Inequality, Organization, and Change in Chile
By Abby Kerfoot

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The Violent Peace in Honduras
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We are pleased to present to you the fourth annual issue of the Washington University International Review. This journal is a compilation of undergraduate research organized under the theme of Protest in International and Area Studies.

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Acknowledgements

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Stone Prize

In honor of Dr. Priscilla Stone, a lead architect of the International and Area Studies Program at Washington University, a cash prize of five hundred dollars is awarded annually to the best journal article of the year. Our editorial board has awarded ABBY KERFOOT the Stone Prize for Excellence in International Studies Research.
Dear Reader,

The latest volume of Washington University’s International Review explores PROTEST on multiple scales: local and global, individual and collective, across and within cultures, protests that address a range of audiences, and that are expressed in an array of forms. Furthermore, the volume examines those that mediate and interpret protest: the media, the police, and even the classroom. Protest can be communicated in a variety of ways; peaceful or even comedic to violent, deploying international or more culturally specific forms of expression. And protests are also continually transforming as cultural and technological shifts occur within societies. The fluid nature of protest further ignites the proliferation of discourse on the subject itself. In other words, protests have a life of their own, even as they take life from specific concerns. In actively engaging the world they inhabit, societies and individuals produce tremendous change. We argue therefore that acts of protest should not be evaluated merely according to their efficacy to change what they set out to protest, but rather, that we learn to appreciate what these acts reveal about the way that people and communities engage with the world. Indeed, this past year we in St. Louis watched and participated in protests in Ferguson, Missouri. The events made St. Louis an epicenter of protest comparable to similar uprisings against majority power as seen in Gaza and the Arab Spring. The relevance of protest in our local community over the past year has allowed us to foster a discussion of protest from the heart of conflict. The significance of the protests in Ferguson have continued to intensify while attention from around the nation and world has landed on our home. We hope that this journal will provide diverse perspectives on the process of inciting change, both locally and internationally, by examining different methods of protest through an interdisciplinary and intercultural lens.

Individuals of all generations can proliferate the forms of protest, and incite change on many structural levels of society. Age and power are often linked in predictable ways, yet as Abby Kerfoot shows, this connection can be creatively re-directed by sustained organizing. In “Inequality, Organization, and Change in Chile: How Students Mobilized a Nation Behind the Cause of Education Reform,” Abby Kerfoot discusses the transformations that Chilean students effected over a period of eight years, eventually resulting in the implementation of improvements to the Chilean education system. She emphasizes the significance of student unions, which banded together in order to demand an end to profit in education and gained the support of workers’ and teachers’ unions and then caught the attention of secondary school students. By gaining momentum through persistence and publicity, young protestors created valuable change that surpassed initial resistances and barriers.

Protest can also be expressed through a range of artistic mediums, encouraging involvement and empowerment through a sensory experience. Laken Sylvander’s “Protest in the Every Day” undertakes an artistic approach to capturing the notion of protest by examining how individuals protest in their daily lives through clothing and appearance. By photographing people who are embodying “everyday protest,” she is able to capture the micro-level disruption of gender binaries and the dismantling of gender assumptions. The potency of a visual expression of protest is astounding, as a single photograph has the power to speak volumes about bias and intolerance.

Protest need not always be communicated loudly, as the influence of an online campaign can spread at an incredible rate. In her piece, “#ShortTermChange: Social Media in the Arab Spring,” Emma Milford explores the use of social media to streamline a protest started by one man during the uprisings and demonstrations in Syria beginning in late 2010. As Milford discusses, even a hashtag has the ability to incite political change when large numbers of margin-
alized people are proffered the vast potential of the Internet. For those of us who have become unquestionably reliant and hence inured to the scope of technology, it is astounding to be reminded of the level of influence achieved by an online protest campaign.

In “Speak Up,” Victoria Sgarro examines the role of art in revolution, and whether revolutionary art can truly bring about societal change. She explores art as activism through a poster created with charcoal and pastel. The image reveals the historical refrains of police racism as it echoes in our (sub)consciousness. Based off an iconic photograph, Sgarro foregrounds a hooded figure, who it turns out is Michael Brown but wearing the characteristic hood of Trayvon Martin. Behind him, she recounts the names of unarmed black men who have been shot and killed by police in the United States. Artwork can re-work knowledge, and thus serve as a commanding tool to incite change among those who encounter a visual form and are inspired to probe its meaning and with that, help us understand the magnitude of the injustice being protested.

One of the most influential methods of protest lies in the written word. Lynn Ryan’s “The Violent Peace in Honduras” highlights the value of journalism in protest, studying the power of journalists willing to risk their lives in order to report on the intense violence that continues to persist in this nation. Although they face violent censorship from the media that threatens their ability to protest, Honduran journalists attempt to use their editorial authority to reveal the link between the pretense of welfare services and the truth of the ruthless gangs and corrupt government that enables this violence to continue.

Henry Osman continues with the exploration of media. In his article “To Remember a Life: Chalk Outlines and Silhouettes in St. Louis and Buenos Aires,” he examines the value of media in protest on local and global scales, analyzing El Siluetzo, an artistic protest against state violence in Argentina that used the silhouette as its symbol. He connects this to the use of chalk outlines and the #ChalkUnarmed movement in St. Louis to protest the shooting of Michael Brown, exploring the links between these two modes of protest through visual images. Osman draws attention to the aftermath of trauma in global and local communities, and the ways that activism can occur when a group of protestors attempts to intervene in the law.

Protest has become particularly significant to St. Louis and surrounding communities following the August 2014 events in Ferguson, Missouri. In her piece “Undergraduate Explorations of Protest: ‘Whose Streets?’ and Ferguson Civil Rights Movement,” Kelly Carde examines the use of media and politics to protest injustice. She discusses the use of social media activism, emphasizing that websites such as “whosestreets.com” can allow for collective action by bringing together many voices that are protesting a societal ill. Even when battling against a vast problem within society’s structure, people can unite to raise attention to a cause, and incite change by refusing to stand by as inequalities and oppression are perpetuated.

Together the scholarship and analyses that we present here reflect the many manifestations of protest that exist to shape our awareness of community, of the world, and of our place in both. Locally and globally, individuals protest through a range of acts, all of which reflect an aspiration to address the world they live in and create lasting change. Ultimately, each act of protest is powerful in its own right and archives the incredible ability of individuals and societies to produce remarkable transformations.

- The WUIR Board
Kelly Carde is a senior at Columbia University. She has focused her studies on Human Rights and Comparative Ethnic Studies, with an interest in varying perspectives and social justice issues surrounding different minority communities in the United States and the Caribbean. Her academic career at Columbia has had a large focus specifically on Latino communities in America, as she hopes to delve into public policy and immigration law in the future.

Abby Kerfoot is a senior majoring in Philosophy-Neuroscience-Psychology (Language, Cognition and Culture) and Spanish Language and Literature. She spent her junior year studying literature and social sciences in Santiago de Chile and traveling within South America. She plans to spend next year teaching English abroad.

Emma Milford is a sophomore majoring in International Area Studies and minoring in Global Health and the Environment. Since visiting South Africa in high school, she has had a strong interest in social justice policy. This summer she will be interning with South Africa Partners, a non-profit organization dedicated to improving health and education in South African communities. She will return to Durban, South Africa, for the fall semester of her junior year where she will study the multifaceted social and political transformation of South Africa since the Apartheid era. After graduating, Emma plans to pursue a career at an NGO that focuses on human rights activism.

Henry Osman is a Senior studying Comparative Literature and International and Area Studies. He spent last summer researching the construction of monuments and memorials across the Southern Cone and how they interact with the surrounding urban fabric. After graduation he hopes to take a year or two off school before applying to graduate programs.

Lynn Ryan graduated in December 2014 from Saint Louis University, where she majored in Spanish and International Studies. She became interested in social justice through service opportunities, which she pursued while studying abroad in Madrid, Spain and Quito, Ecuador. Her research on Honduras was informed by her work as a translator and administrative assistant in immigration law. Upon graduation, Lynn will move to Memphis to teach Spanish and English as a Second Language with Teach for America.

Victoria Sgarro is a senior at Washington University in St. Louis studying Comparative Literature, Communication Design and Chinese Language & Culture. After graduation, she hopes to work at the intersection of art and social change. She is interested in all forms of artistic storytelling, be it journalism, design, illustration or photography.

Laken Sylvander is a sophomore studying French and Women Gender & Sexuality Studies. She will be studying abroad in Morocco in the fall of this year to look at how communities of migrant women maintain cultural contact with their constructs of family and how they reproduce culture abroad. Having grown up in both Saint Louis and Singapore, she is interested in how privilege or lack thereof intersects with accessibility to social mobility in foreign contexts. She hopes to one day work long-term in France and North Africa to study and engage with cross-cultural modes of self-expression and construction of identity.
Danielle Heller is a senior majoring in International and Area Studies (Sustainable Development) and minoring in Children’s Studies. Her interest in IAS was sparked by her passion for a deeper understanding of the global community and creating sustainable solutions to international social issues. After college, she hopes to pursue a career in advertising.

Gary Huang is a senior majoring in International and Area Studies (Global Cultural Studies) and pursuing minors in Entrepreneurship and Operations and Supply Chain Management. Born in New York but raised in Taipei, Taiwan, his interests in international affairs stems from his early exposure to multiple cultures. Gary spent his freshmen fall studying abroad with Semester at Sea and spent a summer abroad in Istanbul, Turkey in 2013. He loves food and to participate in local cultures. After graduation, Gary hopes to go into the travel industry.

Oliver Lazarus is a senior majoring in International and Area Studies (Development) and minoring in French. He spent his freshman fall semester traveling and volunteering in Southeast Asia, and his junior spring semester in Istanbul studying at Bogazici University. After graduation, Oliver hopes to work in journalism.

Molly Prothero is a senior majoring in International and Area Studies (Development) and Comparative Literature, with a minor in Spanish. She spent six months of her junior year living and studying abroad in Santiago, Chile. After graduation, Molly hopes to pursue her love of travel and ideally work for either a non-profit or an NGO with a focus on social justice issues.

Anna Rossi is a senior majoring in International and Area Studies (Global Cultural Studies) with minors in Biology and Legal Studies. She is involved with different volunteer groups on campus and leads a group that promotes healthy lifestyles for elementary school students. Anna enjoys visiting Denmark to spend time with family and friends while being immersed in Danish culture. In the future she hopes to attend law school in order to practice family law.

