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The limits of bodies: Gatherings and the problem of collective presence

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Abstract

Modern social collectivities—such as nations, publics, and political movements—depend upon the capacity of media technologies to transcend bodily proximity. The contemporary proliferation of such remote sociality may seem to render physical gatherings superfluous. But at times, people go to great pains to manifest collectivities by assembling bodies in one place. This article explores what we should make of cases in which it is not enough for collectivities to be projected, abstracted, imagined, or invoked—times when bodies together are all that will do. Presenting research from India and Laos, and in dialogue with reflections on the COVID-19 pandemic, we consider those cases in which bodies are thought to be essential for making collectivities. We show that it is the limits and weaknesses of bodies—that they require sleep and food, that they are vulnerable to police batons and thrown stones, that they can usually only be in one place at a time—that often make them potent materials for building mass actors. Sketching a comparative anthropology of gathering, we reflect on what these limits afford and rethink what bodies might mean for future modes of social connection.

KEYWORDS
activism, body, copresence, COVID-19, funerals, India, Laos, presence, protests, semiotics, social collectivity

Resumen

Las colectividades sociales modernas –tales como naciones, públicos, movimientos políticos– dependen de la capacidad de las tecnologías de los medios para trascender la proximidad corporal. La proliferación contemporánea de tal sociabilidad remota puede parecer que hace las reuniones sociales superfluas. Pero a veces, las personas hacen un gran esfuerzo para manifestar colectividades al ensamblar cuerpos en un lugar. Este artículo explora qué deberíamos hacer con los casos en los cuales no es suficiente para las colectividades ser proyectadas, abstraídas, imaginadas o invocadas –momentos en que cuerpos juntos es todo lo que las harán. Al presentar investigación de India y Laos, y en diálogo con reflexiones sobre la pandemia del COVID-19, consideramos esos casos en los que se piensa que los cuerpos son esenciales para hacer colectividades. Mostramos que son las limitaciones y debilidades de los cuerpos –que

ellos requieren dormir y alimento, que ellos son vulnerables a los bolillos de la policía y las piedras arrojadas, que usualmente solo pueden estar en un lugar a la vez– que a menudo los hace materiales potentes para construir actores de masa. Al bosquejar una antropología comparativa del concurrir, reflexionamos sobre lo que estos límites permiten y repensamos lo que los cuerpos podrían significar para modos de conexión social futuros. [*cuerpo*, *copresencia*, *presencia*, *colectividad social*, *semiótica*, *activismo*, *protestas*, *funerales*, *COVID-19*, *India*, *Laos*]

HERE COMES EVERYBODY

Modern social collectivities—such as nations, publics, and political movements—depend upon the capacity of media technologies to transcend bodily proximity. The use of such technologies intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, when breathing the same air became newly dangerous.[1] Many gatherings, such as religious services, academic conferences, and family reunions, went entirely digital. Yet, even in the midst of the pandemic, some people still went to great pains to assemble together. In some cases, people flouted limits on gathering as a way of denying that bodily proximity was risky—"anti-maskers" raided grocery stores and COVID deniers crowded around state capitols. Other people gathered not because they were unafraid of the coronavirus or unconcerned with its spread but because they valued something so much that it was worth the risk. Members of various religious groups continued to congregate in person for services, weddings, and funerals even in the face of juridical sanction and a deadly virus (e.g., Balilty and Kingsley 2021; Srinivas 2021; Trinity Reformed Church 2021). At the height of the pandemic, protestors around the world still took to the streets (US Institute of Peace 2021).

Compared with other animals, humans rely heavily on extrasomatic resources to produce, maintain, and represent their social relations (Strum 2012, 10–11). Human sociality is defined by a "release from proximity" (Rodseth et al. 1991, 240). The contemporary proliferation of remote interaction, accelerated in pandemic times, further extends our capacity to be together at a distance. This may seem to render physical propinquity almost entirely superfluous. Nonetheless, there are times when people go to great pains to manifest collectivities by assembling bodies in one place. New media technologies may be used to organize these assemblies as well as to broadcast images and accounts of them afterward (Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Chio 2019; Gerbaudo 2012; Gürsel 2017; Juris 2012). But in certain moments, gathering bodies is all that will do.

In what follows, we focus on situations where people bring bodies together to manifest some social body. There are, of course, countless reasons that people gather bodies together.[2] But in some cases, and across very different contexts, people gather bodies to bring collectivities into being. Just as some protestors marched during the pandemic to make their movements seen and heard, so too do Lao funeral-goers and Indian activists gather to give flesh and voice to group actors. What should we make of these cases in which it is not enough for collectivities to be projected, abstracted, imagined, or invoked? In a world with increasingly more efficient means for communicating at a distance, why do these events persist?

Previous analysis of these issues has often centered on a distinction between crowds and publics (for a review, see Cody 2011). In a formative essay, Tarde (1969) presents the crowd as an embodied, emotional, and erratic foil to the "mental cohesion" of the public made possible by modern communicative technologies. For Tarde, these technologies allowed publics to overcome the limits of bodies; one could participate in numerous publics simultaneously and across vast distances. Writing in 1901, Tarde had the printing press, the railroad, the telegraph, and the telephone in mind, but his comments apply even more to our current moment, where physical proximity is often entirely dispensable. One might feel that we have now stepped even further into the era of the public and away from the era of the crowd.

