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Theatre Journal, Volume 55, Number 3, October 2003, pp. 395-412 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: [10.1353/tj.2003.0111](https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2003.0111)



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# Choreographies of Protest

Susan Leigh Foster

For protest to succeed, it must produce a feeling of moving ahead; it must force people to take notice of injustice; and it must win new allies.<sup>1</sup>  
—Bayard Rustin

Of the 189 different methods of protest surveyed in *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, pacifist Gene Sharp identifies twelve varieties of “physical intervention.” As distinct from strikes, boycotts, and symbolic public acts such as marches and theatricals, Sharp categorizes sit-ins, walk-ins, pray-ins, and occupations as varieties of intervention “characterized by the interference created by people’s physical bodies.”<sup>2</sup> In this essay I want to trouble the distinction that Sharp makes between symbolic action and physical intervention by approaching the body as a vast reservoir of signs and symbols, by envisioning the body as capable of both persuasion and obstinate recalcitrance. At the same time, I want to celebrate Sharp’s contention that the physical body can and does create interference. At this moment in history when bodies gather primarily at shopping malls and when protest is frequently conducted through the on-line circulation of petitions, I want to argue that this physical interference makes a crucial difference. Approaching the body as articulate matter, I hope to demonstrate the central role that physicality plays in constructing both individual agency and sociality.

Classic theories of political protest envision the body as an agitated irrationality, propelling individuals into the chaos of mob performance.<sup>3</sup> Swept up into the fervor of the crowd, the body succumbs to the unpredictable whims of the masses. Subsequent

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I want to thank David Román and the anonymous readers of this essay for their valuable comments, and also Melissa Blanco for her inspired research assistance.

<sup>1</sup> Bayard Rustin, *Strategies for Freedom: The Changing Patterns of Black Protest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 42.

<sup>2</sup> Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent Publisher, 1973), 371.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Survey of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730–1848* (New York: Wiley, 1964); Georges Gurvitch, *The Spectrum of Social Time* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1964); and Aristide R. Zolberg, “Moments of Madness,” *Politics and Society* 2 (1972): 183–207.

theories conceptualize protest as the calculated pursuit of narrowly defined interests, which emerges when the political or economic opportunity to leverage a complaint presents itself.<sup>4</sup> Each of these explanatory frameworks depends upon an oppositionality between thought and action, the first because it presumes the inefficacy of spontaneous events, and the second, because it disregards the protest itself, focusing instead only on the gains and losses of the protestors' agenda. Both dismiss the body, either by conceptualizing protest as a practice that erupts out of a bodily anger over which there is no control, or by envisioning it as a practice that uses the body only as an efficacious instrument that can assist in maximizing efficiency. Neither hypothesizes the body as an articulate signifying agent, and neither seriously considers the tactics implemented in the protest itself. Yet, as social movement theorist James Jasper observes, "Tactics are rarely, if ever, neutral means about which protestors do not care. Tactics represent important routines, emotionally and morally salient in these peoples' lives."<sup>5</sup>

This essay reconstructs nonviolent protest during three moments in recent US history—the lunch counter sit-ins of 1960, the ACT-UP die-ins of the late 1980s, and the World Trade Organization meetings protest in Seattle, Washington in 1999. Each of these protests takes up a distinctive issue, addressing a different kind of social injustice, yet all three share a grass roots profile, in which they seem to come forth onto the social stage in an unanticipated way, lacking any charismatic leader. They also form part of a large-scale series of initiatives that, in each case, realized significant social change. In the first two cases, there existed a marked discrepancy between the ostensible laws governing public space and the actual practices of participants within that space. This discrepancy created an opportunity for concerned citizens to make evident that very contradiction. For the Civil Rights movement, the laws regulating equal, that is to say desegregated, access to public facilities strongly contrasted with social practice. For the AIDS protests, the rhetoric of humanitarian concern for all strongly contrasted the policies of funding based on homophobic assumptions about the nature of the disease. The WTO Seattle protest, in contrast, pointed toward a global set of policies that affect various populations differently. It synthesized a broad range of grievances including ecological conservation, labor rights, and gender equality. All three moments, however, shared a recalcitrant physicality that refuses to comply with the bodies of those in positions of authority. And all three implemented a tactics of non-violent direct action for which bodies rehearsed specific procedures of non-cooperation.

I do not intend to read these events as dances, for that would radically de-contextualize their motivation and intent. Nor do I intend to demonstrate the close ties between artists and activists that may influence a given choice of action.<sup>6</sup> Instead, I

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent overview of these theories of protest, see James M. Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 1–100. See also Belinda Robnett, "African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Spontaneity and Emotion in Social Movement Theory," in *No Middle Ground: Women and Radical Protest*, ed. Kathleen M. Blee (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 65–95.

<sup>5</sup> Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest*, 237.

<sup>6</sup> Many of the ACT UP protestors were choreographers, dancers, directors, and actors, and this undoubtedly contributed to the kinds of events they staged. For further insight into the relations between artists and activists, see David A. Schlossman, *Actors and Activists: Politics, Performance, and Exchange among Social Worlds* (New York & London: Routledge, 2002).

want to reconstruct these events, asking of them the kinds of questions that a dance scholar might ask: what are these bodies doing?; what and how do their motions signify?; what choreography, whether spontaneous or pre-determined, do they enact?; what kind of significance and impact does the collection of bodies make in the midst of its social surround?; how does the choreography theorize corporeal, individual, and social identity?; how does it construct ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality?; how have these bodies been trained, and how has that training mastered, cultivated, or facilitated their impulses?; what do they share that allows them to move with one another?; what kind of relationship do they establish with those who are watching their actions?; what kinds of connections can be traced between their daily routines and the special moments of their protest?; how is it possible to reconstruct and translate into words these bodies' vanished actions?; how is the body of the researcher/writer implicated in the investigation?

Like Baz Kershaw, who conducts a dramaturgical analysis of several recent protests, I want to contest "the volcanic view" of protest as purely spontaneous and lacking in form or technique.<sup>7</sup> Unlike his study, however, my analysis focuses on the corporeal in relation to a changing structuring of power. My aim is to probe both the collective connectivity that is achieved among protesting bodies and the violence of the encounter between their bodies and those defending the status quo. By showing how bodies make articulate choices based upon their intelligent reading of other bodies, I will endeavor to frame a new perspective on individual agency and collective action, one that casts the body in a central role as enabling human beings to work together to create social betterment. Using non-violent, direct action examples, I also hope to contribute to the theoretical discussion of social movements, showing how dance studies is itself a form of social theory.

