyond speech acts to include the concerted actions of the body. Hereby, Butler makes a distinction between forms of linguistic performativity and forms of bodily performativity: “They overlap; they are not altogether distinct; they are not, however, identical with one another” (Butler 2015, p. 9).

This article will explore why extra cultural meaning is attached to resisting bodies that are involved in demonstrating assemblies by departing from, and adding to, Butler's theories of bodies and signification. Why do resisting bodies and assemblies signify something that is in excess of what is being expressed with words at demonstrations? It will be argued that

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bringing in emotions and matter (bodies, spaces, etc.) can contribute to our knowledge of how resisting bodies signify more than any particular demands that they are making. What emotions, matter and practices of meaning-making can explain the surplus of meaning that is attached to resisting bodies?

Resisting assemblies – where bodies move and speak together – are motivated by various political purposes in different public spaces. The bodies of the assemblies occupy pavements, streets and squares, which are the material conditions for public assembly and public speech. When analysing these assemblies, an interesting aspect is, therefore, how different materialities affect the bodies, along with how the bodies, in some senses, produce or reproduce the character of that material context. The material space transforms and thereby impact the bodies and their symbolic value; for example: ‘when trucks or tanks suddenly become platforms for speakers, then the material environment is actively reconfigured and re-functioned’ (Butler 2015).

At political gatherings, the bodies are also participating in various emotional processes. Angry, frustrated or sad bodies come together to struggle against disenfranchisement, effacement and abandonment (Butler 2015). Thus, the circulation of different emotions contributes to the mode of signification, which is a concerted bodily enactment and a plural form of performativity (Butler 2015, p. 8). Emotions interact with coordinated actions – such as a demonstration – and contribute to a situation where the gathering itself signifies something in excess of what is being said at the event. Some pattern in regard to this, will be outlined in the below text.

In order to discuss the distinction between forms of linguistic performativity and forms of bodily performativity, I will start off with a section that discusses resistance, bodies, matter and emotions. Thereafter, I will depart from the assemblage that these concepts constitute, in order to understand how bodies and different forms of assemblies signify something that is in excess of vocalised or linguistic demands.

2. Bodies, emotions, resistance and materialities

2.1. Materialities, bodies and resistance

Materialities, bodies, resistance and performativity seem deeply connected in Butler's outline of contemporary resistance. She states:

(…) the enactment of ‘we the people! may or may not take linguistic form; speech and silence, movement and immobility, are all political enactments; the hunger strike is precisely the inverse of the fed body standing freely in the public domain and speaking –it marks and resist the deprivation of that right, and it enacts and exposes the deprivation that prison populations undergo. (Butler 2015, p. 172)

Above, Butler illustrates how resistance may take different forms that consist of different representations, which are played out in different venues. Resistance often challenges a lack of rights, such as the deprivation of the right of bodies to speak in the public domain. Still, resistance could be considered as mainly productive – by creating new relations, activities or advancing subjugated knowledge, thereby (de)constructing certain claims of knowledge.

Within resistance studies (Lilja 2016, Lilja and Baaz 2016, Lilja et al. 2015) language and symbolism are regarded as highly relevant in terms of resistance and ‘(…) the most powerful practices of dissent (…) work in discursive ways, that is, by engendering a slow transformation of values’ (Bleiker 2000). Discursive or everyday practices of resistance are
often subtle and hard to locate. Therefore, resistance studies has emphasised ‘less than tangible’ entities such as texts, signs, symbols, identity and language’ (Törnberg 2013). Overall, there has been a focus on cultural processes and intersubjective meaning systems and how these can be understood from the concepts of power and resistance. In line with this, this article will focus on cultural processes and meaning-making of gathering bodies and popular assemblies.

To investigate signs, and the repetitions of these, as means of resistance in cultural processes, requires an exploration of the impact and meaning of different representations (such as sounds, written words, images, musical notes, statements and body language) (Lilja 2013). Different representations used in resistance have different meanings and impacts on the resisting moment, and bodies, words, sentences or musical notes all play different roles.

From a posthumanist perspective not only humans, but also non-humans – such as animals, artefacts, objects, buildings, technologies, machines and nature – could be seen as resisting materials, with ‘agency’, that are involved in the becoming of the world and the construction of a phenomenon (Haraway 1991, Åsberg et al. 2012). The importance of natureculture and the interconnectedness of matter and discourse, can be exemplified, and become evident in, the bodies who participate in protesting assemblies. Something, which takes us back to the questions expressed in the introduction: What separates linguistic performativity and forms of bodily performativity? Why do embodied, coordinated actions, such as a demonstration, signify something in excess of what is being said at the event?

