The politics of pleasure: Is there a place for partying in the revolution?

In pursuit of this question, Michelle Lhooq takes Document inside Seattle's autonomous zone and through the history of protest

Michelle Lhooq

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One afternoon in June, I stepped out of my house in Hollywood and fell down a rabbit hole. Standing at a crosswalk, I heard beating drums and an approaching crowd, and suddenly found myself swept away in a tide of extremely hyped young people dripping in streetwear, linking arms, and holding up signs with slogans like, RACISM IS SMALL DICK ENERGY! The heat of so many sweaty bodies after months of sterile isolation was overwhelming. I'm a music and weed journalist, and the last time I found myself in a massive throng of turned-up young people was... Coachella. *This feels like Big Festival Energy*, I thought.

"Protestchella"—what I started calling that Hollywood protest in jest—was organized by the superstar rapper YG and Black Lives Matter Los Angeles and ended up drawing 50,000 people, making it the largest George Floyd protest in LA yet. It was a scene: YG filmed the music video for his protest song "Fuck Donald Trump" at the march; Vanessa Hudgens showed up in a Gucci mask; and ravers hula-hooped like they were at Burning Man.

The backlash on social media was swift and biting: "Stop treating the protests like Coachella!" tweeted the popular account @influencersinthewild, which further fanned the flames by posting videos of glamorous influencers posing for selfies with Black Lives Matter signs. "People are risking their LIVES going to these protests. They are NOT an aesthetic, they are NOT A TREND and they are NOT your chance at a photo shoot!" said another viral tweet that racked up 40.5k likes.

This is hardly the first time issues surrounding respect have emerged in the centuries-old fight for racial justice. Similar discourse also reared its head during the civil rights movement, when Black Americans were instructed by others in their communities to distance themselves from negative stereotypes associated with the working poor, in order to "prove" themselves worthy to white America. In a striking reversal, the demands to behave more respectfully at Protestchella were mainly coming from Black Twitter and directed at white people attending the marches.

"A protest isn't a party" was the refrain I kept seeing on social media. It haunted me that summer like a song stuck on loop.

The criticism of Protestchella represents the complex optics of a political movement playing out on social media, where everyone is expected to take a stand but not look like they're capitalizing off it—or having too much fun. Yet, historically, the lines between partying and protesting have always been blurry. For example, in the '90s, Reclaim the Streets, a direct-action movement against corporate globalization, drew heavily from UK rave culture, while anti-sectarianism demonstrations in Lebanon in 2019 saw all-night DIY raves hosted at protest sites and abandoned buildings across the country. In September 2020, hundreds of protesters from climate-activist group Extinction Rebellion threw a dance party outside Buckingham Palace in an act of "civil disco-bedience."

So what *is* the place of partying and pleasure in the revolution? I decided to pack my bags and jump further down the rabbit hole, spending months chasing protests in pursuit of the answer.

A political revolution over racism and police brutality unfolding in the midst of a global pandemic results in a set of unprecedented conditions. A *New York Times* headline in June stated, "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History," the article going on to note that 15-26 million people in America had participated in protests in recent weeks—a scale that considerably overshadows the '60s civil rights marches. The *Times* ticked off factors that are fueling this mass movement, including the decentralized reach of social media and an influx of young, wealthy white allies.

I suspected there was another factor at play, one that belonged more to the realm of the sensual and unconscious. Protestchella fell on the same weekend that LA was emerging from three months of lockdown. With nightlife, festivals, and concerts all canceled for the foreseeable future, the usual social pressure valves were no longer viable, and protests were one of the only socially acceptable places to publicly blow off steam—so that's exactly what people did.

Twentieth-century Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin described this atmosphere as "carnivalesque"—his term for the playful spirit of popular medieval festivities that temporarily upend the dominant order. Carnivalesque protest tactics—which span laughter, costumes, dancing, and theater—have been instrumental to resistance movements throughout history, especially against a state regarded as rigid and humorless. The 2013 Gezi Park occupation in Turkey began with people walking around the park dressed as clowns, mimes, and other fantastical characters, chanting and dancing to the sound of drums, as Tijen Tunali noted in *The European Journal of Humour Research*. As images of police beating a man dressed as an angel went viral on social media, the joyous exuberance of the protesters in the face of brutal police violence weakened the state's authority as arbiter of punishment and fear. Protesters even adopted a slogan from young radicals in 1960s Paris: "Laughter is a revolutionary act."

