

Moods, Collectivities, and Our Own Stupid Feelings

You go to the protest; there are pink pussy hats everywhere; you feel excited for new people. And then a woman butts into your conversation about public schools to say that she got such a good public school education in New York in the seventies; she doesn't know what changed; she came in as an immigrant not speaking any English but the immigrants today don't want to be Americans; they just want to stick to their own culture and that's what's gone wrong. The Latinos really don't want to be American.

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You try to start a chant and no one picks it up. No one is even chanting at all. You pass two protesters smiling and posing for a photo with one of the cops. We're never going anywhere, you think. Of course we're not going anywhere. But despite that, the very unexpectedness of the events that occasioned the march suggest that everything is historically contingent and wildly unpredictable. In this instance that is bad, but mostly it is good.

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In England, it's very difficult to get a chant going at a protest unless the protest is absolutely massive. No one wants anyone else to pay attention to their chanting. Someone will be on the mic, there'll be an overamplified drum, and the chant will begin: No Trump, No KKK, No Fascist USA. Tentatively, like lapsed churchgoers at a religious service, the protesters will start up a low mumble in the crowd. Trump—murmur—K—murmur—USA—awkward pause. Oh sorry, someone says.

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It is 1989. You live in Baltimore. You work for a gay newspaper. A good friend calls from New York to say that he would like to come down and

stay. He is going to the ACT UP protest at the FDA. You say yes, of course, you are going to be covering the march for the newspaper anyway. It is an amazing day. You stay up late, hanging out and talking, smoking cigarettes. The next morning you get up and drive your friend to the bus station, arriving just in time. When you arrive home, the apartment is full of smoke. Before you left, your friend must have put the coffee maker on the stove and turned on the burner, then forgotten it. The coffee maker is one of those octagonal aluminum stove-top espresso makers from Italy. Or was, rather. When you fight your way to the stove to turn it off, you discover that the plastic knob and handle have melted, leaving ashy black pools on the range top. The next time your friend calls to ask about staying with you, you say okay. Then you say: but first, some ground rules . . .

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You are visiting Los Angeles during the inauguration. It rains for weeks. Feeling isolated from your friends and family, you go to the protest at LAX but get stuck in traffic on the way there. You miss meeting up with the friend who invited you but take pleasure in shutting down the inner roadway. And the traffic isn't too bad on the way home.

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You leave your friend's birthday brunch and take the train out to JFK, and everything is happening. It's joyful; your friends are there; people you know a little bit are there; many many people you don't know at all are there; there are new people there with pink pussy hats that you no longer find as stupid; the line is "no walls, no borders," and someone has started a Palestine chant; everyone is chanting it, including some people who are probably new, who have probably never chanted for Palestine before. And here in this spot there are a lot of people mostly chanting, and here in this other spot we are blocking traffic, and the guy in the bus that is being blocked is dancing, and on Twitter people are reporting that passengers on the planes landing are cheering when they hear why there are delays, and the cops don't know what to do; they're failing. We move luggage carts into the street and use them as barricades. Someone yells to everyone to sit down, and people start to sit down, but then someone else yells, "That makes it easier for them to arrest you," and everyone stands up, because we don't want to be symbolically arrested; we want to demonstrate our power and not what the state can do to us. You go with your friend to pee behind cars in the parking deck; the cops are blocking the way back into the airport; you stay as long as it feels useful to stay and then make your slow way back to the neighborhood and eat a sub with your friend in your tiny apartment that feels suddenly vast and empty and pleasurable.

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The Republican National Convention, 2004. You and a group of women you only know vaguely get together and brainstorm ideas for an affinity group. You decide to form a delegation to the convention from the United States of Outrage. You make signs like the signs on the convention floor that say what state people are from. But instead of the names of American states, your signs list affective states: Grief, Shame, Anger, Pain, Denial. You and your crew dress in white and march around Union Square shouting: United States of Outrage! United States of Outrage!

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Walking past an abortion clinic one Saturday morning, you become another person. There is an old white guy handing out pictures of bloody fetuses in the palm of a doctor's gloved hand. There is a dime on the glove too, for scale, but also perhaps as a way of saying, "This is how little the evil mother values the life of her child." When you see him approaching two scared teenagers, you get in front of him and say, jabbing you finger, "Do you believe in the death penalty?" When he doesn't reply you say it again, louder, not allowing him to step around you. You become another person.

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The assistant principal at your junior high school banned the wearing of all concert T-shirts (although he was primarily targeting the metal bands, which depicted what were evidently satanic images). You didn't really care much about the bands since at the time you were deeply enmeshed in your study of classical piano. But it was clearly an injustice, and you wore your brother's concert T-shirts in solidarity with your friends who did like metal and felt that their freedom of expression was arbitrarily being policed. Nothing much came of it. The principal discovered that the ban was more "disruptive" than the T-shirts themselves. But you learned a couple important things back in seventh grade: (a) an injustice doesn't have to affect you personally to be an injustice; (b) metal really does suck.

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You're on vacation in Seville with your elderly parents. One afternoon, after a boozy lunch, they announce that they are going on a day-trip tomorrow, to a town about an hour away. We advise you to come with us, they say. There's going to be a demonstration tomorrow. Hearing this, you say, oh, well I think I'll go to that. They are worried that you will get into something, that there will be violence. But the protest is a good-natured affair. The marchers are farmers, sunburned and toothless, wearing 1970s sweaters. They are drinking beer from the can at ten in the morning. The protest is against a recent decision by the Spanish government to support free trade with the United States in agricultural goods, because American farm subsidies mean that Spanish farmers can't sell their produce for a

living price. The only violence is a few thrown oranges. These people are desperately poor.