Butler (2015) focusses on bodies and how they are vocalising their opposition to the legitimacy of the state. By virtue of occupying public spaces, without protection, people are displaying their challenge in corporeal terms; when the body ‘speaks’ politically it is not only in vocal or written language. The bodies exercise a right that is often being actively contested and destroyed by military forces. In their resistance to these forces, the bodies articulate their way of living, showing both their precarity and right to persist (Butler 2015, p. 83).

In order to form assemblies, bodies must be able to move across a range of public spaces and embody forms of action and mobility. The bodies, which appear in the public spaces, are facilitated, hindered and/or informed by the very space where the resistance is happening. Consider, for example, Tahrir Square in Cairo, which has become a well-known symbol of the ‘Arab Spring.’ The material conditions of the square, its location, openness and grandness affect how the resistance emerges in-between the protesters and the square. The protesters’ bodies are adjusted to a range of material conditions – the square’s generous surface area, its flatness, its structure and its central location. The material forces of the area’s architecture, infrastructure and cityscape interact with the bodies and minds of the protesters. The material forces of the square provide the protesters with the material conditions that they have to either work with or against. Overall, the space itself becomes a condition for the emergence of resistance (Lenz Taguchi 2000, Lilja 2016). The materiality of signs, including resisting bodies, also produces the character of the resisting act.

2.2. Emotions

Emotions have not been the core of resistance studies. Still, they have played a silent but fundamental role in many theories of resistance. James Scott, for example, brings in fear of reprisals and repressive actions as an important aspect when discussing everyday resistance, without emphasising ‘emotions’ as an important aspect (Scott 1977, 1990).
Due to the intermingling of emotions and resistance, this paper is inspired by the sociology of emotion, more generally, and affect theory in particular (Goodwin et al. 2001, Ahmed 2004). Emotions affect people and we need to consider how they work; how they, for instance, mediate the relationship between the individual and the collective (Hochschild 2003). Recent research has specified the role of emotions in social movements and related forms of political actions (Goodwin et al. 2001). What political subjectivities are emotions generating? Hochschild (2003, p. 114) shows, in her study on emotions, how resistance can be incorporated into a situation that appears to be nice and pleasant on the surface. Moreover, Jansson and Wettergren (2013) show how communities draw upon collective emotional resources when they feel threatened by the social and political advancement of marginalised groups.

According to Hemmings (2005, 2014), cultural studies have seen emotions as a ‘rescue’ from the deterministic aspect of the poststructuralist approach (in which language decides everything). By taking emotions as the point of departure, it has been argued that it is possible to show how bodies move in their own ways, but still in relation to others. Hemmings argues that this perspective must, however, be critically discussed given that affects also discipline bodies and form realities.

Just as emotions connect people, they also define who does not belong. Feelings of love and hate are emotions that are crucial for the nation and for determining who ‘fits’. Sara Ahmed describes this by referring to the white nationalist, the average white man, the white housewife, the white working man, the white citizen, etc., who are presented as endangered by imagined others. Through their proximity, these others threaten the subjects who are afraid that they will lose not only their jobs, security, wealth, etc., but also their place as subjects altogether. Thereby, the presence of the others becomes an imagined threat to the object of love (Ahmed 2004, pp. 117–119). Hate is not seen to reside in a given subject. It is economic; it circulates between ‘signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement’ (Ahmed 2004, p. 119). Ahmed concludes:

How do emotions work to align some subjects with some others and against other others? How do emotions move between bodies? (…) I argue that emotions play a crucial role in the ‘surfacing’ of individual and collective bodies through the way in which emotions circulate between bodies and signs. Such an argument clearly challenges any assumption that emotions are a private matter, that they simply belong to individuals, or even that they come from within and then move outward toward others. It suggests that emotions are not simply ‘within’ or ‘without’ but that they create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds. (Ahmed 2004, p. 117)

Emotions are, in line with the above quotation, sometimes used to describe how feelings move between people, rather than to describe individual or internal feelings.