However, the distinction between crowds and publics is of limited value to our inquiry for two reasons. First, the crowd/public distinction is frequently drawn as a difference in affect and sensory experience. Many have grappled with what it feels like to be a body among many bodies, with how one gets swept up in the emotions of a crowd (Canetti 1981; Csordas 1990; Durkheim 1915; Le Bon 1896; Shilling 2005; Tarde 1969). Protests, for example, can offer rare affective and intersubjective states (Juris 2008), and their organizers often value and actively pursue such "intoxicating" effects (The Ruckus Society 2003). But not every gathering of bodies has the frenzied enthusiasm commonly associated with crowds. And participation in virtual gatherings can arouse contagious and overwhelming emotions (Stage 2013; see also Erickson-Davis et al. 2021). Assuming that physical and emotional distance parallel one another obscures inquiry into the heterogenous affective states that different modes of sociality can bring about.

Second, the distinction relies on a misleading contrast between the materiality and immediacy of the crowd and the immaterial and mediated quality of the public (Chowdhury 2019; Cody 2015; Warner 2002). A collective is never merely a pre-semiotic aggregate of individual persons, embodied or virtual (Shilling 2005, 218). Even the seeming immediacy of the crowd is the product of some mediation (Keane 2008; Mazzarella 2006; Meyer 2011). Talking in the same room as someone is not always a conversation (Goffman 1957). Walking at pace with someone is not necessarily walking *with* them (Gilbert 1990).[3] Nor is the apparent brute fact of X amount of people in the "same" place ever enough; it requires some construal, some semiotic mediation to be

recognized as such (see Eisenlohr 2009; Meyer 2011, 2012). The presence of a collectivity is always grounded in culturally specific notions of what counts as being "together" or "here" (Hanks 1990). But even as we emphasize the role of construal in the production of collectivities, this does not mean that they are immaterial entities, existing only in a realm of disembodied meaning or imagination; they are always produced and made recognizable through palpable material signs in the flow of interaction (Agha 2007). This is as true for seemingly immaterial collectivities, such as nations (Anderson 2006) and publics (Warner 2002), as it is for crowds.

The problem of manifesting collectivities is, thus, not as simple as solving a mathematical equation. Not all bodies are equally valued (Cox 2015, 142; Shilling 2005, 233), and no number of bodies gives you "everybody." Instead, it is a problem of presence. The phrase "a problem of presence," coined in the anthropology of Christianity (Engelke 2007; Keane 1997), has been used to describe situations where the materiality of signs comes into dramatic tension with ideologies of immateriality. For the Friday Apostolics Engelke describes, for example, the need to mediate divine presence with material objects clashed with the group's understanding of God. But the phrase is also apt for characterizing the problem of using bodies to make social collectivities present: What counts as "everybody"? How is this accounting differently informed by local understandings of the value and material properties of distinct kinds of bodies?

These are core questions for an anthropology of gathering. We contend that answering them must begin from comparison. In what follows, we juxtapose our experiences in two disparate fieldsites: Luang Prabang, Laos, and Kerala, India. We explore how the success of Lao wakes and postpartum gatherings hinges upon drawing attendees at the right times and in the right ways. And we describe how Kerala environmental activists make "the people" present in gatherings by displaying physical suffering and uncontrollable rage. In both cases, we find that bodies afford the presence of a collective through their supposed limits as materials for mediation. We suggest, furthermore, that the limiting qualities of bodies—that they require sleep and food, that they are vulnerable to police batons and thrown stones, that they can usually only be in one place at a time—are what make them potent materials for building mass actors. This is not a universal or deterministic claim: the apparent limits of human bodies do not force people to understand their significance in a particular way. But, reflecting on our cases in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we find reason to expect that, as new technologies render copresence increasingly superfluous, the limits of bodies may make gathering bodies together an even more powerful means for making collectivities present.

DEATHS AND BIRTHS IN LAOS

Phòò Thiang spent the day expecting his sister to die.[4] She was lying in a small decrepit house a few kilometers down the road, old and very sick. At 9 p.m., her daughter called with the inevitable news, and Phòò Thiang rushed across town to her lifeless body to tend to it and give it company. He spent the night awake next to her, otherwise alone, minding a candle, lighting incense, and playing solitaire. The next morning, a few people who had known the woman arrived at the house, and Phòò Thiang went to his home to rest. Some of the new arrivals whispered that the night before had been a sad scene. Not because of the death—the woman had been sick for a long time—but because of the loneliness that lurked around it.

When you die in Luang Prabang, Laos, throngs of people should rush to your side. Much as Klima (2002, 251–52) notes of "funeral casinos" in Northeast Thailand, a central purpose of the Lao wake—which fills the days after death and before cremation—is to pull people toward the home of the deceased.[5] In March 2020, when Laos announced its first COVID-19 restrictions, the government banned gatherings of more than ten people for events such as festivals, weddings, and religious activities. Yet they made an exception for funerals and "alms offerings for the deceased."[6] Death is a time for huddling together. Family members of the dead work hard to ensure that wakes draw and keep crowds. They play time-killing movies and serve cigarettes, coffee, and sunflower seeds. They encourage gambling because it keeps mourners awake and in their seats. And they even welcome strangers to their homes, who are as useful and effective as anyone else: their bodies too can form a crowd.

This crowd encircles the one exceptional body: the corpse (Figure 1). The wake responds to the liminal status of this lifeless body, whose once firmly attached "spirit" or "consciousness" (*vinñaan2*) is now only loosely tethered, "hovering" around the casket (Tambiah 1970, 193; on *vinñaan2*, see Keyes 1987). In this state, there is sometimes worry that the spirit might wander off before cremation and become lost or confused, perhaps causing harm to those nearby (see Stonington 2020). People in Luang Prabang suggest different ideas about exactly how this works, but they tend to agree that the wake is a crucial step in shepherding the corpse's spirit to rebirth in a new body.[7] The importance of this process is clear from what is said to happen when postmortem rituals are impossible to fulfill: untended bodies make for wandering ghosts (compare Kwon 2008; Langford 2013).