Matt Russell is a senior majoring in International and Area Studies (Development) and finance. In the summer of 2013, Matt studied European political economy in Florence, Italy. He is especially interested in global political and economic processes and foreign policy. After graduation Matt hopes to work in economic development and public policy.
Inequality, Organization, and Change in Chile: How students mobilized a nation around the cause of education reform - Abby Kerfoot

Chilean students broke records in 2006 and again in 2011, organizing the biggest protests the country had seen since the 1990 reestablishment of democracy. On March 11, 2014, Michelle Bachelet took office as President of the Republic for a second time, having been reelected on a platform of social reforms focused around education and equality of opportunity. These reforms were a version of those originally articulated and demanded by the Chilean student movement, which she and her government had repeatedly decried, repressed, and deceived during her first term in office. In 2013 leaders of the student movement also won seats in the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of Chile’s National Congress. How did students in a deliberately depoliticized country mobilize a whole society around the cause of education, leaving even the former president to incorporate their demands into her own reelection platform? To what extent does this recognition by official institutions constitute a victory for the student movement?

Education and Inequality

The current state of education both results from and contributes to the broader social and economic inequality that pervades Chilean society. Despite acclaim for its development and prosperity over the past few decades, Chile remains highly stratified: it is the most unequal country in the OECD as measured by Gini coefficient, and the 14th most unequal in the world. It is common to make reference to the existence of ‘two Chiles’: one with the income and resources of a rich developed nation and the other in extreme poverty, evident from the shantytowns (poblaciones) just miles from the Louis Vuitton at Santiago’s Mall Parque Arauco.

Augusto Pinochet’s military dictatorship transformed the very foundations of Chilean education as part of a radical project of social and economic reorganization imposed through violent repression. Education was converted from a right into a market good, with lower education based on competition among schools through a voucher system, the first of its kind in the world. Despite the official reestablishment of liberal democracy in 1990, the vast majority of Pinochet’s structural reforms remain in place today, including the 1980 Constitution and the marketized educational system. In lower education this system consists of public, subsidized private (particular subvencionados), and private schools, plus a small group of elite selective public schools known as emblematic schools (liceos emblemáticos). Despite the theoretical option for parents to select from any of these schools, in reality economic and geographic segregation work to determine who attends which school. High tuition and fees at private and subsidized private schools prevent the lower classes from attending them. Private schools may use their own criteria in admitting students; and despite legislation prohibiting selective admissions in state-funded schools, emphasis on high average results on standardized tests leads subsidized private schools to select among applicants in order to better compete in the education market.

Higher education is similarly privatized, segregated, and profitable, despite the official prohibition of profit in university and lower education. Extremely high tuition fees (the world’s highest, relative to per capita income) have created a booming industry of predatory high-interest loans for all but the richest of university students. As in other areas like health care and basic consumer goods, higher education has grown hand-in-hand with credit industry, drawing
the poorest further and further into debt. The relatively low income anticipated for most university graduates relative to their astronomical debt makes paying off loans next to impossible: a university graduate’s average debt is 174% of her projected income, as compared to less than 25% in most of Europe. Though the proliferation of private universities and the credit industry has increased access to education, it also systematically redistributes income from the poorest to the very richest.

Though these critiques are now common arguments in Chilean politics, it was only through the political analysis and concerted ideological campaign of the student movement that they became so. It was the students themselves who first articulated these sophisticated and intersectional critiques of the education system, preempting the analyses of sociologists, philosophers, and experts in education policy.

2006 Pingüino Movement

The 2006 Pingüino Movement was led by secondary school students (ages 14-18), colloquially called pingüinos (penguins) for their black-and-white uniforms. These protests did not arise out of nowhere: yearly protests by secondary and university students have a long history in Chile, and student unions were some of the few political organizations that maintained some continuity through the dictatorship, even helping lead the opposition to it. Nonetheless, until 2006 Chile had stood out among Latin American countries for its lack of social mobilization since the dictatorship, and the protests of the Pingüino Movement constituted a significant change in the status quo.

After yearly clashes between students and the Santiago Seremi (Regional Ministerial Secretary) of Education, in 2005 the Seremi of Education set up official channels of dialogue with the students and defined short and long-term agendas for education reform. Despite the new Minister of Education denying any knowledge of these agendas once Bachelet took office in 2006, these talks trained the leaders of the pingüinos in negotiating with the government, giving them a deeper understanding of education policy and allowing them for the first time to proactively build their own agenda and propose changes. Students from schools across Santiago formed a single horizontal heterogeneous organization, AES (Assembly of Secondary School Students), incorporating members and spokespeople from disparate political parties and class origins. Its heterogeneity made it difficult for any one political party to coopt the movement, as well as bolstering public opinion by making it clear that their grievances were not specific to the left wing.

When the students began protesting in the capital’s streets in response to deplorable conditions in public schools in the small city of Lota, the media focused on the violence of their clashes with Chile’s militarized police force, denouncing the students and lowering public opinion of the movement. The students quickly changed their tactics in order to win back public support, occupying their schools (tomas) rather than protesting in the streets, and refining their message by formulating an official list of talking points and spokespeople. By strategically broadening the range of their protest tactics, they were able to engage more of their fellow students: increased participation by students gave them more bargaining power and greater capacity to make profound political and structural demands rather than solely material or technical ones.

In response to the protests and their growing public approval, Bachelet formed a Presidential Advisory Council on Education Quality, inviting students, school administrators, and professors to speak with policy makers on the future of the Organic Constitutional Education
Inequality, Organization, and Change in Chile

Law (LOCE). However, students felt that they were being ignored by the Council and left it in protest. The General Education Law (LGE) drafted in 2007 to replace the LOCE seemed to confirm that betrayal: it answered only their short-term demands for regulation, failing to address the demand for greater representation in educational policy-making and the end to the administration of local schools by individual municipalities.

Through attempts to ignore the movement, repress it with police force, and negate its political aspects by delegating it to a technocratic taskforce, Bachelet’s 2006 government was ultimately able to defuse the Pingüino Movement. The students found that their influence was significantly limited once they entered the institutional space of formal negotiation with the government. Some of the other causes leading to the dissolution of the movement were falling public opinion from growing radicalization and the abandonment of the Council; contention over internal voting procedures in the student organization; disagreement on the specific reforms to be made to the LOCE; and simple exhaustion on the part of the students.

However, the pingüinos laid the groundwork for what would become the 2011 student movement by organizing students, winning public support, and recognizing the problem with Chilean education as political and structural rather than merely technical. It also gave them practical experience in negotiating with public officials and countering government rhetoric and tactics by presenting their own agendas and framing the conflict according to their own point of view. The pingüinos were able to take advantage of Bachelet’s own discourse of discontentment with the current state of politics – a popular enough position to have won her the presidency – and bend that public desire for change to their own movement, showing that Bachelet had ultimately proven herself an ally of the very political status quo she had claimed to oppose. The pingüinos demonstrated that students were a political force to be reckoned with and put education on the agenda as a political and social issue, not one to be resolved through mere tinkering and surface-level reforms. They made demands that challenged the very fabric of Chile’s neoliberal society.

2011 Student Movement

The 2011 student movement grew directly out of the work of the 2006 pingüinos, with many former pingüinos, who were now university students, participating. Protests began in April 2011 at the Universidad Central de Chile in response to a proposed sale of the university to a for-profit company, soon expanding into a general demand by student unions across the country to end profit in education. Along with marches endorsed by workers’ and teachers’ unions, students occupied their universities, prompting some to close indefinitely; and secondary school students followed suit. As students protested in growing numbers with labor unions and social groups joining them, the national media focused on violent clashes between police and encañuchados, masked provocateurs at least some of whom were police officers disguised as students. Chile’s militarized police force (Carabineros) employed water cannons, tear gas, and arrests in attempting to disperse students marching or occupying their schools.

Students continued to march through the winter of 2011, rejecting proposals from the Ministry of Education to address some of their grievances or begin regular talks with students as insufficient and duplicitous. With the 2006 betrayal by the Bachelet administration fresh in their minds, the students were able to avoid a similar interaction with the government that could have forestalled their momentum. Despite open condemnation of the police by the Inter-Ameri-
can Commission of Human Rights and Chile’s own National Institute of Human Rights for their repressive tactics, the government continued to praise them openly for maintaining order.23 Students deliberately settled on a transversal strategy, framing their demands as ways to promote equality of opportunity and benefit nearly everyone in a society made deeply unequal by neoliberal policy.24 This allowed them to portray themselves as a social movement with broader goals than just education reform, and gain accordingly broader support as well. They found backing in the entire education sector, unions, and families of students and workers, lending legitimacy to even their most ambitious goals. By making discursive links between their struggle and those of teachers, workers, and other Chileans, they established their rhetorical role as representatives of Chilean society as a whole, holding family demonstrations and citizens’ strikes that implicated the entire country in their demands. Like the pingüinos before them, students strategically employed a wide variety of protest tactics (ranging from occupations to marches, hunger strikes, and theatrical demonstrations) in order to engage more participants and win themselves broader support and legitimacy. The movement ultimately broke with long-standing assumptions of political organization: it was the first massive social movement in Chile that was not led, organized, or mobilized by a political party, partly because its diversity made it difficult for any one party to assume control.25 However, the heterogeneity of the movement was at times a source of weakness as well as strength. Then-president Sebastián Piñera’s right-wing administration used the inclusion of multiple groups in the movement to try to split it: the government first entered into talks with deans and university students only and claimed that they were making substantial progress, thereby encouraging complacency in secondary school students, the most radical wing of the movement.26 Within the movement there was disagreement between deans and students on particular demands, and even the secondary school organizations CONES and ACES (representing prestigious emblematic and more radical peripheral schools respectively) often found themselves clashing.27

The students also portrayed themselves as heirs to the pro-democracy movement under Pinochet, with Piñera’s government the ‘heir of the dictatorship’, a particularly salient claim in light of police repression of students.28 They drew on nationally specific historical protest methods to cement this comparison by calling for the first pot-banging demonstrations (cacerolazos) in the streets since the 1990 reestablishment of democracy, a tactic familiar from pro-democracy demonstrations under Pinochet.29 Through their rhetoric and the careful staging of their protest actions, they were able to frame the student movement as the natural continuation of the pro-democracy campaign fighting in opposition to the legacy of dictatorship.