There are a number of connections between political assemblies and subjects, which become explicable and visible in the light of the ‘affective turn’. In Ahmed’s (2004) work on emotions, she indicates that they do things and we need to consider how they work; how emotions, for instance, mediate the relationship between the individual and the collective. Since our love or hate for something is not dependent upon whether the thing is good or bad, but on whether it seems agreeable or hurtful to us, our emotions generate and construct the object (Ahmed 2004). While issues, political institutions and/or their practices are attributed emotional value, such as hate or frustration, this sometimes forms the very basis for political activities. It directs bodies and makes them connect or perform political
practices. The adhesiveness of the emotions makes people stick to resistance movements and to others aligned with the movement. Thus, emotions are performative – they do things, they direct bodies and create practices. Subjects embrace, forward and construct subject positions and discourses from different interpretations that are entangled in emotions.

With the above in mind, not only are relationships between bodies and bodies, or how bodies move, central issues when discussing emotions, but the relationship between bodies and representations must also be considered important (images, texts, etc.). This is because the repetition of signs is what allows others and objects to be embued with meaning and emotional value – a process that is dependent on histories of association.

This article embraces the emotions that move and circulate between bodies and bodies, and bodies and signs; however, the subjects’ reflections upon the emotions must be added to this. We cannot solely focus on the circulation of emotions while omitting the behaviour of the ‘self’ and how emotions are negotiated. Techniques of the self here involve practices through which individuals inhabit subject positions while reflecting upon signs and entangled emotions that are circulating in society (see Foucault 1988, Foucault in Nixon 1997, p. 322).

To add to this aspect, Hickey-Moody (2013, p. 80), by following the works of Deleuze (1968/1994), draws a distinction between affects and emotions: Affects, in some senses, become a model for conceptualising the social, while ‘emotion is the psychological striation of affect, the way in which our experiences of change are captured by subjectivity’ (see also Clough and Halley 2007, Koivunen 2010, Braidotti 2011). Affects are created and exist within the encounter, while emotions constitute the subjective reaction arising from affects.

The double dimension of emotions, as circulating between objects simultaneously creating various subjectivities and subject positions, provides our focus for the following analytical sections. Emotions become an engine that creates subjective reactions, motivations and various resisting practices. Thus, to hate, desire or love are relational reactions, embedded in social contexts that create the possibility for us to communicate, share and circulate emotions, while still having an individual attachment to it.

3. Resistance and a surplus of meaning: an analysis

As stated above, resisting bodies, whether they are individual or in assemblies, signify something more than what is expressed with words. Judith Butler states: ‘forms of assembly already signify prior to, and apart from, any particular demands they make. Silent gatherings, including vigils or funerals, often signify in excess of any particular written or vocalised account of what they are about’ (Butler 2015 p. 8). The heavy load of extra cultural meaning attached to resisting bodies has a number of explanations. This article attempts to shed some light upon the processes of meaning-making, by bringing in the concept of emotions in relation to resistance and matter (bodies, etc.). By doing so, a number of patterns will be explored that explain how/why bodily performativity exceeds linguistic performativity, and how the gatherings themselves signify something in excess of what is being said.

In this paper, it is argued that matter and emotions must be included in the analytical framework in order to explain the assemblage of material, emotional and symbolic dimensions of gatherings. Angry, frustrated, touched or sad bodies gather together to struggle against disenfranchisement, effacement and abandonment (Butler 2015). It is bodies that convey emotions to other bodies while receiving and forwarding intensities (emotions)
themselves. The surplus of meaning that is attached to the bodies of those involved in demonstrating assemblies is entangled in affects that circulate between the bodies. Emotions are forwarded by the subjects of resistance to the readers of these bodies. By expressing emotions with their bodies, these bodies express more than what is being said with words.

Moreover, emotions have the tendency to become more intense as they circulate. Emotions are produced as an effect of their circulation. They circulate and accumulate over time. According to Ahmed:

That is, emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation … Affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs (= the accumulation of affective value over time). Some signs, that is, increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to ‘contain’ affect. (Ahmed 2004, p. 120)

Thus, affects intensify as they circulate at the gathering and meeting between people. This implies that, in some situations, affects that are forwarded in networks give rise to increased intensity and escalating resistance. Hence, one might speculate that when resistance moves from everyday and individual resistance to larger gatherings and assemblies, that this might be due to the affects that are circulating and becoming intensified as they circulate, thereby leading to a more covert, joint and explicit resistance. Or, in other words, resistance is sometimes accelerated or ‘up-scaled’ – it is practised by larger assemblies as the result of an affective intensification.