When asked, people tend to offer two basic reasons why wakes, somewhat euphemistically called "good houses" (*hùan2 dii3*), need these other bodies to be successful. Some say that the events must be "guarded" (*faw5*) against the spirit of the deceased or other ghosts (*phii3*) attracted to the scene of death.[8] A group of people, especially a group of people wide awake, can keep these ghosts away. In guarding the good house with a mass of bodies, mourners build a wall against ghostly intruders.[9] Others say that wakes need crowds to keep everyone—dead or alive—happy, ameliorating the physical and spiritual consequences of being sad at such a time (Abhay 1959, 144; Anusaranaśāsanakiarti and Keyes 1980, 9). Overly despondent mourners risk being drawn toward their own deaths by the partially detached spirit.[10]

These two accounts of the functions of crowds at funerals are often articulated alongside comments about what large gatherings signify. Many treat "the massing of people" at a funeral as a sign of the deceased's reach and qualities as a person (High 2011, 225). Not unlike a crowd at a wedding, a wake manifests one's entire social network (Mariani 2012, 157). At a wake, the collectivity that supported and was

FIGURE 1 A man rests besides his mother's casket at a Lao wake (the woman's framed photograph has been obscured to protect anonymity). (Photograph by Charles Zuckerman, 2014)

supported by the deceased becomes flesh. Alongside donations to the family and the Buddhist monks that aid the rituals surrounding dying, the wake's size and duration produce merit for the deceased in the afterlife and stand as a sign of their karmic value when they were alive. This is what made Phòò Thiang's games of solitaire on the night of his sister's death so tragic and cutting.

Not everyone agrees about which of the different reasons for wanting a crowd at a wake is right, but these reasons are not mutually exclusive. Together, they depict a common vision of a successful funeral: throngs of people gathered for several days following a death, awake and aiding the deceased and their family until after the cremation.

BODIES IN THE NIGHT

The emphasis on continual presence at wakes is paralleled by many of the ritual objects and practices that make a "good house" work. Beyond having a crowd in the space of the house of the deceased, one should also keep a candle and incense lit continuously, and the corpse should remain at the home until it is taken for cremation. Yet even these emphases on continual presence are diffuse and interrupted. People sometimes fumble with matches in between candle lightings, fall asleep when they should be tending to incense, or forget their duties. When I (Zuckerman) began exploring the crowds at funerals, I expected to see throngs of people lingering, guarding the house uninterrupted. But I found that almost no one—and definitely no one who is not an immediate member of the deceased's family—stays for the entirety of a wake; the crowd thins out at some times and thickens at others.

Broadly put, the sense of continual presence—a chronotope of mourners packed into the space of the house for the days and nights of the wake—is compelling for people, but it does not fully capture how they actually attend these events. That is, it is not an automatic result of people being at a house. Rather, the sense of presence is the product of semiotic work: people stress the importance of attending at night, they exaggerate their time spent, and they manifest continuity with the steady flames of the candles they light. This work is required in part because actual prolonged presence is impractical: the wake's need for bodies, especially awake bodies, throughout its multiday run is difficult to satisfy. Potential guests always have other commitments and priorities. Thus, the problem of presence hinges in part on framing and interpreting the time people spend within and around the house.

That this problem of presence is addressed both physically and semiotically is clear from the fact that some ways of being at wakes are treated as more meaningful than others, as more convincing signs of "enough" people. The kind of bodily presence that counts most for Lao wakes happens at night. A mourner need not have known the deceased to effectively attend a wake, but people said that staying late was nevertheless a sign of the quality of one's relationship with the dead. Phòò Thiang, for example, stressed to me and others that he had to stay with his sister's body the night she died because she was his sister. Earlier during my time in the field, when one of Phòò Thiang's close friends died, he expressed the diagrammatic relation between how late he stayed at the wake and how much he loved the man. As the night grew later, he told me that not sleeping would be bad for his health, but he wanted to stay at the man's wake anyway because they were so close. We didn't leave until just after one in the morning. Phòò Thiang had

only lingered until 10 p.m. or so at other funerals we had gone to. Over breakfast the next morning, his wife chastised both of us for staying so late and risking our health. When we saw people before the cremation the next morning, Phòò Thiang stressed how late we had stayed the night before. He even rounded up the time we left—just past one in the morning became two in the morning. I caught myself rounding up as well, feeling serious, sentimental, and alive to the interpersonal effects as I did so.

This emphasis on being there at night suggests how the human body affords certain readings of bodily copresence. Here, bodies are compelling signs in part because they are limited in their capacity to endure without sustenance or to be in more than one place in a single moment. As Tarde (1969, 281) put it, "one can only be part of one crowd at a time."[11] It is these perceived material limits of the body that allow attendance at a wake to be construed as meaningful. With them in view, attendance becomes a simple act of sacrifice and commitment.[12]

The need for attendance at the wake during the night—a time for the curative practices of sleeping and eating as well as a time marked by spiritual and physical danger—allows us to see this. Nighttime is the time one is usually sleeping. Just as someone might treat whether you have cleaned behind your ears as a sign of your thoroughness in the shower, those long, late hours seem to be especially powerful and motivated signs of continuity. They span the time one is least expected to be at another's home, the time when the body is usually at rest. If the house is crowded at night, the logic goes, one can only imagine what it would look like during the day. The image of staying as late as possible, sometimes until dawn, is central to how people imagine these events: a group of people huddled together, guarding the house in the scary part of the night.