### **More Than a Hamburger<sup>8</sup>**

In February of 1960 four black male college students walked into a Woolworth's store in downtown Greensboro, North Carolina; they bought several small items and then sat down at the white-only lunch counter. When the white waitress announced that she could not serve them, they showed her the articles they had purchased only a few yards away and insisted that the store did serve black customers. They reiterated this explanation to a perplexed store manager who arrived a few moments later. And then they sat at the counter, quietly, knowing full well they would never be served, until the store closed a few hours later. During that time a black dishwasher came out to scold them for being so stupid as to sit at the white-only counter instead of the black counter located around the corner. A policeman passing by came in to observe the scene, pacing back and forth, hitting the palm of his hand with his billy club. Two white middle-aged women shoppers paused to pat the students on the back,

<sup>7</sup> See Baz Kershaw, "Fighting in the Streets: Dramaturgies of Popular Protest, 1968-1989," *New Theatre Quarterly* 13.51 (1997): 255-76.

<sup>8</sup> This is the theme of the speech delivered by Ella Baker at the first meeting where various students coordinating sit-ins in different cities organized to become the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Baker, who had worked for King, believed that the students should have autonomy to develop their own organization and plan of action, and she organized that first meeting in April 1960.

remarking that they should have done this years earlier.<sup>9</sup> Throughout these various encounters, the four students maintained a calm silence, refraining from response to either criticism or encouragement. Facing forward, looking expectant, their bodies continually posed the question, “Why can’t we be served?”

Although not the first lunch counter sit-in, the Greensboro incident marked the beginning of a rapid expansion in similar protests.<sup>10</sup> Within weeks lunch counter sit-ins occurred in downtown department stores and public buildings all across the northern south, eventually spreading across the entire southern US.<sup>11</sup> Civil rights historian Claiborne Carson observes that the students who composed the vast majority of those protesting aspired to enjoy mainstream, middle-class privileges, only slowly realizing that, as Ella Baker proclaimed, their actions were about “more than a hamburger.” Yet the speed with which the movement grew suggests that the students apprehended the enormity of social injustice their actions were designed to redress.<sup>12</sup> They were not, as Carson claims, engaging in “passively aggressive behavior,” merely stepping over a line and waiting to see what would happen.<sup>13</sup> Instead, they crucially discerned the appropriate kind of line to step across. Analyzing the distribution of black and white bodies in segregated downtown commercial and public buildings, they realized that the lunch counters in dime stores provided an environment well suited to their direct action ideas. Since they were allowed to shop in all parts of the

<sup>9</sup> For a fuller account of the first day, see the interview with Franklin McCain in *My Soul Is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered*, ed. Howell Raines (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1977), 77–78.

<sup>10</sup> Lonnie King remembers his response in Atlanta after reading about the Greensboro sit-in on day three: “. . . the situation in Greensboro would again be another isolated incident in black history, if others didn’t join in to make it become something that the kids ought to be doing.” *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>11</sup> The Greensboro protestors were asked to disband after the third day so that civic leaders could confer about a solution; however, they continued to exert pressure over the next several weeks. In the meantime, the practice of lunch-counter sit-ins spread rapidly to other cities across the south. According to Claiborne Carson, they began on February 8 in Winston-Salem, Durham; on February 10, in Raleigh, Hampton, Virginia; and by the end of that week in Charlotte, Fayetteville, High Point, Elizabeth City, and Concord. By the end of that month, Nashville, Chattanooga, Richmond, Baltimore, Montgomery, and Lexington were among over thirty cities in seven states that had experienced sit-ins. See Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 11. By mid-April, seventy-eight cities in southern and border states were undergoing sit-ins in which 50,000 black students and white sympathizers were participating and 2,000 arrests had taken place. See Henry Hampton, ed., *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 64.

<sup>12</sup> But William Chafe argues for a more historicizing approach, which would show that the students were influenced profoundly by many years of prior civil rights initiatives of which they were well aware. See William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). Chafe also provides an excellent history of the city of Greensboro and a larger context within which the sit-ins took place.

<sup>13</sup> Carson argues that the motivation behind the sit-ins was a desire to participate in mainstream American activities and values. It was not counter-cultural or politically radical, so much as pressing for a quicker pace toward integrating African Americans into white American culture. He further analyzes the political motivation of the students this way: “The protestors themselves, though usually peaceful, were engaging in a form of passively aggressive behavior—stepping over the line and waiting, rather than exhibiting overtly hostile or revolutionary behavior” (Carson, *In Struggle*, 14–15). Carson contrasts this initial wave of protests with the civil rights actions that followed, showing an evolution in political radicalism and organization. Still, I want to argue that the lunch-counter sit-ins were not lacking in sophistication or organization.

dime stores, they should also be allowed to eat at a single counter rather than at one specified for “coloreds.” These students’ bodies were not out of place, but rather, the wrong color. Unlike a general sit-in, used to block access or to insistently remind those in power of protestors’ demands, the lunch counter sit-ins performed the function of the very action they were protesting, and this reflexive status of their actions must have contributed to their appeal.

Not only did their sitting convey a double significance, as quotidian event and as protest, but it reverberated with the tension created among all the bodies who, in contrast, circulated through the space. Shoppers, clerks, waitresses, dishwashers, managers, police, those in support and those who were outraged by the students actions—all maneuvered around the static, tensile postures of the protestors. With the potential for violent eruption so high, protestors quickly developed protocols of behavior to temper their own impulses and to accommodate the diverse aggregate of physicalities around them. Working with church and school officials and sometimes de-segregationist activists from up north, they quickly organized and began to sketch out rules and regulations.<sup>14</sup> They charged themselves with the task of remaining respectful at all times. Dressing well, they endeavored to sit upright and never talk back or laugh at those around them. If they brought books to read, they chose textbooks rather than magazines. Above all, they aspired to meet all threats and acts of violence toward them with a stoic, non-compliant non-action.<sup>15</sup>

In order to adhere to these general guidelines, protestors put themselves through an informal training program. Sometimes benefiting from contact with members of CORE (Committee on Racial Equality) who had been conducting workshops in nonviolent direct action since the 1940s, they encouraged all those who wished to participate in the sit-ins to learn what to do.<sup>16</sup> In such workshops, participants practiced role-playing both as protestors and as those who might easily aggress against them.<sup>17</sup> Leading organizer for the Nashville sit-ins Diane Nash remembers regular training this way:

<sup>14</sup> “I recall I drew up some rules. . . . Don’t talk back. Sit straight up. Don’t laugh out. Don’t curse. And at the end of the rules, it said something like, ‘Remember the teachings of Jesus, Ghandi, Martin Luther King. God bless you all’” (Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 99).

