

# My Protest Body: Encounters with Affect, Embodiment, and Neoliberal Political Economy

Hannah E. Quinn

*The University of British Columbia*

**ABSTRACT:** In this paper, I explore my involvement in the Québec student protest movement through a political economic analysis of the proceedings. I also consider how the inclusion of affect and embodiment theory can build on our understanding of why and how people engage in political activism and social movements. By combining these approaches I ask “what can we learn about the affected body and political dissent?” This exploration of affect and embodiment in the context of neoliberal structures of power does not exist in a vacuum, but draws on a significant body of research that seeks to place the personal within the political, the subjective within the system. While affect and political economy are distinct types of theoretical questions that lead to specific theoretical outcomes, I am interested in how these approaches might play together, and coexist in one academic pursuit. As such, this autoethnography is an exploration in how we can bring in to dialogue a political economy analyses with an analysis of my phenomenological and deeply affected experience of the protest movement, and the visceral and continuous existence of my class consciousness and protest body.

**KEYWORDS:** affect, embodiment, neoliberalism, political economy, Québec, student protest

## Introduction

In the streets, in cafes, in university classrooms, in public parks, and in tiny apartment kitchens, thousands of Québec students and youth became engaged political citizens as a result of their engagement in the 2012 Québec student protest movement. Despite previous participation in protests and demonstrations, this year would mark my explicit entry into the world of political activism, social justice and civil disobedience. Over a 10-month period from November 2011 to September 2012, I would be introduced to the socio-political history of Québec, the political economy of neoliberalism, Marxist notions of revolution and class, and to radical direct democracy. The air was thick with political philosophy and emotion. The streets were filled with, at times, half a million protestors. Our movement was not only about a 75 percent tuition increase, but also about social democratic values, the politics of austerity, and neoliberal

economic policies. The success of our protest movement has been debated and contested. Just the same we did stop the proposed tuition increase and the threat of mass protest persists as an effective political strategy in Québec.

As we approach the five year anniversary of one of the largest protest acts in North American history, I find myself asking why? I have frequently explained my participation in the *printemps érable* by addressing the structural forces, including the economic and political climate in Québec, the heritage of strike action and protest by students in Québec, and the global neoliberal project. But as my fingers find patches of skin, once blue with abrasions and inflamed with anger, I wonder how I arrived at my class consciousness. The phantom pain of protest lives in my body, under the surface of my dermis, in my tear-ducts, and as *la chair de poules* that I experience

whenever I hear helicopter blades above me, megaphones in large crowds, and firecrackers at parades. What does a structural political economic analysis of the Québec student protest movement leave out? How might the inclusion of affect and embodiment theory build on our understanding of why and how people get involved in political activism and social movements? By combining these approaches, what can we learn about the affected body and political dissent? This exploration of affect and embodiment in the context of neoliberal structures of power does not exist in a vacuum, but draws on a significant body of research that seeks to place the personal within the political, the subjective within the system. While affect and political economy are distinct types of theoretical questions that lead to specific theoretical outcomes I am interested in how these approaches might play together, and coexist in one academic pursuit. This autoethnography is an exploration in how I can bring in to dialogue a political economy analyses of the 2012 Québec student protest movement with an analysis of my phenomenological and deeply affected experience of the protest movement, and the visceral and continuous existence of my class consciousness and protest body. By drawing on a diverse body of academic work, I find myself engaging in what Desjarlais (1997), Melançon (2014) and Syversten and Bazzi (2015) call ‘critical phenomenology,’ along with Kathleen Stewart’s (2007) affect theory approach based in disconnected but inter-related prose. Therefore, what follows is an attempt to explain affect and embodiment in the context of neoliberal policy in Québec both through the simple structure of the piece and as a theoretical endeavour.

### **(No) Ordinary Affects**

My questions regarding the seemingly incommensurable worlds of an embodied affect approach and a political economy approach emerged upon engagement with Kathleen Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects* (2007). Stewart explores everyday life as “lived on the level of surging impacts” (2007:9) in the context of the United States in the current moment of neoliberalism, globalization, and advanced capitalism (2007:1). In presenting the ‘intensity and texture’ of life as lived by everyday people going about their everyday lives

Stewart argues that studying political and economic structures alone obscures the reality of a “weighted and reeling present” (2007:1) that people embody and experience. Stewart is interested in the lived experience of people who move through the world affected by and affecting others. Her approach, rooted in affect theory and a phenomenological approach to the body and experience, brings to light personal intensities that are related to larger structural forces, *without disclosing or addressing those structural forces*. The prose seems to hang, suspended in air, disconnected from the reality they stem from. I have been inspired by this approach, but nonetheless find myself wondering how we might speak to affect, embodiment and individual experience, without underestimating the importance of a political economic analysis that sheds light on structural violence, historical oppression and inequality that inform and often limit our individual experiences.

