# Dada in the Public Square: Police, Protest, and Creative Dissent

*The Republican National Convention in Cleveland culminated one of the craziest party nominating contests in history. Many people on both the left and the right were dissatisfied with the result—the coronation of Donald J. Trump. Trump's rhetoric throughout the primary season had been incendiary, and had led to protests, sometimes violent, at his events. Because of this, security in Cleveland was extremely tight, and progressive groups, including the ACLU, sued in advance over worries that citizens' rights to free speech were going to be unconstitutionally restricted. As a result, the police presence in Cleveland was overwhelming. They manned barricades on foot, on horseback, on bicycles, and in cars—totaling nearly 5,500 in all. This made protesting very difficult, and forced protesters to become creative in expressing their dissent.*

*This article describes the situation in Cleveland, and shows how dissent—in the spirit of the now century-old Dada movement that rose up in response to World War I—still finds a way to express itself, even when this dissent must become shocking and outrageous to gain voice and show the true absurdity of an undemocratic situation.*

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If the Dada Movement was about anything, it was about protest. It was about resistance. It was about pushing back. Dada made space for artists and citizens to say no to the incipient nationalism that many believed gave rise to the horrors of World War I. At its best, Dada artists from across the spectrum—poets, painters, novelists, photographers, and more—used techniques of shock and mockery to draw attention to the way bourgeois society tends to reinforce inequality while ignoring obvious injustice. At the heart of Dada is the anti-: It is anti-modernity. Anti-industry. Anti-establishment. Anti-getting along.

I begin this essay with this short reminder about the national mood of resistance that gave rise to Dadaism because what made the movement relevant then is what makes it relevant now. Many experts agree that there is a dangerous spirit of nationalism that contributed to the election of Donald J. Trump in 2016 and that has permeated American culture since the attacks of September 11, 2001, as well (Burney, 2002; Lieven, 2016). However, in this essay I will go beyond the usual forms of artistic resistance, to consider instead public forms of protest. In so doing, I will highlight how American citizens have begun to incorporate Dada-like practices in exercising their First Amendment rights of speech and assembly. Even as this has happened, the state has become ever more militant in resisting these citizen protests. Thus, while the courts have moved since the early 1930s to open public streets and parks to the people for speaking, for protest, and for art, the government has taken steps wherever possible to still circumscribe these popular rights. So, while citizens are freer than ever to agitate against elected leaders, against controversial policies, and against candidates for office, engaging this kind of speech often requires standing in front of police or moving through military-like barricades. In the highest of ironies, sometimes citizens who wish to speak out forcefully against perceived practices of institutionalized and ongoing police brutality find themselves having to articulate their arguments in front of the very law enforcement officers they are protesting against. Even so, the bravest and most outrageous of these speakers are not deterred but rather find ways to draw visual and aural attention away from the amassed police forces and to their messages of anger and change. They do this by adding speech-plus elements to their protests, items that serve to visibly shock passersby and so draw them into their performances: objects like handmade T-shirts with outrageous messages; posters with extreme slogans; and improbable props, even including the fecal droppings left by the horses of mounted

police. These dissents based in absurdity find resonance with the artists of Dada: For example, Emmy Hennings once donned a Madonna mask and performed the splits onstage while dancing with Hans Arp. And then there was Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, who Holland Cotter of the New York Times once described as "a public event, a proto-Happening. She painted her shaved head red. She wore a tomato-can bra, a bustle with a taillight and a bird cage around her neck with live canaries inside" (Cotter, 2002). Through costume and dance each of these women embraced Dada's spirit of anti-, its "principle of nonacquiescence," in Ezra Pound's words, that refused to allow either meaning or critique to fully close.

There are many places we could look to find incidents where the state has tried to limit protest, and yet people have found ways to speak and protest just the same. Indeed, as I have suggested, while the rights to petition and assembly are firmly ensconced in the First Amendment, they are not always as well affirmed or appreciated by government officials as they might be. But the 2016 Republican National Convention (RNC) in Cleveland, Ohio, represents an especially poignant example. I argue this for the following three reasons:

- The expectations for protest at the RNC were especially high. The convention took place after a highly charged race for the Republican presidential nomination that finally culminated with the coronation of Donald Trump as the party's candidate. Trump's rhetoric throughout the primary season had been incendiary and had led to protests, sometimes violent, at his events. Because of this, security in Cleveland was extremely tight, and progressive groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), sued in advance over worries that citizens' rights to free speech were going to be unconstitutionally restricted.
- Related to the first point, the police presence in Cleveland was overwhelming. They manned literal barricades on foot, on horseback, on bicycles, and in cars. They represented organizations including the Cleveland Police Department, the Ohio State police, the Ohio state National Guards, the Secret Service, the FBI, and many other federal agencies, as well. Within the "event zone" that I will highlight later in this essay, one could not move more than 10 or 15 feet without running into a law enforcement officer of some kind.
- This barricading and police presence relegated protests against Trump and Republicans out of sight and, strangely, left those wishing to mock Clinton or lambast other progressive causes (or perceived progressive threats) with the more premiere viewing space that delegates had to pass as they entered the main convention gates. Even so, individuals who wanted to protest either Trump's candidacy or police policies found ways to make use of their limited space several blocks away and so were able to shock those who saw them into taking stock of their claims.

