

“Whose Streets? Our Streets! Whose World? Our World!” -- Narratives & Negotiation after the WTO  
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Tuesday, November 30, 1999: I boarded a van to Seattle, Washington to participate in the mass protest against the 1999 World Trade Organization Ministerial Meeting. The van was sponsored by the University of Oregon Graduate Teaching Federation; so “officially,” one might say, I went to Seattle as Labor, as a member of the AFL-CIO. More accurately, I suppose, I went there as an environmentalist and as a feminist, deeply concerned about and committed to social, political, and environmental justice. An activist and an academic, I went to Seattle as an ethnographer -- with my tape recorder, my camera, three rolls of film, and extra batteries. As a folklorist, I was interested in the performance of protest, in its “traditional” and “dynamic” manifestations, and I was eager to witness the street theater and the direct action blockades -- the “Festival of Resistance,” the “Carnival against Capitalism.” I went to Seattle as a pragmatist; my brother prepared me for tear gas with a vial of vinegar and a handkerchief. As a grad student, I couldn’t get arrested; I had to be back in Eugene the next day to teach. As a mother, I phoned home midday to assure everyone I was okay, in case they were watching the news.

I situate myself here not merely in an exercise of intellectual forthrightness or an offhand gesture to subjectivity; I must implicate myself in all aspects of this paper -- in the object and analysis, in the event and the interpretation. It is imperative I locate myself here -- as a participant in the WTO protest, as a performer of a personal narrative about my experiences there,[1] as an activist still reeling from the event. Somewhere between the transcripts and the tear gas, my voice and my politics have run throughout this paper. It is a reflexive exploration of the WTO protest; my reflexivity is nested amongst others’, not merely reflected through our stories, but lived and interpreted through our bodies.[2]

Political protest itself is a reflexive act, a symbolic interaction that comments on social, cultural, and political difference. According to theatre studies scholar Baz Kershaw,

“the synecdochic nature of protest events may produce enormous political potency, for they double society back on itself, as it were: they present a reflexive critique of the foundations of authority by showing that the assumption of power by the state, for example, may be based on nothing more substantial than the chimera of presumption or a predisposition to violence.”[3]

In this performance-oriented culture, this “performative democracy,” protesters are self-conscious about the meaning and interpretation of their actions.[4] Protest assumes an audience, and the symbols and “sound-bites” of the performance are Other-directed. “Other” in this case was not only the WTO delegates and government officials, but the media and the public -- locally, nationally, and globally. In addition, the protest in Seattle was performed for activists around the world, particularly those who have staged protests of their own in opposition to similar meetings of global capitalists -- against the IMF, the World Bank, and the Asian-Pacific Economic Forum, for example.[5]

The WTO protest continues to be “performed” as participants (among others) recollect and narrate their experiences. As one union member notes, “there is a second ‘Battle for Seattle’ that is now

underway. The first was in Seattle. The second is the battle for public opinion over what Seattle means. The first thing we need to do is address this second battle with every means at our disposal.”[6] The performance of narratives from the WTO will be the focus of this paper.

Framing the event through the participants’ personal experience narratives adds another layer of reflexivity to the performance of protest. These recollections and testimonials re-present the WTO, shaping identity and memory. Barbara Myerhoff describes the performance of narrative as a creation of history -- re-membering. She argues that,

“since these constructions are intentionally designed, they are not only reflections of ‘what is’; they are also opportunities to write history as it should be or should have been, demonstrating a culture’s notion of propriety and sense. History and accident are not permitted to be imposed willy-nilly, those badly written, haphazard, incomplete recordings of occurrences that are so unsatisfactory. Rather performances are shaped and groomed justifications, more akin to myth and religion than lists of empty external events we call history or chronicle.”[7]

The WTO narratives are well-shaped and tell a rich, multi-faceted story of the “Battle in Seattle.” They relate the event; they chronicle, and they evaluate. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the narratives’ re-presentation of political solidarity and partiality. These narratives reflect on the coalition performed at the WTO. I will also argue that as reflexive examinations and reconstructions, the narratives themselves promote, perform, and produce that cohesion.