Affect theorists are interested in turning our attention to the body as the site of lived experience and felt intensities (Labanyi 2010, Merleau-Ponty 1962, Csordas 1990, 1994), and seek to describe a body that is pre-conceptual and pre-structural (Kimmel 2008:94). Affect, for Massumi, is distinct from emotions insofar as emotions are subjective content, “the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point on what defined as personal” (2002:28). Following Massumi, Mazzarella understands the register of affect to be one of embodied intensity, a corporeal experience that is pre-subjective and impersonal (2009:293). Affect is experienced through the body as “circuits, surges and sensations” (Stewart 2007). While an embodied-affect approach might seem to speak to a decontextualized, limp body that is passively affected and affecting, I follow Stewart in thinking that affective experiences “shimmer with the undetermined potential and the weight of received meaning” (2007:230). Affects, through embodiment, are brought into the present as potentialities and opportunities to respond. The fact of our experience as embodied subjects in the world presupposes “the body as mediator of the world” (Merleau-Ponty 1962:145). Therefore, by embodying affect, by being embodied, I can use my body to act and affect in

return. In *Protesting Like a Girl*, Wendy Parkins suggests that the body is our anchorage in the world “that opens us up to the world and places us in situation there” (2000:60). Thus, if I am to study the protest movement in Québec through my body, I need to understand the situation that my body is anchored in, the world within which my body moves and acts. This is how I can bridge the disconnect between the lived and affected body, and the structural political-economic forces at play. Vignettes relay the affect, my embodiment anchors me in situ, and the political economy detail defines the situation within which I am anchored.



### “Je me souviens, le dix Novembre”

*Tuvalu.*

*Too-va-loo*

*Too-vaa-looan*

*I was walking across a very wet and very slippery campus, repeating this word to myself. I would be presenting a case study in my Environmental Anthropology class in a week on the subsistence fishing and marine rights of the Tuvaluan people for Colin Scott. I had not heard the word ‘Tuvalu’ out loud, but Professor Scott had just introduced our readings for the next week at the very end of class.*

*Tuvalu.*

*Too-va-loo*

*I had to commit the sound to memory, let the proper pronunciation stick to the front of my brain until the next Thursday. A whole week. I pulled out a sheet of scrap paper and wrote out the phonetics.*

*Tuvalu, oh to be a Tuvaluan. A tiny island, slowly being swallowed up by the ocean. Your home, hammered by wave upon wave of the salty pacific sea, sinking ever so slowly. Your way of life, dismantled by market forces. Pounded by environmental forces.*

*To be a Tuvaluan, how horrific.*

*I walked passed familiar buildings, pondering the disappearing island of Tuvalu. My phone vibrated in my hand.*

*“Are you on campus?”*

*The text message was from a close friend.*

*“Yea, why?”*

*Tuvalu, too-va-loo. Wait, was the emphasis on the first or second syllable?*

*“Come to James Admin”*

*“Why?”*

*...No response.*

*The James Administration Building is the structure that houses the majority of the offices of McGill University’s executive staff, including the fifth floor office of the then Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Heather Munroe-Blum. The windows of the ‘James Admin’ building look out onto a square, bordered by the Arts faculty building, the Engineering department, and Milton Gates, one of the main University entry and exit points. The Milton neighbourhood, also referred to as ‘the McGill ghetto’ is a close-knit and active community made up of international students, first year students, professors, and long-term community residents. I figured that I would pass by the building, and leave campus via the Milton Gates.*

*This would not be possible.*

*James Admin was surrounded by students and professors, linked arm in arm. A human chain had been established and I didn’t know why. A crowd of 100 or more people had gathered. People like me, people passing by at the end of class. It was 5 o’clock. There were parents with their children, students, professors, dog-walkers, joggers, people reading their text messages:*

*“Hannah, I’m on the fifth floor. We’re occupying”*

*The scene was relatively calm. The links in the human chain were silent, facing outwards.*

*At Milton Gates, red and blue flashing lights were visible. Campus security and police crews had passed in and out of the scene for the past half hour. We could hear loud authoritative voices over megaphones. Twenty confusing minutes passed.*

*Tu-va-lu. Unconscious mantras.*

*“What’s going on?”*

*Twenty cold, rainy, frustrating minutes.*

*I had approached the human chain, I had recognized a group of friends. We exchanged words, we exchanged concerns. What's going to happen? 14 students were upstairs, occupying the fifth floor, protesting the looming tuition hikes.*

*"Are you up there?!?"*

*The intrigue overwhelmed me and sank, flooding my stomach with anxiety.*

*My uncertainty and growing discomfort were met with a distinct and unforgettable reply —*

*BANG.*

*A sound grenade.*

*Disoriented and scared. I turned around in time to catch a unit of 30 or more riot police rush through the narrow Milton Gates and flood the square. They rapped their riot shields with their riot batons, and stopped. 10 feet from the human chain, they stopped.*

*They did not exchange words with the human chain, nor concerns.*

*They met protest with power, with fear.*

*With terror.*

*They rushed the crowd, slamming their batons on their shields again. Crack. Crack. Crack.*

*"We're up here. I'm fine. Trying to negotiate with the Provost before the cops get here"*

*I howled, adding my voice to the cacophony of screams. The rest was chaos. The scene, relatively still and tense, descended into utter confusion. I was cornered, not a link in the chain, but not protected by it either.*

*I yelled and pleaded, 'Please stop! What are you doing? There are kids here. We're students'"*

*Complicit bystanders.*

*My lungs were on fire, toxic burning fire.*

*What was happening?*

*This would be my first experience of not only a sound grenade, but of tear gas. While I adjusted to the burning in my lungs, I realized I couldn't see. I wasn't crying, but water was pouring out of my eyes. They were tears I would want to cry later,*