<sup>15</sup> John Lewis remembers the response in Nashville: “It was like going to church, I guess. You would put on your church-going clothes, Sunday clothes, and we took books and papers and did our homework at the lunch counter, just quiet and trying to be as dignified as possible” (ibid., 99).

<sup>16</sup> According to Carson, some students had attended workshops sponsored by CORE or SCLC on the use of nonviolent tactics, and they were also influenced by the African independence movement. Nashville student leaders included James Lawson, Marion Barry, John Lewis, and Diane Nash. Lawson spent three years in India studying Gandhi’s use of nonviolence to achieve political change. He led workshops in nonviolence in Nashville in March 1958, at Vanderbilt in early 1959, and with students in Nashville during the rest of that year, during which time they staged a test sit-in that was unsuccessful. These students formed a large contingent at the Raleigh conference organized by Ella Baker to organize the various student initiatives that resulted in the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). See Carson, *In Struggle*, 16–22. For an excellent ethnographic account of CORE’s activities during the 1960s, see Inge Powell Bell, “The Double Standard: Age” in *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, Jo Freeman, ed. (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield, 1984), 256–63.

<sup>17</sup> “The Nashville students maintained firm control over the protests, ensuring that they remained nonviolent. Their rules of conduct for demonstrators became a model for protest movements elsewhere in the South. Among other items, they specified: ‘Don’t strike back or curse if abused. Show yourself courteous and friendly at all times. . . . Report all serious incidents to your leader in a polite

We would practice things such as how to protect your head from a beating and how to protect each other. If one person was taking a severe beating, we would practice other people putting their bodies in between that person and the violence, so that the violence would be more distributed and hopefully no one would get seriously injured. We would practice not striking back if someone struck us.<sup>18</sup>

Participants discovered how to defy the physical impulse to respond in kind to assault and to re-direct it into maintaining composure. They learned how to help minimize the damage to another's body by sharing the attack among them. Some found in the philosophy of nonviolence a moral and even spiritual rubric to which they dedicated themselves as a life commitment. Most found it an efficacious tactic that provided them with the moral and political superiority of appearing in control rather than out of order. Practicing nonviolence, especially in the face of those who ignored the codes of civility and comportment, they imposed themselves as proper rather than unruly, a potential object for compassion rather than a figure that inspired fear.<sup>19</sup>

The repertoire of responses developed in these kinds of training sessions provided a constant in what was otherwise a radically mutable sociality. Sit-inners necessarily devised new tactics daily in order to challenge the changing regulations instituted by store managers and police. In his invaluable account of the Knoxville sit-ins, *Diary of a Sit-In*, white Presbyterian minister and college professor Merrill Proudfoot chronicles the varied responses made by protestors to changing conditions within the stores. After the first few days of sit-ins, for example, a barricade appeared at one major department store announcing the closure of its lunch counter. A few days later, however, the manager began monitoring the barricade so as to admit white customers passing by. Protestors responded by forming a line, as if waiting to be seated, that all white potential customers necessarily passed in order to enter. Then, they would sit and eat while a row of mostly black bodies looked on. Sometimes protestors defied the plan and slipped under the rope to sit at the counter. More often, they stood, "utterly motionless," their request etched in somber clarity by their stillness.<sup>20</sup> Proudfoot

manner. Remember love and nonviolence'" (Carson, *In Struggle*, 22). Leader of the Nashville sit-ins, Jim Lawson remembers: "We met weekly for much of September, October, November. We tried to give people a fairly good view of nonviolence, and we mixed that with role-playing of various kinds. We also added to it the first series of forays into downtown to test which restaurants we would decide to work on. In November, everyone who attended the workshop was given the experience of going to a Nashville restaurant and sitting in. These were very small groups, no more than usually four people. And they were not supposed to be arrested. They were supposed to sit, ask for service, and if it did not come—which of course it didn't—then talk with customers around them, and talk with the waiter, waitresses, see what their attitudes were, and then ask to see the manager or somebody in authority and talk with them about the policy of the place" (Hampton, *Voices of Freedom*, 54).

<sup>18</sup> Diane Nash describes the workshops conducted by fellow protestor Jim Lawson: "Jim Lawson . . . had been to India and studied the movement of Mohandas Gandhi. He also had been a conscientious objector and had refused to fight in the Korean War. He conducted weekly workshops, where we would do things like pretend we were sitting in at lunch counters" (Hampton, *Voices of Freedom*, 55).

<sup>19</sup> Some African Americans complained that nonviolent tactics placed them in a subservient position, appearing to beg for consideration, rather than acting forcefully to claim rights that were theirs. However in the early 1960s most agreed that the nonviolent approach worked particularly well, especially in consort with boycotts and other means to exert economic pressure over storeowners.

<sup>20</sup> Merrill Proudfoot recalls: "The standing protest requires much more physical stamina than a sit-in. We tried to remain utterly motionless as much as possible. After two hours, of this, my knees were

describes the manager as becoming increasingly agitated, assuming the role of a “sideshow barker” as he assured white customers that the counter was open. “Finally he exploded bitterly, ‘Well, why don’t you go home now? You’ve proved your point, haven’t you?’ I said calmly, ‘Thank you, but we’d like to go on proving it a while longer.’”<sup>21</sup>

In such potentially explosive situations, every detail was registered and evaluated, with protestors frequently maneuvering so that white customers would be forced to scrutinize their own behavior. Distributing themselves along the full length of the counter, protestors left scattered seats for white customers that, as Proudfoot explains, signified in more than one way:

Negroes were present in sufficient numbers at this store today that it was difficult for customers to find two seats together without having to decide, “Should we sit beside a Negro?”. . . One trouble is that any white who sits down beside a Negro is in danger of being identified as a sit-inner whether he is or not. If the waitresses think a white is there in sympathy with the Negroes, they will not ask that person for an order. They do not wish to risk the offense of being told, “My friend was here first.” The whites who come in seem to sense this.<sup>22</sup>

Monitoring the movements of all bodies in the space, protestors exerted a subtle control over everyone’s actions. Even when a white cook sent slices of watermelon out on the conveyer belt past the hungry black students who were sitting at the counter, they refused to react, thereby depriving the cook of any satisfaction.<sup>23</sup>

The protestors’ nonviolent training helped them to maintain this control even when the situation turned violent. Video footage from the documentary film *Ain’t Sacred of Your Jails* shows one black sit-inner surrounded by enraged white men who initially harass him with verbal taunts, jabs, and ruffling of his hair.<sup>24</sup> As police look on impassively, the hoodlums begin to pull at the protestor’s suit coat, eventually prying him loose from the counter he has been holding and shoving him onto the floor. As they surround him punching and kicking, he lies curled on his side, protecting his head with arms and abdomen with flexed legs. Here, the protestor’s physicality moves from taut alertness to momentary insistence on remaining seated, and finally to self-enclosed protection. At no point does his energy turn defiant, nor does he ever exert his full strength. Allowing himself to be pulled from the counter, he never risks losing the confrontation.

