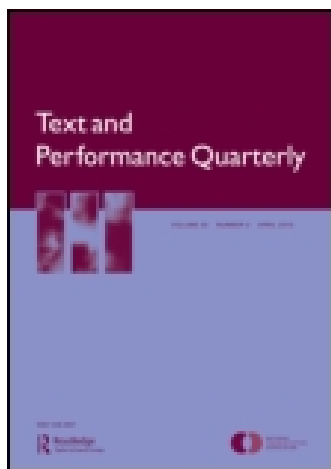


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Performance Constellations: Memory and Event in Digitally Enabled Protests in the Americas

Marcela A. Fuentes

This essay analyzes the development of the relationship between performance and digital media within protest movements in the Americas. I track digital media's role in constituting what I call "performance constellations." Performance constellations complicate previous definitions of performance as acts of transfer in order to account for hybrid, networked, and decentered protest performances. Focusing on 1990s hacktivism within the Zapatista rebellion and on social media practices during the 2011 Chilean student protests, I demonstrate that by dis-locating bodies and events, performance constellations constitute important reworkings of time and space outside of neoliberal management.

Keywords: Performative protest; Digital activism; Distributed democracy; Zombie flash mobs; Networked culture

FINAL NOTICE:

Tomorrow at noon, ALL SLUGGISH PEOPLE who didn't attend today's rehearsal have to be in the CLINIC AREA so that we can integrate them into one of the four blocks!...

REMEMBER the part that goes before the dance, listen attentively and remember the sounds that you should make: "BRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR" hahahaha! =P

Marcela A. Fuentes is Assistant Professor in the Department of Performance Studies at Northwestern University. She is also a performer and dramaturge. I want to thank the anonymous readers of this essay for their invaluable comments. I am also grateful to the students and colleagues who offered insightful responses to this piece at various instances of its development. Correspondence to: Marcela A. Fuentes, Department of Performance Studies, Northwestern University, Rm. 205, Annie May Swift Hall, 1920 Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208, USA. Email: marcela.fuentes@northwestern.edu.

Costuming:

Everyone is responsible for their own costumes, make yourself the best zombie outfit that you can, be creative, WE WILL NOT DANCE in our uniforms or with school insignias.

Stick on your outfit signs and stuff related to your death caused by education, the death of your dreams, ETC.

Make Up:

It's personal and optional too; however, we uploaded tutorials on how to do your own make up, and on Thursday we'll have people available to help those who have problems.

...

IT'S STRICTLY PROHIBITED to shout during the convergence and the dance performance the NAME OF YOUR SCHOOLS OR ANY INTELLIGIBLE WORD OF ANY TYPE.

Zombies do not speak. They make the typical "groan."

Please pass along the information through this medium....

We'll coordinate rehearsals.

We have several colleagues who danced this in STGO [Santiago] and who are motivated to repeat it in honor of their 4,000 peers who danced in front of LA MONEDA! :D

Let's get motivated! ("Thriller" my translation)

The text above is excerpted from the Facebook event page that was created in preparation for *Thriller por la educación* (*Thriller for Education*), a zombie flash mob performed in the Chilean city of Antofagasta in July 2011. Flash mobs or smart mobs are ephemeral, often highly stylized occupations of physical space by hastily assembled crowds. Relying on devices with communication and computing capabilities, unacquainted people can perform as an "intelligent mass" (Rheingold xii). As the Facebook event announcement indicates, the *Thriller for Education* demonstration replicated a prior event, also organized via Facebook, in which 4,000 students gathered in the Chilean capital of Santiago to perform as zombies (undead victims) of the government's for-profit education system.

Choreographed street protests such as *Thriller for Education* show that technology, in this case mobile computing and social media, can be vital tools in generating, documenting, and replicating embodied activist performance. The ephemerality and swarming modality of flash mobs as tactical interventions thrive on a contrasting temporality of continuous and dispersed networking facilitated by computational technologies in the era of the "always-on lifestyle" (boyd). The unpredictability of performance as an impromptu event, its unforeseen emergence in the urban landscape, strongly depends on the technologies implemented to ensure the replication and spreadability of learned gestures (Jenkins, Ford, and Green) to potential re-performers. In this sense, what we see as a radical expression of political presence in the street is both informed and enabled by so-called disembodied

technologies. Contemporary technologies of digital, networked mediation shape how bodies appear in political platforms as such mediation becomes the main vehicle for self-assertion and collective action.

Grounded in performance studies, which privileges the body as a principal agent of social justice, in what follows I track the development of the relationship between body-based street activism and digital media as central tools of tactical intervention in protest movements in the Americas. Focusing on two paradigmatic sites—the Zapatista rebellion of the mid-1990s and the Chilean student protests of 2011—I trace how bodies and digital media evolved from a complementary into a synergetic relationship. Aided by hacktivist modes of disruption and participatory social media culture,¹ indigenous rebels and student protesters were able to occupy a political stage that was predicated on their exclusion. Both the Zapatista insurgency and the Chilean student protests succeeded in using digital media to make excluded voices heard, constituting a public forum that questioned the legitimacy of neoliberal democracy by linking local constituencies with global publics. I argue, however, that the efficacy of these movements resided not in the activists' use of technology per se but rather in their capacity to articulate bodies in combination with embodied, digitally mediated action to produce a politics of appearance (Arendt) in which bodies—their vulnerability, their strength, and their ways of working together—are the main symbolic and material vehicles in the struggle for social change.