To summarize, much like the original Dada movement came about in response to disillusionment over the brutality of World War I and the spirit of unquestioned nationalism many believed allowed that conflict to rage, so today's protesters are striking back against state practices that seek to silence them. These state actors, too, claim to be working for the citizenry's overall benefit but in so doing close down spaces for speaking and so limit the very political and democratic rights that a free government is supposed to protect. When this happens, similar assertions of nationalism that undergirded the Dada movement in the early part of the 20th century appear again as state legitimations for the need for extra security and in state discourses about how a strong police presence actually works to protect freedom rather than restrict it. That is, when officials explain their reasons for sending police and other law enforcement officers out into protest zones, or for setting up barricaded protest areas, the reasons they give are usually about the need to safeguard the community from possible harm. These official rationalizations, in turn, create formalized rhetorical divisions between those citizens who are dangerous because they dare to dissent from the government who means to protect them and the safe but silent majority. This, in turn, sets up a dynamic where people passing by protest zones often feel compelled to thank those in law enforcement for their service—for standing in harm's way. These remarks of gratitude, moreover, are often framed in terms that imagine that what the officers are doing represent acts of national sacrifice: a willingness to put their own selves and safety on the line for the innocent who do not speak out against power or security. Read in a particular way, then, these comments are actually strikes against the very protesters who are availing themselves of cherished political liberties. I argue that Dada-like forms of shocking dissent work to counteract these tendencies to read protest as threatening and reframe protest as a necessary strand of public discourse that

questions power and so returns voice to marginalized populations.

## A Brief History of Free Speech Jurisprudence in the Public Sphere

Like most free speech rights in the United States, rights to petition and assembly in America are not absolute. Rather, they can be circumscribed according to constraints of "time, place, and manner so as to conserve the public convenience" (*Cox v. New Hampshire,* 1941), as long as these regulations are *content neutral* (*Virginia Pharmacy Board v. Virginia Consumer Council,* 1976) and *narrowly tailored* to serve a significant government interest (*Shuttlesworth v. Birmingham,* 1969). Case law has evolved on this front, moving from a restrictive interpretation that favored government rights to intervene to a more liberal approach that favors citizen rights to free speech (*Davis v. Massachusetts,* 1897; *Hague v. CIO,* 1939). An essential case on this front was the *Hague* decision, where Owen J. Roberts, writing for a plurality of the Court, wrote that, "Wherever the title of streets and parks may rest, they have immemorially been held in trust for the use of the public. . . . And [may only be] regulated *in the interest of all*" (*Hague v. CIO, 1*939) (emphasis mine). Thus, while this decision did not provide the people with unfettered rights to public places, it did provide citizens "a kind of First Amendment easement"—to use constitutional scholar Harry Kalven's words (Kalven, 1965). As such, *Hague* affirmed the longstanding common law tradition that citizens should have relatively free access to public spaces, including public parks and streets, for meetings, for protest, or for any other peaceable reason.

But what does it mean for the state to keep open the streets and parks "in the interest of all"? Dissenting speech invites dissenting views. The policy that inspires ire in some encourages advocacy from others. And so, this is the rub. The question is: When tensions are high, what is the state's obligation to maintaining order and peace while also allowing for speech that might cause offense? What is the trade-off between freedom and safety?

## The 2016 Republican National Convention in Cleveland

The 2016 Republican National Convention took place in the aftermath of a highly charged nomination contest. Seventeen candidates initially entered the GOP primary race, and almost no one expected the outcome it produced: Donald J. Trump as the Republican nominee. On his way to snagging this brass ring, Trump had managed to offend nearly everyone, including most of his opponents and wide swaths of the American people. He had engaged in name-calling: There was "Low-Energy Jeb," "Crazy Bernie," "Lyin' Ted," "Little Marco," and, finally, "Crooked Hillary." He insulted immigrants, especially Mexicans, calling them "rapists and murderers" and repeatedly promising to build a "great wall" to keep "illegals" out. He disparaged women and suggested that people of color all lived in crime-riddled ghettos without hope.