BODIES AT RISK

But there is another respect in which being with the corpse during the nighttime is a compelling metonym for having a crowd at a wake. People stress that staying late at wakes is difficult for their physical bodies and impinges upon their other commitments. It makes one lose rest and health. Even for those who choose to sleep at a wake, as many do on roll-out mats near the corpse, the sleep is uncomfortable and hazardous. One's body can start to ache and hurt (*cêp1 khiing2*). With the potential of floating ghosts around, the event also has the capacity to harm the spiritual composition of attendees. Insofar as living bodies are always thought to be attached to spiritual substances—both *vinñaan2* ("spirit" or "consciousness") and *khwan3* ("soul" or "vital essence")—spiritual danger often entails bodily danger.[13] Phòò Thiang, like many others, refuses to eat meals at wakes, and says that doing so would be taboo for him and have ill-effects on his health. Pregnant women are also advised not to attend wakes because of fear of what might happen to their fetuses. Being at the wake is taxing and dangerous to the vulnerable body of the attendee.[14]

Similar dangers are said to shadow events after the birth of a child, and postpartum gatherings raise an even more severe problem of presence. At these events, which lack the ticking clock of a quickly rotting corpse, people guard the house of the newborn for up to a month.[15] The

FIGURE 2 A group of card players at a Lao wake. (Photograph by Charles Zuckerman, 2014)

length of postpartum gatherings makes sustaining prolonged physical attendance even less practical than at wakes. To wait at these events throughout their entirety is an impossible task for nearly everyone, including the mother and the newborn, who often have to sneak away to visit the doctor. Thus, people attend intermittently. One man in his late twenties recounted his calculation to me: if someone was a good friend, he aimed to spend at least three or four nights at their postpartum gathering.

Though wakes and postpartum gatherings draw crowds for different reasons, they are strikingly similar. Both involve persons understood to be "on the border between the world beyond and the life-world" (Hayashi 2003, 216); both conclude with a formal ceremony, in which people bless and tie strings around one another's wrists to recall their souls (*khwan3*) to their bodies; both are thought to be spiritually risky times where tragedy lurks; and both require a crowd to ameliorate these risks. These two most significant moments in a life, the emergence and the disappearance of an embodied person, are times when the presence of the social body is most essential.

To draw attendees, birth and death houses also both involve gambling on cards (Figure 2). Losses in gambling serve to underline sacrifice and commitment. Gambling is regarded as inherently attractive and captivating, and people explain its presence at wakes as a kind of lure, which pulls guests in and keeps them there (Klima 2002). When people are gambling, they lose track of the time and think of nothing but the cards in front of them and the possibility of winning (Schüll 2012). The games, like the movies that play on projectors, inoculate people against the pain and boredom of having nothing else to do. People sometimes also talk about gambling at these events in ways that emphasize sacrifice, concretized in lost cash. Just as they repeat how late they stayed at a friend's house as a sign of their friendship, so too do they repeat and exaggerate how much money they lost gambling at these events.

Because having a crowd at a wake or a postpartum gathering is so important, at times people in Luang Prabang fear and fantasize about the absence of bodies at their own life events. When a core group of friends did not show up to one man's postpartum event for his daughter, one of the no-shows wondered over WhatsApp how the man had reacted (see Zuckerman, in press). "How did he feel?" he pondered in an audio message to me. "What did he tell his family?" Surely something. The absence of bodies would need to be accounted for.

PROTESTS OF "THE PEOPLE" IN KERALA

On the way to the suburban village of Manamur, at an intersection not far from the main highway, my research assistant Ahmed and I (Mathias) spotted a small pavilion of tree-trunk poles and blue plastic tarps. It was a mundane sight in Kerala: a protest tent surrounded by hand-painted signs declaring an indefinite hunger strike. But it caught our attention because we were studying such protests—that's why we were headed to Manamur—and we had not known another protest was so close by. We wondered what the conflict might be, but we had passed too quickly to read all of the signs. Whatever it was, Ahmed said, it must be over now. There had been no one in the tent.

In Kerala, "people's protests" (*janakīya samaraṅṅaḷ*) happen in tents. For example, when residents of Manamur formed an Action Council to protest pollution from a local gelatin factory, they erected a "protest tent" (*samarapantal*) just outside the factory gate. The tent was built like a stage—a raised concrete platform reaching out over the asphalt, backed by the factory wall and roofed with plastic sheeting. And when the Action Council held marches or welcomed distinguished visitors, they used the platform like a stage, with the street for an audience. But it was also a place to discuss strategy, to paint posters and write press releases, and to begin and end marches, give feasts, and fast to the death. In the heat of the day, one could rarely find more than a few men there—usually the same few, slouching low in molded plastic chairs and conversing intermittently, while dozens of colorful flags and posters proclaimed outrage on their behalf. But at dusk more would gather, both men and women, bringing children as well. There would be ceremonies—marching behind a blazing torch, shouting slogans at the gate, extending hands to pledge commitment to the cause—but the main thing was to have people there. Always to have *somebody* there. If the tent was empty, the people were not protesting.

Not all protests are "people's protests," and not all protest tents are automatically seen as tents of "the people." Broadly speaking, there is a distinction in Kerala between people's protests and protests organized by the parties, unions, and religious organizations that dominate Kerala politics. Both kinds of protests use tents. For a month, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, the major opposition party at the time, erected such a tent, tall and communist red, on the other side of the gelatin factory gate from the Action Council's tent. The CPM set up speakers along the road, drowning the much smaller Action Council tent, which was not affiliated with any party, in their anthems and speeches. For a time, the CPM had stolen the stage, but those in the Action Council tent were uncowed. The other tent would soon be taken down, they told me, most likely when the gelatin company paid CPM politicians to go away. They saw the CPM protest as no more than political pageantry; it was not relevant to their fight.