Based on these case studies, I show how activists assembled digital media practices and street performance to mobilize local and global support in response to transnational power configurations. Building on Diana Taylor's definition of performance as body-to-body "acts of transfer" of memory, identity, and sense of belonging, I track the role of digital media in forming what I call "constellations of performance." Taylor's notion of acts of transfer, rooted in Paul Connerton's work on bodily practices as conduits of communal memory, allows us to see how performance, an art form and cultural practice that is conceived as ephemeral because it is consumed in its realization, is actually a critical medium of transmission and preservation of social memory. In turn, the concept of performance constellations complicates the linearity of transfer between a transmitter and a receiver to account for hybrid, networked, and decentered iterations generated by the creative assemblage of body-based performance and digital media. The new dramaturgies of protest (Kershaw), wherein those affected by neoliberal globalization appear on the political stage in constellations of performance, function pragmatically to intervene in transnational scenarios. They also function ideologically, by enabling the visualization of bodies in alliance where local specificities meet global and historical resonance.

By focusing on these case studies I demonstrate that, unlike past theorizations within performance studies that have positioned mediation as peripheral to the event of bodily, live performance, digital technologies are instrumental in constituting the embodied radicality that characterizes activism and protest in the era of neoliberal globalization. The concept of performance constellations that I contribute helps us visualize new ways

in which digital media assembles dis-located bodies and events, materializing contrasting temporalities of synchronous and asynchronous behavior across various platforms that are crucial in confronting contemporary power configurations.

Changing Landscapes

Even though in the 1990s tactical media activists and artists labored to create forms of direct action (such as virtual sit-ins) on the Web, in that stage of digital technology development and culture, the online and offline worlds operated separately. Street activists were often critical of digital interventions as unengaged, “safe” acts. Conversely, digital activists considered the streets “dead capital” (Critical Art Ensemble 11), lacking relevance vis-à-vis capital’s investment in rapid circulation across national borders.

The relationship between online and offline protest has changed with the evolution of digital media itself. The emergence of ubiquitous technologies that enable users to access the Internet from anywhere has altered the relationship between digital and street protest from complementary to synergetic. As we have seen in recent social revolts such as the Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movement, new media practices are integral to compelling physically grounded collective action.

The digital world, no longer a novel, separate space to which we must “log on,” now pervades our lives, shaping how we navigate space and the social. Mobile devices collaborate with bodies and locales “in a process of inscribing meaning into our contemporary social and spatial interactions” (Farman 1). This hybrid landscape, in which we interact with others in physical space while simultaneously relying on digital connectivity, has dramatically changed the status of embodiment, subjectivity, and spatial production, all central aspects in constituting collective action.

Consider, for example, the issue of digital embodiment, which has divided scholars between those who consider the digital a disembodied medium of information processing and those who claim that the digital only confirms that embodiment is always already “conditioned by a technical dimension” (Hansen 9) or that embodiment is a process, the effect of a particular staging (Balsamo 497). In *How We Became Posthuman*, N. Katherine Hayles situates the arguments centered on disembodiment (when “information loses its body”) in an intellectual tradition that de-couples cognition from the body (the mind–body split) and in which the body is not identified with the self. Hayles explains that the erasure of embodiment is a shared feature of both the posthuman construction of the cybernetic tradition and the liberal humanist subject: “Only because the body is not identified with the self is it possible to claim for the liberal subject its notorious universality, a claim that depends on erasing markers of bodily difference, including sex, race, and ethnicity” (4–5).

Beyond 1990s attempts by theorists and activists to account for the Web as an embodied medium or a medium that could articulate experiences of embodied action, with mobile media it is easier for anyone who owns a smartphone or a Global Positioning System to offer insights into how their bodies are implicated in spatial and social orientations via digital interfaces. Gadgets that connect tangible objects

and spaces with the Internet, thus becoming “wearable remote-control devices for the physical world” (Rheingold xii), redefine our experience of locality and subjectivity as dispersed and distributed. Hayles notes how, against a notion of the liberal, unified, consistent subject, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have posited the liberatory potential of “a dispersed subjectivity distributed among diverse desiring machines”—what these theorists call the “body without organs” (4). Living in hybrid spaces also redefines, as we will see, the notion of *in situ* or site-specific performance, a form of situated enactment that derives its deeper meanings from the particularities of its location.

While wireless connectivity, smartphones, and social media have moved the spatiality of the Internet from the desktop to the streets (Farman 17), radically changing the relationship between online and offline behavior, the level and quality of participants’ engagement further distinguishes 2010s networked collective actions from 1990s online protests. Although Internet enthusiasts in the 1990s conceptualized cyberspace as a democratic space (surfers were referred to as “netizens” or Internet citizens), in their paradigm the roles of producer and participant were clearly demarcated. People participated in digital actions designed mainly by experts, a modality defined as a “one-to-many” approach. Those who joined collective protests online had little control over the dramaturgy and development of such events.