A combination of established organizations with the power to mobilize people, lasting grievances about social inequality, and a lack of response from political institutions led to the emergence of the student movement as a prominent social force.30 The movement was a product of years spent building networks and learning to communicate and negotiate with the government. Although many other groups in Chilean society share the same grievances about inequality and lack of opportunity, the relative strength of student organizations allowed them to mobilize for broad political change. Unions, in contrast, were systematically targeted and delegitimized during the dictatorship: today union membership is at a record low of 10%.31 Students were able to make their call for change heard because of the particular historical circumstances in which they found themselves.
Reforms and the Student Movement Today

Bachelet’s 2013 reelection campaign against right-wing candidate Evelyn Matthei was based around a platform of social reforms, central among them a major tax reform to be used to finance free education for all Chileans. Such was the power of the 2011 student movement: even their former adversary recognized the popularity of education reform and used it to ensure her reelection. As of 2015, her government has succeeded in passing an education bill through Congress that promises a host of educational reforms, including free public university education beginning in 2016. Other reforms include the end to selective admission and parental copay in subsidized private schools, prominent student demands which are intended to limit the class segregation endemic to the lower education system. The law also formally bans profit in the education sector for all schools receiving public funds, although this was already forbidden by the General Education Law (LGE) and nonetheless widely practiced.

Former student leaders have made their own forays into institutional politics: Camila Vallejo, Giorgio Jackson, Karol Cariola, and Gabriel Boric all won seats in the Chamber of Deputies in 2013; and in 2015 Camila Vallejo was made president of the Commission on Education of the Chamber of Deputies. Despite Bachelet’s fulfillment of various student demands, not all of the student leaders are wholly content. As Gabriel Boric, a former president of the Student Federation of the Universidad de Chile (FECh) explains, her reforms do not substantially alter the market logic of the dictatorship’s neoliberal education system predicated on vouchers. Despite attempts to regulate profit and prohibit schools from preferentially admitting upper-class students, the market incentive remains for schools to seek profit in any way they can. Boric argues that Bachelet’s reforms amount to “patching the dictatorial legacy” rather than starting anew by building a new system of public education.

Valentina Saavedra, current president of the FECh, has signaled that 2015 will again be a year of student mobilization because “[taking to the streets] is the only way to apply pressure and have weight in each of the debates on educational reform.” In light of disappointment on the part of teachers and municipalities with the details of Bachelet’s reform, Saavedra emphasizes that the Confederation of Students of Chile (Confech) must maintain pressure and have an active voice in discussions in order to achieve their desired outcome. In a recent interview Vallejo echoed Saavedra, emphasizing that many of the students’ demands remain to be met, including reform of the teaching profession (carrera docente) and of the regulatory framework of education. Despite her own position as president of the congressional Commission on Education, she too prioritizes the student movement’s grassroots capacity for exerting pressure and making proposals: otherwise, she argues, that capacity falls to those who do not want to make changes.

Although Chilean students have won an impressive victory in the form of nationwide tax and education reform, as well as representation in Congress, their work is far from over. By incorporating other social actors and issues beyond education, students set their sights beyond the reform of education to the reform of an entire society. Chile remains a profoundly unequal country, a dynamic that will require much more radical change than education policy can bring about. Even within the realm of education not all of the students’ demands have been met, and the voucher-based market system remains in place as the basis of lower education.

Just as the 2011 student movement was only possible because of the organizing and experiences of the 2006 pingüinos, it will be crucial in the wake of Bachelet’s reforms for students today to maintain their organizations and institutional knowledge acquired through years of mis-
steps and false starts. Even beyond the foundations laid by the Pingüino Movement, it was the organization of Chilean students over decades that led them to emerge as a formidable political force even when other social actors were unable. Their organization and acquired knowledge gave them the necessary tools to win the support of Chilean society at large through, allowing them to demand profound structural change and force the president to answer their grievances. Bachelet’s reforms do not signal an end to the student movement. If anything they prove that sustained organization and mobilization are crucial to the project of voicing and achieving student demands. Without continued pressure exerted by the student movement, it is all too easy to imagine the changes they won through years of struggle being reversed by a better organized reactionary force.

Notes

1: Country Comparison: Distribution of family income - Gini index.
4: Ibid.
5: Carrasco, 2014.
9: Ibid.
12: Ibid.
15: Ibid.
18: Ruíz, 2012, p. 76.
20: Ibid.
22: Ibid.
29: Vallejo, 2011.
Inequality, Organization, and Change in Chile

Bibliography


In an opinion editorial for *The Washington Post*, “The novelist vs. the revolutionary: My own Syrian debate,” Syrian novelist and journalist Samar Yazbek discusses the internal conflict between her separate identities as a novelist and as an activist in the Syrian Revolution. Yazbek portrays her novelist-self as the weaker and more timid of the two women; while the revolutionary joins her fellow activists in protests even as they turn violent, the novelist deserts her country and flees to France. Throughout her piece, “These women crash about beneath my skin, colliding at every twist and turn of this unfinished narrative” (Yazbek, 5).

I read Yazbek’s editorial less than a week after the grand jury decided not to indict Darren Wilson for the fatal shooting of Michael Brown. Assigned in a class I was taking about the literature and art of the Syrian Revolution, the piece surfaced the major questions we had been exploring throughout the semester: Can art participate in revolution? Can revolutionary art truly bring about societal change? Can art be a form of activism? Yet as I read Yazbek’s words, I did not think of activists thousands of miles away, but rather of those in my own city.

I originally created “Speak Up” for a design class I was taking that same semester. The cloth over the figure’s mouth initially read, “Vote for those who can’t” in order to fulfill the class assignment, which was to create a non-partisan poster calling viewers to vote. I first drew the image by hand with charcoal and pastel, and then scanned and edited it in Photoshop. The figure’s face is based off of a photograph of Michael Brown, while he wears the hood characteristic of Trayvon Martin. In the background, I wrote the names of unarmed black men shot and killed by police in America. Later, I changed the word “Vote” to “Speak Up” before I posted the image to my social media profiles. However, as I made these artistic changes and crafted a post suitable for my Facebook page which might attract some of my followers’ attention to the issue, some of my friends were on the ground protesting the grand jury’s decision. I wonder if my actions as an artist or social media user can ever truly compare to theirs. Would it have been more appropriate to have abandoned my artistic inclinations and joined them? After all, Yazbek suggests that artists and protesters exist in conflict with one another in times of revolution. As I contemplate my own place in the current historical moment in St. Louis — as an artist, as a writer, as an activist, and as any combination of the three — I continue to return to her article and think about whether I agree with her or not. “Speak Up” is my answer to the question, can an artist find a place in protest?
The 2014 border crisis between the United States and Mexico should have been expected. Many U.S. citizens grumble about the resulting economic or political nightmare but few have taken the time to discover why and how this border rush transpired. The majority of these immigrants are Central Americans who travelled here to escape the overlooked human rights violations in their native countries. The issue cannot be solved by reinforcing our border walls. The systemic injustice of countries in this region will continue to drive out families that will undertake even more disturbing and deadly journeys in hopes of living in safety elsewhere. In Honduras, the local gangs, linked with militarized drug cartels, provoke deep fear in the general population but simultaneously offer protection and a sort of employment the weak government and aching economy cannot. Journalists in the Honduran media have been censored and endangered because gangs know the media is the crucial link between the benevolent image they foster and their bloody drug trade. As long as the people of this developing nation are devoid of a voice with which to examine the ubiquitous injustice, we will continue to see immigrants flocking to other countries. One way to reform Honduras is to end violent censorship of the media by the government and gangs in order to expose corruption, because the unrestrained gangs offer welfare services to distract citizens while killing journalists that reveal their true purpose of trafficking drugs.

The lethal hurricane of October 1988 was one event that significantly shook the social, economic and political stability of Honduras. The devastation following Hurricane Mitch allowed pre-existing gangs to more deeply take root and exert control. BBC News reported around 18,000 died in Central America in Mitch’s floods and landslides--over 14,000 of those victims Honduran. According to Inter-American Development Bank, Hondureños were left without an income due to the destruction of crop lands. Though the U.S. among other powers sent emergency support worth upwards of $70 million, the people had nothing to sustain themselves long-term. Agriculture, the fuel of their economy, was destroyed and the population was displaced, therefore monitoring the drug trade was low-ranking on the list of concerns. It was in this period of disarray and low supervision that gangs could flourish. The aftermath of Hurricane Mitch coupled with the 1996 deportation of thousands of desolate Latinos charged with gang activity in Los Angeles provided gangs both the environment and the input of human capital they needed to expand.

Gangs in the lucrative, internationally-supported drug trade were able to rebound and maintain transport channels along the coastline. Because Honduras serves as a crucial transit area for drugs like marijuana and cocaine moving up through South America into North American markets, dominant cartels found a way to keep business moving among the ruble. The United Nations Office and Drugs and Crime (UNODC) recently completed a review of cocaine markets and their sources, concluding, “Practically all of the world’s cocaine is produced in three countries in South America.” In 2012, seizures of methylamine (the base of ‘meth’) took place primarily in Mexico (197 tons and 150,000 liters) followed by Honduras (51,000 liters)” and lastly in the United States where there is a concentration of consumers. When the Honduran people and governmental leaders needed money, the behemoth drug trade presented as a way out of poverty. Though there was still an international demand for tropical agricultural products, agriculture was no longer a viable option and the demand for illegal goods was sustained by foreign markets unaffected by Hurricane Mitch.
Many young men join gangs due to community pressure and the welfare services they offer. From patrolling certain neighborhoods to keep out robbers and competing gangs to working as a team to gain employment and earn money, the gang does what a decent government should. Each individual in the hierarchy works for the good of the local gang and loyalty and obedience are demanded in return. What gangs offer—certainty, power, control—is attractive to an individual living amidst a broken economy and unjust system. Members have an income and are given drugs to both sell locally and consume to sustain their stressful lifestyle. According to Dr. Douglas Farah, national cartel leaders have demanded the institution of this new benevolent front, making it difficult to distinguish between the good and the bad. These welfare services and mutual support gangs offer can be viewed as a disguise to distract the public from the abuse, innocent deaths, and tyranny of the drug trade network. Mona Kanwal Sheikh Ph.D. of the Danish Institute for International Studies has been observed this tactic in other regions of the world as well. Sheikh asserts that “[justifying] the presence of these groups on the basis of their welfare work…ought to be seriously challenged. The welfare work has been manipulated to the advantage of militants--it is not their core activity, but is used for showcasing. Such exhibition, in turn, is essential for creating greater political space.” By lessening the frequency of public attacks and offering benefits to their communities, gangs and larger cartels seem to have earned impunity from the weary Honduran government.

