



On s'en câlisse, La loi spéciale: The Music Festival that Wasn't

Carrie Rentschler

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OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF “CASSEROLES”

textes qui bougent au rythme du carré rouge

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On S’En Câlisse, La Loi Special: The Music Festival that Wasn’t

Carrie Rentschler, McGill University,

Art History & Communication Studies; Institute for Gender, Sexuality & Feminist Studies

*People produce completely different noises when the cars stop:
feet and words (Henri Lefebvre Rhythmanalysis, 2004, 28).*

It may not be on the summer festival schedule, but the *manifestations casseroles* are a daily popular music festival happening on the island of Montreal. Every night at 8pm, Montreal neighborhood residents pour out of their apartment doors and hang off their balconies with wooden spoons and saucepans in hand. In Villeray, my husband and I know when it is time to grab our instruments and join in the festivities by hearing the din of people passing by, joyously clanging on their cooking implements and other percussive, wind and brass instruments such as trumpets, congas and full drum kits (set up on balconies over looking the street), flutes, vuvuzelas, my orange maracas, and even a tuba. Drawing on powerful movement traditions that blend musical performance and protest – from civil rights and anti-war traditions to charivaris (for the latter, see Sterne and Zemon Davis, 2012) – les manifestations casseroles constitute music making en masse. It is an experience of acting together with our neighbors on a scale bigger than the block. Neighborhood by neighborhood, city wide, people are making music and moving in rhythm together to protest a law that aims to prevent unannounced collective action. Some manif even incorporate dance, as seen in this youtube video, which highlights the rhythm and dance moves of manifestants (see around 1:40, in particular): [“Montréal 28 Mai Manifestation des casseroles de Villeray avec rythme court vidéo.”](#)

Each night at the manif casseroles, I wave to the neighbors and acquaintances I have come to know by protesting along side them. We nod in recognition of our shared commitment to claiming our streets and sidewalks as our own. In the city streets and sidewalks we move along everyday, we are claiming a right to express ourselves publicly and politically. We do so together, not one-by-one, in serial fashion. We are making political rhythm on a schedule, one that we have made nightly.

Thousands of Montrealers and Quebeckers have been driven into the streets in outrage over the passage of Bill 78 (May 18, 2012), a law we declare an unjust limit on our rights to congregate and protest. The current protests amplify the months of

popular democratic anti-tuition hike protests carried out by students in Quebec, from both francophone and anglophone universities. *Manifestants* speak many languages in my neighborhood. We come from many backgrounds. We occupy different kinds of jobs. But we all live in the same *quartier*, and we are bound in our agreement that *Loi 78* is unjust. At the corner grocer, the young woman at the cash checks in with me most days to see if I'll be at the manifs that night. Conversing in French, the owner of the dry cleaning business I use asks if I beat on my pot. I tell him I most certainly do, and that it's an important civil act, to which he responds in agreement. In practice, les manifs are not primarily about dialogue, they are about co-presence in taking over the streets. But as a result, I am talking more about the state of public culture and political engagement with my local shop merchants, store employees and my neighbors as people who are mutually engaged, as participants and witnesses, in public action that is larger than ourselves.

My participation in the manifestation casseroles has made me feel more connected to my neighbors and fellow Montrealers than anything else I have experienced in the city. This feeling is certainly not mine alone, nor is it limited to my immigrant experience. When I talk with friends, colleagues and acquaintances, they respond in remarkably similar ways, usually with a big grin on their face. Some declare "I've never experienced anything like this." Others describe the experience as "incredible." Still others comment on how peaceful the mass gatherings are, counter to many press pieces, which describe them as chaotic, mob-like, and riotous. I have not witnessed any "mob-like" behavior; quite the opposite. I've been witnessing people acting together in unison, and looking out for each other. At intersections, a few marchers will stand guard so that cars and other vehicles do not pass. On May 27, a local automotive business provided bottles of water to thirsty marchers – visible in this [youtube video](#) at 4:05. Marchers warn each other of potholes in the street and of approaching police. Noticing other people with pots in the metro station on the way home from a march, we strike up conversations about the night's activities and learn more about who they are. Compared to most of my daily trips on the metro, I've spoken more to other passengers after an evening of casseroles than I ever do normally. The manifs enable us to grasp a different rhythm to the city because, as Henri Lefevbre would describe it, "we have been grasped by it" (2004, 27).

The people I have spoken with describe les manifestations casseroles as a transformative, cross-class, cross-racial, and multi-generational community building experience. I am especially moved by the multi-generational nature of these protests, and the forms of recognition people enact across age differences. On nights when the manifs in Villeray turn into marches down rue St. Denis, we routinely come upon an older, grey-haired woman who stands, somewhat unsteadily, on her second floor balcony banging a small pot with a wooden spoon. As the marchers approach her, people stop banging their pots in rhythm. We all look up at her in recognition, lifting our pots and drums over our heads, banging out wild beats double time and

whooping screams of support. An older woman who lives in the high rise apartment building above the metro station parks her wheelchair at the corner of Jarry and Berri to participate in the evening's activities, paying witness, like hundreds of our other neighbors, from the sidewalk. Babies in strollers snooze as their parents and caregivers take to the streets. Toddlers and young children gravitate to the middle of the street, perhaps in excitement over being able to safely cross and occupy the streets away from car traffic. Teenagers, it seems, stick primarily to the edges of the march, walking at a brisker pace than most of us. But mostly, we are a hodge podge of people of every age walking with purpose down the middle of a street we have claimed from traffic.

The English-language press has largely ignored the community building aspects of les manifs casseroles and the powerful collective feeling that develops through them. I would hazard a guess that most of the reports in the English-language press are written by people who are not even present at these events, let alone actively taking part. Too often press coverage refers to us as rioters or a mob, and at other times as senseless noise makers. The difference between what the press reports and what my neighbors and I experience point to the "frequent tension between received interpretation and practical experience" within emergent structures of feeling. The manifs casseroles are "experiences to which the fixed forms" of press coverage "do not speak at all" (Williams 1977, 130). As social experiences in process and "specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships" (132), the manifs are, as Kathleen Stewart describes of ordinary affects, "rooted not in fixed conditions of possibility but in the actual lines of potential that a *something* coming together calls to mind and sets in motion" (2007, 2). The manifs produce collective feeling through the co-presence of people sounding together bodies and instruments, car horns and whistles, as we move through our neighborhood streets. This feeling "pick [s] up density and texture" as it moves. The longer I march, the more collectively bound I feel to others, each night. This process of making music with others, of moving in rhythm, not on the dance floor but in the middle of major thoroughfares like rue St. Denis, Jean Talon, St. Laurent, Beaubien, Sherbrooke, Christophe Colombe, René-Lévesque and others, is an animating circuit of collectivity. I've never felt anything like it before because such collective feeling is unique to these and other similar conditions that social movements around the world create – like the Quebec and Chilean student movements right now.

As "literally moving things," (Stewart, 4), then, the manifs are best grasped from a perspective on, and in, their movement. In addition to our own participation in them, video recordings shot from balconies and from the streets of protest become moving image and sound witnesses to this phenomenon. I encourage you to watch and listen to the youtube videos I have linked to above. Against press representations that dismiss the manifs as merely noise, or "deafening sound," as Patrick Lagace of *La Presse* put it in his blog post of May 23, what you will see and hear modeled there is a

collective politics of sounding in the city, neighborhood by neighborhood. Now grab your drum and join us!

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