Conversely, in the 2010s, employing the more dynamic and user-friendly Web 2.0 paradigm, Web surfers became what Alvin Toffler termed “prosumers”—proactive consumers or consumers who produce. As the Facebook event text quoted earlier shows, even when organizers use social media to summon participants in a one-to-many approach, new media users represent a critical force in generating the spreadability that keeps an event (a)live through peer-to-peer reporting, instant street-to-Web documentation, and multi-platform sharing. As a YouTube video of *Thriller for Education* shows, spectators watched the live event through their cameras in an act that weaves live presence and documentary performance (waiwenkref pirilongko). This is a clear sign of spectators’ presence in hybrid spaces, as these records are instantly uploaded to social media for the audience gathered around the breaking-news-content economy of Facebook’s and Twitter’s live feeds (Malini and Antoun 211). Being present means both sharing the here-and-now of an event and enacting its reiteration online. Here the live is privileged not as bodily co-presence, but as a way of initiating a performance constellation of actual bodies and social media sharing. Such a many-to-many communication approach is central to the constitution of performance constellations in which events circumscribed by time and space such as flash mobs are generated, circulated, and outlived by a multiplicity of hybrid gestures of enactment and documentation.

The notion of prosumers on a user-friendly Web can be misleading, however, as it conveys a sense of agency and autonomy that is problematic, insofar as social media-enabled activism by non-experts relies on pre-formatted products such as Facebook and Twitter whose parent companies sell users’ data to corporations for marketing purposes. Moreover, the culture of self-expression fostered by social media caters to

what David Lyon calls “the soft-end of the surveillance continuum” (Bauman and Lyon 54), wherein users are enticed to enact *sousveillance* or self-monitoring as part of a culture of fun rather than as a technique that is instrumental to “control societies” (Deleuze).

Despite these important cautionary points, and because mobile technology and ubiquitous computing have transformed how we navigate space—making it difficult to assert any notion of “offline” or non-digitally mediated interaction—to underestimate the digital as a critical tool for political intervention would be to miss an opportunity. It is precisely through the convergence of street and digitally mediated events that the bodily, local, and global scales of late capitalism can be engaged. I now focus on the case studies that offer concrete modalities through which activists in the 1990s and in the 2010s have approached available digital media to generate a performance of collective action from multi-sited, synchronous, and asynchronous participation.

Streets as Dead Capital: Translating Resistance to the Internet

In 1973, Gene Sharp published a three-volume study, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, based on the writings of Mahatma Gandhi and hundreds of historical struggles. Writing at a time when radical groups such as the Black Power Movement had disengaged from the tactics of peaceful civil disobedience of the Civil Rights era (see *The Black Power Mixtape*), Sharp’s work presented a pragmatic take on nonviolence, arguing that it constitutes as efficacious a weapon as violent means of fighting oppression. Sharp’s study was published during a period of revolutionary left-wing militancy in Latin America, which in Chile ended disastrously with the CIA-backed military coup led by Augusto Pinochet against Salvador Allende’s socialist government. In Part 2 of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Sharp cataloged 198 nonviolent methods of action and persuasion. The text is an archive of “ways of doing,” a script that activists can follow in employing nonviolent tactics to confront oppressive regimes.² Sharp’s taxonomy encompasses a range of resources such as text, sound, visual, and symbolic and material uses of the body.

Forty years on, many late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century protests both build on and re-elaborate the modalities Sharp surveyed in the early 1970s, adapting them to the transnational, mediatized, and elusive power formations and control techniques that Zygmunt Bauman calls “liquid” or extraterritorial. Among the emergent activist forms that re-elaborate past repertoires of protest are the virtual sit-ins organized by Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT), the interdisciplinary collective led by Ricardo Dominguez. An application of the Critical Art Ensemble’s concept of “Electronic Civil Disobedience,” the virtual sit-in protest modality is the digital version of the pacific occupation of a physical space, echoing the struggles led by Gandhi against the British Empire in India.

EDT’s first virtual sit-ins were staged in the late 1990s to support the Zapatista rebellion that emerged in 1994, led by the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN or Zapatista National Liberation Army). This guerrilla group was formed in

1983 in the Lacandon jungle in Chiapas, Mexico, an area populated by several indigenous (mostly Mayan) communities. The Zapatistas took their name from Emiliano Zapata, a leader of the Mexican revolution of the turn of the twentieth century. As an antecedent to many popular revolts and social movement protests following the 2008 global financial meltdown, such as the Spanish 15M movement and Occupy Wall Street, in 1994 the Zapatistas rose up against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) among Canada, the United States, and Mexico. NAFTA enacted the fundamentals of neoliberalism: an open market economy, privileges for transnational corporations, withdrawal of the state from social programs, downward pressure on wages and conditions, and the privatization of natural resources (Carlsen 2). In Chiapas, this situation particularly affected indigenous communities and *campesinos* whose low-scale agricultural practices were rendered unsustainable by the inflow of cheap imports or the privatization of indigenous lands.

The Zapatistas gained international support through their extensive use of mass media and digital media. Their spokesperson, Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, was a key figure in reaching out to global activist networks through his *communiqués*. Building on the Zapatistas' networking strategies, in preparation for their virtual sit-ins, EDT invited demonstrators from around the world to "converge on a website" during a predetermined period of time to show their solidarity with the Zapatista cause. EDT's first virtual sit-in was organized in response to the Acteal massacre of 22 December 1997, in which 45 indigenous people were slaughtered by Mexican paramilitary forces. The activist networks that had been witnessing the conflict via bulletin boards and online forums followed EDT's instructions to take part in an event in which synchronous participation on specific Web addresses created an experience of co-presence and in situ performance. EDT's invitation—which built on a common hacktivist practice of interfering with server performance through file requests—represented a qualitative leap from asynchronous, mainly textual, cyberactivist tactics to a performative intervention that aimed to transpose the experience of bodily spatial takeover to the Internet.