*in anger, but couldn't.*

*The crowd scattered, the human chain reeled with panic.*

*Breaking the links, they raised their arms up. "This is wrong! What is wrong with you? We're students, we're allowed to be here!"*

*The riot unit had wedged itself into the crowd of 200. I had been pushed to the engineering building. I leaned against the cold glass, waiting for clarity. My vision returning, I helped to pour water from water bottles into other peoples' eyes, flushing out the toxin, the fire.*

*But the toxin was in our bodies now, the anger. I held a woman's face in my hands as a man poured water over her electric blue irises. We stayed close to each other, holding on, confused — angry, on fire.*

*I was on fire. Terror had replaced the taste of pepper spray in my mouth and lungs.*

*I was learning about my protest body, the body being awakened in me. We all were.*

*James Admin, the tiny island, hammered by riot police.*

*Waves of tear gas slamming our shores. Riot shields and riot boots, pounding our bodies.*

*James Admin, the island sinking in a sea of violence.*

*Tu-va-lu. Was the emphasis on the first or second syllable?*



The occupation of administrative and government buildings was by no means a new tactic used by students to express dissent and disapproval of policy and legislation in Québec political culture (Pineault 2012). The November 10th occupation of the James Administration building at McGill University was also not the first act designed to shed light on the tuition hikes and other austerity measures proposed by the Québec Liberal Party, led by Premier Jean Charest, but would mark a watershed moment in student awareness and involvement in the movement. Jean Charest, a former federal conservative member of parliament under the Mulroney administration, took over the Liberal Party leadership in Québec



in 1998. With a focus on small government, tax cuts and ‘tightening the belt’ on public spending to reduce the provincial deficit, Charest won the 2003 provincial election with a majority Liberal government (Gattinger and Saint-Pierre 2010:282). Québec politics had been inundated with talk of sovereignty and Québec nationalism for decades, whereas the Charest platform highlighted the importance of modernity, a strong economy, and jobs – a platform that resonated with the growing middle class and Anglophone community. The 2003 election marked the end of nine years of Parti Québécois (PQ) rule and with it, the slow demise of social democracy and the welfare state in Québec more generally, already initiated by the PQ earlier in 2000 (Gattinger and Saint-Pierre 2010:287).

Touting the language of socioeconomic ‘modernization,’ the 2010 Liberal budget, also called a moment of “cultural revolution” in Québec by the then finance minister (Pineault 2012:38), chipped away at existing public sector spending on health care, education, hydro, and social services. The 75 percent proposed tuition hike included in the 2010 Liberal budget, according to Pineault (2012:38), epitomized the Liberal party’s goal of retracting the welfare state and ending decades-long commitment to social democratic values in Québec. The budget sought to attack “the culture of gratuity and entitlement” in Québec (Pineault 2012:38), which had persisted since the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s. Attempts made by preceding governments to increase tuition for University education in Québec had also been met with strikes, protest, and demonstrations, most notably in 1996 and 2005 (Berntson 2014:23). In Québec, the values of social democracy and welfare statism have been supported and maintained by strong civil society engagement on the part of students, labour unions, and sovereigntists (Berntson 2014:23). Pineault argues that the unlimited general student strike action as a ‘legitimate form of resistance,’ enforced through picket lines and *les manifestations*, has enjoyed unquestioned cultural legitimacy for nearly 50 years in Québec (2012:42). As such, the 2012 student movement would be the most recent manifestation of a culture of student dissent and civil unrest.

As McGrane argues, prior to the Quiet Revolution, Québec society was regulated by a Catholic ethno-religious nationalism, wary of monopoly capitalism and focused on religious destiny, and a collectivist “duty in the nation to aid the weakest” (2007:177). Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Québec’s political economy shifted towards an industrialist manufacturing sector, resulting in a dramatic increase in urbanization and multiculturalism (McGrane 2007:192). As McGrane states, “the growth of an industrial and urban population which needed adequate educational and health services to ensure economic growth could simply no longer be supported by the church administered welfare state” (2007:209), resulting in a shift in the 1970s towards nationalist social democracy rooted in Marxism and worker’s unions. The Quiet Revolution entrenched strong social democratic values rooted in state-nationalism and “the progressive regulation of industrial conflict, worker’s rights and labour organizations” (Pineault 2012:41). As Pineault argues, student movements during the 1970s in Québec resulted in strong ties between labour organizing and student organizing, resulting in student organizations and federations organized in exactly the same manner as Québécois trade unions. Student unions throughout the 70s, 80s and 90s promoted the right to higher education as a public good.

Consequently, with the Liberal budget announcement in 2010, Québec’s student unions including the Coalition Large de l’Association pour une Solidarité Syndicale Étudiante (CLASSE) began to mobilize and promote strike action throughout the province in the face of neoliberalism and corporatization of the university (Pineault 2012). As the possibility of a general student strike was being organized by student organizers, students took to the streets to fight for affordability and accessibility of education. On November 10th, a group of students who were leaving a protest outside of Charest’s office would find their way to the James Administration building at McGill, and proceed to occupy.