The Action Council's dismissal of the noise from the CPM tent speaks to a crucial difference between protests of the people and protests of political parties: while the two share the same tool kit of political actions (e.g., they both do hunger strikes, set up tents, and organize marches), they conduct these political actions in distinct ways and to divergent ends. Each genre of protest takes different advantages of what bodies afford. Protests by parties, unions, religious bodies, or other mass organizations in Kerala often claim to represent the people, but it is widely assumed that only their adherents could be convinced by these claims. They use mass demonstrations as shows of strength, especially by taking over public spaces, to demonstrate their power in a representative democratic system. They empty the streets of bodies by calling for *harthal*, or mass closures of roads and shops, and they clog the streets with bodies by holding huge demonstrations and rallies. With both tactics, they use strength in numbers to show their support among the populace (see also Chowdhury 2019, 8–9; Mitchell 1988, 125–26; Tambar 2009, 532).[16]

People's protests use bodies differently, both by necessity and as a deliberate strategy to differentiate themselves from parties and

other "partisan" groups. Efforts like the campaign against the Manamur gelatin factory are usually highly localized; their members are people who live near a polluted river or in the path of a proposed train. While they aspire to gain sympathy and support from nonlocal actors, they can rarely rally the numbers needed to take over the streets. The Manamur Action Council called for *harthals* occasionally, but they could not enforce them. They marched, but they could not swarm.

The discourse of "the people" provided a means of turning this seeming weakness into a strength. For activists in the Manamur Action Council, the "problem of presence" was how to manifest the *whole* people, a task for which no portion of the people, no matter how large or loud, could suffice (Laclau 2005). Rather than gathering as many bodies as possible, they sought to make the people present by differentiating their protests from the politics of parties and partisans—from those who claimed to represent the people.[17] This rhetorical strategy centered on the comportment of bodies: on some bodies, however few, acting like "the people." Through displays of suffering and performances of uncontrollable rage, they foregrounded their bodies' vulnerabilities and incapacities, turning corporeal limits into semiotic strengths. To become the whole people, they differentiated their own spontaneous, organic response to injustice from the organized politics of the vying parts.

SUFFERING BODIES

The indefinite hunger strike was supposed to begin on Monday morning, but when Ahmed and I arrived at the Manamur protest tent, there was no one there. A few men soon joined us, but the mood was glum. They said that the relay hunger strike had been postponed because Jerry, who was supposed to take the first leg of the relay, had been advised by his doctor not to participate. A local celebrity with political aspirations, Jerry had warned about his high blood pressure and diabetes when he accepted the inaugural role. At the time, everyone had laughed, joking that they all had high blood pressure and diabetes. No one was joking anymore.

In the politics of people's protests, activists often render themselves as "the people" by putting their bodies in danger. In contrast to what they call the "power politics" of parties vying for dominance, they display their corporeal vulnerability, marking their protests as pure reactions to the harm done to them by others—as eruptions of the people, desperate for justice. Hunger strikes are one tactic in a broader repertoire of such displays of physical risk and suffering. When people visited the Manamur protest tent to show their solidarity, local activists took them behind the factory to smell a polluted paddy field and told them of skin rashes, late-night coughs, and cancer. They also assembled in front of the factory gates until they were arrested or, on one occasion, beaten with police batons. And, as with Lao funerals, they saw the simple act of occupying a tent for days on end as a kind of sacrifice. Activists' willingness to endure lost wages was, like their willingness to endure hunger, a sign of their commitment to the cause.

Such displays of suffering are traceable to the mode of nonviolent political action Gandhi called *satyagraha*—a term Manamur activists self-consciously use to describe their campaign. Variously glossed as "truth firmness," "truth struggle," "passive resistance," or "nonviolent resistance," *satyagraha* is not so much a specific practice as a political philosophy, and its meaning has been much debated by scholars (e.g., Herman 1969; Steger 2006). In Manamur, the meaning of *satyagraha* is far less abstract; people tend to use it to describe the continual occupation of the tent, sometimes while fasting. Yet hunger strikes in Manamur, like Gandhi's own fasts, tap into a semiotics of sacrifice with deep roots in India. Like Gandhi, they draw upon religious traditions of fasting as a form of self-renunciation—welcoming hunger of the body as a means of transcending the desires of the self (Alter 2000; Laidlaw 2005; Skaria 2010). But this is not self-renunciation in a religious mode, aimed at spiritual liberation. Rather, it is a sign of the Manamur activists' desperation. Fasting is not the culmination of a good life, but the mark of an unbearable life.

In a broad sense, this semiotics of sacrifice parallels the semiotics of bodily risk at Lao funerals. Insofar as the body is seen as patently valuable, endangering one's body for someone or something can become a sign of sincere commitment to that person or thing. To lose an eye to a rubber bullet and then return to the street is a powerful symbol of dedication to a cause (Hamdy 2016).

This need not mean that all bodies are seen as equally valuable sacrifices. As others have noted, in India bodies are commonly understood to be fundamentally unequal: bodies and bodily substances are the ground, both metaphorically and materially, for the maintenance of social hierarchy (Busby 1997; Holdrege 1998; Marriott and Inden [1977] 2011). Caste hierarchy figured prominently in precolonial hunger strikes, in which Nambutiri Brahmins would fast to intimidate others into acceding to their demands (Vijayalekshmy 1999).[18] The Manamur relay hunger strike differed from this tradition in that it involved the sacrifice of diverse bodies—across class, caste, and gender. But it also reflected the differential value of these bodies. Local activists wanted Jerry to inaugurate the rally because of his renown, and when he could not, they searched for some other such public figure. Moreover, later on, some activists complained that the hunger strike was failing because they had not been able to recruit famous participants. It was pointless to lead a hunger strike with only local people, they said, because no one would pay attention.