Like traditional sit-ins, EDT's virtual sit-ins constitute a performance of collective presence that in this digital version is based on the client-server structure of the Internet as a network of connected computers in which clients request information or files from servers. When virtual participants type in the URL address of the protest organizers' homepage (in the 1990s it was thething.com), they activate a Web-based program created by EDT members Carmin Karasic and Brett Stalbaum called the Zapatista Tactical Floodnet. Running Floodnet from their computers, a code performance that is invisible to them, demonstrators automatically and repeatedly reload the webpages of the institutions targeted by the protest (technically, they are requesting the same file from the institutions' servers). Participants are made aware of this interaction when the image of the targeted website(s) displayed on the protest organizer's site flickers. In EDT's virtual sit-ins, the more participants join, the faster the reloading effect. This excess of traffic (massive requests for a single file located on the server of the targeted organization) inevitably affects the performance of the

websites, in some cases causing the server to shut down entirely. Thus, virtual sit-ins involve multiple levels of the Internet's network architecture: the front end (what participants see), in this case the webpages with which demonstrators interact; and the back end, where a choreography of request and response is performatively enacted by code and not legible to the untrained "eye."

The technical name of the interference on which virtual sit-ins rely is "Distributed Denial of Service" (DDoS). Typically, DDoS attacks can achieve disruptive effects with only one hacker, as seen with those launched by the cyberactivist group Anonymous. EDT's Floodnet, however, requires that many people execute the same action in order to accelerate and intensify the protest's pace and effects, embedding at the programming level the philosophy of collective action that informs EDT's activism (Fusco and Dominguez 155). By characterizing a DDoS attack as a virtual sit-in, EDT connects this method with the tradition of nonviolence, redefining the Web as a site of protest rather than merely a means of communication (Wray).

Contributing a performative modality of online intervention, virtual sit-ins demonstrate the role of the Internet as both a tool and a key aspect in reconfiguring activism in late or liquid modernity. Through such digitally mediated practices, activists have also redefined what constitutes activism, community, collective identity, democratic space, and political strategy (McCaughey and Ayers 1). These efforts are better understood when contextualized as exemplifying so-called New Social Movements, which, unlike past social movements, activate in defense of cultural rather than material reproductions (Buechler 442). Lee Salter defines New Social Movements as "the bodies that perceive problems and push them onto the public agenda" (126). In this sense, cyberactivists use the Internet to fill the "communicative gap" created by hegemonic mainstream media, producing information that diverges from administrative or market interests (126).

Adding to the counter-informational function of some forms of Internet participation that emerged in the 1990s—online petitions, email campaigns, forums, listserves, and the like—EDT's virtual sit-ins contribute a performative dimension, framing participation as constituting a synchronous and in situ event. As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun explains, even though the fictional concept of "cyberspace" has been conflated with the Internet, especially in the 1990s when the Internet was pushed as a medium of freedom, the Internet is not spatial—or, rather, it is constituted by various understandings of space. Playing off Michel de Certeau's definition of "place" as a term that designates a field of stable relations and "space" as a practiced place (constituted by our experience), Chun states that the Web "practices space" by "loosening place" (46). Hence, whereas virtual sit-ins build on a tradition of interference predicated on bodies in space, the enactment of this protest method does not take place materially, but rather practices space. That is, it creates a shared experience of presence by working through disjointed notions of location: the location of the participants, their service providers, the protest site's server, and the target server.

As performance constellations, virtual sit-ins assemble dispersed behavior into a synchronic performance while simultaneously making a diachronic or historic connection with the tradition of anti-colonial resistance. If, as stated earlier, Sharp's

taxonomy of 198 tactics of nonviolent action may be considered an archive of ways of effecting change by using nonviolence as a weapon, then EDT's virtual sit-ins—do-it-yourself cultural practices that enable appropriation and re-performance—represent another mode of memory transmission, which Taylor calls the “repertoire.” With this term, Taylor theorizes performance, that is, embodied behavior, as a system of memory, focusing on the ways performance *remains* despite its alleged ephemerality as a non-objectual cultural practice. According to Taylor, who grounds her conceptualization in examples of hemispheric American performance, the repertoire transmits memory through embodied performance defined as “acts of transfer.” That is why, the repertoire, unlike the archive, requires the co-presence of participants in the transmission of social memory. In this sense, cultural or political practices such as indigenous *fiestas* and performative demonstrations survive because they are passed down from generation to generation through bodily practices. As a practice that translates defiant bodily behavior into embodied online gestures, EDT's virtual sit-ins participate in the repertoire's transmission economy, maintaining and at the same time altering the “original,” which in archival logics is sacred. Participants in EDT's virtual sit-ins are provided with a mental representation of embodied behavior (a sit-in) that engages their “kinesthetic imagination,” bringing together the virtual, simulation, and fantasy to drive or have an effect on human action. Kinesthetic imagination is used in virtual sit-ins as a way of creating an embodied experience, “thinking through movements—at once remembered and invented” (Roach 26–27).