*On ne lâche pas! We won't back down!*

*La grève est un droit!*

*Fuck les liberal, grève generale!*

*Dehors, les neoliberales! Out with neoliberalism!*

*My sign read: "Ta Gueule, Charest!" Elloquent.  
Poignant.*

The general strike was called in late February by the members of CLASSE through direct-democratic means. By the 1st of March, over 40,000 students were on strike, nowhere near the 400,000 who would be on strike by the month of May. The strike votes had been cast in the student-led general assemblies at universities all over the province. As Cox and Nilsen argue in *We Make our Own History*, their piece on Marxism and Social movements, the notion of 'winning' in this social movement would rest not only on a tuition freeze, but in our collective human development, "in changing the social relations on a micro-scale; in creating new ways of working" (2014:188). Direct-democracy was being practiced on a massive scale as a counter-movement to the 'movement from above' composed of elites and disengaged politicians (Cox and Nilsen 2014). We were using our bodies in new ways to express the kind of governmentally we were interested in participating in and based on a different "logic of construction" (Zibechi 2010: 3). Physically, we gathered in alternative spaces and cast our strike votes. McGill students were not yet on strike, but I was attending weekly meet-up groups, where we would discuss the right to education, the foundations of free education, social solidarity, the nature of neoliberalism and the potential of protest and direct action. Unconventional spaces beyond the walls of the University had become classroom.

In solidarity, our professors hosted courses off campus to honour the picket line, but as a means of fostering conversation and an opportunity to connect course-content to our reality. We were meeting in cafes, on street corners, and in bars. Protest vocabulary and the language of civil disobedience was exchanged between strangers. Bags of books were strewn on floors: Thoreau, Brinton, Marx, Skocpol, Subcomandante Marcos, Fanon, and Bakunin. I was waiting for the protest to begin, reading a copy of *Statism and Anarchy* by Bakunin (1990), loaned to

me by a man with fiery orange hair a week earlier at a kitchen-party learning session. I was underlining provocative ideas in red, my eyes wide with inquisitiveness.

The modern State is by its very nature a military State; and every military State must of necessity become a conquering, invasive State; to survive it must conquer or be conquered, for the simple reason that accumulated military power will suffocate if it does not find an outlet. [Bakunin 1971:337]

### *"Bakunin in the bag"*

*We're the outlet.*

*I sensed the truth of this statement as I waited for the protest to begin on a cold March evening. My skin itched and my tongue became numb as I pondered the black jackets, white helmets, and plexiglass shields of the riot squads.*

*Military state.*

*We had been engaged in less than a month of regular strike and protest, and we were met with the full force of the riot police each night.*

*The crowd, comprised of thousands of students, began to move down Berri street toward Sherbooke street. I closed Bakunin and placed it back in my bag, the content scrolling across my line of vision as we marched.*

*We walked, we cheered, we sang, we danced. We talked about our plans for the weekend, talked about the upcoming episode of Game of Thrones, and exchanged jokes and ideas about the upcoming nights of protest.*

*We'd been walking for two hours, engaged in lighthearted conversation with hundreds of new friends and acquaintances.*

*As we rounded a corner, the atmosphere changed. We were entering a surveilled space, a militarized space. The crowd of thousands, stretching many blocs, fell silent. Mumbling and murmurs could be heard, the occasional profanity, and some concerned facial expressions. I climbed the front*

*steps of an apartment building to try and catch a glimpse of what was coming, what we were walking towards. Nothing.*

*Yet, my nose burned, anticipating the unwelcome sting of pepper spray.*

*Bang. bang. bang. Three sound grenades in a row. My ears rang, but I didn't bend over to puke as I had in previous weeks of protest. My body was acclimatizing to the bangs. They didn't make me dizzy anymore, I recovered from the confusion more quickly.*

*I conquer you.*

*Our collective heart rate slowed. Anticipation was building. We stopped walking and began looking around. The atmosphere became more frantic.*

*An unfamiliar sound flooded my ear drums, clop — clop — clop*

*Faster now. Clop. Clop. Clop. Clop.*

*Hundreds of screams rang out. To our left, a wall of pure muscle and mammalian might crashed against the east side of our group. 20 big brown horses, carrying 20 armoured cops slammed the side of the march. Bodies scattered, shrieking in fear. The horses jumped up and down, neighing and pounding the pavement. My body exploded with panic. Would they do that? Would they risk trampling peaceful protestors? All in the name of control?*

*Military state. Conquer or be conquered.*

*My body is the outlet. My ideology is the outlet.*

*I grabbed people, looking for my friends. We had scattered. My eyes burned with hot peppery tears, again. I found myself alone, in a street that was becoming increasingly empty. The crowd was being kettled, but somehow I had been separated. I ran towards the kettle, feeling Bakunin thrashing around in my bag as I ran. Fixed on the kettle crowd ahead, and the line of horses approaching me from behind, I sprinted. Out of nowhere, I was on the ground on my back. Bakunin pressing against my spine. A cop pulled me up by the jacket, "calisse tes con" (stupid fucking idiot).*

*"Va t'en" (get out of here) he shouted.*

*"Why!?" I replied.*

*He pulled me over to the cop car, and pressed me against the hood of the car and placed me so that I was bent over, face down on the car. Undignified, mortified, horrified.*

*He held me by my belt and the back of my jeans.*

*Who is this person, and who does he think he is?*

*He is the state. I am the outlet. Bakunin was wrestles in my backpack.*

*He bound my hands with a plastic zip-tie and said, 'will you be quiet now?'*

*I looked up at him, seething. I searched for his eyes behind the visor.*

*Does this monster have eyes? Can this monster see me?*

*All I could do was bare my teeth. "Asshole. Get your hands off me. Lache-moi! Stop touching me, I'm allowed to be here. I'm allowed to hate Charest and to hate you!"*