Communities of resisting subjects are bound through emotions and, in the moment of resistance, through the very space of the gathering. Emotions do things. They align individuals with communities. Emotions bind figures together, which then creates the effect of a collective – and it is the potential of affects to travel that makes emotions binding and draws us together, since they can be transferred from one agent to another (Ahmed 2004). Emotions are about movement; they move us and as a result we move in different directions, depending on how we are moved; that is, the kinds of emotions we feel. In the moment of a demonstration, emotions not only circulate but also find a clear direction with a sender (the assembly) and a receiver. Emotions make masses move in a direction against others, against political institutions and their embodied figurations. The intensity of the emotions that are directed towards concrete bodies, units, or state apparatuses is frightening for the receivers of the bodily performativity, which exceeds the linguistic performativity. Resisting bodies disrupt the normality of public spaces and create non-normalised, non-disciplined movements, thus shaking up and unsettling order, and challenging technologies of power that are centred on life.

Resisting bodies are not tamed or docile, but by displaying themselves at public venues at different gatherings, they indicate agency and a mode of resistance, subversive standpoints and eruptive views. By challenging the logic of governing bodies, resisting bodies become threatening. Or as Grosz states: ‘the body has been regarded as a source of interference in, and a danger to, the operations of reason’ (Grosz 1994, p. 5). Angry bodies are frightening and a threat to the nation state and the order of democratic states; there is a risk that these bodies, which are out of place, can put the state order out of play. Resisting bodies, and emotions expressed in the moment of resistance, are in themselves a representation of a vibrant, political sphere (Mouffe 2005), which is not the sphere of normalisation, homogenisation and standardisation. By displaying themselves as concrete, precarious or suffering
bodies, they destabilise the public by their presence. While linguistic performativity cannot directly cause chaos, violence or the assassination of people, bodies are able to cause physical damage, expose people to violence and remove commissioners. The knowledge of what (material) bodies can do also adds to the representations of resisting bodies that become ‘dangerous’. This mode of signification is a ‘concerted bodily enactment, a plural form of performativity’ (Butler 2015, p. 8).

Resistance by ‘non-governed’ bodies interplays with context-specific practices of discipline within the movement itself. How to move and what political messages to display are settled between those who constitute the assembly. Thus, within the movement, the resisters might be disciplined and normalised according to the norms of the movement. Thus, there is an interplay between discipline and dissent at work within the resisting assembly. The resisting bodies are simultaneously disciplined and undisciplined, as well as under and against power. This influences how the bodies are read at the moment of resistance.

Moreover, bodies are often more disjointed and ambiguous than the posters that are used at various demonstrations in public spaces. Subjects interpret, embrace and react to emotions in different ways. Bodies move in their own ways, but still in relation to others. This implies that bodies are ambiguous and not easy to identify or categorise.

However, there are further reasons why resisting bodies signify more than what is expressed with words. According to Judith Butler, we have to rethink the act of speech in order to understand what is done with bodily enactments. Demonstrating bodies say ‘we are not disposable’ even if they stand silently (Butler 2015, p. 18). Over and above this, I would argue that bodies not only signify things that are separate from vocalised messages, but bodily and linguistic performativity interact while different representations support each other and bring forward the same message. In this moment, the different symbols produce extra meaning through resemblance – something is similar to something else. Different representations (bodies, vocalised messages, posters) repeat a similar standpoint, but through slightly different means and expressions. It is an establishment of patterns and a steady return to what is already stated but with a new kind of representation. Mixing different kinds of representation also adds complexity to the political message that is being forwarded. Butler states:

To act in concert does not mean to act in conformity; it may be that people are moving or speaking in several different directions at once, even at cross-purposes. And it does not mean they speak the exact same words, though sometimes that happens in a chant or in a verbal relay as in Occupy public assemblies. And sometimes ‘the people’ act by way of their collective silence or their or their ironic use of language: their humor and even their mockery take up and take over a language they seek to derail from its usual ends. (Butler 2015, p. 157)

Thus, assemblies often express themselves in ambivalent ways. Complex messages, I argue, slow down the interpretation or decoding process and make the receiver concentrate more on the message. Tsur (2012) calls this ‘delayed categorisation.’ Mixing different representations, then, makes the resistance more effective.