Besides keeping the practice of sit-ins current, EDT's virtual sit-ins act as political palimpsests, making a critical connection with a system (colonialism) that may seem like a thing of the past but is in fact at work as a foundation of contemporary systems of oppression. In other words, the shape of the protest is crucial to its message, framing contemporary forms of oppression as part of the colonial matrix still at play in regions such as Chiapas. As practices of convergence, virtual sit-ins work through remote, dispersed user participation relying on synchronous co-presence to create an experience of collective action. They are enactments of the memory of sit-ins (acts of transfer) and simultaneously constellations of performance engaging dispersed agency. Virtual sit-ins show how the digital provides new tools as well as emergent symbolic practices that are instrumental in confronting a nomadic capitalism that has withdrawn from its physical dwelling spaces. Even though this form of digital activism is predicated on assessing streets as less relevant than capital flow in contemporary configurations of power, the implementation of virtual sit-ins in support of the Zapatista struggle shows that geopolitics are still critically important in denouncing neoliberal conglomerates that profit from unrestricted access to resources and strategically situated cheap labor.

Let's Get Motivated! Undead Streets and the Making of Distributed Protests

The Chilean student protests of 2011 offer another salient example of how contemporary social movements rely on tactics of embodiment and digital media

to denounce the impact of extraterritorial power configurations on specific localities. Whereas in the 1990s digital activists such as EDT directed their efforts into translating street protest tactics to the Web, demonstrators in the early 2010s use new media technologies to create collective action by interweaving online and offline environments. In virtual sit-ins, activists created the experience of online convergence by assembling a performance constellation of dispersed participants through synchronicity. Conversely, within the Chilean student movement, mobile and social media enable protesters to create constellations of distributed participation through practices of synchronous and asynchronous relation.

This technopolitical shift, whereby technological means are used tactically and strategically in the organization, communication, and performance of collective action (Toret), is most strongly represented by the emergence of social movements such as the Iranian Revolution of 2009, and, in 2011, the Arab Spring, the Spanish Indignados or 15M movement, and the Occupy Wall Street movement. These movements signified the return of massive street protests, although they were strongly supported by mobile computing and social media, which are vital to the affective amplification of nonviolent street actions. Theorized as enactments of decentralized or “distributed democracy” (*Democracia Distribuida*), movements such as the Spanish 15M employed digital tools to create discontinuous cooperation among participants. Through technopolitical tactics, individuals who were separated in time and space were able to respond to performances received from others and simultaneously replicate these acts (Sánchez Cedillo 56). This dynamic of distributed participation is what I am calling constellations of performance, which include historical memory as a meaning-making vector in collective action assembled from disparate localities and temporal registers.

In the Chilean context, student protests emerged from the widespread rejection of the economic model that was installed during Pinochet’s dictatorship (1973–1990) and that brought about both successful development and high socioeconomic inequality, a factor that became increasingly pronounced—and unpopular (Valenzuela 2). Heralded as the first neoliberal state, a laboratory of economic experimentation, Chile’s transition to neoliberal capitalism was enforced by Pinochet and crafted by the “Chicago Boys,” a group of US-trained economists who followed Milton Friedman’s free market doctrine of privatization, deregulation, and reduced social spending (Klein 94). Organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank imposed what is known as “the Washington Consensus,” a list of economic policies designed to abolish barriers to foreign capital that were in turn presented as technical directives to protect countries from economic trouble (204). As Chile implemented the neoliberal doctrine, it was transformed from an industrialized society organized around labor and production to a postindustrial society profiting from human capital; that is, from individuals’ investment in education, training, hobbies, and so on to increase their value in the marketplace (Fornazzari 51). Within this logic, education is a deregulated service and students are customers. This business approach to education turns individuals into life entrepreneurs increasingly entangled with forms of capital that have disengaged

from production to profit from financial forms of capital such as “investments, mortgages, currency contracts, corporate securities, and the stock market” (2).

The 2011 wave of student protests aimed to pressure the government of right-leaning president Sebastián Piñera into launching a far-reaching reform of the education system that had dismantled public institutions and pushed families into serious debt without providing students either quality education or jobs. Drawing inspiration from 2006 high school student protests, in 2011, university and high school students sustained seven months of collective action combining traditional nonviolent methods such as assemblies, occupations, strikes, and demonstrations with episodic protest performances. Student leaders Camila Vallejo and Giorgio Jackson became internationally known and, with the incoming presidency of Michelle Bachelet in 2013, gained seats in the national congress.

Through performative protests, students choreographed a politics of embodiment in which bodies and their projection in time and space served as the main vehicle of political expression. However, although protests like *Thriller for Education* and other flash mobs enacted within the Chilean student movement appear as a radical reclaiming of public space via corporeal agency, this tactic of pacific occupation belongs to the early twenty-first-century moment of hybridization or, more specifically, *intermediality*—modalities of experience that are constituted by two media working together to provide mutually constitutive elements (Bay-Cheng, et al.)—between bodily practice and digital media. If, in the past, Peggy Phelan could assert that it is impossible to conceive of the real without a notion of embodied performance in view, then we may add that today it is impossible to conceive of embodied performance without a notion of digital mediation at work. In the Americas, student protests such as the Chilean Winter of 2011, the 2012 Quebec protests, and the #yosoy132 movement in Mexico³ have articulated through their generational specificity striking street events with the use of digital practices.

The Chilean case stands out because it offers compelling ways in which embodiment, the body as the subject or existential ground of culture (Csordas), is mobilized both online and offline as a central feature in the protests. The Chilean students’ protest performances emerged as unexpected occupations of space connected to a history of dissident acts, working through synchronized behavior, the main goal of which is to disarm repressive forces by relying on positive affects such as love, communal organization, sacrifice, conviction, and persistence. Protesters used synchronized, scripted behavior suggesting that individual limitations and obstacles can be overcome only by working together, an ethos that runs counter to the individualism of neoliberal ideologies.