Political activism is about “doing” -- marching, protesting, teaching, organizing -- but it is also about “talking” -- negotiating, evaluating, persuading, telling stories. Narratives play an important role in political activism, constructing and maintaining individual and community identities.[8]

“In telling the story of our becoming -- as an individual, a nation, a people -- we establish who we are. Narratives may be employed strategically to strengthen a collective identity but they also may precede and make possible the development of a coherent community, or nation, or collective actor.”[9]

Activists’ narratives are an important vehicle to promote and legitimate a cause, to garner support, to recruit new members, and to sustain those already in the movement. Narratives provide a forum for mediating, arbitrating, and resolving meanings, identities, and strategies. These protest narratives are performances, but they are also performative, constituting political subjects, actors, agents. “Speaking truth to power,” these narratives configure events in such a way to re-present the past with a moral, even revolutionary, telos.

Personal experience narratives about the WTO protest have proliferated; students, union representatives, Black Blockers, Seattle residents -- many participants have been prompted to relate their version of events.[10] I will attest that the WTO protest was an extraordinary occurrence, certainly one worthy of storytelling. For many participants, it was their first experience with direct action and civil disobedience, as opposed to more conventional, more staid marches and rallies. It was their first exposure to tear gas, pepper spray, and police brutality. For most, it was unprecedented to protest with

people from different walks of life, with different issues, complaints, and tactics about the WTO, free trade, and global capitalism. Regardless of age or background, participants at the WTO protests describe the event with wonderment and awe. Starhawk described it as “one of the most intense and powerful experiences of my life – and I’ve had a few!”[11] Another participant recounted, “Personally it was the greatest feeling I have had standing in a concrete jungle.”[12] Others expressed similar sentiments, using words like “indescribable,” “surreal,” “vibrant,” and “inspiring” to portray their experiences.[13] In contrast, the trauma of police violence, characterized as “oppressive” and “brutal,” provided another impetus for a cathartic release. Protesters thus felt compelled to share their experiences, to tell their story to others.

Immediately upon return from Seattle, many participants, including myself, posted their stories to Internet listserves, emailing family, friends, and colleagues with their tales. “I just got back from Seattle tonight,” begins one online narrative.[14] “I just got in off the streets of downtown Seattle and am writing to you from a free computer at the Independent Media Center,” starts another.[15] “I just arrived home from the WTO Rally in Seattle, exhausted, but this . . . calls for a quick response.”[16] The Internet was not the only site for the performance of these personal narratives. Many affinity groups and community organizations held follow-up meetings where participants recounted their experiences in face-to-face situations. The events in Seattle still dominate activist discourse, and WTO protest narratives continue to be performed.

Many of those who related their experiences asserted that they were doing so in reaction to the misrepresentation of the event by mainstream media. “The media is working hard to portray the protests as a violent riot,” wrote Starhawk in an open email to the pagan community, “Do not believe them.”[17] Another activist said, “The scene downtown was intense, but still peaceful. Images on television showed rioters and violent protest. Don’t be fooled.”[18] Each individual’s story counteracts the media’s generalizations about “50,000 protesters”; a personal voice defies stereotyping about “anarchists,” “union members,” or “environmentalists.” These narratives resist the dismissal of the WTO protest by the press; they counter the divisiveness injected into the media analysis.

“I think this is the moment to show our solidarity with [the arrestees] by making everybody know what we experienced and saw. We need to express solidarity with everybody we talk to and see [sic] how things really were there. . . . Let’s not allow them to revise the events of Seattle and make a profit out of it by dividing the Anti-WTO movement between violent and non-violent participants. Let’s not play their game. We were just one energy of common sense and solidarity and dignity and integrity. This is the moment to stop their lies and tell everybody what really happened, to speak all those radical commentaries that we normally don’t talk about with people in daily life. . . . They have the media but we have our voices.”[19]

The protest narratives resist closure; no-one has the final “say.” The narratives, in turn, demand that more narratives, more testimonials be told.