Throughout the sit-ins, enraged whites purposefully bumped into, tripped over, and assaulted protestors, spilling or throwing drinks at them. They even tossed burning cigarettes down the backs of women’s dresses. They followed protestors from the stores and to parking lots, or even home or school, shouting insults, encircling,

ready to give way” (Merrill Proudfoot, *Diary of a Sit-In*, 2nd ed. [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990], 61).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 58–59.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, 39.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ain’t Sacred of Your Jails*, in the series “Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years” WGBH Boston; a production of Blackside, Inc.; series producer, Jon Else; series associate producer, Judy Richardson; series writer, Steve Fayer. [1995]



facing-off, hitting or dragging them along the road.<sup>25</sup> Occasionally, blacks did retaliate, shouting or punching back. With no recourse to law enforcement, however, protestors largely absorbed the aggression, and even worked to subdue the unruly bodies in their own ranks. Sometimes their non-reaction provoked white onlookers into taking a stand in their defense. Other times, their quiet endurance leveraged a point of view from which news media could document the injustice they suffered. Mostly, they persevered, day after day, in demonstrating inequality, enabling the interference that their bodies caused to wreak economic and social havoc on the businesses that practiced segregation.

The stillness of the protestors' bodies seemed to some to reinforce the stereotype of the passive Negro waiting expectantly for consideration, and this prompted some to defy the pact of nonviolence by taking up a more aggressive and retaliatory plan of action.<sup>26</sup> Yet stillness also gave them a powerful position from which to exert a sense of agency. Leading organizer of the Nashville sit-ins Diane Nash describes the fear and also exhilaration she felt on the first day she sat in:

In our nonviolent workshops, we had decided to be respectful of the opposition, and try to keep issues geared toward desegregation, not get sidetracked. The first sit-in we had was really funny, because the waitresses were nervous. They must have dropped two thousand dollars' worth of dishes that day. It was almost a cartoon. One in particular, she was so nervous, she picked up a dish and she dropped one, and she'd pick up another one, and she'd drop it. It was really funny, and we were sitting there trying not to laugh, because we thought that laughing would be insulting and we didn't want to create that kind of atmosphere. At the same time we were scared to death.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to the waitress's out-of-control body, cartoon-like in its ineptness, protestors held themselves in check, thereby prompting her ongoing clumsiness, and also reaffirming their control. The fact that protestors found the situation laughable belies their own sense of integrity and mastery over the situation as does John Lewis's anecdote about the day when one of the waitresses said, "We can't serve you. We don't serve niggers." To which one of the protestors replied, "Well, that's fine, because we don't eat them."<sup>28</sup>

As the number of sit-ins grew, large chains of stores such as Woolworths began to feel the impact of lost revenues. In many towns, the sit-ins inspired boycotts and picket lines that prompted blacks and sympathetic whites to abstain from shopping in any segregated establishments. Within six months many businesses had agreed to negotiations with civic leaders that resulted in desegregation, and civil rights advocates were galvanized to plan new actions, such as the Freedom Rides on public buses, that continued the push for civil rights and ultimately changed race relations in the

<sup>25</sup> Whites, identified as sympathizers with protesting blacks, were also harassed by crowds of white men. Proudfoot recounts being verbally attacked, accosted as "queer," and also physically assaulted, pulled from a booth where he was sitting and beaten, by a gang of white men (Proudfoot, *Diary*, 42).

<sup>26</sup> This critique of nonviolence as a tactic and an ensuing increase in violent response gained momentum in the months following the sit-ins. During the initial period of the sit-ins, however, there seems to have been a remarkable adherence to the nonviolent regimen.

<sup>27</sup> Diane Nash, quoted in Hampton, *Voices of Freedom*, 57–58.

<sup>28</sup> Lewis, quoted in Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, 100.

US. The lunch counter sit-ins, however, figure as a cornerstone of this activism because it gave so many individuals the opportunity to participate directly in an action that asserted new rights and a new justice. As one protestor explained: "I myself desegregated a lunch counter, not somebody else, not some big man, not some powerful man, but little me. I walked the picket line and I sat in and the walls of segregation toppled."<sup>29</sup>

### Acting Up, Dying In

Whereas the discrimination addressed by the lunch counter sit-ins was everywhere evident, blatantly manifest in the segregation of black and white bodies in public spaces, the discrimination against those infected with HIV during the 1980s operated at a more clandestine level. State and local governments, churches, drug companies, and health organizations all responded to the AIDS crisis with homophobic suspicion, envisioning the disease as the inevitable product of obscene sexual practices and failing to estimate its impact on American society. ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, formed in 1987, undertook to change public opinion about and policy on the disease.<sup>30</sup> This group of mostly middle-class white gay men conducted extensive research on a confluence of institutions responsible for responding to the AIDS crisis: hospitals providing care and conducting research; drug companies testing potential antidotes; city, state, and national governments that created policy and funded research.<sup>31</sup> And they began to organize multiple, small-scale protests, using a minimum number of people to effect maximum disruption in objecting to the insufficient response to a critical problem.

Like the sit-ins protestors, ACT UPers endeavored to adapt their protests to the specific geographical and social environments in which they found themselves. Among the earliest actions, die-ins jumbled lower Manhattan, disrupting the commutes of those working on Wall Street and at adjacent corporate facilities housing companies known for their profiteering from experimental treatments for AIDS.<sup>32</sup> A signature form of demonstration, especially in the early years of ACT UP, die-ins featured bodies moving from vertical standing to horizontal lying, occasionally exaggerating the fall with flare and angst, more often transiting pragmatically onto the

<sup>29</sup> Proudfoot, *Diary*, xxiii.

<sup>30</sup> By focusing on ACT UP, I do not mean to obscure the earlier activist responses to the AIDS crisis that issued in the form of performances, literature, music, candlelight vigils, memorial services, fundraisers, etc. I am, rather, focusing on a moment in the history of political protest that choreographed the body in a particularly vivid way. For an excellent discussion of early AIDS-related theatre and also the politics of representing AIDS activism, see David Roman, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

<sup>31</sup> Evaluating the constituency of ACT UP, activist Ty Geltmaker explains: "White self-identified gay men were able to organize around AIDS because their publicly worn sexual marginalization was accompanied by ferocious assumptions of social entitlement and relative access to power and wealth" (Moir Rachel Kenney, *Mapping Gay LA: The Intersection of Place and Politics* [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001], 182). See also Ty Geltmaker, "The Queer Nation Acts Up: Health Care, Politics, and Sexual Diversity in the County of Los Angeles," *Society and Space* 10.6 (1992): 609–50.