However, more importantly, different kinds of representation, both bodily and linguistic, not only support each other but the former makes the linguistic representation more concrete. Butler discusses specific bodies in regard to demonstrations and media coverage, stating that it is important to show that ‘… it is this body, and these bodies, that require employment, shelter, health care, and food …’ (Butler 2015, p. 10). But how can we understand the importance of these specific bodies? I would like to argue that the concreteness
displayed by the matter of the bodies signifies something in excess of what is being said. Some representations are experienced as more applicable, understandable, detailed or practical; that is, more concrete than others. These concrete representations, by their visible and material expressions, make complex matters more graspable and illuminate the complex issue to the readers.

One example of this is how broad and diffuse historical time epochs can be made understandable by concrete narratives and personal memories by those who experienced these times. Giving the historical ‘then’ a face thereby makes and strengthens ‘real’ histories of past times. The body, which embodies and concretises the narrative, then signifies more than what is said. The historical account is strengthened through concrete bodies and ‘personal’ memories. The ‘concreteness’ of the material bodies is probably because they are material, touchable and visible, not only audible (Trenter 2000, pp. 50–63, Lilja 2013, 2016).

In the case of demonstrations, it is the body image of suffering, frustration and anger that supports more theoretical claims of, for example, precariousness. Thus, the desperate, precarious body strengthens the written or vocalised accounts of precariousness, neoliberalism and what is going on at a global level. These bodies, which are frustrated, poor or acting on the behalf of others (proxy resistance), and live in scarcity, illustrate and concretise the linguistic politics of precarious bodies. Thereby, they constitute more of a concrete representation (bodies), which supports and strengthens linguistic messages. Together linguistic and bodily performativity serve as dense moral points that create discourses, subject position and politics.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to discuss, in relation to embodied resistance, how the gathering of bodies (or bodies themselves) signifies something in excess of what is being said. I have argued that it is possible to shed some light on gatherings, and what they signify, by bringing in the concepts of matter and emotions. Not only can we understand gatherings through the circulations of emotions, but also how these bodies come to signify more than the political utterances. By departing from this observation, this paper has highlighted a number of patterns, or possible explanations, as to why embodied resistance signifies something in excess of what is being said.

First of all, I propose that bodies, which move across a range of public spaces, embody not only forms of action and mobility but also prevail as ambiguous, untamed or non-disciplined. By displaying themselves at public venues in different gatherings, bodies indicate agency and a mode of resistance, subversive standpoints and eruptive views, thereby challenging the logic and technologies of governing bodies (Grosz 1994, p. 5).

Secondly, at the moment of a gathering, bodily and linguistic performativity interact in conveying political messages and emotions. Different linguistic and material representations support each other and bring forward the same message. One representation resembles the others, thereby repeating the very same message but by different means. The resisting body brings forward the political message, through a steady return to what is already vocalised. Linguistic and bodily representations support each other, thereby clarifying and strengthening the political message. Combining different kinds of representation also adds
complexity to the political message, which slows down the decoding process and makes the receiver concentrate more on the message (Tsur 2012). This, in turn, makes the message more effective.

Thirdly, gatherings in themselves tend to strengthen resistance as emotions circulate. The more that emotions circulate, the more intense they become. Gatherings then, where people meet and talk about emotion-laden issues, tend to intensify emotions as they circulate. Resistance is then probably fuelled by the gatherings themselves and the emotions that are circulating could probably explain how everyday practices of resistance are sometimes ‘up-scaled’ in order to be practised by larger assemblies.

Finally, the specific bodies that require employment, shelter, healthcare, and food, through their visible, emotional and material expressions, render complex matters of precarisation more graspable for the reader. The body, which concretises and embodies the narrative, then signifies more than what is said by strengthening what is being said. The image of suffering, frustration and anger supports more theoretical or abstract claims of precariousness.

In the above explanations, posthumanism provided a starting point, referring to the analytic stances that grant agency to non-human entities as well as embracing the intertwining of matter and our discursive constructions (Barad 2008). This paper, however, does not offer a complete picture in regard to natureculture but opens up opportunities for further research in relation to the matter of bodies and their performative power. How, for example, can we distinguish between material and human agency? And, is ‘agency’ the right epithet for the effects that matters create?

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Notes on contributor

Mona Lilja currently serves as the professor in Sociology at Karlstad University and as a Professor in Peace and Development Research at the School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Her area of interest is the linkages between resistance and social change as well as the particularities – the character and emergence – of various forms of resistance. In regard to this, she is currently working on how different articulations of gendered resistance emerge. Some of her papers have appeared in Signs, Global Public Health, Nora, Feminist Review and Journal of Political Power.
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