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It's the first decade of the twenty-first century. You are living on the campus of a Quaker college outside Philadelphia. Somehow, you hear that there is going to be a protest against the war in Iraq on Lancaster Avenue tomorrow at noon, so you show up with your sign saying, "I Didn't Vote for This War," wearing a T-shirt that says "Bush Lied People Died." There's not much of a crowd, but someone has unfurled a giant rainbow-colored banner that says PEACE, and cars are honking as they go past. A reporter from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* approaches. "Okay," he asks, "so why are you out here?" You are ready with your answer—no blood for oil! The Bush administration is profiting from death!—but the khaki- and oxford-wearing Quakers get in first. Well, we're Quakers, they say. We are against all forms of war.

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You can't take the streets because the cops are too many. A prerecorded order to disperse is playing over and over; you see an older activist friend who is weirdly gruff to you; you see some young women get picked off and abruptly arrested. One group breaks away down a street and not enough people follow; everyone winds up walking on the sidewalk the whole way and arriving at the destination, which has speeches and a shitty band and everything you hate about this. You go eat hand-pulled noodles with a friend; this friend hasn't been to a protest since the early 2000s. He's totally elated. His experience is not your experience.

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You organize an anti-student debt protest, and the person you organize it with is very nearly crying as the fifteen of you march the empty street in the rain.

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After the grand jury news you and hundreds of other people walk down Sixth Avenue in the street, stopping traffic for probably an hour. The cars with Jersey plates are silent, but both the cab drivers and the tourists on double-decker buses are cheering and taking selfies.

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2012. Trayvon Martin is dead. There's a march at Union Square. You bring your two-year-old, who sits on your shoulders, chocolate brown hands clasped in your white grip. People give you looks—not unfriendly ones. There are pictures of Trayvon on many of the signs. Who's that black boy, the child asks. His name is Trayvon, you say. Why is his picture

on there? He died, you say. There's silence, then another question: Am *I* going to die? You think to yourself that you shouldn't have come. The child is too young.

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You see your student at the protest. You're so happy to see him that you give him a giant hug. You know he is in a lefty group you consider kind of cultish—I mean, great to recruit queer kids from Detroit public schools, but the group pays for their housing and then exerts what seems like a crazy amount of control over their lives—but you love this kid; he's obviously great; you are so very happy to see him here. Why are you so contrary otherwise?

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You feel like you should wear slutty clothes for the slut walk contingent, since you were an organizer and it seems weird not to. You don't really have any clothes that read as “slutty,” specifically, you realize, and you end up in a skimpy version of your running clothes. Then you are sexually harassed by itinerant men in the public park that the protest ends at. “I can see your butt cheek,” one man points out.

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In college, Grisha Coleman made buttons that said S.L.U.T. and handed them out to everyone. I don't know, you said. I don't know how I feel about wearing a button that says SLUT. It's an acronym, she said. It stands for Subversive Lust Under Tension. A decade later, in a bar in Chicago, you meet a woman wearing a button that says B.I.T.C.H. Alerted by the punctuation, you ask her if it is an acronym, and if so, what it stands for. She says, with great satisfaction: B.I.T.C.H. Being In Total Control of Herself.

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You are in a meeting about what to do at the protest against right-to-work legislation. The union leadership will just bring signs telling people to vote in two years. Your group aims to form a rank-and-file coalition across the state. The coalition will probably be a mix of autoworkers, steelworkers, some other blue-collar workers, and teachers, given who is unionized here. Everyone is tired and can't believe that you've finally come to an agreement and divvied up the various bureaucratic tasks. “What do we call the group?” someone asks. “I mean, it doesn't really matter, but like what should I put at the top of the clipboard?” This conversation takes an hour somehow. When someone finally proposes “Fight to Win,” which seems innocuous enough to facilitate a quick consensus, someone else replies, “This is where we really need to look to Derrida. I'm uncomfortable with the word ‘winning.’”

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An older activist writes to you and asks you to catch him up on Occupy. You're irate and feel like he is asking you to do secretarial work when he has sat on the sidelines through the long timeline of insane meetings and arguments and endless e-mails and fights with LaRouche-ites that have taken place. But actually this person is pretty great; it has only been six weeks; it is a totally reasonable way to reach out to someone. Your senses of time and work are just really, really warped right now.

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Occupy is dead and the world seems to have closed off its historical trajectory again. Maybe different things will happen now, but you no longer feel like you don't know what is going to happen next—an intense rush of feeling that had made you suspend pretty much everything else.

So you skip the regional Occupy meet-up that has been organized and that was supposed to be a step toward building something but that mostly felt depressing. You read for school, which at that moment means reading a history of the Nation of Islam. Your partner goes to the meeting, though, and when he returns he is more depressed than you are. Everyone argued the whole time; the moderation was bad; they went for hours in loops. A bunch of crusty kids who had traveled from Ohio were camping out next to the space the meeting was held in. One of them had announced that they had discovered that you could use twigs from the ground to brush your teeth. So you and your partner laugh a bunch about the goofiness of this and various other things that had happened at the meeting. You are still not sure you could do any of this without having at least one person you deeply agree with about these things. You make dinner. You watch a show.

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Someone attempts to use the human microphone and, instead of using a brief “mic check” call and response to initiate call and response for something more substantive, they accidentally initiate a chant: “Mic check! Mic check! Mic check!” the crowd chants.

Later this happens to you too.

Mic check! Mic check! Mic check! we all chant.