<sup>32</sup> Such protests, highly effective on the congested streets of New York, were replicated in other cities; yet protestors often found that they needed other types of actions in order to communicate their message, especially in sprawling urban centers such as Los Angeles. For further discussions of the interplay between site and protest, see Kenney, *Mapping Gay L.A.*

ground. Sometimes the “dead” held signs resembling tombstones that were inscribed with various slogans written as epitaphs. Usually the bodies aggregated in close proximity to one another, heads touching, if not resting, on the legs or arms of other bodies. Diseased and infirm bodies joined healthy bodies to form clusters that, even in the stillness of mock death, radiated outrage. Largely more privileged than the lunch-counter sit-inners had been, they confidently hurled themselves into the street, explosively defiant, more than willing to break their role as “dead” to shout back at a passer-by.

The closeness of the prostrate bodies made it difficult for police to surround any given body, grab hold of it, and lug it onto a bus for arrest. ACT UPers further complicated access to individual bodies by exerting a passive noncompliance. Even as they shouted chants and slogans, they maintained a determined listlessness, thereby increasing their weightiness and requiring police to fumble for handholds and to jockey for leverage as they coordinated the removal of each body. Exacting two, three, or four policemen to disperse each protestor, the die-ins drained state resources, but they also resonated with meaning beyond mere non-compliance.<sup>33</sup> They pushed death, in all its unpredictability and ubiquitousness, squarely in front of all those who witnessed the event. They forced police, and those who watched to envision the body as helpless, as incapable of moving itself. And they raised the specter of contamination, so much so that in many of the early die-ins police wore gloves. In this way, they provoked everyone in the vicinity to contemplate how one body can and should care compassionately for another, and to examine the ethical obligations that the well have toward the sick and dying.

For some of the die-ins, protestors organized in waves, the first ten lying down in the streets and waiting to be carted away, followed by the next group. The cycles of bodies dying underscored the magnitude and urgency of the AIDS crisis by staging its effects as seemingly never ending. Equally persuasive was the practice of tracing a chalk line around each of the “dead” bodies who would then stand up and move to a new location where they would die again. The chalk outlines, resembling the drawings of murdered bodies at crime scenes, contrasted sharply with the fleshy bodies so recently posed in those shapes. Intended to represent statistical counts of AIDS fatalities, they documented with ghostly inadequacy the effects of AIDS, reducing the idiosyncratic liveliness of each body to a thin, ephemeral trace.

In contrast to Civil Rights protests, ACT UP events were conceived, in part, to attract and utilize media attention to spread the word about their cause. Lunch counter protestors benefited from newspaper and television documentation, but they did not purposefully organize their protests with media coverage in mind. Sent into the South during the first years of general access to television, the camera crews that documented lunch counter sit-ins were seen as reporting on the nation to the nation. As civil rights activist Bayard Rustin observes:

<sup>33</sup> The die-ins functioned at the most fundamental physical level to instantiate what activist Aldyn McKean identified as ACT UP’s most basic strategy: “Make it more costly for those in power to resist than to give in” (L. A. Kauffman, “A Short History of Radical Renewal,” in *From Act-Up to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization*, ed. Benjamin Shepard and Ronald Hayduck [London: Verso Books, 2002], 35–41, 38).

With the coming of television, the violence of the South was no longer tucked away from the nation's attention. Now all eyes were focused on Little Rock, New Orleans, and Birmingham, transfixed by the sight of howling mobs and bombed-out churches. . . . As the TV saw it, the South was not holding a dialogue with black people; it was attempting to crush them by any means at hand. For many Americans who had been ambivalent about Negro demands, television coverage was the determining factor in solidifying their views. As the cameras laid bare the southern lies, public opinion turned against the South. As the public witnessed the South's violent response to the law of the land there seemed no choice but support for those who were the victims of that violence.<sup>34</sup>

Rustin's description of media documentation as "laying bare" the political realities of the south belies a trust in the media as a reflexive arm of the social body that objectively records events as they unfold.<sup>35</sup> This prevailing attitude toward the press would change over the next ten years as growing discontent with the US government, in particular its policies in Viet Nam, prompted many protestors to adopt a more skeptical attitude toward the media as an extension of corporate and governmental operations. ACT UP's policy of attracting and using media to broadcast its message reflected its view that the media functions not as pure documentation but as a social force that sways public opinion, and hence, must be manipulated.<sup>36</sup> Convinced that media should be cultivated and even managed as part of their protests, ACT UP activists orchestrated each action to emphasize its visual punch.<sup>37</sup> As founding member of ACT UP Larry Kramer explains: "Each action is like an enormous show . . . . We're divided into committees doing banners, logistics, media, just like a producer would hire people for scenery, costumes, publicity."<sup>38</sup> Not only did protestors envision each show as attention-grabbing, but they also worked to get reporters onsite, choosing a media friendly time of day, sending press releases and publicity packets in advance, and contacting reporters before and after events.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Rustin, *Strategies for Freedom*, 44–45.

<sup>35</sup> I do not mean to suggest that the media did function in this unbiased way. For example, Proudfoot reports: "A reporter from WATE-TV interviews some of us. He admitted that the various news media have cooperated in clamping a boycott on news of lunch counter desegregation in Knoxville, but he denied that this resulted from any pressure exerted by the merchants." Proudfoot, *Diary*, 7.

<sup>36</sup> This is not to say that ACT UP relied exclusively on mainstream media for their coverage. Protestors also brought along video and photograph cameras with which they documented actions, both to set the record straight regarding culpability and police brutality, and also to use as raw footage for many educational and other alternative documentaries about the AIDS crisis. For a survey and analysis of these video productions, see Alexandra Juhasz, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Alternative Video* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995).

<sup>37</sup> The "How to Handle the Media" Section for the ACT UP organization packet for the action entitled "Target Bush" explains: "Encourage clear, concise, dramatic visuals for the demonstration. If a photograph or a few seconds of video coverage can get your main point across and look interesting doing it, your chances of getting media coverage are greatly increased," August 1990, 16. In the video documentary for the *Stop the Church* action, one activist explains: "We must communicate *through* the media, not *to* the media. Use the media to get our message across to the people whose attention we have grabbed with our event" (Cindy Kistenberg, *AIDS, Social Change, and Theater* [New York: Garland Press, 1995], 158).