The performance of these narratives seeks to reclaim the success of November 30th. Victory included not only gaining press for the issue of the World Trade Organization, but shutting down the meeting and

reclaiming the streets of downtown Seattle; the victory was not only that environmentalists marched with Labor or even that the “millennium” round of the trade talks collapsed. The triumph was not just political, but emotional, almost spiritual, as well. Many of the narratives point to the hope that abounded that day, the belief -- the realization -- that people can make a difference.

“I would despair, except that when I was in Seattle I witnessed something truly spectacular, an energy that can change the world. Seeing the brave looks in the eyes of the marchers, standing side by side with the protesters in their dedicated training, and learning why this movement is legitimate and reasonable, gives me hope that their goodwill can pierce the gloom and their chants be heard.”[20]

The positive narration and evaluation of the WTO protest is a political and rhetorical strategy that praises and legitimates the protesters’ experiences.

As the excerpt above indicates, a large part of the hope and the promise perceived on November 30 stems from the unity amongst protesters. This coalition of participants appears frequently in the narratives. Many of the narratives list the different groups in attendance at the protest:

“ . . . Teamster president James Hoffa sharing a stage with student anti-sweatshop activists, of Earth First!ers marching with Sierra Clubbers, and a chain of bare-breasted BGH-free Lesbian Avengers weaving through a crowd of machinists.”[21]

“United Farmworkers, Communication Workers of America, Steelworkers, UA Plumbers and Steamfitters, Carpenters, Teachers, Airline pilots in full uniform, Longshoremen . . . Electricians, Boilermakers, Service Employees International Union.”[22]

“There were small farmers from Korea, human rights advocates from Burma and Columbia [sic], California farmworkers, 300 costumed sea turtles, Chinese Falun Gong practitioners, several hundred nurses from Canada, Oregon fisherman. . . . The Sierra Club’s giant green banner ‘Make Trade Clean, Green, and Fair’ was almost lost amidst large union banners, and signs promoting the Green Party, the New Party, the Labor Party, the Communist Party and Free Mumia. Earth Island Institute had a huge inflated sea turtle, and Greenpeace had a 50 foot long green condom, advocating ‘safe trade.’”[23]

“Teamsters and turtle-lovers, grandparents and gap clerks, the homeless and computer geeks, high school students and Alaskans, nuns and Jimmy Hoffa Jr, airplane mechanics and caffeinated slaves from Microsoft.”[24]

In contrast to previous protests -- with a focus on a single issue and participation from a homogenous group of people, this WTO did bring together a variety of activists with differing backgrounds, beliefs, and tactics. This coalition was remark-able as apparent in the repeated itemization would indicate.

Despite the heterogeneity of protesters, most accounts emphasize their cohesiveness. Narrative after narrative uses the word “solidarity” to describe the coalition and fellowship that occurred on November 30.[25] One activist reported,

“Having been in Seattle, in the tear gas-infested streets of modern-day insurrectionary America, I can tell you that the unity and solidarity expressed by all was immense. Anarchists supported people locked down in civil disobedience by building barricades of street debris between them and the cops, college students alerted protesters as to the new movements of the riot cops at different intersections, longshoremen reinforced young militants at conflict-ridden intersections, balancing the scales.”[26]

This “solidarity” is political unity and accord, but it is also a manifestation of Victor Turner’s notion of “communitas.” In the ritualized and transformative performance of protest, the participants experience a reduction in difference (both social and ideological), and an enhanced sense of community. Kershaw posits that protest can create “radical liminality” that moves beyond subversion and resistance[27]; I want to propose a “radical communitas” -- the constitution of a coalition from diverse, even oppositional forces.