*He pushed me and I fell to the ground. He stared at me a long time. It was hard to distinguish what he was directing towards me: disgust? hatred? sympathy? He kept staring....*

*Just say something.*

*His partner took him by the shoulder, and they turned to walk towards the kettle, a now distant racket three city blocks away.*

*I was kneeling, my hands tied, and my tongue bleeding.*

*My protest body, learned in Marxism and neoliberalism, reeled. My dissenting body*

*Another officer approached me, I winced as he bent over me. Snip - Snip.*

*He undid my zip-tie restraints. "Go home, ma fille" ....No.*

*We positioned our bodies towards the kettle, well, let's go then. I walked 3 feet behind him.*

*3 feet behind this man who would be inflicting pain on me in a few moments time. For now we just walked, I held my side, cradled my ribcage, cradled my backpack. Cradling Bakunin.*

*Bakunin was wrong. It was not about the state and its outlet.*

*It was about the monster. The man who aggressed me and shamed me in a compromising position up against a police car. This was about what neoliberalism does to each of us, to people. The dehumanizing process of commodification that had made us monsters to each other tonight, like every other night. His Bakunin body. Our violent bodies, porous and sharing anger, frustration and exhaustion.*

Here, we find my protest body in contact with the bodies of others, with a system, and with violence. Our embodied experience of the system, of the structures of power at play, impact how we interact and how we understand the social world that we are both occupying in that moment (Tapias 2006, 2015). Tapias argues that to understand society, we need to first examine the lived-in body, because one knows about the world through the body (2006). The Bakunin vignette reveals an embodied experience of violence that is visible through the remaining bruises, as well as the anger that motivated my continued participation in the movement. By engaging my body in this kind of protest, I am “assuming bodily demands and risks” (Sutton 2010:162). An examination of my protest body would reveal scars and wounds, muscles that are quick to tighten under threat, muscles that are tired and sore, dark circles under my eyes, a pepper-spray induced cough. An examination of the riot cop’s body would not reveal the same wounds, the same inflictions. Our embodied experience of the protest produces and reveals different embodied inscriptions. By looking at our bodies, we can understand something about society in that moment. By looking at our bodies in relation to each other, we can understand something about social relation in our

society in that moment, we embody social suffering and violence in distinctly different ways throughout the protest process (Tapias 2006). As the dissenter, I deploy my body into violent encounters to achieve anti-neoliberal political ends, leading to a body that is, as Barbara Sutton states, the “interface of powers of resistance” (2007:139).

The notion that the body knows the world and that society is inscribed on the body stems from a seminal piece on the phenomenological body by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock wherein bodies can be indicators of suffering, inequality, marginalization, and protest. In *The Mindful Body* (1987) Scheper-Hughes and Lock present a tripartite body composed of the individual body, the social body, and the body politic. The individual body is the “lived-experience of the body-self” (1987:7); much like the body described by Merleau-Ponty, Massumi, and Labanyi. The social body refers to the body as a symbol, the body that is “good to think with” and that helps us to understand cultural phenomena and structures (1987:18). The body politic, individual and collective, is defined as “the regulation, surveillance, and control of bodies” (1987:7). In the body politic, we see a body that is entangled with the material and the political (Labanyi 2010:223). Willen, a phenomenological anthropologist working on concepts of illegality and migrant workers in Israel, further conceptualizes the body politic as a body that is part of a larger social order, “through which social processes can act with and upon its constituents to (re) produce itself” (2011:161). By mobilizing my protest body against the State and its policies, I sought to destabilize this reproduction of the social order.

Additionally, McAllister describes the body as a site of resistance, and as a functional force “that can disrupt the social order and shape new patterns of intellectual and bodily action” (2010:10). The phenomenologist, Jerome Melançon also argues that “the body is inscribed in society and in political processes, which affect thinking just as much as the corporeal character of existence” (2014:2). Here, we can see how the tripartite understanding of the body can be mobilized to discuss a body in relation to society, or a body moving within a structure and being informed by the boundaries of that structure. As social bod-



ies, the riot cop is an appendage of the structure, I was a foreign object lodged in the structure's throat. Through force and violence, he seeks to use his body to tear apart the tissue that binds the protest movement together, to pull apart the sinew and ligaments that make up our solidarity. As a protest-body in the neoliberal political economy, I seek to resist that structure-as-body, to attack it where it is weak. Our affective and embodied experiences are delineated by the system, a kind of neoliberal affect.