This is expressed most compellingly in the 1,800-hour run that was initiated in June 2011 by students and the general public. *1800 Hours for Education* was conceived during an assembly at occupied educational buildings, when students of the Drama School of the Universidad de Chile in Santiago were looking for alternatives to the massive demonstrations that were being discredited by the government and the media. Building on a suggestion by one of the assembly’s attendees who proposed running around the government house for a day, Sergio

Gilabert, a twenty-three-year-old drama student, suggested escalating the challenge significantly by extending the run to last 1,800 continuous hours (Gilabert). According to Gilabert, this number would symbolize the amount of money in millions of dollars that would pay tuition for the 300,000 students enrolled in Chilean public universities. This number was replicated in a series of events organized by diverse social sectors in solidarity with the student movement, including *1800 Drawings for Education*, *1800 Minutes for Education*, *1800 Minutes of Soccer for Education*, and *1800 Reasons for Education*.

The performance had an impulsive beginning when, even though the proposal to run was not yet official, an assembly participant asserted that he was starting the run immediately because he was tired of words and abstract ideas. Since the proposal was that the run would not to be interrupted at any time under any circumstances, by leaving the assembly to initiate the performance on 13 June 2011, the man bodily implicated those who were sympathetic to the proposed method. There was no time to waste. The episodic protest that would last 75 days had officially started. Students were supposed to be running until 26 August. They would not be able to do it alone. Some announced the performance to the general assembly that was located a few blocks from the drama school. Others created a Facebook page. The first post is dated 13 June 2011, and consists of a flyer depicting a caped, superhero-esque figure running alongside the image of a coin. The flyer contains the following text: “Run! 1800 Hours for Education. Around La Moneda [the government house] from 13 June to 26 August. I move for free education! Come and join!” (1800 horas “Timeline Photos” my translation). I narrate this aspect of the gestation of the performance because it shows both the tactical and improvised nature of embodied protest. Some of the assembly attendees complained that the performance had started abruptly without being fully organized. In our interview, Gilabert told me that many aspects of the performance, especially those that revealed the action’s productivity as a model for rebuilding civic engagement, emerged from the actual practice. It was in the moments when those not strictly from the student movement joined the performance in various support roles that organizers learned what this proposal was able to generate within a society that was awakening to the effects of neoliberal individualism. Particularly important was what Gilabert calls “the installation,” the support area stocked with fruit, water, and blankets, a space that activated conversations among runners about the status of the student revolt, Chilean democracy, and the like, and to which many returned often as a site of belonging.

As striking as this performance is, encircling a “site of memory” (Nora) that recalls widely circulated images of the military’s bombardment that ended Allende’s democratic government, the durational character of the action necessitated a strong digital component to maintain its performance momentum. The *1800 horas por la educación* Facebook page, the @1800Horas Twitter account, and the documentation uploaded to video-sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo helped create “a feedback loop between the urban collective phenomenon and the nets woven in cyberspace” (Toret 5). Digital media contributed not only visibility, but also prospective performers: through the action’s social media accounts, organizers

recruited runners and supporters by announcing the markers reached in the proposed duration of the run and calling people to join. Just as the man who left the assembly implicated others by initiating the action himself, so organizers disrupted the clear-cut distinction between performers and witnesses by engaging social media users as co-participants.

Decentralizing—sharing the experience with participants outside the circle of drama students who had initiated the action—was important pragmatically and ideologically. Pragmatically, students needed many bodies to sustain the performance over its intended duration. Decentralization was also integral to the ethos of the action, as a way of enacting how the students framed their struggle within broader misgivings about the effects of neoliberal policies. This ethos of inclusion that made the action something of a relay turned the 1,800-hour run into a political event configured not merely as a form of public address, but also as a movement “belonging to all” (Badiou 153). In the action, a black flag carrying the legend “Free Education Now” served as the baton that was passed from one group or participant to another and also identified the cause. Similarly, the cover picture of the *1800 horas por la educación* Facebook page is an image of a boy carrying a Chilean flag overlaid with the word “*gracias* (thank you)” (1800 horas “Page—Cover Photo”). Indeed, the decentralized ethos of *1800 Hours* forms a core value of social media and its culture of replicating via “sharing” and retweeting. Whether or not social media culture informed the students’ action ethos, it perfectly matched the drive to distribute responsibility for an ambitious collective action as widely as possible.

By the end of the 1,800 hours, 5,000 people had participated (as documented in the run’s daily notebook), and the protest was re-enacted in other Chilean localities by an unrelated group. Besides playing a critical role in sustaining a durational performance by enabling students and general participants to maintain the event’s presence both online and offline, social media provided students with tools for framing the action in their own terms. Whereas mass media usually characterize protesters as disruptive, social media facilitates collaborative coverage (Malini and Antoun 245), that is, bottom-up, decentered, autonomous, and redundant information. Such a cooperative effort draws its power from the ability to produce a news agenda that would otherwise escape the attention of mass media (246). In the end, the protest was shaped not as a failure because its demands were not satisfied but as a way of shaming the government for its lack of engagement with a collective action that involved participants in striking forms of civic participation. *The Clinic Online* registers this on 27 August 2011 by titling a report “In 1800 hours the government didn’t move for education” (“En 1800” my translation). Claiming an impossible ideal (\$1,800 million) through a seemingly impossible goal (the 1,800-hour run), the students and their supporters were able to put non-performers on the spot.