Nonetheless, while a famous or higher-status person's body might draw more attention, the semiotics of sacrifice was available to less esteemed bodies in Manamur as well.[19] Unequal bodies could take equivalent positions in the hunger strike because the performance of self-renunciation depended not only on the social value of one's body but also on the perceived worth of one's body to oneself. Willingness to sacrifice one's body for a cause was powerful because of a perceived incompatibility with the interestedness, calculation, and artifice of everyday politics. As Bargu (2014, 16) notes in her study of hunger strikes among Turkish prisoners, the body's "deployment only by way of its destruction" seemingly "obliterates instrumental rationality" (compare Laidlaw 2005). One who puts one's body at stake, the notion goes,

FIGURE 3 After six days of fasting, Jerry is arrested by the police at the protest tent. (Photograph by John Mathias, 2013) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

cannot simply be posturing for political or financial gain. Who would be left to gain? Sacrifice of the body becomes the ultimate sign of sincerity.

For the Manamur Action Council, sacrifice was a way to mark their protest as different from the "power politics" of parties and other interested political actors. Yet the political parties also drew upon the semiotic resources of Gandhi and India's independence struggle. In the initial days after the CPM raised its red tent in Manamur, they held their own hunger strike featuring prominent leaders from the party. This threatened the Manamur activists' efforts to distinguish their campaign as a protest of the people. "*Satyagraha*, hunger strikes, *harthals*, and roadblocks are all tools of protest," explained one activist, "but when the political parties use them it weakens them for everyone. Their sharpness is lost. For Gandhi, the hunger strike was a complete offering of oneself."

Both the CPM and the Manamur Action Council used hunger strikes to tie their protests to the original, archetypical people's protest. But unlike in the politics of marches and *hartals*, in this semiotic economy, the Manamur protestors' lack of rank-and-file multitudes, vast financial resources, and high-level contacts gave them the upper hand. Here, being the people hinged on performing vulnerability—on being perceived as making "a complete offering of oneself." To be the "whole people," Rancière (2011, 9) argues, a set of actors must be defined not by their particularity but only "in the name of the wrong done them by the other parties." *Satyagraha* marked the Manamur tent as different from the huge red tent of the CPM not by asserting the strength of the Action Council as a separate organization, with its own flags and anthems, but by showcasing the harm done to Action Council activists by others.

By sacrificing their bodies, these activists sought to deemphasize their own organizational affiliations and political aspirations, making their campaign appear as a natural outgrowth of the injustice committed by the gelatin factory. The bodies in the Manamur tent indexed that people were still protesting because they were still getting sick, and that they were still getting sick because the air and water were still polluted. Before he joined the campaign, Jerry was known as a loyal member of the Congress Party, but now he had given up his white shirt and *muṇḍ* (the traditional attire of politicians of his party), seeking instead to present himself as another victim of pollution, another body on the line. He and other activists solved the problem of making the people present by enacting the suffering of the original people's protest against colonialism, a protest uncorrupted by the self-serving power struggles that divide Kerala politics today.

Eventually Jerry did, with his doctor's assent, launch the relay hunger strike by being the first to fast. The strike began with press releases declaring the desperation of the people in Manamur and their willingness to fast until death. When, after one week, Jerry passed the torch to the next faster, Jerry was hauled off by the police (Figure 3). This was by no means a sting operation. Campaign leaders informed the police that Jerry was gravely ill and insisted on fasting unto death, and when the police arrived, Action Council members helped to load him onto a stretcher and carry him to the police car. Media was informed ahead of time. Here, the performance was clearly not aimed at the government, even as the arrest presupposed the state's commitment to asserting its power to "ensure, sustain, and multiply life" (Foucault [1976] 2019, 138). The addressee was the public, by way of the media, by way of the police. The arrest ratified Jerry's

fast as a "complete offering" of his body rather than simply a tactical ploy.

BODIES ENRAGED

Despite the centrality of *satyagraha* to their campaign, the Action Council also engaged in certain acts of violence. Periodically, campaign participants would do things like get into fistfights with factory workers or throw rocks at police. Campaign leaders did not openly describe these as the Action Council's activities, nor did they plan for them in the same way as they planned for speeches, for marches, or for ensuring the tent was occupied. Violence was not altogether unexpected—there was frequent boasting in the tent about what one "would do" or "would like to do"—but the actual episodes of violence were generally described as spontaneous and uncontrollable outbursts.

For example, one day Action Council members got into a quarrel with a journalist from a major TV news channel (Figure 4). Within the campaign, this channel had a reputation for coverage sympathetic to the gelatin factory, and a few men accosted the journalist. When the journalist did not back down, a ring of shouting activists formed and tightened around him. Bodies jostled, forearms jerked, fingers shook in the reporter's face, hands were raised, some held others back. In the end, the reporter left without any blows thrown, but everyone said it had been a close call.

"We cannot help ourselves," explained Satish, who had been foremost in the fray, "Rage [*vikāram*] is the strength of our campaign. But, because we have experienced so much suffering, it's so strong that it makes us do things like this."

Vikāram, the term I gloss here as "rage," can be used to describe a broad range of emotions—such as anger, sadness, or lust—that can have an overwhelming effect. *Vikāram* is passionate emotion: it drives a person to act in ways that they would not when level-headed.[20] For the Manamur campaign participants, *vikāram* was induced by prolonged suffering; it was an anger that motivated them to fight, but it could also make them lose control. This was part of Action Council members' self-understanding, but others described them this way as well. People otherwise sympathetic to the campaign sometimes criticized local activists' rage. They worried that it made them volatile and irrational. But like Satish, such critics also recognized that this rage sprang directly from local residents' long experience of suffering and struggle.