<sup>38</sup> Larry Kramer, quoted in Alisa Solomon, "AIDS Crusaders ACT UP a Storm," *American Theatre*, October 1989, 40.

<sup>39</sup> ACT UP, "Target Bush."

Protestors met in advance of actions to discuss the general plan and also to practice nonviolence. Critic Alisa Solomon describes one rehearsal in these terms:

A dozen young men sit in a circle with their arms linked tightly. Rocking a bit, they chant, "Act up, fight back, fight AIDS!" Their melodic mantra takes on urgency as the "up," sung a minor third above the "act" and tunefully prolonged, gives way to the staccato calls to fight. On and on they croon, their voices becoming tarnished with hoarseness. Soon, another dozen men approach, ordering the chanters to disperse. They do not move. One by one, each man is torn from the group and dragged away, his body goes limp, but his voice keeps going strong.

Once the circle has been demolished, the two groups of men change places. The ones who dragged the chanters off now sit down, lock arms and start sounding the battle cry. After they are hauled asunder, they change roles and begin again.<sup>40</sup>

As in the lunch counter protests, activists learned what to expect from another body exerting force over them, and this enabled them to remain in charge of the protest as it developed. Solomon continues:

Experienced activists (mostly women) lead workshops in nonviolent CD for small squads called affinity groups for weeks before busloads of these newly trained shock troops arrive at the bleak 18 story FDA office—to find a hostile audience of 50 riot police and a dozen cop cars. Blocking entrances, posting their signature "silence = death" banner on the building's roof, ACT UP closes the building within half an hour. For six hours more, the performance continues. Every 32 minutes—the rate at which an American dies of AIDS—one group of demonstrators cuts through the incessant chanting with shrill air-raid whistles and falls "dead" to the pavement. Another affinity group made up of people with AIDS collapses to the ground beneath cardboard tombstones read, "I needed aerosol pentamidine" . . . "AZT wasn't enough" . . . Of more than 1,000 protestors, nearly 180 are arrested. They go limp and are dragged off, just as they rehearsed it."<sup>41</sup>

ACT UP was organized into units known as affinity groups. Typically, these small clusters of like-minded protestors met together regularly and determined how they, as a group, would participate in large-scale actions. They charged themselves with being responsible for one another, sharing information amongst themselves that would assist them in maintaining contact in case of arrest or during crises. ACT UP inherited the model of the affinity group from the feminist influence on the anti-nuclear movement of the 1970s. Seeking to develop a leaderless and consensus-based form of political organization, the Clamshell, Abalone, and Lag (Livermore protest group) alliances formulated affinity groups whose members rotated responsibilities of leading meetings and representing the group's decisions to others.<sup>42</sup> The affinity group structure also allowed members to determine the level of participation in civil disobedience, whether they were willing to trespass and be arrested or preferred to engage in picketing, passing out leaflets, or other legal forms of protest. As elaborated

<sup>40</sup> Solomon, "AIDS Crusaders ACT UP a Storm," 39.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>42</sup> According to Barbara Epstein the idea of the affinity group was based on the work of philosopher Murray Bookchin, who developed the concept from his studies of Spanish anarchism, and especially his book *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Reprint, Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1977), 66. For an excellent overview of the anti-nuclear demonstrations, see Barbara Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct Action in the 1970s and 1980s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

within ACT UP, the affinity group model encouraged different groups to propose diverse actions, vivid and sometimes hilarious in their conception, that would then be approved and funded by ACT UP. In putting forward a proposal to the ACT UP Coordinating Committee, each group was asked to identify its goal, describe the action designed to accomplish it, list resources required and expected results, anticipate the legal ramifications, and delineate methods of contacting the media. Proposals addressed how participants would travel to the action, whether it posed special issues of accessibility, what kinds of fact sheets and flyers would be circulated, and the budget needed.<sup>43</sup> Once approved, the action could utilize ACT UP resources and contacts and display its logo and graphics.

Whatever the action, ACT UP insisted that members adopt a regimen of nonviolence. Drawing on protocols used during the Civil Rights protests, the writings of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, and Gene Sharp's studies of nonviolent protest, ACT UP members identified principles of response to violence designed to promote respect and reconciliation. Practicing these responses, protestors endeavored to maintain eye contact with police or other officials, to move slowly and without any abrupt gestures. Rather than register pain or suffering, they were encouraged to announce their actions in advance and to observe the effects of another's actions on them, e.g. "You are hurting my arm." Continually changing both physical postures and verbal perspectives on the point of disagreement, protestors endeavored to appeal to opponents for understanding while managing the level of hostility. "Keeping the talk going," they hoped to establish their shared humanity and the potential reasonableness of their actions.<sup>44</sup>

In order to insure their safety at demonstrations, protestors were asked not to bring any drugs or anything weapon-like to protests, not to engage in any destruction of property, and to refrain from actions that inspire panic such as running or throwing rocks. They also learned to cut their hair short so that police could not pull it, and to wear steel toed boots to protect their feet from being trampled. Whereas the lunch-counter protestors dressed and acted to represent civility, ACT UPers donned a rough and ready look that underscored their defiant righteousness. Whereas the tension permeating the lunch-counter protests derived more from outraged whites surrounding the protestors, the explosiveness of ACT UP actions issued equally from police and protestors, whose sense of urgency was fueled by the privilege many enjoyed as white and male in other parts of their lives. Not infrequently, ACT UPers, unable to contain their outrage or desperation, broke from the plan and launched an idiosyncratic attack; yet their actions, even as they advertised the agony and sense of privilege of the individual, underscored the disciplined dedication of the group.

Through the use of these nonviolent tactics, the ACT UP demonstrators, like the lunch-counter sit-inners, prevailed in exerting their agenda during chaotic and

<sup>43</sup> ACT UP created packets designed to help members organize an action that included checklists of issues that needed to be considered and explanations of why and how to organize a protest. See, for example, "ACT UP = ACTION. WE WANT YOU TO PLAN AN ACTION!" ACT UP New York Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library.