Thousands have died at the hands of the gangs that mark their territory with illegal taxes and murder people that pose a threat. The police force tasked with controlling the drug trade is mercilessly targeted. There is no limit on who can and cannot be killed and often times the murder of innocents is used to send a threat to relevant individuals. According to the international nonprofit Committee to Project Journalists, the Honduran government blatantly enables this street anarchy by not investigating murders and assuring the public that the murders were not personal or due to one’s career, but rather evidence of the country’s issues that everyone must work to end. Impunity is so common that daring rebel groups have taken law enforcement into their own hands. In neighboring country El Salvador where impunity is also prevalent, disguised death squads such as “La sombra negra” roam the night murdering criminals and well-known gang members the government should have. When the government fails to protect the victims of gang violence, they tacitly comply with the activities of cartels like MS 13 and Sinaloa while they terrorize the region into a state of complacency and hopelessness. Very few are willing to risk their lives to question the corrupt and dysfunctional government above them and the violent gangs surrounding them, except Honduran journalists and the media.

Censorship is a key strategy of the gangs and government, who aim to keep the population distracted from the drug trade they partake in out of self-preservation at the cost of innocent lives. This country knows the power of the media as evidenced in Honduras having the worldwide highest mortality rate of journalists per population in 2012 (Human Rights Watch). The seemingly peaceful rule of the Honduran government is due in a large part to censorship. The violently censored media turns a blind eye to drugs, arms, animals, and other illegal goods being shuttled through the area. Journalists reveal the link between the positive allure and brutal reality of gangs in addition to the connections between the corrupt government and the gangs. Both sides partake in censorship. When the gangs do not physically
curious journalists, the government silences them in an allegedly democratic fashion. The usual charge for incarceration is that of “defamation,” or damaging the reputation of someone, whether by hosting members of the opposition of their television show or publicly accusing a political official of accepting bribes from or otherwise interacting privately with gangs. Naysayers are reproached for “sensationalistic journalism and unprofessional conduct whenever they speak of government corruption.”

Theories of journalism as well as the importance of free press in country building has extensively been covered by Leonard Sussman, the most published U.S. critic of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization press-control programs. In Power, The Press, and The Technology of Freedom, Sussman dedicates his research “To the independent-minded journalists of the developing countries, who are often undervalued and intimidated by Third World governments, underrepresented in UNESCO’s debates on communication development, and underemployed by Western new media. They deserve better.” Advancing technology is generally a tool that encourages transparency and accountability which is why governmental powers in developing countries fear it. When speaking of the press in places like Honduras, Sussman remarks that some fear more the unrestricted access by their own people to domestic news and information than the flow of information from abroad (125). To evade the threat of incriminating news being disseminated to their country, the government creates a national and regional news agency. The government of Honduras took this route in feigning freedom of the press, then shutting down the media during momentous events. Additionally, there is a governmentally owned telecommunications company, Hondutel, which legally regulates all calls. The independent media companies that the Honduran government does not own are held in fear of charges for defamation and they report on trivial topics to avoid causing trouble.

A list of “Weapons of the State” created by Sussman clarifies the multifaceted censorship in Honduras. The censorship has been both physical and psychological against individual journalists and media centers. During the climax of the 2009 coup, there were attacks and raids on media plants in which the Honduran military occupied newsrooms, causing a media blackout. Psychological censorship has appeared when journalists are detained without charge for publishing articles portraying the government in an unfavorable light. Gangs contribute greatly in the psychological intimidation of journalists as well. Editorial censorship is seen in constant monitoring and having governmental representatives “leak information to control the spin” and influence public opinion of their actions (163). Everything journalists report on can easily be tainted or controlled by coercion.

One of the strongest tools of journalists Sussman cites on his list of “Weapons of the Press” is autonomous editorial power, namely “investigative reporting of closed aspects of a candidate’s or official’s career, or the system” (165). This type of journalism is crucial to country building and government accountability, yet it is strongly discouraged in Honduras. A simple keyword search for “corrupción” on Honduran newspaper websites yields plenty of articles on the bribes of the World Cup. One can read extensive articles about corruption in China, but nothing of Honduras. Interestingly enough self-censorship falls under the “Weapons of the State” list, because Sussman comprehends that it is often out of fear that journalists censor themselves. It only takes so many deaths of colleagues for journalists to stop rebelling.

Rick Rockwell and Noreene Janus cite an instance of both self-censorship and exertion of power from the state in their book Media Power in Central America. Cuban rebel broadcaster Nodarse attempted to encourage new voices on the news until he was isolated and betrayed.
“not just by the political system but also by his brethren in the media” (23). While he was indeed breaking some copyright laws, the greater issue was his news did not fit the norms of other broadcasters. The new Honduran Communications Commission (CONATEL) used legal issues as the means to shut down his operations so the same obedient historic families could continue dominating the news. He was originally protected by liberal patrons in the military, but eventually the government closed in on Nodarse “under the guise of attempting to regulate competition” (23). While Nodarse was going through trial and organizing protests, the rest of the media turned a blind eye and continued reporting on petty happenings in their area. Not only were the oldest news companies shaken up by a newcomer, but also out of self-interest they stuck to their careful routine of avoidance from revolutionary events.

Sussman concedes that a government-subsidized or owned press is not necessarily a bad sign because initially the state must help build up communication for national development (153). Honduras has seen the increase in technology, but the missing puzzle piece is the separation and freedom of the press that should develop over time as people take the media into their own hands. In this case, Honduras has been a republic since 1825. There is no excuse for the lack of media diversity in the media as far as a country’s development timeline. They are behind in liberating the media and that is partially holding them back from reaching a higher level of political stability. Because the press cannot accurately represent the population, the government goes about doing what it wants and the people accept the consequences.

Some journalists in this region follow the series of survival tips from the Inter American Press Association published in 1985 outlining the ways to stay alive while reporting in Central America. Their slogan is “no story is worth your life.” They advise journalists to stay within areas patrolled by central authority. Staying where the government wants journalists makes it nearly impossible to cover “the other side, whether that be an insurgency or a drug-ridden sector” (Sussman 166). Publishing on topics that matter requires a high level of risk.

Offering hope for progress, aggressive newspapers like El Diario Tiempo lead Hondurans to ask questions to reveal the violence behind the welfare. El Tiempo has highlighted the murders of individuals by members of their own gang and chronicled the sadness of those who have lost something trying to combat the trade either as police officers or journalists. These individuals and this newspaper are trailblazers. They are not waiting for freedom to be offered to them—they are claiming it.

The greatest danger of censorship is that it keeps the country’s residents unconscious of the deeply-seeded corruption and isolates radical thinkers from one another, stifling opposition. As Sussman said, the censored media “give[s] government great power to control word and act and manipulate the public. Citizens, in turn, have little power to resist the central voice” (129). Weak and corrupt governments like Honduras “have opted to use the instruments of mass media as a means or a shield to protect them on their unpopular thrones.” Investigative journalism poses a direct threat to the power of corrupt authority, and in this case the corrupt authority is connected to the gangs. Both the reporters that risk their lives to report on something other than new recipes and the gangs and government that oppress them understand the power of consciousness a free press would offer. Honduran reporters have to be nearly reckless to speak out against the corruption, knowing that both the government and perhaps their neighbors in local gangs pose a threat to their lives. As long as the voice of reason and truth is muted, no amount of financial support will improve the quality of life for Hondureños forced to submit to a system of poverty and living in fear of questioning injustice. As technology becomes more accessible and this censorship persists, the
result will be increasingly more human rights violations as authorities struggle to maintain censorship.

Those who have been threatened by the human rights violations and ask for help from the Honduran government or lethargic police force are the individuals migrating to our right now. Because their government is not protecting its people, these immigrants will most likely be granted asylum here which brings into question why the United States and international organizations did not confront this issue sooner. When we could have worked to make it safe for the opposition to exist, we pulled out all Peace Corps. When our media should have reported on the injustices the immigrants suffered in Honduras, we reported on their effect on our GDP here. Either we as a global community help with the concerns in Honduras or we deal with the issue on our borders. The obvious answer seems to be reform within Honduras. Based on the bloody censorship that conceals the mere existence of corruption, a push for freedom of the press would be an efficient start to reforming. Investigative journalism would reveal the link between the welfare services and cold-blooded murders of the gangs and confirm to the masses the corruption of certain individuals in their government. This publicized knowledge alone would encourage the rise of opposition.

The movement has quietly begun with foreign NGOs using technology to aid journalists in their push for freedom of speech. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), based in New York City, has been heralded “Journalism’s Red Cross” for rallying the global community to demand reform. CPJ leverages the power of the media in the U.S. by using quantitative data to inform and stories to compel developed countries to combat censorship. Beyond that, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services has witnessed the severity of immunity in Honduras and broadened the portal for Honduran asylum applicants. Honduras falls right next to Syria and Somalia as one of only twelve countries on the U.S. Immigration Temporary Protected Status list. Though it is laudable that the U.S. has loosened its immigration requirements for Hondurans as a temporary safe haven, the global focus should shift to implementing plans to end the violence in Honduras so there is no need for Hondurans to escape to the U.S. Though the best avenue to reform the country as a whole is widely debated, it remains clear that the onerous censorship is key in suppressing rebellion and guarding the corruption that already exists.