Performed 11 days after the start of *1800 Hours for Education*, the flash mob *Thriller for Education* was predicated on a similar ethos. Students disguised as zombies used dance, synchronicity, and digital media tactics of spreadability to make a statement about the effects of neoliberal financial capitalism on their lives. The zombie is a canonical horror movie figure co-opted by the West from Haitian

folklore. Born from the “complex colonial history of the Americas,” in contemporary protests, zombies have come to represent “the slave, a silent worker whose humanity has been consumed and whose existence is living death” (Truffin 207). A student explained the performance, saying, “Public education is dying so we took the Michael Jackson creation and we united to this movement that is dying, the zombies.... And behind each zombie, there’s a family. This has much deeper meaning” (“Chile ‘Thriller’ Protest”). Through an iconic figure associated with both slaves and slave rebellion (Lauro 290), students exposed the biopolitical dimension of neoliberal governmentality, a technique of government through which power “invest[s] life through and through” rather than killing to achieve social control (Foucault 262).

In the Chilean context, students engaged in a specific instantiation of biopolitics, denouncing the speculative practices at play within so-called parasite or rentier capitalism that treats students as hosts of capital accumulation by subjecting them to inexhaustible indebtedness. Moreover, the figure of the zombie as the undead can also be connected in the Chilean case with the country’s recent history of authoritarianism that targeted political dissidents’ bodies to eliminate opposition. In critical mass protests such as *Thriller for Education*, disappeared, tortured, or incarcerated bodies haunted the bodies that appeared in the streets in 2011 to expose the connections between past and present modes of violence and neoliberal designs. Lauro makes a similar connection between the rise of zombie walks in the United States in 2005 and the Iraq War, speculating on the possibility that, in the collective unconscious, the zombie mobs were “making visible the corpses that could not be shown” (282).

As in the *1800 Hours for Education* run, the means of occupation in *Thriller for Education*—choreographed massive movement—enacts rather than merely communicates the ethos of the protest: it is a “moving together” that disrupts the neoliberal logic of individual progress and competition at the heart of a market economy education. As we can see in the performance videos uploaded on YouTube (see Silva), displaying worn-out costumes representing their prospective professions alongside signs disclosing their debt, the students’ fragmentary dance denounces the devastating effects of the neoliberal state’s withdrawal of its responsibility for its citizens. Signs reading *Yo mori debiendo* (I died in debt) manifest what happens when a collective right is transformed into individual responsibility by transferring costs to families: debt outlives humans. As instructed by the flash mob organizers on the Facebook event page, the students embody their truncated professional selves framed by the sum of money that has caused their cessation, moving together to transform their individual demises into a dance of shared burden, collective resurgence, and potentiality.

In the Chilean students’ *Thriller for Education*, digital media practices are assembled with live, body-based performance to constitute what Javier Toret calls “the augmented event,” in which physical and digital practices combine to give meaning and sustain their potency through a collective transmedia narrative (6). Digital media practices such as video tutorials and video documentation uploaded to social media platforms along with hashtags, tweets, Facebook event pages, and other

social media practices were vital in shaping constellations of performance through which *Thriller for Education* became a site-specific and transposable event with global ramifications. Through tutorial videos, participants prepare their bodies materially while motivating themselves affectively. This aspect, as demonstrated via the text of the Facebook event (“Let’s get motivated!”), is central to the intervention’s success. In order to perform the lifeless selves that remain as a consequence of parasite capitalism, students need the moral element that characterizes all performances and protests in which the body is put at risk, whether through vulnerability to police repression or entering public modes of address. Nevertheless, not only are digital media related to the before and after of the performance event but, more importantly, they inform the ontology of the protest. Digital tools do not exclusively occupy the documentary role that, in the past, scholars of performance positioned as peripheral to, rather than constitutive of, such events. In cases such as *Thriller for Education*, digital culture provides the means for creating and sustaining the viral impetus that animates these performances as affective occupations of digital, physical, and hybrid intermedial spaces. This is where motion and e-motion work together, compelling new media spectators to replicate an event, becoming participants via the social choreography we now call “sharing.”

Further demonstrating the synergetic character of the relationship between performance and the digital, contagion as re-performance occurs not only online via spreadability but also offline, when online traces of past performances motivate a physically grounded re-performance. By choosing the original *Thriller* choreography to draw attention to the effects of for-profit education, the Chilean students contributed a new iteration of a flash mob classic. Like Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*, this version too may be appropriated and re-performed in other contexts, creating a new constellation that differs from the *Thriller* flash mobs performed in shopping malls and at weddings. Within the culture of viral contagion and embodied transfers, the Chilean *Thriller for Education* inaugurated a new constellation of zombie choreography, turning Jackson’s piece into a transnational signifier of the struggle over access to education.