While displays of suffering in *satyagraha* are afforded by the vulnerabilities of bodies to harm, performances of rage play off another limit: the possibility of losing control. Rage may seem like a show of strength, and activists at times described it that way, yet both local activists and their supporters warned that the campaign's intensity of rage could be risky. Unlike the threats of violence with which political parties empty the roads, for Action Council activists, the semiotic power of uncontrollable rage did not lie in forcing their opponents to submit. Rather, their erratic outbursts of violence operated with a similar logic to their hunger strikes. In flashes of rage, as in displays of suffering, the protestors' political action was read as a direct, unmediated effect of the harm done to them. Fistfights and thrown stones were organic outbreaks of popular sentiment, not the organized machinations of political factions.

In view of our discussion so far, displays of rage help to clarify what kinds of limitations of bodies are useful for making collectivities present. In Lao wakes, physical risks and sacrifices of time and

FIGURE 4 Angry protestors close in on the journalist. (Photograph by John Mathias, 2013)

sleep make some kinds of attendance more valuable than others. Similarly, hunger strikes are compelling because bodies can only go so long without food. Unlike risk, sacrifice, and suffering, rage does not index physical fragility or weakness as such. Instead, it indexes an upper limit on one's capacity to control one's body. Bodies that fly out of control are constrained in their availability for semiotic manipulation; like a blush or a twitch, enraged bodies are thought to be pure reaction, energetic interpretants (Kockelman 2013), which cannot be faked. It is this relatively organic dimension of rage that makes it a compelling index of "the people" as a collectivity.[21]

Yet producing and sustaining spontaneity can require strategy and care. After months of exhausting protests, the chief minister of Kerala (the most powerful elected official) invited the leaders of the Manamur campaign to come to the capital for a discussion. To some, this seemed like a huge victory. Their protests, after all, had always aimed at influencing those in power. Yet others saw only danger. If they entered into discussions, they feared, it would undermine their campaign, which was rooted in rage. Here lay a dilemma: to continue to rage in the streets or to enter into calm, rational negotiation in the halls of power. Into the night, they debated, carefully considering the value of being enraged beyond control.

In both hunger strikes and displays of rage, Manamur protestors use their few bodies to present themselves as something they can never be: the whole people. This requires constant and deliberate manipulation of signs. In this respect, their efforts are no less organized than the protests of political parties. But the work of organizing "the people" is the work of appearing organic—as pure, unmediated reaction to injustices perpetrated by elites. Activists' suffering and raging bodies are apt signs of the organic insofar as they are difficult to manipulate strategically. In this case, as in the Lao case above, it is the limits of bodies as material for mediation that make physical gatherings so essential for manifesting collectivities.

CONCLUSION

In the current moment, our exploration of the importance of bodily proximity to social life might feel antiquated. For the past century, work on nations and publics has shown that modern collectivities are often formed and sustained through long-distance webs of communication. The growth of communications technologies, such as WhatsApp, Zoom, and Twitter, has only expanded our capacity to circumvent in-person interaction. With these technologies comes a vision of a possible future where people rarely need to gather. During the COVID-19 pandemic, such a future seems more likely than ever. Classrooms and offices have moved to Zoom, retail has become contactless, and doctor's visits have gone virtual. Many now believe that, for better or worse, we have crossed a threshold into a "new normal" where getting together physically is a relic of the past.

But as we noted at the outset, even during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, some people still gathered for weddings, funerals, and protests. How does this fit with a vision of a virtual future? At a time when gathering bodies was risky and socially proscribed, some people thought it was worth the risk to celebrate a marriage or memorialize a death. Some protestors continued to put their bodies on the line.

In research in Mauritius, Eisenlohr (2009, 273) found a paradox: as new media technologies were gaining greater prominence, those same technologies were also being used to fulfill fantasies of unmediated interaction. Here we anticipate the possibility of another, related paradox. As communications technologies make face-to-face interaction expendable, as people spend more and more of their time together online, we might expect to see a new importance given to gathering bodies together. Like the nostalgic move to vinyl in the age of Spotify, the inconvenience and superfluousness of bodily proximity might make it more meaningful.

Clearly, the limits of our bodies do not determine what physical gatherings can mean. Nor do bodies have exclusive semiotic capabilities that nothing else can mimic. In our examples, people approach the problem of making a collectivity palpable and present in diverse ways. Friends sitting around a card table at a Lao wake are engaged in a fundamentally different project than a Kerala protestor fasting on a cot. The spiritual dangers of accompanying a corpse are different from the dangers of confronting the police. And the crowd that gathers to usher an embodied person into or out of the world is a different sort of collective from the suffering, enraged "people." To send a soul on its way, a Lao wake draws as many bodies as possible in the middle of the night, forming a collective that protects those gathered from spiritual harm while indexing and enhancing the merit of the deceased. To win public support for its cause, a Kerala people's protest does not rely on numbers. It gathers bodies that comport themselves in certain ways, forming a collective that cannot be written off as merely another political faction.

But spanning these disjunctive construals of bodies and copresence is a broader sense of what bodies afford for those who demand them. When people need to form collectivities, they may turn to bodies—not because of their powers, but because of their limits. In both Kerala and Laos, perceived constraints on the semiotic manipulability of bodies lend themselves to powerful projections of collective presence. In Laos, the body's need for sleep and inability to bilocate help give a sense of a continual crowd. In Kerala, people exploit the body's capacity to starve or spin out of control to evince a spontaneity that transforms a group of people into *the people*. In reflecting on our contemporary moment, we also see the limits of bodies at play. The things that make bodies inconvenient or even risky to gather may be the things that make them more powerful signs of commitment and community.