We might imagine a set of neoliberal affects, or a neoliberal affective atmosphere (Anderson 2009, 2015), that seeks to modulate our collective affect, and prime it for neoliberal activity rooted in competition, individualism, privatization, isolation, hostility, apathy, disconnection, and alienation. If a neoliberal political economy is founded on economic logics and the rational free market, then in a way, it seeks to regulate or extinguish embodied affective experiences of empathy, community, collectivization, love, and joy. Anderson argues that affective atmospheres, neoliberal or otherwise, are “pressing” and “enveloping” society from all sides (2009:77). As protest body, motivated by my affective experience of austerity and corporatization, my role is to enact and embody an alternative to neoliberal policy and society – a protest affect. As Cox and Nilsen argue, “the role of movements from below is placing neoliberalism in crisis and undermining its hegemony” (2014:160). Here, we can see how neoliberalism hegemony lies not only its economic force, but in its ability to curate an affective atmosphere that further regulates how our bodies can experience the world. My body politic, surveilled, aggressed and regulated by the neoliberal state, resisted. First and foremost, my protest body engaged in acts of rage, love and joy, and community. The power of our community, as a kind of social machine (Zibechi 2010) rested in our shared valorization of protest affect. With continued involvement, I fell into “affectual attunement” (Massumi 2005) with my protest peers. Students, working class men and women, professors, grandparents, and allies built new subjectivities from a shared ground, a shared affective atmosphere that countered the regulatory pressures of neoliberal affect (Anderson 2009).

Our struggle was not just about a \$1500 difference in tuition, but about the political economic regime that was threatening our shared social values, first through economic means, and then through state sanctioned violence. David Harvey in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), presents a thorough and compelling discussion on the rise and nature of neoliberal economics and politics that informed many of my and my colleagues' global and structural understanding of our dissent. Harvey defines neoliberalism as a “theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2005:2). As such, the role of the state is to create and preserve the political economic practices aimed at deregulation, privatization, state retraction, and financialization, and to “set up those military, defence, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets” (2005:2). It was this ‘force’ that I was encountering each night in downtown Montreal. Nose to nose with riot cops, we engaged with the enforcers, the body politic that had been put in place by the Liberal government to quell our anger and to protect the integrity of the neoliberal project.

As Harvey explains, the capitalist world ‘stumbled towards neoliberalization’ from the 1950s, into the 1980s, wherein the ‘new orthodoxy’ was articulated through the policies and approaches of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, and crystallized in the *Washington Consensus* in the mid-1990s (2005:13). Like Thatcher, Charest began confronting and limiting trade union power and dismantling social solidarity that had been built over nearly four decades. In the 1990s, Lucien Bouchard's Parti Québécois had held regular summits that united the government with businesses, trade unions and community groups, with “the goal of the collective process being to hammer out a fiscal consensus” (Pineault 2012:39). Charest sought to undermine this solidarity by

pitting the groups and sectors against each other through clever rhetoric, framing unionized workers as “privileged wage earners,” etc. (Pineault 2012:39). Dismantling social solidarity was central to what Harvey calls “the financialization of everything” that typifies the neoliberal project, where finance takes hold of all areas of the economy, the state, and daily life (2005:33). Along with this general trend towards the commodification of goods and services by the neoliberal state, Harvey suggests that larger and larger segments of the population become exposed to impoverishment and risk as the state withdraws from the welfarist provision of services such as health care, social programs and education (2005:76). Since the 1960s, Quebecers supported the notion that “no qualified student should be denied a university education on financial grounds” (Bhardwaj 2010:12). The neoliberal government had threatened this social value, and we were prepared to meet the threat every night in the streets. As Harvey explains, the neoliberal state will resort to coercive and policing tactics, in our case riot squads that seemed to multiply each night, to repress opposition (2005:77). The monster behind the visor was this surveillance force and “coercive arm of the state [that] is augmented to protect corporate interests and, if necessary, to repress dissent (Harvey 2005:77).

Violent clashes with disciplinary forces such as riot squads are not unique to the *printemps érables* or neoliberal states, but have marked dozens of recent social movements that have sought to confront the attack on social values by neoliberal states, and the substitution of corporate welfare for people welfare (Harvey 2005:47). As Cox and Nilsen explain, the Zapatista movement, the ‘water wars’ in Bolivia, the battle in Seattle, the Arab Spring, Occupy Movement, are all movements that have sought to address the reality of poverty, and the core tenets of neoliberalism, addressing “a massive and sustained presence on the world stage of a collective action from below of a very dramatic kind, and a powerful undermining of neoliberal hegemony” (2014:161). Under neoliberal logic, my violent encounters with riot squads had become normalized, if not invisible to the media. As the dissenter, the occupier, the protestor, I was threatening a ‘movement from above,’ the hegemonic

hold of neoliberal ideals aimed at advancing the aspirations of an elite and exclusive segment of the population. The democratic process, or government by majority rule, is “profoundly suspicious” (Harvey 2005:66) to neoliberal elites, who seek to protect their individual rights and liberties. The Québec Liberals, supported by these elites, would stop at nothing to quell our democratic voice from below. On the 18th of May 2012, *La loi speciale*, or Law 78, came into effect as an attempt to significantly limit our ability to protest in public space by making demonstrations of more than 50 people illegal without the proper permits. This attack on democracy and the freedom to assemble only mobilized us further. On the 100th day of protest, almost half a million people flooded the downtown core. We embodied our political ideals, our protest affect and sought to affect others in a massive way.



### “Red Nails, Red Squares, Red Revolutions”

*My hands, clasped around a porcelain coffee cup, were trembling. My nails were a deep crimson colour. I had painted them late the night before. The sound of helicopters buzzing above my apartment in the cold April air had kept me awake, as it had for the past month. Red, the colour of my class consciousness.*

*I sat across from one of my closest friends, a loud and vivacious Quebecois woman, who donned her red lips now the way I donned my red nails.*

*Mmmm. I was eating a cherry-turnover. I licked my fingertips to pick up the chunks of crystallized sugar off my plate. That poor pastry never had a chance. I devoured it. A streak of the sweet cherry filling was all that was left on the white dish. I was pleased.*

“What time is it?”