The corruption they suffer in Honduras can directly affect the global community as seen in the 2014 border crisis. Honduras has not seen the end to censorship, so while the ethically charged journalists suffer, the cruel allure of the gangs draws in new members. It is hard to find one person or event to blame because the corrupt government and gangs worsened due to the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch and the arrival of Los Angeles deportees. The resulting lack of jobs and resources forced a part of the country to succumb to the drug business. International cartels and local gangs are interconnected with the government in guarding the drug business—preserving what is now their livelihood. Censorship ensures those who strive for a fair justice system feel hopeless; meanwhile gangs offer support the government cannot. Censorship is the perfect system, the perfect cycle, wherein a corrupt government renders their society unaware and unable to affect change. The violent peace in Honduras can begin to end when we combat censorship and journalists are safe to critique public officials, knowing that the system will both protect the media and prosecute offenders.
Notes

6: See citation 3. Pg. 108.
9: Translation: “the black shadow”
18: Ricchiardi, Sherry (December 1997). “Journalism’s Red Cross – Under-Staffed and Low-Profile, the Committee to Protect Journalists Rides to the Rescue of Reporters and Editors Who Run Afoul of Governments Hostile to the Press”. American Journalism Review.
The Violent Peace in Honduras


Bibliography


Flames engulfed the man standing in front of the Tunisian government building. The fire licked his cheeks and his clothes dripped with gasoline. But the real fire was in the man’s weary, determined eyes. Mohamed Bouazizi was desperate for change in Tunisia. He saw the corruption in his country every day and when he reached his breaking point, when he reached the point at which he could no longer live with the existing state, he reacted with a flamboyant public statement, demanding the government’s attention. For 23 years, President Ben Ali had ruled Tunisia with no tolerance for public protest and was known for arresting and mistreating anyone who publically opposed him. Thousands of Tunisians felt the same frustrations as Bouazizi under the rule of President Ben Ali, and they also decided to make their government listen. The corruption was the red-hot coal that continuously fueled the protestors’ determination to insist change, but Bouazizi was the spark that ignited the flame.

The discussion of agency, or the ability to take charge of one’s situation, is a trending topic in many societies. Those engaged in this conversation question and examine the limits of an individual’s agency to change the world for the better. The Arab Spring, specifically in terms of the January 25th Revolution in Egypt, was stimulated by one man, the push for change was streamlined by social media, and the 23-year Mubarak dictatorship was stopped by masses of protestors. Although the change that occurred was unexpectedly immediate, the protestors did not have any organized plans to follow this upheaval of their political system. Even though social media seems to heighten the ability of individuals to support a common desire for change, it alone does not yet provide a medium for achieving long-term, sustainable change.

The entirety of the Arab Spring was essentially initiated by the frustration of one man: Mohamed Bouazizi. Twenty-six-year-old Bouazizi, after being publically humiliated by the Tunisian police force, marched to the front of a Tunisian government building on December 17, 2010, and set himself on fire. He died a few days later in a hospital; however, his public act of defiance was already circulating through the population via the intense global media coverage. The international community and, more importantly, the Tunisians, latched onto his story and the Tunisian Revolution ensued. Following this unrest in Tunisia, in June of 2010, twenty-eight-year-old Khaled Saeed was removed from an Egyptian Internet café and was beaten to death by two police officers. His story was similarly spread across the world via global and social media. Websites like We Are All Khaled Saeed were created to promote social unrest and revolution. Egyptians joined the protest movement that was growing larger every day, and on January 25 of 2011, huge masses of protestors met in Cairo’s Tahrir Square to peacefully show their desire to overthrow the dictator at the time, President Hosni Mubarak. In response to the constant protesting, President Mubarak, after almost thirty years of ruling Egypt, stepped down in February 2011 and left the power in the hands of the army council. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces quickly dissolved parliament and amended Egypt’s constitution to grant itself even more authority. This result was, of course, not what the people wanted to achieve and only revived the protesters’ demonstrations of their agency to make their voices heard against the oppressive state.

What is perhaps most interesting about these protests is that their efforts were not coordinated. Rather, the events occurred as a result of individuals choosing to become involved. The activists were volunteers who showed interest in the movement but who lacked specific instructions about an overall plan. Xosé Soengas, a professor in the Department of

#ShortTermChange: Social Media in the Arab Spring - Emma Milford
Communication Sciences at the University of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, describes the medium of the Internet as providing a “word-of-mouth effect” in which people are exposed to the movements in ways that simulate being exposed to movements in the physical presence of others. He suggests that social media has the power to amplify the spread of information person-to-person, similarly to the way information is spread in personal interactions in, for example, a small community. Yet in this case, since the Internet reaches almost every corner of the earth, that “small community” is a global audience. He also connects the Internet, specifically social media sites, to the “mimetic effect” in which people join movements because they know other people who have already joined. For example, if a friend shares an event for a peaceful protest on Facebook and it comes up in someone’s Newsfeed, they can click on it and learn more about it (the “word-of-mouth” effect). Then while they are learning more about the event via its event page, they are able to see how many of their friends have already RSVP’d. Because their friends have joined the group, and because they respect the opinions of their friends, they will feel more confident joining the event (the “mimetic effect”). Perhaps once they join they will share it themselves, and this same process repeats with another friend. In a time when the government was highly censoring all information going in and out of Egypt, Soengas argues that the Internet and social media sites functioned to reconnect Arab society and to inform the international community of the issues in Egypt. Thus social media sites became, in a sense, the new newspaper full of personal accounts and commentaries on events and daily frustrations. Unfortunately, as Soengas points out, since these events were uncoordinated, participants joined to feel solidarity as general agents of social and political change rather than to follow a common set of goals to improve the society. Everyone wanted Mubarak out of office, but the people had not reached a decision, nor had they discussed what they wanted to do past that goal. Because the movement was not led by any sort of structured organization, it probably is unrealistic to think that the masses could have ever reached a consensus about how to proceed – there would be simply too many opinions and too many ideas.

In this time of uncoordinated social activism, women and youth, who are normally viewed as two separate marginalized social groups, pushed past their distinct social and political desires to contribute to the collective efforts of the Arab Spring. By choosing to join the effort to oust Mubarak instead of breaking off and forming their own movement, these citizens merged with the Egyptian populous as collective “victims of oppression.” Although their contributions to the movement differed from those who were previously less marginalized, their work was just as vital to their overall short-term success. Most of the protestors who comprised the on-ground forces present at events like the January 25th protest, in fact, were unemployed or underemployed youth between the ages of 20 and 29. By using social media sites, available at cyber cafés to those without computers or smart phones, they coordinated large-scale protests in which they risked their lives protesting against armed forces. Women, on the other hand, often fear harassment on the street and in cyber cafés, and since most houses do not have computers, women comprised only about 37% of Internet users. Those who had access to social media, however, could not only view and sympathize with posted opinions and complaints, they could learn about the similar protests arising in other nations involved in the Arab Spring. Thanks to social media sites, women minimized their exposure to danger while still being agents of change in their communities during the Arab Spring. Esraa Abdel Fattah, for example, was one of the organizers for the January 25 protest and was even dubbed “Facebook Girl” for her behind-the-scenes activism. By increasing
access to information and providing a medium with which they could organize protests, the
Internet acted as a liberating force to grant its users greater agency. The existence of Twitter
and Facebook alone could not have caused the upheaval of the political systems; rather,
those who used these sites and who executed the planned events were the driving force of
change. Social media was the medium through which the people’s actions and words trans-
formed their nations.

Ultimately what brought individuals together was not the messenger, but the content
of the messages. The people used social media to unite their stories of being marginalized
by their governments. Often this common identity was reinforced by spreading the martyr
narratives of Mohamed Bouazizi and Khaled Saeed. Shortly after the latter’s death, activists
created a website, We Are All Khaled Saeed, which unified the people under one narrative
that represents hundreds of similar stories. The stories of these men emphasized the in-
justice of the oppressive governments and elicited personal connections between the pro-
testors and the martyrs. Narratives, in particular, allow for “vertical integration” whereby the
common person identifies with the martyr narrative and tells their own experience by weav-
ing it within the popular martyr story. This interwoven martyr and protestor narrative sug-
gests that even the common protestor is a martyr in their own way for enduring the oppres-
sive actions of their government. These stories, both interwoven and pure martyr narratives,
spread through the medium of social media, connected and motivated the people to join
together as one powerful force in the Arab Spring.

Though social media certainly played an important role in streamlining the Arab
Spring, the revolution was not a simply a result of its presence. In an article examining the
use of hashtags on Twitter during the Arab Spring (specifically from Jan 2011 to Nov 2011 in
Egypt and Libya), Axel Bruns, an Associate Professor in the Creative Industries Faculty at
Queensland University of Technology in Australia, and his colleagues Tim Highfield and Jean
Burgess conclude the following:

The substantial level of Arabic tweets in the case of #egypt certainly points to the
fact that Twitter — and, by extension, other online media — did play a role in forming,
organizing, and reporting protest activities in the country (and most likely continue
to do so now, as postelection unrest persists), but this does not necessarily transla-
te into support for the popular narrative of Egypt as a social media revolution.

In other words, it cannot be stated that the revolution would not have occurred with-
out social media. Shadi Hamid, director of research for the Brookings Institute in Doha says,
“The revolution had been building up for decades in Egypt” and would have erupted at some
point with or without the help of social media. Further, Bruns and his colleagues noticed that
in the civil war in Libya there was a lack of Twitter activity compared to that in Egypt. Like
the revolution in Egypt, the revolution in Libya started with a large protest in February of
2011 (a month after the January 25th protest), but turned violent as it gained momentum and
the government responded with brutality. The civil war culminated in the death of Libya’s 42-
year dictator, Muammar Gaddafi, in October of 2011. Despite the lack of Twitter activity, the
people were still able to overthrow their dictator, indicating that social media alone cannot
start or sustain a revolution. Nonetheless, it is a useful tool for sharing a huge volume of in-
dividuals’ frustrations in a way that challenges the government’s ability to censor information.
Social media may speed up the process of revolutionary actions; however, as seen in Libya,
it is not a necessary factor in the causation of revolution or civil war.

The real question is whether social media is capable of creating long-term, sustainable change. In the short term, social media can motivate those in dire situations to band together and work for change. It is an excellent way to inspire people to be agents in their communities and it makes the idea of change tangible by simply pressing a “Join” button. Problems arise, though, when we look into the future. The first problem is that because, by its nature, the Arab Spring protestors had no defined leaders, they lacked the structure to make future decisions about the goals for which they wanted to fight. So as soon as they achieved overthrowing Mubarak, they lost all authority and power to keep asking for a defined change simply because they never stated what they wanted. Additionally, since the movement allowed so many people to become involved, the idea of everyone consenting to one plan for the future was unlikely and probably impossible. The second problem is that if the citizens (rather than the government officials) are to discuss a future plan, how do they do it? If only 37% of Internet users are women, then any decisions reached via a social media poll would be an inaccurate representation of the opinions of all Egyptians. Not to mention that in 2011 only 19% of Egyptians had access to the Internet. Furthermore, social media seems to be limited in the types of activism that it promotes. For example, it is easier to spur a political reform via social media than an economic reform, simply because it is easier to overthrow a government by force than to improve or change a country’s economy. Following this logic, Soengas states that the Arab Spring was only a political reform. In order to achieve long-term, sustainable reform, “political reforms must be accompanied by economic reforms,” which have yet to be achieved. Thus, because of its nature, social media seems to be an ineffective means of defining and executing long-term, sustainable change. It can only be expected to excite and encourage the people to make immediate, definitive changes in their countries.