Carnivalesque forms of protest are often dismissed as frivolous or eccentric, yet the state recognizes their destabilizing potential. During 2011's Occupy Wall Street, the police arrested protesters for wearing masks, citing an obscure 19th-century ban. Similarly, Hong Kong tried to curb protests in 2019 by invoking its colonial-era emergency powers to ban masks, but that didn't stop protesters from showing up on Halloween night in masks decorated with flashing LEDs and the defaced visages of leaders. "It's our freedom to wear masks," a protester told Al Jazeera. "We are going to this mask parade to try to have some fun in these difficult times." Carnival protest tactics aren't limited to costume; they can also be situated in the carnal. This summer, a protester nicknamed Naked Athena showed up fully nude, waltzing across the front lines of a protest in Portland, Oregon. Photos of her sitting on the ground with her arms outstretched and legs spread open, facing a wall of police officers in full riot gear, went viral. "I'm a sex worker," she told a local podcast. "My nakedness is political, and it is my expression."

"Carnival isn't merely a cultural practice recuperated by the global anarchist movement," wrote Claire Tancons in an e-flux article titled "Occupy Wall Street: Carnival

Against Capital? Carnivalesque as Protest Sensibility." "It harks back to ancient human archetypes in calling for a reversal of the status quo as a means to mediate between opposite ends of the social spectrum and to create a shared, if fleeting, space to live side by side—a sort of Foucauldian heterotopia, or lived utopia." If the carnival allows oppressive forms of thought to be cleared out from the collective psyche, it should come as little surprise that Los Angeles would be the site of this spiritual saging.

On the same weekend as Protestchella, a very different battleground was taking shape in Seattle. Following weeks of violent clashes between Black Lives Matter protesters and police, the latter abandoned their precinct in the city's Capitol Hill neighborhood on June 8. Protesters pitched tents and set up barricades in the area surrounding the precinct, declaring that the six-block occupied space would be a no-cop zone until their demands—to defund the Seattle police department and reinvest in Black communities—were met. CHAZ (Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone), which was later renamed CHOP (Capitol Hill Occupied Protest), would soon become the most infamous autonomous zone to take root in America in recent memory.

Popularized by the anarchist writer Hakim Bey in 1991, the term "temporary autonomous zone" is often used to describe self-governing liberated spaces that operate free from state control. These ephemeral enclaves are alternatives to more permanent models of revolution: They exist only for a moment, as brief bursts of freedom experienced at maximum intensity, before they dissolve again into the darkness, or are inevitably snuffed out by the state. "Like festivals, uprisings cannot happen every day—otherwise they would not be 'non-ordinary,' " Bey wrote in his seminal text, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone*. "But such moments of intensity give shape and meaning to the entirety of a life." (The darker side of autonomous zones, and their potential for abuse, must be considered when engaging with this theory. Bey was also an admitted pedophile, and critics like writer Robert P. Helms allege that his autonomous zone theory is "no more than a 'Neverland' on the anarchist landscape.")

I had first learned of temporary autonomous zones through the rave community—and now that there was a real autonomous zone flourishing in Seattle, I was obsessed. I watched nonstop media coverage of the events unfolding there, which spanned from pop-up farmers markets to con- versation cafés, block parties, film screenings, and a community vegetable garden. It looked like paradise. "We could have a summer of love!" enthused Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan, in an interview with CNN.

At the same time, I was becoming quickly disillusioned with the relative lack of political engagement in the rave communities I've long been a part of. I would sometimes run into ravers at marches, but for the most part, the scene seemed more comfortable doing virtual parties at home than hitting the streets. Whenever I met DJs playing music at rallies, they would tell me they felt the same way. "I definitely don't think enough people from the rave community have been coming out to protests," said Ashanti Hall, a DJ from Portland's drum and bass scene, who I met during a protest in Washington, DC, that had erupted into police slinging tear gas, rubber bullets, and flash-bangs at protesters. "I think some of them are scared—ravers are generally not aggressive or

violent people, and the protests aren't necessarily dangerous, but they're portrayed as such in the media."

"I also think rave culture's emphasis on unity means sometimes people don't want to talk about racism—they just want to dance," Hall continued. "That's also why a lot of this music doesn't have lyrics. There's always been an element of escapism."

One morning, I woke up to a voice text from my friend Gregory Scruggs, a freelance journalist in Seattle who I knew from our earlier days as rave reporters. "In the past few years, there has been a strong effort to bring sociopolitical consciousness to music festival culture— everything from calling out Native American headdresses to fighting for gender equality on festival lineups," Gregory mused. "Now it feels like things are happening in reverse: People are bringing music festival tactics and party energy to the protests—camping out like they would at Coachella, except it's in front of an abandoned police station! The idea that you can pitch tents and create an autonomous zone is being applied to protest occupations in the fight to defund the police."