“We have an hour or so still.”

“Good, I’m exhausted. Do you want more coffee?”

*We had met at one of our favourite coffee shops, Pekarna, on the corner of Atwater and St-Catherine street. We would be meeting our*

*friends in about an hour at Berri-Uqam metro for the evening protest. We were in the west end of town, pavement less imbued with protest philosophy, buildings that did not echo the sound of chanting and hollering, air that was not thick with anger and relations of power. The stain of 'student angst' had not sullied this neighbourhood. But the helicopters buzzed over downtown regardless of where the locus of protest lived.*

*I was buying my second coffee, considering a second cherry turnover as well.*

*"Hey, back the fuck up man..." – a French-Canadian English accent I knew all too well.*

*I spun around to see my friend, standing up with her arm stretched out towards two young men.*

*"Leave me alone," she yelled, "I'm allowed to be here, I'm not doing anything to you."*

*The cafe – white and purple, with ornate tables and chairs, a glass case for delicate cakes and pastries, and Parisian music playing over the sound system – fell silent.*

*"Get a life, get out of here – carre-rouge bitch!"*

*I placed my body between them, "Okay, enough!... get out of here"*

*"You get out, don't you have a protest to be at, entitled pricks."*

*"Arrete man, c'est fini!" I argued.*

*My hands, clasped around a porcelain coffee cup, were trembling. This was not the first time we had been called out, donning our red squares, red nails, red lips. We were students, we were protesting. I wore black military boots every day. I wore a red bandana around my neck or in my hair everywhere, every day. A wet bandana wrapped around your nose and mouth works wonders when tear gas canisters are deployed. My protest gear. My protest body.*

*"I'm so sick of explaining this to people."*

*I said, "I'm just tired. I need to sleep. I fought with my dad on the phone until 1, maybe 2am. I was*

*trying to explain to him why, as a blue-collar worker, what we're doing here shouldn't surprise him. In his eyes, we are entitled and selfish students. I want him to understand that this is about all of us, that the same government that has tried to pry open his union's collective agreement is trying to corporatize my university. These are not isolated events.*



Lionel Groulx, a prominent Catholic priest and Québec Nationalist during the 1950s and 1960s, was adamant that the French-Canadian nation was a classless entity characterized by the unity and homogeneity of its constituent parts (McGrane 2007:177). This rhetoric was mobilized to justify a religio-ethnic unity foundational to the separatist agenda. However, as McGrane states, a "Francophone working class developed alongside the Anglophone managerial class and a financial elite class" with the industrial changes that came about during the 1950s (2007:182). By the time I began to participate in the student protests during the spring of 2012, the movement had already been defined as a popular struggle based on class consciousness by CLASSE, and other student organizations. Through the protest process and my political engagement, I began to understand how neoliberalism is a class project, or as Harvey states, that

redistributive effects and increasing social inequality have in fact been such a persistent feature of neoliberalization as to be regarded as structural to the whole project ... neoliberalization was from the very beginning a project to achieve the restoration of class power. [2005:16]

Class was not a concept that I was familiar with prior to the student protests. The process of embodied political engagement with ritualized protest introduced me to my own class consciousness.

As a distinct class, or "stable social group defined by a specific social condition and culture (Husu 2013:16), we were defined by a common appreciation for education as a social good, a right. We were concerned about rising unemployment rates among youth, increasing debt burdens and the commodi-

fictionation of social services. As a class, a community, a collective, we would be profoundly limited by increased financialization and corporatization. The tuition hike was our call to action. In the face of riot brigades, tear gas, sound grenades and rubber bullets, we found strength and purpose in our cohesion, or as James Scott argues, we found high levels of internal cohesion as a result of the physical danger of our project (Zibechi 2010:18), and our shared experience of our social class and position in Québec society. By nurturing our class consciousness, the protest movement fostered new social relations and the possibility for a new world to emerge. As Zibechi argues, Marx affirmed that the “concentration of workers caused by the development of capitalism creates the conditions for their unity, based on self-education, and argued that this unity would erode the basis of bourgeois domination” (2010:30). In Québec, the neoliberal conditions had awakened in many of us an awareness of an elite class and an economic system that favoured the financial and corporate sectors. From this set of neoliberal relations, the social relations among the student-class flourished. As Cox and Nilsen argue, the image that Marx offers us “of revolutionary change is that of latent power that lies dormant within the world of the oppressed, and grows out like a flower” (2014:188). Over the course of 10 months, Québec students emerged as class of militant subjects, taking control of their political agency and bodies in the neoliberal structure. We could be identified by our red squares, our bandanas, our combat boots, our picket signs, and our presence at marches, sit-ins, meet-ups, and demonstrations. Our class consciousness was rooted in a desire to “shows the importance of building communal, municipal, and regional autonomy, from below (Zibechi 2010:1) and eventually, ousting a neoliberal government that did not represent our values and ideals.