Although it necessarily problematizes the fixity and boundedness of identity politics, this liminal coalition or community does not negate the existence of the individual. In their narratives, protesters assert their subjectivity and their partiality. One protester starts his account, saying, “I haven’t seen any media coverage yet, so what I report now is what I either witnessed or heard recounted many times by people. I can’t promise complete accuracy, but here goes.”[28] Another activist peppers his narrative with statements like “I know because I watched it happening” and “I saw this with my own eyes.”[29] A fan-zine devoted to the WTO protest states, “Keep in mind that it is only a fraction of what went on, then extrapolate.”[30] Each claiming imprecision, these many versions of the day’s events defy a single, master narrative. They suggest a failure on the part of the media, the government, big business, even on the part of certain segments of the activity community, and more broadly, the Left, to present a monolithic interpretation -- or story -- of the WTO protest. The stability of political identity gives way to fluidity, affinity, and understanding.

By emphasizing coalition and affinity in these narratives, I am by no means implying that the protesters were consistently harmonious -- at the event or in their storytelling. Antagonism and factionalism do appear in these narratives, particularly in relation to the property damage that occurred at the hands of the Black Bloc. This aspect of the WTO protest continues to be hotly debated in activist circles, and in many ways the issue does threaten the nascent coalition of the protesting groups.[31] Nonetheless, the protest narratives -- even ones that vilify window-breakers -- do emphasize, even romanticize, the protesters’ similarities and the day’s cohesion. Some narratives critique those who have spoken out against the actions of the Black Bloc, preferring to present an indivisible front.[32] To minimize difference and to emphasize similarity are rhetorical strategies to promote coalition and retain “communitas.”

This strategy is of utmost interest to me, as a participant and as a scholar. I would like to shift now, to conclude this paper, from the narratives as the object of study and as methodology to the narratives as praxis. Thus far, I have examined how the WTO protest narratives produce and exchange meanings and experiences. I have also suggested that these narratives can be the means (the method) to analyze something else -- namely the performance of coalition politics. I believe this moment of narrative

coalition is crucial to the development of political coalition, for as sociologist Catriona Sandilands notes in her book on radical democracy, coalition is performative.[33] Sandilands asserts,

“the point of a coalitional politics is not an ability to claim to have ‘got it right’ through some perfect enumeration of subject positions . . . but a process by which each position in the chain comes to recognize its profound partiality, its inevitable contingency on all of the others, in order to foster an open and non-innocent view of the discursively produced self and the discursively produced affinities that flow around it.”[34]

As the many versions of the WTO protest attest, there is no one story; yet all these stories perform an emerging coalition, replete with tensions between global and local, communities and individuals, cohesion and fracture.

I believe that the radical “togetherness” of the WTO protest intersects with the imperfect and unending partiality of the protest narratives: insurrectionary heteroglossia at its best. This moment of “communitas” and coalition -- albeit temporary, liminal, or even fictionalized -- is the place to build upon to further opposition to the forces of global capitalism, as typified by the World Trade Organization. The willingness to suspend totalizing explanations simultaneous with a desire to promote a unified (or at least unified in difference) front presents a promising and provocative juncture.

There must be then, I would argue, an encouragement of and an urgency to the mobilization of these narratives -- to vocalize the subversive, the marginalized, the counter-hegemonic. As groups fracture and momentum dissipates, the protest narratives can (re)construct connectivity. The interaction of these narratives encourages intimacy and offers intersubjectivity; the narratives demand participation and interpretation. As legal scholars Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey note, narratives have two virtues: the ability to “reveal truth and to unsettle power.”[35] As an activist, as an academic, as a participant in the WTO protest, it is my sincere hope that these personal experience narratives can reveal, unsettle, and most importantly coalesce.

#### Footnotes

[1] On December 3, I posted my story to several campus listserves, sending an email to practically every individual alias in my address book. Empowered by “giving voice” to my experience, I was also encouraged by the responses I received in return, some from as far away as Pennsylvania and New Zealand! My performance of a protest narrative deepened by commitment to the issue and piqued my academic interest, particularly when I stepped back and noticed how many participants were similarly compelled to express themselves in narrative form.