<sup>44</sup> See the "Non-violent Response to Personal Violence" adapted from an article by Mark Morris in *WIN* (P22), 24 January 1974, circulated in "Civil Disobedience Training" ACT UP New York Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library.

sometimes violent situations. This resilience attracted considerable support for their cause and also contributed to their individual senses of making a difference. Interviewing one protestor, Solomon argues that many ACT UPers, new to activism, envisioned demonstrations as a kind of role-playing:

“I know how I’m supposed to look, what I’m supposed to wear—jeans and an ACT UP T-shirt—and how to do the chants and shake my fists,” one young newcomer told me, “but it took me a long time until I felt like it was really *me* doing those things.”<sup>45</sup>

Vacillating between Brechtian detachment and “avant-garde acting that seeks to erase the boundary between performer and role,” Solomon sees participants in ACT UP as either commenting on the role they are playing or fervently fused to the act of protest. But it is also possible to see the donning of a T-shirt, the singing of chants or shaking of fists that the activist describes as “techniques of the body” that must be learned.<sup>46</sup> Over the time that they are practiced, they acquire increasing influence over corporeal and also individual identity. Not a script that the protestor learns to execute, these are, rather, actions that both require and provide strong commitment and, once practiced, slowly change the world in which they occur.

### **This is What Democracy Looks Like**

Building on the affinity group model developed in anti-nuclear and ACT UP actions, the 1999 World Trade Organization protest in Seattle brought together an unprecedented variety of constituencies dedicated to political change. Although they typically focused on single issues—logging of old-growth forests, abortion or immigration rights, nuclear waste policies, privatization of water, health-care, or public space, gender, sexual, and racial equality—these groups aspired to connect the workings of their concerns, one with another across the globe, thereby constructing a “glocal” approach. Rather than convene for a political rally where they would gather as a large mass to listen to and support speakers addressing crucial issues, the Direct Action Network (DAN) coordinated these groups’ independent involvement in four days of protests. Throughout the WTO convention, protestors, diverse in race and age and sporting costumes or props that emblemized their specific concerns, claimed the streets, exuberantly walking, standing, shouting, waving banners, sitting-in, holding hands, or clasping arms in differing configurations so as to create solidarity in unabashed opposition to police and in support of the people.

DAN facilitated communication among these diverse groups and also opened a dialogue with the trade unions’ march and demonstration against WTO labor policies scheduled to occur at the Seattle conference. As part of their organization, DAN created and distributed an orientation booklet that offered advice on how to avoid injury, how to maintain solidarity during arrest, and possible answers to standard questions that protestors might encounter. They established a free clinic and provided maps of the downtown area that identified WTO sites including hotels of participants

<sup>45</sup> Solomon, “AIDS Crusaders ACT UP a Storm,” 40.

<sup>46</sup> The reference here is to Marcel Mauss’s visionary formulation of human action as a repertoire of techniques that are learned. See “Techniques of the Body,” *Economy and Society* 2.1 (1973): 70–87.

as well as the conference center so that affinity groups could collectively blockade the conference and keep it from functioning.

DAN also set up a news distribution center that collated and edited participants' video documentation of the proceedings around the clock. Their encouragement of videographers and photographers to record independently their experiences of the protest reflects a new attitude toward the media that neither the lunch-counter nor ACT UP protestors shared. While the lunch counter protestors looked at the media as documenting a social reality and the ACT UP organizers as a social force that influences public opinion, the WTO demonstrators conceptualized the media as owned and operated by the same forces the protestors were working to overthrow, and hence as adversaries who would never report what really happened. As a result, they anticipated negative coverage of the protest and countered this with their own on-line broadcasts of events in the streets.

DAN encouraged groups to fashion their own kinds of blockade, including "sit-down blockades, lockdowns, street parties, mobile blockades, creative use of objects, theatre performances, die-ins, etc."<sup>47</sup> They also organized two processions designed to highlight street theater contributions and to support those who were willing to take action that could more definitively result in arrest. Implementing standard nonviolent tactics, they requested that all participants undergo a nonviolent training orientation and adhere to four basic principles of action: no violence, physical or verbal toward another person; no weapons; no alcohol or illegal drugs; and no destruction of property.<sup>48</sup> They also sent members to the Seattle Police Department to announce in advance the plans for the protest.

As protestors descended on Seattle, DAN worked to coordinate their movements, making use of pagers, cell phones, and walkie-talkies. Police, caught off guard by the large numbers, worked to contain the demonstrations, but the spontaneously choreographed movement of affinity groups evaded their efforts and successfully disrupted the conference. Hearing from other groups that conference participants were exiting a hotel by a back door or that police were headed down the street, protestors quickly decamped to more efficacious locations. They confronted individual delegations on route to the conference and stalled the proceedings, advertising their concerns to WTO members and the Seattle populace. After a small number of protesters vandalized storefronts of select multi-national corporations such as Starbucks and Microsoft, police determined to lock down the city and began to exert brutal force. Protestors, however, remained effective by continuing to structure their interventions as mobile events.

The video documentary *This Is What Democracy Looks Like* splices together images recorded by over one hundred videographers and photographers who participated in the protests over four days of actions.<sup>49</sup> It details the disparities between media coverage of the event and the experiences of participants, countering mainstream

<sup>47</sup> "Direct Action Packet" circulated by the Direct Action Network Against Corporate Globalization, 1999.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> *This Is What Democracy Looks Like*, an Independent Media Center/Big Noise film production, 1999.



media's exaggerated estimates of the damage to property and their portrayal of the demonstrators as rabid animals bent on destruction. Footage from hand-held cameras immersed in the action imparts a visceral sense of struggle as protestors linking arms are pried loose from one another by police and dragged to buses. Robotized in full riot gear, faces shielded, bodies encased in black bullet-proof nylon, police offer no opportunity for contact or dialogue. Unlike the policeman pounding his billy club at the lunch counter sit-in, these officers emblemize the anonymous repressive force of the state. The wriggling liveliness of the protestors' bodies, frail and variaform, testifies to the strength of the weak.

Throughout the four days of protests, demonstrators created several distinctive kinds of ruckus; yet they were also galvanized by a sudden feeling of connectedness to one another. On the video one anonymous participant describes his experience this way:

Each of us came to Seattle for different reasons. . . . When we filled the streets of Seattle, there was a power in our bodies that we didn't know we had. In this city, for this moment, our lives were our own. Who can say at what precise location, exact hour and date, this global movement began. In Seattle we were just a small part of the movement, but in the gas and bullets our memory returned. For that moment, our history was made clear to us. We felt the edges of our skin marked by global and historical struggle. We stopped waiting for our world to be legislated or prescribed to us. This time we did not ask for permission to be free.

Here, the protestor claims that in the tumult and upheaval of civil disobedience, participants tapped a primal connection to one another and to a collective vision of freedom. Felt physically as a power in their bodies, their effort to resist forces of domination and control evoked a memory of past protest. With the "edges of their skin marked by global and historical struggle" they underwent a transformation in their own sense of agency, one that endowed them with newly found freedom as individuals and as a collective.