My class consciousness was experienced and performed through and with my body, in communion with the bodies of others. For me, the development of class consciousness necessitated a body that could be affected, that could mobilize in acts of dissent, and be affected by the body politic and structural forces. My social position within the politico-economic structure oozed out of my pores, and was inscribed

on my body not only as the cuts on my shins and my swollen lip (elbowed in the face by a fellow protestor), but as the red paint on my nails, the red bandana in my hair, and the red felt square pinned to my shirt. These adornments, the material elements of my performance, were the conduit through which I expressed that which had affected me, my embodied experience made visible. Similarly, Kimmel states that, “what takes place inside the living flesh is an interface between external stimuli, what we know, and, more fundamentally, what we are” (2008:95). I was my protest body. I performed my class-conscious protest body, and was “radically open to the world” (Labanyi 2010:225), despite the continuous attempts to control my body by the state, the media, and elite bodies.

In terms of embodied performance, and the performance of politics, Jeffrey Juris (2008) suggests that protests are characterized by high ritual density, “resulting from the bodily awareness of co-presence among ritual participants who are physically assembled and share a mutual focus of attention” (65). Our embodied class consciousness necessitated the repeated engagement in the protest ritual. Being together, we maintained an affective atmosphere rooted in anger and shared frustration by performing our class consciousness (Anderson 2009). The movement was successful because it was able to harness an embodied experience of terror and convert it into a coherent and shared consciousness that was practiced, performed, and entrenched through encounters with state violence. We were all profoundly changed in the process of performance, allowing our bodies to be physically altered, and open to mutual affective exchange. The protest movement gave words to affect, gave structure to shared intensities and surges, which fostered “affective solidarity” (Juris 2008:65) that made us feel powerful against the neoliberal state and to engage in ritual, performative, militant confrontation with other bodies. As Juris argues, it is through this performance that “new meanings, values and identities are produced, embodied and publicly communicated within social movements” (2014:227). Consequently, my class consciousness was learned and produced through embodied engagement with the protest movement and via the sharing and reproduction of affective atmospheres with other dis-



senting protest bodies. Our collective embodiment was a sacrifice, wherein the body appears as “the most basic and ordinary thing one can offer ... but at the same time, this bodily offer constitutes a supreme act because the body is the essential stuff of existence” (Sutton 2007:146). We sacrificed our bodies together and, in doing so, learned a class consciousness that lives on in our bodies, and not just in our political-economic understanding of the protest movement.



### “*Memories in the Underground*”

*I was riding on the metro on a muggy September afternoon. I was back in school. A provincial election had been announced. As we pulled out of the station, I noticed a black backpack with a red felt square pinned to the front pocket on the floor in the corner of the metro car. I hadn't noticed who had put it there or for how long it had been there. I watched my reflection in the metro window and felt my skin get hot. Panic blurred my vision. I have to get off this train. What if it's a...*

— *This was the legacy of my encounters with neoliberalism, state power, and political protest.*

*My body seized, clenching with fear, swimming in the red, but electrified by a deep sense of justice and awareness: my protest body.*

### Conclusion

My body is where the memory of the 2012 Québec student protest movement continues to live. I am continuously affected by the memory, motivated by the lived intensity and embodied experience, resulting in my continuous and ever-present protest body. I am marked, and I have marked. As Merleau-Ponty argues,

my body is made of the same flesh as the world... this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world reflects it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world. They are in a relation of transgression and of overlapping. [1969:248]

This autoethnography has provided me with the opportunity to explore how a political economic approach and an embodied-affect approach can speak

to each other, and improve upon the findings of the other. As I seek to navigate these two theoretical approaches, I can conclude that they are not as incommensurable as presumed but are, in effect, mutually reinforcing. By mobilizing Scheper-Hughes and Lock's notion of the tripartite body, we can explore the relationship between the phenomenological body as lived-experience, and its relationship to powerful structures through the body politic. My protest body emerged only in response to an intensely affective experience that was harnessed and reinforced by a social movement, which transformed my affect into a shared affective atmosphere, a class consciousness. By performing protest affect and class consciousness through my body, the original intensity was maintained and buttressed, allowing for my continued engagement in the movement. Our engagement involved the on-going collision and negotiation of embodied actors in different spheres of influence and power (McAllister 2010:27) and the legacy of those interactions persists as embodied memory. I was profoundly affected by provincial politics and neoliberal policies, and my embodied dissent against the structure allowed me to affect others implicated in the system as well.

The work that I have done here is not unique within the discipline, but represents the ongoing struggle of marrying the local with the global, the specific with the general, the subjective with the objective, the structural with the affective. This auto ethnographic endeavour has allowed me to understand how my agency – my protest body – arises out of “the experience of embodiment located and engaged in specific material and historical situation” (Parkins 2000:62). Consequently, anthropologists such as Desjarlais (1997) and Syversten and Bazzi (2015) have sought to explicitly link affect, embodiment, and political economy in what they deem a kind of “critical phenomenology.” In their work, much as in mine, they see embodied lives as constrained by structural forces, and attempt to use the phenomenological body as a site and process where we can bridge the divide between subjective and structural dimensions of experience (Syversten and Bazzi 2015:186). As such, embodiment and affective experience are to be described thickly, and located in

time, place, and context to link the phenomenal and the political, the neoliberal state and my protest body. The structure of this autoethnography has allowed me to not only suspend two theoretical approaches within the same text document, but to bring them into dialogue, and to find myself in the thick of a critical phenomenological approach, that, in future, can be articulated in an ethnographic approach that is personal, evocative, and visceral, yet situated, contextualized, and shedding light on structural inequalities and political economic forces.

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