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OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF "CASSEROLES"
textes qui bougent au rythme du carré rouge
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Quebec's Noisy Revolution: Social Dramaturgies of the "Maple Spring"

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The social movement born out of the 2012 student strikes has been firmly branded as the *Printemps Erable*– or Maple Spring. If the 1960s and 70s saw Quebec's Quiet Revolution, this uprising may well become known as the Noisy Revolution. By the end of May 2012 people could be heard clanging on pots and pans in protest across the province every night. It had truly become a movement that one could hear, see and breathe – a movement replete with its own self-generated soundtrack, costumes and mascots. It had become a movement through which political unrest and an array of social dramaturgies coalesced to spark new forms of collective subjectivity and actualized a host of collective actions.

By the end of May, the movement could loosely be divided into three phases, each punctuated by a massive march on the 22nd of each month, each of which gathering 200 000 to 400 000 thousand or more protesters. The first, oriented primarily toward defending accessible education and fighting privatization models of education and other social services; the second, toward defending the commons more generally, wherein stronger links were made with environmental groups; and the third, in defense of freedom of expression and public assembly. Each of these phases was articulated by distinct social dramaturgies. At all three phases of the movement, attacks of a performative order have been launched against protest tactics: either they were too 'festive' or too 'violent'. In both cases the attacks occlude the actual socio-political transformation that is being enacted in the streets.

Quebec's Quiet Revolution secured a host of rights and promises. Amongst them, accessible Post-Secondary Education was promised and tuition rates were frozen at a low rate. Indeed, much of Quebec's distinct identity was founded on its commitment to egalitarian principles and resistance to neoliberal policies. Thus when in 2012 the Charest government announced a 75% tuition hike over 3 years, Quebec students did what students in Quebec have always done when tuition hikes were proposed: they went on strike. However, the red squares worn by protestors are clear symbolic referents, not specifically against tuition hikes, but to the rejection of debt culture and the systems that have put a large portion of students and graduates "squarely in debt" – carrément dans le rouge. The use of symbolism in the movement, of which the red square is the most salient, functions less as a means of communicating or evoking a message and more as performative; in wearing the red square one not only "shows" one's solidarity; one in effect becomes part of the movement. What the movement is, exactly, has thus morphed and grown with its participants.

From the outset, the oppositional project of resisting tuition hikes was paired with positive projects enacted with the spirit: "out of the classrooms and into the streets", which joined symbolic and real action. There was the action known as the "red line": every morning at 8:30 am, students dressed in red would board the metro together in silence and get on and off at every station (for maximum visibility) until they got to school. Dance students continued training on the streets with slow Butoh walks ("don't slow down our education"); theatre students constructed giant puppets and group imaging actions to create a vision of the world they would like; design students formed "l'Ecole de la Montagne Rouge" and developed images for the movement (including the branding of "Printemps Erable"); philosophers, historians, geographers, law students all formed working groups and gave public lectures. These actions are reminiscent of what Kershaw discussed in 1997 as the "New Dramaturgy of Protest": a dramaturgy which, unlike traditional workers movements which functioned according to a set script of a march ending in a rally with designated speakers, have rather tended to be "other directed", with decentralized leadership, and a multiplicity of performance scripts, giving rise to a multiplicity of interpretations by participants, spectators and media outlets (Kershaw, 1997). The point of the student strike was never to take a hiatus from schoolwork, but to allow people to re-vision and actualize another model of education - an education that would be publicly accessible, publicly visible and allow for public participation.

Despite the multiplicity of events and actions, the dominant dramaturgy, remained the often highly improvised street marches. In the first month of the student strike, marches took place daily, reclaiming the streets and sometimes blocking bridges – actions which themselves combined the real with the symbolic - oriented toward disrupting the systems that were enacting the institutional violence of silencing and indebting youth. The second major march, on April 22nd, corresponding with international Earth Day, combined concern for Quebec's recently released Plan Nord, a multi-billion dollar project which seeks to develop the entire Northern Region for mining and hydro-electric energy, with the broader concern for protecting social services. The march was literally shepherded and choreographed so that when photographed from above, the march would be seen to form the image of a tree. It marked a broadening of the movement to that of protecting the commons.