After President Mubarak stepped down and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces stepped in, the Egyptians were unable to protest in the collective unit that they had formed to destroy the dictatorship because they lacked definitive, long-term goals. They knew they did not want a dictatorship, but they did not know the details of their desired democracy. In June of 2012, four months after President Mubarak left office, Egypt elected the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammed Morsi as their new President. Unfortunately, Morsi did not turn out to be the change they had hoped to see, and was removed a year later by the military. The Court then banned any future involvement of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egyptian government, and has now formally recognized it as a terrorist organization. In November of 2013, a law was passed that restricted public protests. After almost three years of building tensions, in January of 2014 Egyptians voted in referendum on a new constitution draft that essentially banned parties with religious affiliations. In May, after almost a year without a ruler, Egyptians elected Abdul Fattah al-Sisi as their new president who, in his first year, had to handle many violent situations. Parliamentary elections were set for mid-March of 2015, but the Supreme Constitutional Court decided that the law defining voting districts is unconstitutional, and postponed the elections until amendments to the constitution are passed. Because the protestors had no long-term plan in mind after the overthrow of Mubarak, Egypt is now in a state of trial and error. They must go through a long, tedious process in which they discern the type of
democracy that will fit best with the cultures and peoples who live in Egypt. Despite all this, the Arab Spring was a remarkable event in history. People from all over the world supported the Arab nations virtually and physically as they tried to convert their countries to democracies. Unfortunately, due to the nature of social media and the lack of structure in the movement, long-term sustainable change was not immediately achieved in the case of Egypt. A year after the January 25th Revolution, Esraa Abdel Fat-tah said, “the country is still in the ‘Mubarak regime’ and life is not better than it was a year ago.” Egypt is still struggling with the idea of a new political system, and keeps tumbling back to its practices from the Mubarak regime that do not naturally accompany democratic ideals. But when has revolution ever been a clean-cut change? The revolution in Egypt may not have resulted in an immediate democracy, but it seems to be on its way to a more democratic system. No doubt it will take time to piece together a constitution that accurately fits and represents the cries of the people. But change is happening. Change is coming.

Notes

1: The Muslim Brotherhood is considered a terrorist organization only by Bahrain, Egypt, Russia, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Due to its non-violent nature, the White House does not acknowledge the organization as terrorist.

Bibliography


On Saturday, August 9, an unarmed 18 year old black teenager was shot. We know Michael Brown’s story now. However, memory is malleable and to often tragedies instances of violence are wiped away and ignored. It is never too early to remember or memorialize. One of the most potent memorials to emerge in the last eight months has been the chalk outlines that have sprouted across St Louis and other sites as well. Monumental yet also transient and ephemeral, these simple chalk outlines are a powerful aestheticization of politics and an important reclamation of public space. Although the use of chalk outlines as a form of artistic protest is not new, it has become a more widespread and visible tactic in the region over the last nine months. At once a hashtag, a potent symbol of police brutality, and an act of mourning, chalk silhouettes and #ChalkedUnarmed are useful and universal symbols with a complicated and international genealogy. In this paper I will explore the internationalism that I see as a fundamental part of post-Ferguson art in St. Louis. I will begin with an analysis of el siluetazo, a 1983 artistic protest against state violence in Argentina that used the silhouette as its primary motif, and then explore the use of chalk outlines in St Louis. I hope that this comparison will highlight forms of artistic solidarity both local and global as well as articulate the unique aesthetic and political qualities of the silhouette in a post-trauma setting. Finally, the way each group orients itself towards the law and whether they choose to hold their interventions on public or private property will highlight how issues of respectability and neutrality manifest in each situation.

Argentina

One of the most common motifs in post-dictatorship Argentine political art is the silhouette. Part of a countrywide process of mourning and bearing witness to the atrocities committed between 1976 and 1983, silhouettes memorialize those disappeared by the government. Although the exact number is unknown, the government is thought to have murdered upwards of 30,000 people. While many memorials and monuments to these events are to a single person, like Claudia Fontes’s Reconstrucción del retrato de Pablo Míguel or Nicolás Guagnini’s 30.000 in the Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires, others are more general in their response to the many undocumented murders that occurred. Because of the unknown number and nature of victims, more ambiguous forms of representation like the silhouette are central to post-dictatorship artistic production.

One of the most prominent artistic and political actions to use this motif is el siluetazo. El siluetazo uses the suffix –azo which signifies greatness or massive size and is often used in Argentina to denote social revolutions and protest movements. Although El siluetazo was a peaceful march unlike El Cordobazo or El Rosariazo, two other events using the suffix, it marked a watershed moment in Argentinean public life.

Taking place at the end of 1983 during the last gasps of the military dictatorship, El siluetazo as an artistic and political technique was developed by three artists, Rodolfo Aguerreberry, Julio Flores, and Guillermo Kexel, along with Madres de Plaza del Mayo. It consisted of numerous life size silhouettes and was originally part of the third Marcha de la Resistencia, an annual human rights march that still occurs today. Besides the media through which the images were disseminated (the silhouettes were directly used in the march and later wheatpasted and posted around the city, while in Ferguson the outlines are more ephemeral chalk drawings), there are two other ways in which el...
siluetazo is markedly different from the chalk outlines of Ferguson. The first is that they were not allowed to be put on the ground, instead going on buildings and walls. The logic behind this, according to the artists, is that if they were on the floor it would be an acknowledgement of death and the fates of many of the disappeared were still unknown (ES 110). By inserting the silhouettes directly into everyday action, they were impossible to ignore and directly disrupted official memory. The second difference is that it was forbidden to put the names and information about specific individuals on the silhouette because el siluetazo was for all the disappeared.

However, as the project developed, the names of victims were eventually put on silhouettes rendering them a more pointed, if less aesthetically challenging, project. Uncertainty and ambiguity gave out to mourning and grief. In many ways, el siluetazo brought the disappeared back to life and back into the city. The urban space became less a graveyard, more a palimpsestic site of memory. Las siluetas were not markers of death but reaffirmations of life. The disappeared had taken back the city and their narratives would not be forgotten. Friends and family likewise used their own bodies to form the silhouettes in an act of radical empathy and solidarity. Gustavo Buntinx, a well known Argentine historian, highlights the impossibility of el siluetazo’s project when he states, the “active, symbolic principle at work there [el siluetazo] was not one of representation but rather of presence” (Interview with Longoni). They brought the disappeared to life instead of solely remembering them.

St. Louis

While similar actions have taken place in cities across the country, I will focus on a single manifestation in St. Louis. The silhouettes themselves are simple, poetic gestures but they resonate in complex and multivalent ways. Primarily drawn by #ChalkedUnarmed, a St. Louis based group consisting of Mallory Nezam and Derek Laney, they are composed of an outline, a name, and a date. Nezam and Laney focus on shootings of unarmed black men by the police across the country. As stated in an interview with St. Louis Public Radio, they aim to situate the shooting of Michael Brown in a larger genealogy of extrajudicial state violence against unarmed black men. They work with a list of over twenty victims. An archival and historical exercise, #ChalkedUnarmed aims to rewrite narratives of racialized state violence.

The media used by #ChalkedUnarmed is telling. Their work exists physically in chalk and online -- the hashtag here is as important as the silhouette -- and these two halves are symbiotic and necessary parts of their project. Much of the critical power of #ChalkedUnarmed is gained from how the chalk silhouettes are integrated into urban spaces. The silhouettes are primarily drawn on public sidewalks, forcing pedestrians to make a difficult decision. They can either step over or step across the outline. Through this choice pedestrians are asked to consider their own complicity with violent systems of state oppression. Even if they step over the outline, they are made conscious of their implicit support of the violent status quo. Yet, there are also those who ignore these temporary memorials, stepping on them in what must be a jarring image. This is fundamentally different from el siluetazo, where it was next to impossible to avoid the many silhouettes posted around the city.

Chalk is an ephemeral medium; it can be erased, washed away, and is not an act
of vandalism. The hashtag, however, adds an element of permanence to their project. Through social media, these outlines are constantly being reiterated and each of these murders is constantly being grieved. It makes every outline profoundly current even when the chalk has been washed away. The images do not leave us and their aftereffects become permanent marks. Social media and “hashtag activism” played critical roles during the initial actions after the August 9 shooting of Michael Brown as well as being a critical tool for maintaining awareness of the issues facing Ferguson and the region at large. In many ways, there are two Fergusons, a physical municipality in St. Louis and a #ferguson that is a potent symbol of the systemic racism and police brutality that exists across the country and was hashtagged 8 million times last August alone. Therefore, new articulations of political protest and street art like #ChalkedUnarmed must exist on two levels (the physical and the networked) to function as an effective mode of artistic resistance.

Finally, works like #ChalkedUnarmed recalibrate how we grieve and actively oppose racialized and normative understandings of what a life is worth. The question of which lives are grieved for and which are not reveals broad inequalities and in many ways maps the limits of the social. What happens to those who are not grieved? Those whose obituaries are not published? #ChalkedUnarmed as these questions by locating Ferguson in a larger narrative of violence. In many ways, such acts of resignification actively counter the ongoing dehumanization of those not deemed necessary by the state. Perhaps hashtags and social media movements like #ChalkedUnarmed offer a more democratic forum for public acts of mourning and actively resist racialized violence and control over official memory.

#ChalkedUnarmed and El Siluetazo: Adjacencies and Resonances

El siluetazo and #ChalkedUnarmed resonate with each other across decades and continents. Although they emerged from radically different situations -- in Argentina, many did not know what happened to their friends and family, while in St. Louis the issues of police brutality, racial discrimination, and unequal justice can be publicly discussed -- both movements demonstrate artistic resolve in the face of violence and highlight the radical power of a simple silhouette. Further, they both investigate and implicate the state, examining the many injustices of the justice system and revealing that the state is never neutral. In many ways, they are greater political statements than artistic ones: their power lies in their politics rather than their pure aesthetics.