But what is it about the body that ordains it as the catalyst for this transformation? Does the body command some kind of primordial connection to the past that can be accessed in moments of crisis? Does it enjoy the capacity to empathize directly with other bodies in struggle? To place the body in this role as unmediated cipher of energy or empathy is to lose the opportunity to reflect on the amount and kind of physical labor that goes in to establishing the connection among bodies that protestors experienced. Seattle protestors, like those involved with lunch counters sit-ins and ACT UP actions, trained to perform as they did. They underwent programs of exercise to pattern their pacifism. This cultivation of physicality prepared bodies to apprehend the like-mindedness of adjacent resisting bodies. It instilled the potential to feel connected as a community of bodies partaking in a common effort. Rather than transcending cultural and historical specificities, these protestors' practice of nonviolence, instantiated differently in each political setting, built an articulated network of resistance.

Not universal, but nonetheless persistent, this regimen of nonviolence may muster the kind of reach necessary to respond to the new formations of domination appearing in this age of globalization. In their assessment of the globalized structuring of power in *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that resistance must be formulated

in terms comparable to the size and extent of Empire's organization.<sup>50</sup> Although WTO demonstrators see themselves as part of a new generation, who have chosen to create a new kind of disruption of the status quo, their tactics share with the lunch counter sit-ins and even earlier protests a canny assessment of injustice and a resolve to bring inequity to public attention through inventive, nonviolent demonstrations that put forward their analysis.<sup>51</sup> If conceived as an ongoing tactics, one that has proven historically capable of interfering effectively with inequality, is nonviolent direct action capable of creating a global resistance?<sup>52</sup>

To envision nonviolence as a global tactics is not to discount the distinctiveness of each of the bodies examined here. During the lunch-counter sit-ins, black bodies, marked at that moment in history as irrational, primitive, intrinsically violent or excessive, sat still, thereby refuting in the act of protest the stereotypes on which prejudice against them was rationalized. In the ACT UP die-ins, sick and healthy bodies lay side by side, ushering the place of a body, dying or dead from neglect, into public space, and with it the repressed knowledge of an epidemic. Both these groupings of bodies displayed a physical relationship, black skin or HIV-related symptoms, to the oppression they suffered. Bodies of WTO protestors, in contrast, did not register so obviously the effects of the policies they were protesting against. In some measure privileged, and demonstrating on behalf of others less fortunate, they enjoyed a freer perambulation through public space, taking advantage not only of cell phone and pager technology but also of their entitlement as primarily first-world citizens to break up and re-group throughout a first-world city.

What the winter and spring 2003 demonstrations world-wide protesting the US invasion of Iraq have shown is the potential for these distinctive kinds of bodies to work together, and hence for nonviolent action to contest Empire's actions on a scale that matches its dominion. Exuberant, pleasure-filled, and witty, and uniting unusually diverse groups of people, these demonstrations are building on those that preceded them. As I walk down the street, sandwiched between immigration and gay rights activists, seventy-year-old ecologists on one side, twenty-year-old students on the other, I sense a certain optimism that comes from having made the decision to commit the day to this activity. Why? My body, white, middle-aged, post-hippy, queerly female, and those around me are learning to trust public space and what one might encounter in it. We are reading each others' differences, apprehending the disjointedness of the body politic that marks our distinctive histories; yet we are

<sup>50</sup> See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). Perhaps projects such as Eve Enssler's *The Vagina Monologues*, performed at major theatres and small college recreation rooms from Beijing to London to Capetown, which addresses the sexual rights of women worldwide, also match the reach of Empire's organization, providing a palpable sense of grassroots commitment to women's liberation.

<sup>51</sup> See the introductory remarks for their anthology on activist protest *From ACT UP to the WTO* by Benjamin Shepard and Ronald Hayduk for a survey of how those involved in recent direct action protests envision their history (London: Verso, 2002), x–20.

<sup>52</sup> Historian Carleton Mabee notes examples of the sit-in during the abolitionist movement of the 1830s. See Carleton Mabee, *Black Freedom: The Nonviolent Abolitionists from 1830 through the Civil War* (New York: Macmillan, 1970).

moving shoulder to shoulder together down the street. Like the lunch-counter sit-inners and the ACT UPpers, we do not believe that we are overthrowing power. We are not throwing power off or away in order to be free. Nor do we believe, cynically, that nothing can be done. Our very presence as protestors is evidence of our belief in the possibility of instigating change.

In such moments, bodies work with what is at hand. They feel with and learn from other bodies, both friendly and hostile. Even as they endeavor to practice the principles of nonviolence around which their actions are oriented, they must frequently make split-second decisions about how to protect themselves or how to push forward in an unplanned way. Not radical departures from group solidarity, these moments vivify the forcefulness and vulnerability of everyone involved. They make evident the range of kinesthetic responsiveness exercised by all bodies in response to one another. Engaging in their lunch counter protests, for example, sit-inners learned two new kinds of kinesthetic articulateness, active stillness and passivity. Filled with kinetic potential while seated, their stillness, not a state of non-action but rather a kind of motion, consisted in monitoring and refraining from casually abundant kinetic impulses. Learning to resist coercive onslaughts by attackers and to absorb their hostile energy, their passivity in response to an attack was not a letting go of energy but rather a determined softening of exterior tension so as to absorb the shock of a blow. AIDS protestors, in contrast, spread their physicality horizontally on the ground so as to claim space, exerting proprietorship over public space. Both nonchalant and aggressive, they actively slackened their bodies in non-compliance while at the same time shouting slogans and critiques at police and bystanders. Yet a third kind of physical responsiveness was manifest in Seattle protestors, who learned to think on their feet, organizing both their trajectories and their actions while in motion.

When individuals choose to participate in these kinds of political demonstration, they commit themselves to physical action, whatever form it takes. Whether they become the reflexive body sitting at the lunch counter, the campy body lying on Wall Street, or the glocal body blockading Downtown Seattle, they choose to spend their day constructing physical interference, and this engagement with the physical imbues them with a deepened sense of personal agency. In achieving this sense of agency, protestors are not enacting a script, where the body would function as mere instrument of expression, the meat that carries around the subject. Nor is agency the product of the heightened sense of physicality that results when the body steps outside the quotidian routines of daily life and into non-normative action. Agency does not manifest as the product of a transcendent state. Instead, the process of creating political interference calls forth a perceptive and responsive physicality that, everywhere along the way, deciphers the social and then choreographs an imagined alternative. As they fathom injustice, organize to protest, craft a tactics, and engage in action, these bodies read what is happening and articulate their imaginative rebuttal. In so doing they demonstrate to themselves and all those watching that something can be done. Could this be why they are called political “movements”?