In the weeks both leading up to and following the Earth Day and solidarity march, involvement from the community became far more widespread and the cast of characters and theatrical tactics aimed at popularizing the movement and easing rising tension came to be known. A CEGEP [CEGEPs are Quebec educational institutions, post-high school and pre-university (ed.)]professor in a panda suit became the de-facto mascot of the movement as Anarchopanda, allowing the presence of the cute and cuddly bear to defuse tension with the police, and to raise morale. For the most part, the spectacular "celebrities" were collective or anonymous, borne out of the creativity of those participating in the movement, which was increasingly becoming a widespread social movement. The vulnerability of

protestors to the system they faced could be seen as spectacularly performed in "naked" protests, where the contrast between the naked bodies in streets and the heavily armed bodies of riot police was vivid; and the simple shock value of naked bodies in the streets was enough to attract attention, allowing nudity to take the place of violence. As Alaimo points out, the resonances of the naked body in protest are many fold but tend to highlight the continuity between bodies, stripped of social adornment, giving rise to a sense of shared vulnerability and a shared strength (Alaimo, 2010). These spectacular acts of creative protest became faces of collective action - not simply a matter of playing to the spectator, but of creating a new collective.

Then, on May 19, Law 78 was declared, which required all gatherings of more than 50 people to be announced at least 8 hours in advance and an itinerary provided. The creativity, spontaneity and non-hierarchical organizing would effectively be crushed. Except the law was immediately defied. On May 22nd what has been described as the largest single act of civil disobedience in Canadian history took place when over 300 000 people took to the streets. Since then, day after day at 8pm, people of all ages have been out on the streets banging pots in support, often starting spontaneous marches of hundreds or thousands of people from various neighbourhoods. These "casserole" protests have been depicted as festive, carnivalesque parades, on the one hand signaling mass support, and on the other hand reducing the movement to a festival. What this form of protest certainly does do is get people, neighbours, out, not once, but daily, talking, celebrating, dreaming together, commonly opposed to the restriction of civic freedom in the name of austerity. It is an affective moment whose power is in its repetition and its ability to encourage neighbours to meet, organize, learn and engage in transforming their city and province together.

In many ways there is nothing 'new' about the performative tactics of the movement here. Teach-ins and theatrical and symbolic action have been staples at protests since the 1960s. There are obvious resonances with May '68 Paris with its large scale general strikes, theatrical actions and excessive police brutality; and with the 1999 Seattle protest which saw the rise of the sense that "another world is possible" through the creation of events whose imagery resonated across the globe and showed the world that even in heart of the Empire resistance was still possible. The branding of the movement as "*Printemps Erable*" pays clear homage to the "Arab Spring" of the previous year, and of course, the flat radical democratic structure of the Occupy movement with its resistance to dominant financial models also leaves an imprint. However, the movement can be assimilated to none of these models. For while the strike was voted, planned and renewed in general assemblies, the multiplication of simultaneous, participatory activities over the course of the ongoing movement, were planned by anyone who wished – a phenomenon that continually baffled the government, which sought to hold student leaders responsible for the activities of not only all students, but all their citizen supporters.

In many ways the movement has been more intense and militant than "Occupy"; it has clear goals and proposals voted on in general assemblies and a need to protect the democratic decisions taken therein; it has come face to face with institutional violence and has disrupted the regular functioning of certain institutions, in order to be heard and to enact a change when the government refuses to negotiate. But at the core of the movement there is equally a creative, decentralized positive project that brings with it an energy of the carnivalesque with its joyful throwing off of hierarchy – not because people are resistant to doing the "real work" of negotiating, analyzing and building the systems they want to see, but because such systems must be built collectively, and such collectives begin with reaching out to collective vulnerability and the collective power of those who will do, and are doing, this work - together.

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