Although they use similar tactics, there are a few differences that cause each project to have distinct political ramifications. Prime among these is the ephemeral quality of #ChalkedUnarmed’s project. It is one of the most critical parts of their praxis and reflects its networked and grassroots origins. The outline can be visible one day and invisible the next. Even if the wind and the rain do not quickly erase it, someone could wash it away themselves. In many ways, it is a non-commodifiable form of protest. Its temporary nature prevents it from becoming ossified or institutionalized. El Siluetazo, on the other hand, went from being a potent symbol of political protest to a key part of the Argentine government’s human rights discourse. However, even if the government expounds such rhetoric, recent cases of possibly politically motivated violence reveal how human rights discourse does not always signify the defense of human rights.

The transient nature of #ChalkedUnarmed stands in opposition to consumption
based strategies of political protest that are more deeply engaged with the market and more vulnerable to its machinations. #ChalkedUnarmed does not require a large capital investment and does not try to commodify difference. It is not a t-shirt or a symbol that can be easily co-opted. If it were, it would lose the transience that is so fundamental to the project itself. Through this, #ChalkedUnarmed demonstrates that it is not what one wears or what one buys that constitutes protest but how one changes spatial and material relations. These temporary portraits resignify and remap public space on the people’s terms. It constructs a new urban language, one that is non-commodifiable and rooted in social relations.

However, while the temporary interventions of #ChalkedUnarmed are the root of its political power, they are also in many ways its critical flaw. Even if the chalk outlines continue to exist online, they are too easily erased from actual urban spaces. Perhaps it is a poetic gesture towards the failures and fallacies of both official and collective memory and perhaps it is a testament to the transience of life. Yet those gestures merely reflect the flawed status quo; they do not actively reimagine it. Further, their transitory nature means that they often may not even be seen by figures of authority or those they are meant to challenge. In many ways, impermanent street art like #ChalkedUnarmed is safe, especially when viewed in comparison with El Siluetazo.

El Siluetazo covered the city in the images of the dead, trespassing and breaking the law because, as the multiple silhouettes demonstrated, there was no justice in Argentina during the dictatorship. Las siluetas were posted on walls of private buildings, on sidewalks, on parks, on government buildings, in a massive map of violence that connected the entire city. It was on a larger scale than #ChalkedUnarmed not only because there were many more images but also because the locations of the images were more transgressive. In #ChalkedUnarmed’s interview with St. Louis Public Radio, one of the cofounders stated, “that it’s [chalk] a pretty safe medium to use,” and that, “I did research to find out that sidewalks are a safe space to do that on.” It seems that there is a certain reticence to their project, a certain desire to stay within the bounds of the law. In the interview, a distinction was also made between spray painting (vandalizing) property, and chalk outlines.8

Protesters in St Louis and around the entire country chanted that, “The whole damn system is guilty as hell,” and that “we shut shit down.” These statements reflect some of the central tenets of the Ferguson protests, particularly that the law itself is unjust. Justice is flawed. The rules are biased. Streets are meant to be trespassed and highways are meant to be taken. How can one be “respectable” and “considerate” in the face of oppression? In 1983, property was not respected. El Siluetazo wasn’t limited to public, “safe,” spaces because free speech isn’t safe.9 Even today, there are many political movements in Argentina that reference el siluetazo and use its distinct visual vocabulary. In March 2015, there was a “Siluetazo por los Femicidios” protesting and memorializing a recent string of murders of females. Part of the action consisted of spray painting silhouettes on the street, over cross walks, and on the sidewalks.10 If “neutrality is a fallacy,” then choosing to stay within the bounds of supposedly neutral laws is one as well.

Property is not human life, as much as capitalism would have us believe that it is. Spray painting a wall or a street to commemorate the brutal loss of a human life in the hands of the military or of the police is a radical act that reaffirms the value of lives too often dismissed by the state and state institutions. When the news coverage after Michael Brown’s death focused more on the burning of a Quiktrip than ongoing violence, it became clear that
in certain cases property sadly matter more than human life. If so, acts like el Siluetazo that directly antagonize property itself force the targeted institutions to listen.

Silhouettes, shadows, chalk outlines--these are all universal symbols of humanity and acts of protest that actively seek to change official memory and public discourse. These are international motifs, not limited to a single event or a single country. #ChalkedUnarmed was one of the most poignant and poetic gestures to emerge across St. Louis, a transient and possibly non-commodifiable monument and act of protest. But it may not go far enough. As el Siluetazo shows, when the law itself is unfair, responses cannot be constrained by supposedly neutral rules. This is not to argue for violent protest, but to highlight the importance of even simple transgressions like spray painting a sidewalk or placing silhouettes on government buildings. If property becomes so highly valued, than that overvaluation must be challenged. Paint a wall and make them slip.

Notes

1: El siluetazo is sometimes referred to as la siluetada because the suffix -azo often signifies a violent revolution. However, I use el siluetazo in this paper as it is more common in the literature.

2: Despite the name, Guagnini’s installation is about his father. He references trauma on a national level through the title but the crux of the project is his personal narrative.


Bibliography


PROTEST IN THE EVERY DAY:
HOW OUR APPEARANCE ALLOWS US TO PROTEST
ASSUMPTIONS, BINARIES, & PERCEIVED SELVES
by Laken Sylvander

“Protest is asking, ‘We’ve done this because of this idea or label for years... Why? Is this right? Not even right, but what is this doing? What does this say about me?’
Protest is often perceived as a single act—a loud, visible, disruptive act—but it is generally time specific. There are movements of protests, but again, they have their perceived temporality. However, there is more to protest than an act—protest can be a state of being, and for many people, it is just that. With a multitude of identities under constant attack from systems, institutions, & individuals, there comes a uniform of white-washed respectability politics in presenting oneself in order to conceal those marginalized identities. Conformity to visual & behavioral norms is often one small way to try and garner some sense of safety in a world where we do not choose identities, oppression, or privilege. Protest then comes in the act of choosing to unapologetically be ourselves and to make this visual—to wear our personality, heritage, ideology, or politics in such a way that it is carefully crafted and expressed before we’ve opened our mouths.

Our choices in appearance say a great deal about us: what we choose to do with our hair in the morning can be a source of pride in our history, bridging the divide in the gendering of our clothing can embody our acknowledgement that we exist beyond the binary, piercings and tattoos allow us to make our bodies our own. Defying conformity to the “professional” look and embracing the parts of ourselves that are less loved as a culture can be protest. It happens every day and it can be exhausting, but this protest is a conscious decision to embrace an alternate reality to our painfully constructed one. The individuals photographed in the following pages protest in personal ways: skin, cloth, metal, curls, ink. It requires risk. No protest would be protest if there weren’t risks, and these individuals risk disapproval, rejection, violence, in order to embrace themselves and show the world that risk will not silence them.
“Protest: an action against some system, some ideology, some norm that you’re fighting against through visual means, or any of the 5 senses. Something you hear, something you see, so it doesn’t have to be marching with sign—what we think of as protesting.

It can be your daily life.
I think that’s what protest is, inherently.
It’s something that you’re doing more than once on a Saturday morning in downtown Saint Louis.
That has its place.
But it also has to do with waking up in the morning and choosing to wear what you wear, talk to who you talk to, take the classes you want to take, fighting against the norms of who we’re supposed to be.

It’s fighting against everything you don’t believe in.
Fighting for something.
For equality. For justice.”

I’m wearing what I call my sex romper. It has my chromosomes up top, and my internal organ, my uterus, on the bottom…This is a very overt way of presenting my sex which you wouldn’t know otherwise—we too often combine sex and gender and gender presentation, but I’m bringing to the surface, literally, the symbols that define my sex that you wouldn’t otherwise know upon meeting me. When I was sewing it, I realized the uterus against the orange looked dangerously like the Texas Longhorns symbol, and I’m not into sports, so that was funny.”
I didn’t think I was protesting when I started modifying—piercings and then tattoos. It was just me doing what I wanted with my body. I think it first became a protest when somebody told me I shouldn’t do it, that I couldn’t do it. It then became a form of resistance. I do what I want with my body; some people take that as protest but if me going to bed loving myself and feeling good is protest, then that’s what it is.”
I grew up playing sports, and I would always wear the same clothes as the boys. Now that I’m older and buying clothes for the gym, I go to the store and everything for women is just skin tight...everything’s sexualized. I love feeling like a jock...I shop for work-out pants only in the men’s department. When I wear these in daily life, I walk different. I like how I walk. I walk more confidently and more athletically, being less aware of my hips. I don’t always want to feel like that, but I get to feel like a jock again.

“...I’ve always been pushed into different facets of masculinity and different presentations that I never truly agreed with, never truly felt comfortable with. I think I realized, partially in high school but mainly in college, that I am in such a privileged space and I have the ability to challenge what I wear in a space where I am physically and emotionally protected. Challenging what is normal and what is perceived as masculine, what is perceived as feminine in my daily life, I have the privilege of making the spaces I’m in possibly better for someone else, and making the situations that I was in better. In having that privilege I need to use it the best way I can.
My advisor was talking to us about med school apps and how we definitely can’t have unnatural colored hair. I feel like if I’m able to get into med school through interviews and have less conservative looks, that shows that that institution values my knowledge and my person over my looks and superficial things like that.

I think at first I thought of my gender expression as protest. People’s perceptions of me never align with the way I feel about myself or the way I identify. I’d always wanted to cut my hair and wear androgynous, or at times masculine, clothing. But with every day it feels more like authenticity than protest. Not that the two are mutually exclusive, but I’ve found a space where it’s more for me than for others. My gender presentation and expression is a radical act of self-love.

Christine Dolan

Chelsea Lin
I protest in kind of a quiet way... I don’t want to easily fit into categories based on my gender, my race or my sexuality. I see myself as demanding that people give me the benefit of the doubt—you really can’t judge me before you speak to me or get to know me... in my appearance, I really am demanding that without saying it out loud. I don’t want to be predictable or outspoken in my dress before people really know who I am as a person.
...this eyebrow piercing was entirely for me, and I hadn't really done anything like that before. But this is all mine.

Nina Stoller

Protest to me is a lifestyle. Once, an officer asked me, “Are you guys done protesting?” Protest is everywhere you go. You are a living breathing form of protest. It’s not like, “Let me go to this protest,” ...but every day we’re protesting the ideas that we’ve been conditioned with, and I think that’s so important...

You get this message that you have to express your individuality through colors, designs, anything that stands out. I just think that less is more. I think that your appearance represents your ideas in a way. How I dress is an idea I have, & that also has other implications. I also try to keep it really simple in other respects. If you look at writing, I can metaphorically relate the way I dress to the way I try to write; black and white, down to the bones.