[2] In her article, “The Body as ‘Place’,” social geographer Heidi Nast argues that reflexivity needs to be reworked, enlarged from an emphasis on reflection -- the metaphor of the mirror, to a more corporeal, physical self-awareness. Nast points to the “knee jerk” response that encapsulates the medical definition of “reflex,” that which suggests an immediate and involuntary response -- one located in the

body, but somehow beyond one's control. According to Nast, "analytically recognizing that others often do set our agendas, do show us what is important, and do place us in our bodies and assign us to spaces not of our choosing, allows for reflexivity to be re-cast as an embodiment skill, a means for enabling bodily, spatial difference to register in creatively decentering, fragmentary ways. Reflexivity as such is not anarchic, though the language used here may make it appear so. Perhaps the anarchic sense derives from the fact that in academic traditions there are few ways of valorizing, speaking, and inhabiting worlds that are decentering, unknowable, that mark us. Instead, we often frame our agendas and lives in terms of being in control (good) or not (bad). Loss of control spells depression, confusion, feelings of loss, a lack of physical/emotional equilibrium, alienation, un-centered-ness." I quote Nast at length here as she captures the trepidation of the scholar whose body dictates an analysis that her (academic) mind resists. Such is my dilemma. My physical experience in Seattle -- fear, hope, tear gas inhalation, panic, triumph -- unsettles an "objective," distant examination. I cannot hold the metaphorical mirror my experience, or to the experience of my informants, and hope to understand the protest or the narrative performance. Nast's article posits the body as the field; my paper does not locate itself there, but the stories do, I believe, derive from the bodily experience of being there. Like Nast, in order to explain this reflexive understanding, I turn to "story." Heidi Nast. "The Body as 'Place': Reflexivity and Fieldwork in Kano, Nigeria." *Places through the Body*. Heidi Nast & Steven Pile, eds. New York: Routledge, 1998. p 95.

[3] Baz Kershaw. "Fighting in the Streets: Dramaturgies of Popular Protest, 1968-1989." *New Theatre Quarterly*. Vol 13, n 51 (1997) p 257.

[4] Kershaw, p 257, 260.

[5] Thanks to Lacey Phillabaum for this observation. Her presentation at the 1999 Public Interest Environmental Law Conference made me conscientious of our responsibilities to the grassroots movements around the world. "We need to look at the level of international solidarity that has been offered to us after November 30 and start taking our obligations to this grassroots network very seriously." ("WTO: Its Roots & How to Get Involved in the Campaign Against Corporate Dominance." (discussants: Karen Coulter, Don Kegley, Lacy Phillabaum, Asante Riverwind) panel presentation at PIELC, University of Oregon, Eugene OR March 3, 1999.) This issue of "responsibility to others," to the movement at its most broad and inclusive, informs my analysis throughout this paper.

[6] Jeff Crosby. "The Kids are Alright. . . a summation of the WTO goings-on by a trade union activist from Boston." email posted to A-INFOS News Service. December 10, 1999.

[7] Barbara Myerhoff. "Life History Among the Elderly: Performance, Visibility, and Re-Membering." *A Crack in the Mirror*. Jay Ruby, ed. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1982. p 104.

[8] see Francesca Polletta. "'It was like a fever. . .': Narrative and Identity in Social Protest." *Social Problems*. Vol 45, n 2 (1998) p 137-159; Patricia Ewick and Susan S Silbey. "Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales: Toward a Sociology of Narrative." *Law & Society Review*. Vol 29, n 2 (1995) p 197-226; Scott A. Hunt and Robert D Benford, "Identity Talk in the Peace and Justice Movement." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. Vol 22, n 4 (1994) p 488-517; Robert D Benford. "You Could Be the

Hundredth Monkey': Collective Action Frames and Vocabularies of Motive Within the Nuclear Disarmament Movement." *The Sociological Quarterly*. Vol 34, n 2 (1993) p 195-216.

[9] Polletta. p 139.