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NOTES

[1] On proximity during the COVID-19 pandemic as an ethical problem, see Strong, Trnka, and Wynn (2021).

[2] Beyond the somatic "feeling" associated with crowds (see discussion below), gathering bodies together also allows for people to communicate in different ways than they might online (Collins 2004, 53–64; Molotch and Boden 1993; see also work on multimodal communication and its affordances—for example, Streeck, Goodwin, and LeBaron 2011). People often mobilize these properties to their advantage. For example, in the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests and general assemblies, activists became "human microphones," repeating the words of speakers to those farther away (Radovac 2014).

[3] Gilbert (1990) has argued for the importance of self-reflexive recognition of togetherness in constituting collectivities. For her, a collectivity is always a "we." In our account, we make room for situations in which collectivities are construed as "they's" by third parties.

[4] For more on this particular event, and funerals and postpartum events in Laos, see Zuckerman (2018, 2022).

[5] Klima (2002, 251) writes, "The dead are lonely. The telos of the funeral casino [i.e., the gambling at the wake] is, as they say of the gift economy, to establish relationships between people—to produce a community."

[6] See *The Prime Minister's Order on Reinforcement Measures on Containment, Prevention and Full Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic*. No. 06/ PM.

[7] Ladwig (2002, 132) describes "bone stupas" (*thaat4 kaduuk5*), receptacles for ashes held on temple grounds, as their own kind of "new bodies" for the deceased, which allow them to be "simultaneously here and there, active ancestors involved in the life of [the] living who nevertheless are incorporated into *samsara* and move in the Buddhist great chain of being." Note that, in Luang Prabang, many people do not preserve cremated ashes in "bone stupas" but "throw them out" (*thim5*) into the river.

[8] Exactly from which sort of entity one is "guarding" the house can be a moral question (Zuckerman 2018, 462–63). Many anthropologists have written about the risks of sudden deaths, in which people *taaj3 hung3* or die unnaturally (e.g., Bouté 2012; Formoso 1998; Johnson 2014; Langford 2013; Mills 1995;). Tambiah (1970, 189–90) notes, for instance, that "these spirits are said to hover on earth because of their attachment to worldly interests, having been plucked from life before completing a normal life cycle." Eberhardt (2006, 68–69), in her book about Shan people in Thailand, remarks that in these deaths "making merit for the dead to help them 'get to a good place' can . . . also be seen as giving the spirits of the dead whatever they need to make them go away."

[9] This idea of guarding the good house is not unique to Laos or Thailand. Terwiel (1979, 406) suggests that it is "an aspect of the original Tai funeral rite."

[10] One American observer writes that a "show of sadness would retard the rebirth of the spirit of the deceased in a better existence or prevent its attainment of nirvana" (Whitaker et al. 1972, 120; see also Tambiah 1970, 120).

[11] On the semiotic value of the inability to bilocate, compare how biological anthropologists have characterized primate grooming, as "a simple statement of commitment" (Dunbar 1998, 44). Of course, being together is never an automatic sign of solidarity or intimacy, a crude mechanism for a biologically encoded "phatic communion" (Malinowski 1946), but copresence is, like communicative contact, nevertheless frequently construed as meaningful in local discourses (see Zuckerman 2016, 2021).

[12] Compare the sacrifices and commitments that Lao Buddhist monks and novices endure as they live in the monastery, foregoing dinner and committing themselves to remaining in the temple during Buddhist Lent. Lay people in Luang Prabang often become novices and take these sacrificial commitments upon themselves, sometimes for as short as a day, to honor the dead.

[13] On the implications of *vinñaan2* and *khwan3* for understanding local ontologies of the body, see (Holt 2009, 271–74; Keyes 1987; Stonington 2020; Tambiah 1970, 223–51).

[14] Ladwig (2021, 77) describes how crematoria workers in Thailand and Laos are socially marginalized due to pollution from working with corpses (see also Ladwig, Suban, and Chainon 2009).

[15] On the ways that corpses limit and afford various semiotic uses, see Verdery (1999) and Keane (2014).

[16] Lukose (2005) notes that *harthals* in Kerala are widely associated with a masculine tradition of "politics" (*rāṣṭrīyam*) that is dominated by leftist organizations and criticized by proponents of privatization and consumerism. While activists in people's protests generally pursue aims that run counter to neoliberal trends, they also seek to distance their protests from "politics" as the arena of political parties, identity groups, and special interest organizations.

[17] Compare Derrida's (1973) *Speech and Phenomena* on the metaphysics of presence.

[18] Vijayalekshmi (1999) recounts a case in which locals in Matilakam protested the construction of walls around the town. When non-Brahmin residents lay across the site to obstruct construction, the rulers reportedly built the wall over their bodies. But when Brahmins conducted a group fast, "Society could not bear this." The curse of the fast sowed discord among the rulers, and in the ensuing conflict the rulers' houses were destroyed, the walls razed, and the town burned.

[19] Performing sincerity could, in turn, lead to greater fame and public esteem. Indeed, some activists in Manamur suggested that it was in pursuit of such rewards that Jerry had been so eager to inaugurate the hunger strike.

[20] Halliburton (2002) argues for the salience of multiple levels of "rarification" between material and immaterial aspects of persons in Kerala. Elsewhere, I have written about the importance of "consciousness" (*bōdham*) as a relatively disembodied motive for people's protest activism (Mathias 2017). In contrast, *vikāram* engages the body, yet its force as a motive comes from its capacity to overflow local mind/body distinctions.

[21] Writing about the US civil rights movement, Polletta (2009, 32) notes a similar emphasis on spontaneity in narratives of "the indefinable moment when a group of separate individuals became a collective actor."

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