Clark Randall
The idea is I should be able to self-determine, wear what I want, exist as I want to as long as I’m not hurting anyone. But I guess in someone’s mind, I’m hurting their idea of... I’m hurting them. It’s so personal to them that I would present how they’re not expecting me to, or outside of what they’re comfortable with...
After the shooting of Mike Brown, the people of Ferguson and surrounding St. Louis areas suggested that their resilience against discrimination and injustice had been drained. Overwhelmingly large groups of individuals began swarming the streets of Ferguson, unafraid of the backlash that would undoubtedly arise from the militant Ferguson police force responsible for Brown’s shooting in August of 2014.

An advantage for Ferguson protestors, a spectrum of media ranging from television and newspaper to Twitter and Facebook followed these riots closely, relaying images of individuals stricken with tear gas, beaten with batons and being forced to evacuate the streets of their very own neighborhoods, by all means necessary. By shedding light on the struggles of protestors, media itself proved a universalizing tool: in mere weeks, people living in large cities across the nation began gathering and protesting locally, with some travelling to Ferguson to pursue and progress the Missouri protests. Many colleges and universities across the country even began hosting vigils for Mike Brown on their respective campuses. While the immense amounts of people of color participating has been crucial to the success of these events and protests, it is also incredibly important to note the significant presence of youth in these movements. Suddenly, it seemed the shooting of a young, black, unarmed male surged intent and empathetic rage in young black and brown individuals everywhere.

Still, we know this is not something novel, historically speaking. From the civil rights movements surged by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1960s to the riots in Oakland, California after the shooting of Oscar Grant in 2009, all protests against these racial injustices have stemmed from rage against violence, racism and police profiling; in all of these cases, people of color tended to encompass the majority of protestors present. What, then, distinguishes Ferguson protests and the shooting of Mike Brown and why is social media protest significant in regard to them?

The shooting of Mike Brown in 2014 occurred closely after two other similar incidents: the shooting of Oscar Grant in Oakland, California on New Year’s Day in 2009, and the shooting of Trayvon Martin in Florida in February of 2012. Thus, a third shooting, this time of a certainly unarmed black male, facilitated a revamping and igniting of past sentiments of marginalization and disdain within minority communities. Pushing this further, in 2013, the movie titled Fruitvale Station, a drama film reenacting the events leading to Oscar Grant’s shooting and consequent death, was released; for the first time, a current event pertaining to police violence against black youth was conveyed through media and placed on the big screen, allowing individuals access to a narrative they might otherwise be more detached from or misinformed about.

Upon the death of Mike Brown in 2014, social media took the forefront on relaying live protests and live police brutality through photos and videos taken on protestors’ cell phones. These jarring visuals and audio clips of police brutality and inappropriate civilian treatment led to a surge of social media activism, placing the hashtag #BLACKLIVESMATTER at the top of trending topic lists on platforms such as Twitter and Instagram.

Consequently, I would suggest a correlation between exposure to media and participation. With access to social media platforms that encourage sharing of information, ideas and opinion, many more youth were privy to the Mike Brown case, its social complications, and its symbolism for colored youth nationally. More than simple access, social media complicated the nature of protest organization; with the ability to communicate with mass amounts of Twitter and Instagram followers along with Facebook friends, protests acquired a level of discretion not available to potential participants in decades preceding social media existence. For example, as students gathered at my alma mater, Columbia University, after the indictment decision of Mike Brown’s case, it was social media and technology that allowed us to do so secretly; stand-ins and protests were developed but all
information was distributed through texts, tweets and private Facebook messages. Without forewarning, authorities were forced to deal with mass congregations of students and community activists on a case-by-case basis, giving protestors greater time to gather, chant, and parade city streets and campuses before facing any forceful deterrence or authoritative backlash.

But beyond its strength in secrecy and access, social media and media-based protest has allowed young, visual artists already using these platforms to distribute their work to turn the focus of their content toward current activism, rendering a new lens on the events occurring and the protestors participating. A new hub for activism, Ferguson found itself attracting many photographers and filmmakers interested in using media to distribute and relay the sentiments of the people of Ferguson. One photographer in particular, along with his small team of artists, took his passion for photography and film from the entertainment industry to the streets of Ferguson activism and protest. Artist and social activist Lucas Farrar, the creative director/founder of Far Fetched Future, helps shed light on how photography and film, two mediums easily distributed and accessed through the internet and social media platforms, may be creating more productive forms of protest.

Farrar and his team took to the streets of Ferguson soon after civilian protesting began, molding and framing their platform for “Whose Streets?” As the domain whosestreets.com suggests, their intent is to relay the accounts of individuals in Ferguson, of both those simply protesting as well as civilians who call the St. Louis area home. With bias constantly reflected in news outlets, their purpose is to shed light on the honest words of those striving to sanction change through street and community protest. WhoseStreets introduces its media archives and efforts as a representation of “how the killing of 18 year old Mike Brown inspired a community to fight back, a people’s documentary.” Their images and short clips suggest their description is an apt one.

With photographs of young, colored youth standing in the streets of Ferguson, fists upright and tightly gripped, along with video clips of black and brown individuals of all ages, the spirit of their revolution is transmitted fluidly. Additionally, using film as a medium allowed for voice to be captured, bringing the ideas and voices of real Ferguson civilians to life, messages that still photographs hope to convey but that can often be misinterpreted when not explicitly stated. One of WhoseStreets’ series available on the website titled On the Frontlines, showcases both black-and-white and colored photographs of community members—ranging from priests and local workers to groups of black high school males—as they face the endangered streets of Ferguson protest together. All striking images, Farrar and his team project the emotion behind protest and impose a prolific attribute to protest through media. Beyond its ability to convey the reality of destruction present in those streets, as proven by Farrar’s avid social media updates, protest through media is easily transferrable and accessible to the public eye, especially to social media’s most consistent users: youth 18-30.

With such extensive symbolism and brutal honesty, these mediums and their distribution through social media could potentially mark a new form of productive protest. But this methodology also raises questions about the effectiveness of protest that requires sharing and universalization in order to thrive. As the spotlight remains on the people of Ferguson and the St. Louis area in order to produce images to be distributed, the political responsibilities being called to question begin to drown beneath the need for images stirring empathy or pity. That is, are these images and voices being distributed by Farrar and the WhoseStreets team perpetuating voyeurism and bringing only surface-level attention to the issues at hand, or is this type of social media activism effective in helping enact change? Is media only actively a social tool that propagates...
perspective based in emotion and bias, or can it truly be an objective mechanism through which to communalize political efforts?

Both of these questions are complex, as is the nature of activist efforts disposable to any audience willing to participate. WhoseStreets.com is a public internet domain, easily accessible to any individual with internet access. Thus, it is naïve to presume that the tendency to simply look at these images and short films without truly internalizing them, that a kind of spectatorship and voyeurism, will not be a common reaction. The true power behind the WhoseStreets movement then, lies in how the perspectives of those choosing to truly engage with the material have been driven and in its ability to raise the number of people doing so. With WhoseStreets efforts beginning shortly after Mike Brown’s shooting and extending through March 2015, we can identify the many political pushes, both successful and unsuccessful, that have been pursued during these months. More significant to this analysis of social media activism, we can better identify how Farrar’s personal social media platforms and the WhoseStreets website were tools in enabling those political efforts.

At the start of 2015, we begin to see political action being taken in Ferguson, locally and through outside forces. In January, nearing Martin Luther King Jr. Day, eight members of the Congressional Black Caucus visited a Methodist Church in Ferguson to assure protestors and civilians they were fueling change just as aggressively in the District of Columbia as protestors were in Ferguson. A powerful voice to have backing a movement, the presence of political figures reassured many Ferguson civilians and protestors, along with Farrar himself, that their activist work being done was not futile.

Months later, on March 13th, Ferguson residents submitted an affidavit for the Ferguson mayor to respectfully resign from office. While this did not occur, it was the first time Farrar and his team had seen civilians begin taking political matters into their own hands beyond organized protest. It is important to note that the organizing of these community members and the processes behind obtaining an affidavit for such purposes required many community meetings, meetings much like the gatherings captured by Farrar and the WhoseStreets team within local St. Louis area homes.

One of Farrar’s Facebook posts, after uploading some images from the WhoseStreets archives to his news feed, exposed his experience during a protest outside of the Ferguson Police Department later in March. Lucas writes, “Last night after the shots rang out, everybody hit the ground as the police trained their 9s and ARs on the Andy Wurm. Here you can see two people crawling to cover. The scene would soon be filled with all surrounding jurisdictions as a code 1000 went over the scanner.” Beneath the post were over 30 likes and one comment stating ‘simply watching this is scary.’ We can see then, how moving these images through social media platforms and websites allowed for a collective fuel to remain alive and potent as political efforts began arising.

The most recent of those political happenings occurred on April 8, 2015, when two more African-Americans were added to Ferguson’s City Council, making the council an even distribution of half white and half black members. The highest turnout in recent municipal elections in Ferguson- 30% of the population- occurred during this election process, shedding light on how many individuals, beyond having access to news stories and media through outlets including social media platforms, have become active participants in moving social protest to a political platform.

While I would certainly not attribute these efforts to social media activism alone, it should be recognized that these events have all occurred after months of ongoing social media dis-
tribution of information on local Ferguson events, elections and protest. WhoseStreets.com, along with the social media efforts of Farrar and his co-founders, allowed for conversation on these issues and ongoing political debacles, with more likes, favorites, retweets and shares on links to some articles and WhoseStreets archives than others. In this way, social media can highlight which issues the peoples are concerned with and which solutions being proposed are being digested by civilians as ‘for the people.’ Even as images and ideas born out of Ferguson protests are distributed through social media and the internet, when they transcend into political spaces they become the evidence of the people: this is what we are facing, this is how feel, and this is what we need.

In essence, social media activism can and should serve to empower the voice of the people, to identify collective motives and concerns along with the political ramifications of jarring events such as the shooting of an unarmed black teen. Tweets, Facebook and Instagram posts, and visual art websites such as WhoseStreets solidify a social voice, one that should be considered at times of policy and law reform. As we continue in an era of technological advancement and constant internet usage, we must ensure that our efforts on media platforms do not simply provide images to empathize with but rather perpetuate a notion of collectivism, of power through social movements and protest that can fluidly invade the timelines, news feeds and Google searches, allowing us all to continue educating, learning from and fighting for one another.

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