Gregory said he'd just attended a music festival at the CHOP organized by protesters. The lineup was mostly BIPOC rock bands—Seattle is the birthplace of Jimi Hendrix, after all—but there was one rave tent way out in the park, where a bunch of DJs were playing jungle, dub, and drum and bass. He noted that many of the people in the crowd looked like the types he'd see at a West Coast music festival like Lightning in a Bottle or Burning Man. "With so many enterprising vendors selling Black Lives Matter t-shirts and face masks, there's no way to not think of it as festival swag," he added, noting that the comparison wasn't a diss. "It's like the whole Bakhtin thing—there is radical and revolutionary potential in cultural celebrations, including raves and festivals." By enticing people from all over the world with its carnivalesque atmosphere, Gregory posited that the CHOP was encouraging Americans to reassess their basic assumptions about policing, white supremacy, and racism writ large.

After getting Gregory's messages, I realized that in order to understand the protest-party energy converging in this autonomous zone, I had to go straight to the source. So I took a risky flight in the middle of the pandemic and landed 252 in Seattle soon after, crashing in Gregory's basement. By the time I arrived at the CHOP in late June, a rash of gun violence in the vicinity of the zone had resulted in several deaths, and the vibe had drastically shifted from its earlier euphoria to a febrile and tense energy. The CHOP was now viewed as a dangerous place to be, and the crowds that used to flock there had thinned. In addition to the shootings, people told me that drug overdoses and violent altercations were also common, and leaders of the camp would often walk around, telling people it was not a music festival and discouraging them from drinking in order to prevent more fights. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was showing up to a party after its climax. Even though people warned me that the CHOP could get hairy once night fell, I decided to check it out one evening. I walked past the armed security at the barricades and took in my dystopian surroundings. Every wall was covered in protest graffiti, and a few dozen protesters were hanging out between scattered tents on the sidewalks. A drunk guy wandered up and asked to take my photograph, reeking

of alcohol. Standing outside the abandoned police precinct, I met Mark, one of the leaders of the zone. When I later asked him about the carnivalesque energy, he told me that one reason it was a problem was because the people who were getting too drunk or high were taking up resources—including donations, food, and other people's time—that could be going toward the cause of defunding the police.

"There's nothing wrong with relaxing with a drink at the end of the day, but people came here to shoot music videos, dressed like they were going to the club," Mark told me, echoing my experience at Protestchella. "They treated the CHOP like it was the parking lot of a club, parking lot pimping. Having that environment was bringing too many problems. We couldn't handle their alcohol or drug choices. We weren't trying to take responsibility for that behavior."

"At the same time," he added, "we welcomed people experiencing homelessness and mental illness. It was just a matter of: Are you here to be a part of, or detract from, this movement?" On my next night at the CHOP, a group of twenty- somethings waved me down and quickly divulged they were intoxicated on a cocktail of substances, including ecstasy and heroin. "Finish this," one said, tossing me a bag of shrooms. His colorful kandi bracelet spelled out BREATHE, in reference to Floyd's last words.

The rest of the night unfolded in cascading scenes of beautiful epiphanies and terrifying chaos. I witnessed drunken brawls between campers, people having psychotic breakdowns, medics attempting to revive a woman who was overdosing, and I was even followed around by a creep with a maniacal laugh. All of this left me with a sinking sense of disappointment and disillusionment: I'd made a pilgrimage to this autonomous zone seeking a radical vision of what a society free from police violence could look like. Instead, I was being presented with the darkest and messiest entrails of society. Was this a sign that a cop-free world would result in more chaos and violence?

At the same time, I watched the antifa security team successfully de-escalate conflicts with an extreme empathy that I've never seen police display when dealing with similar situations. When a man started having a drunken meltdown and slinging around offensive slurs—and actual trash—they stepped in to soothe him, calmly provided medical treatment for an injury on his leg, and helped him walk back to his tent. I also met many young activists who inspired me with their dedication to the cause, including a group of hippie kids who'd been traveling around to protests all over the country. As dawn broke, I met a homeless trans woman who had been living in a tent in the community garden and had become one of the leaders of the space. She told me that over the past few weeks, she'd witnessed a level of kinship and camaraderie between strangers from all walks of life that she'd never thought possible. "This place means everything to me," she said, eyes glistening with tears. "It's given me something to believe in again."

The shrooms in my system helped soften the harsh judgments I'd originally leveled at the autonomous zone's failed potential. Eventually, I started to understand that many of the issues I was witnessing were endemic to society and not just the autonomous zone: Substance abuse, for example, can be a coping mechanism for all kinds

of trauma, including racism and systemic oppression. While drug-induced meltdowns would usually be dealt with punitively, here, people were permitted to work through their trauma without fear of having the cops called on them. By the time I stum- bled back home at dawn, I had come to understand that autonomous zones don't have to be peaceful and orderly to be considered a success. While their messy chaos is often misconstrued by the wider public as symptoms of their dysfunction, what was really happening was the revelation of long-simmering social ills typically masked by the chokehold of the police state. At their essence, autonomous zones allow their inhabitants to viscerally experience the possibility of another world, while also suggesting that this radical re-envisioning will not come easily.

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