[10] Between November 30 and December 31, 1999, over fifty personal experience narratives were posted to three of the listserves I belong to (the Citizens for Public Accountability listserve -- a Eugene grassroots organization; ECOFEM -- an ecofeminist listserve run out of the University of Colorado, Boulder; and A-INFOS News Service -- an international anarchist listserve, run out of Canada). Certainly the narratives I've collected and examined here are only a fraction of the narratives posted online. In addition, I have collected these narratives from face-to-face situations: meetings, presentations, interviews. For the purpose of this paper, I have restricted my analysis largely to the Internet narratives. The spontaneity of these performances are most pertinent for my discussion here.

[11] Starhawk. "Open Letter to the Pagan Community." email posted to Citizens for Public Accountability (CPA) listserve. December 9, 1999.

[12] Ralf Landmesser. "More Reports from Seattle N30." email posted to A-INFOS News Service. December 3, 1999.

[13] Yang Chang. "The WTO was SHUT DOWN in seattle! Three reports." email posted to A-INFOS News Service. November 30, 1999; Greg Ruggiero. "live from the streets of seattle 12.1.99." email posted to A-INFOS News Service. December 1, 1999; Ralf Landmesser. "More Reports from Seattle N30."; Audrey Vanderford, "Turtles, Teamsters, & Martial Law." email posted to UO-FOLK listserve. December 3, 1999.

[14] "Barb" "Yet Another View from Seattle." email posted to CPA listserve. December 3, 1999.

[15] Ruggiero. "live from the streets of seattle 12.1.99."

[16] Linda Lombard. "Battle in Seattle coverage by WILPF." email posted to CPA listserve. December 2, 1999.

[17] Starhawk. "Open Letter to the Pagan Community."

[18] Chuck Currie. "Report on Seattle from Portland Methodist." email posted to CPA listserve. December 10, 1999.

[19] Jesus Sepulveda. "Seattle." email posted to University of Oregon GTF affinity group, December 2, 1999.

[20] Frank Talk. "Seattle Debriefing." email posted to CPA listserve. December 3, 1999.

[21] Landmesser. "More Reports for Seattle N30."

[22] Nyla Jebousek. "Yet Another View of Seattle." email posted to CPA listserve. December 3, 1999.



[23] Fahn, Larry. "One WTO Account." email posted to Studies in Women and Environment (ECOFEM) listserve. December 10, 1999.

[24] Michael Moore. "The Battle of Seattle." email posted to A-INFOS News Service. December 7, 1999.

[25] Sepulveda. "Seattle"; Landmesser. "More Reports from Seattle"; ACME Collective. "N30 Black Bloc Communiqué." email posted to ECOFEM listserve. December 8, 1999; Rony Armon, "Seattle 600 - Police State and Jail Solidarity." email posted to A-INFOS News Service. December 7, 1999; <Blackshirt5@netzero.net> "'Violence and tactics against the WTO in Seattle.'" email posted to A-INFOS News Service. December 10, 1999; Randy Newnham, personal interview. February 25, 2000.

[26] <Blackshirt5@netzero.net>. "'Violence' and tactics against the WTO in Seattle." email posted to A-INFOS News Service. December 10, 1999.

[27] Kershaw, p 275.

[28] Chang. "The WTO was SHUT DOWN in seattle! Three reports."

[29] Jim Desyllas. "Shit about Seattle you just have to know." email posted to A-INFOS News Service. December 2, 1999.

[30] The End is at Hand. (fan-'zine) *Mayhap* #7. Eugene, OR.

[31] The AFL-CIO will not sanction their memberships' participation in the April 16, 2000 demonstration in Washington DC against the International Monetary Fund unless protest organizers "promise" no property damage will take place. "Rules" and "guidelines" seem to further alienate and fuel the Black Bloc contingent.

[32] ACME Collective. "N30 Black Bloc Communiqué"; Mitch Cohen. "Seattle Report," email posted to A-INFOS News Service. December 19, 1999.

[33] Catriona Sandilands. *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1999. p 107.

[34] Sandilands, p 107.

[35] Patricia Ewick and Susan S. Silbey. "Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales: Toward a Sociology of Narrative." *Law & Society Review*. Vol 29, n 2 (1995) p 199.

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