Students have used zombie mobs in recent protests against the defunding of education. Lauro reports zombie mobs performed in 2010 at the University of California at Davis and in 2011 at Stow College in Edinburgh, Scotland. Note that the Chilean students were cited in other protests because of their tactics and the radicality of their demands. By going viral, they appeared in international media as “teachers” who transmitted valuable knowledge toward social change (see Laird). For example, a group of professors and students at Universidad Complutense in Madrid, Spain, mention the Chilean students’ rendition of Jackson’s song and moves in their YouTube documentation of a protest they carried out against austerity measures in October 2012. By re-performing the choreography and crediting the Chilean students, the Spanish protestors locate their claim within a broader set of responses to local injustices informed by global systems of capitalist accumulation. In this way, *Thriller for Education* belongs on Sharp’s list of nonviolent resistance methods as a trans-local, constellative protest modality aimed at responding to exploitative

transnational political economies. By performatively connecting with other contexts affected by the same political and economic approaches, trans-local protests generate the vital if complex energy of an eventual emergency that exceeds the here-and-now force of performance.

Beyond its role as a performative and digital media method of creating constellations of memory and alliance, the figure of the zombie as a rhetorical device also represents a strong point of convergence, making embodiment a critical element in interweaving local assertions with global-scale discourses. From a pragmatic standpoint, the Chilean students chose Jackson's choreography because it can be reproduced easily. On the other hand, from a representational standpoint, the zombie figure fits the student protest effectively, since the walking dead have become an icon of the current global economic crisis. Groaning zombies emerge in diverse contexts, either to denounce the effects of financial capitalism, as in the Chilean protest, or to embody corporate greed as in the Occupy Wall Street zombie capitalism Halloween March of October 2011. As Tavia Nyong'o states in his analysis of zombie marches within the Occupy Wall Street movement, "the zombie performs the body as an accumulation strategy" (145). Supported by bodily and digitally mediated affective energies, the zombie attracts myriad temporalities and politics to a point of convergence, becoming a compelling nonviolent protest method that takes over a space of political enunciation by mobilizing occupied bodies.

The appearance of the undead at multiple locations affected by similar macro-economic policies and the multiplicity of episodic protests mobilizing bodily choreographies of protest (Foster) show that situated localities have not lost their relevance vis-à-vis global capital. However, the embodied radicality of today's street protests is shaped by new media technologies and practices that assemble distributed participation by relying on established and emerging protest modalities.

Conclusion: The Coming Constellations

As I have attempted to demonstrate through the concept of performance constellations, activists and social movements in the Americas have articulated performance and digital media tools as central resources in their quests to engage with current political economies. Drawing from traditional repertoires of protest as well as from more contemporary practices associated with digital culture, activists gradually accrete the eventful layers of their performances of appearance within a longer history of resistance to systems of oppression. Protest performances such as EDT's virtual sit-ins and the episodic actions carried out by the Chilean students constitute acts of transfer by which protesters transmit memory in the unfolding of an action in a charged here-and-now. Additionally, while making political use of the embodied, in situ, and time-based aspects of performance, these activists appropriate digital tools through which they assemble remote, dispersed, and trans-local participants in performance constellations to engage diffuse, multi-sited systems of power.

In EDT's collaboration with the Zapatista struggle, hacker culture and nonviolent resistance provided the tactical philosophies that enabled international spectators to become protagonists in a collective act of solidarity. Despite being designed by experts, virtual sit-ins relied on grassroots ethics similar to those of the Zapatistas, whose acts are strongly based on collective action. However, although predicated on the physically situated realities of the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, EDT's enactments of electronic civil disobedience were intended to translate offline resistance methods to online environments, following digital activists' understanding in the 1990s that street activism was losing relevance.

Conversely, in 2011, the Chilean students, a born-digital generation who had not witnessed much activist street mobilization in their country, inspired by movements such as the Arab Spring, took to the streets aided by digital tools. Assembling contrasting temporalities and forms of collective labor that were synchronized and replicated asynchronously through multiple platforms, the Chilean students contested the individualist logics of the Chilean state's for-profit education. The students' intermedial performances enacted alternative forms of collectivity that they deemed an integral aspect of a more inclusive national project. The networks that enabled the students to compose, sustain, and preserve the viral aspect of their protest performances as augmented events also contributed to their extension to similar contexts, thus constituting a meta-performance of bodies in alliance. As translations of nonviolent street methods to digital and synergetic enactments of agency in hybrid spaces, EDT's virtual sit-ins and the Chilean students' episodic protest performances constitute powerful and imaginative constellations of memory and futurity.

Notes

- [1] "Hacktivism" is a portmanteau combining the words "hack" and "activism" to denote activist implementations of digital tools for social change, in particular those that disrupt websites and servers, altering the technological efficiency of institutions and corporations.
- [2] Brian Martin provides a useful contextualization of Sharp's work addressing the controversies surrounding his organization, the Albert Einstein Institute (AEI). Martin explains that critics have raised troubling questions about Sharp's real affiliations and motives as the AEI has received funding from elite US power groups. Serbia and Venezuela are cited as sites where the AEI has conducted workshops and consultation sessions in support of US-funded opposition groups. This is a valid cautionary note, particularly because of the evidence provided by critics. However, Martin's balanced account seems to distinguish between Sharp's conceptualization of nonviolent methods and their possible applications contingent to the real interests behind them.
- [3] #yosoy132, called by the media the Mexican Spring or the Mexican Occupy Movement, is a student-led social movement that originated in May 2012 when 131 students were discredited by then-presidential candidate Enrique Peña Nieto for drawing attention to controversial aspects of his politics. Presented as a movement toward the reconstruction of civil society and democratic participation, #yosoy132 has expanded to include wide sectors of the population, nationally and transnationally. The yosoy132 or IAm132 hashtag is used online and offline as a marker of support and belonging.

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