Collectively, these remarks sparked escalating levels of protest. Frequently at rallies for the New York billionaire, his supporters struck individuals who came to protest his candidacy (Graham, 2016a); other times, Trump protesters punched Trump supporters (Friedersdorf, 2016). Then, in June, various groups on the left joined under the "People for Bernie" moniker and decided to confront Trump protesters directly. Via Facebook, more than 11,000 people RSVP'd to attend a campaign event in Chicago, and, according to NBC, the site eventually garnered 1.5 million followers in all (Seitz-Wald, 2016). In response, the Trump campaign had to cancel the event due to safety concerns. This incident, along with others like it, increased concerns over possible protests at the RNC and set into motion plans for unprecedented levels of security including, initially, a 3.5-mile "event zone" that seemed to have provisions that would work to severely curtail speaking rights. The ACLU filed suit against these protest restrictions and eventually won some concessions first in court and then, pending appeal, through negotiation. The protest zone was shrunk down to about half of its original size; the protest parade route was lengthened from one mile to 1.25 miles, and protest parades were allowed for one hour longer each day than first stipulated (from 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. instead of 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.); speakers were permitted to use elevated surfaces like picnic tables for speeches, in addition to the official speaker's platform that was set up in the Public Square (Tobias, 2016b).

Even so, protesting would not be easy. For the duration of the convention, 5,500 total law enforcement officers were assigned to the city of Cleveland, most all to the area of the event zone. This meant that there was one cop for just more than every nine of the estimated 50,000 visitors gathered in the city for the convention, including 2,470 delegates and 2,302 alternate delegates. Law enforcement personnel included 500 Cleveland police officers; 2,000 out-of-state officers brought in on a temporary basis; and 3,000 federal officers, representing the Secret Service, the FBI, and others (Rascon, 2016). It

was hard to imagine that these officers were mostly concerned about the behavior of those delegates and alternate delegates. Rather, their purpose was to protect them from possible threats. But threats from whom or from what?

One possibility was terrorism—or at least its alleged threat. In 2010, the ACLU released a report detailing how the years since the attacks of September 11 had seen government officials at all levels try to silence dissent in favor of an insistence on patriotic discourse (ACLU, 2003). This included foreclosing access to public sidewalks and spaces in previously unthinkable ways and to seemingly harmless populations. To wit, in 2003 in Maryland the ACLU had to step in to assist a small group of "Women in Black" who were being prevented from holding a silent candlelight vigil near the Baltimore Harbor in protest against the Iraq War and also in support of these same Women in Black, along with some Girl Scouts, who were holding similar vigils on the sidewalk in front of the Westminster city library (ACLU, 2003, pp. 7–8). In St. Louis, also in 2003, war protesters faced police blockades and were forced off of city streets in the aftermath of a large peace rally. The ACLU report further alleged that at the St. Louis incident:

> Some were thrown to the ground or against squad cars, and . . . [s]ome said they were handcuffed, and then maced after the cuffs were on, and that the arresting officers hurled epithets—"traitor," "anti-American," "unpatriotic"—at them for opposing the war. (ACLU, 2003, p. 10)

While each of these examples reaches back to 2003 and so could conceivably show a problem of waning relevance; I suggest that a better takeaway is a now longstanding tendency on the part of government officials to try to stop dissent in its tracks under the guise that security depends on national unity. This type of nationalist instinct was, of course, at the heart of the Dada critique, to which I will shortly return. However, in understanding the situation in Cleveland, and how protest was allowed-but-also-not during the RNC, we must return to the question of protection and the 5,500 police at hand. They were there to provide security from possible terrorism and also, it seems, from protesters.

These few examples from Maryland and St. Louis make clear how the government has linked the problem of terrorism to the (imagined) problem of protest. This linkage, I argue, is essential because it allows government officials to use a tangible fear (pictures from 9/11 are always readily available, and small, but real, attacks have taken place since then) to leverage citizen support against an intangible threat: citizen dissent against establishment politics, including party politics and, even more pronounced, citizen protest against the police.

To this end, the assembled forces in Cleveland seemed to have expected misbehavior. Given the following facts, it is hard to imagine their amassed presence was meant to assure the right of citizens to "peaceably assemble and petition the Government for a redress of grievances" but rather to make such protest as difficult as possible. In preparation for demonstrations, the Cleveland police purchased for the RNC 10,000 extra sets of plastic handcuffs, cleared 1,000 beds in the local jails for possible arrests, ordered 300 bikes for police to use in the primary purpose of crowd control, and—perhaps most significantly—installed 3.7 miles of interlocking security fencing (known as "global fencing") that allowed officials to set up "two rings" of security. This included a "Secret Service secure zone directly around the Quicken Loans Arena" where the main of the RNC was held and the aforementioned "event zone" that stretched out for 1.7 miles from the Cleveland waterfront to the center of downtown (Rascon, 2016). Designated protest areas were inside the event zone but not easily within eyesight of the Quicken Loans arena. In fact, they were several blocks away. I attended the RNC in Cleveland. Finding these protest areas took some work. There is no reason any delegate would have seen them, absent deliberate intent. Finally, at the end of June, the city purchased $50 million in protest insurance. By comparison, the City of Tampa only purchased $1.7 million worth of this insurance in 2012 (Graham, 2016b). This suggests that Cleveland expected trouble—and a lot of it.

There is little doubt that the Trump candidacy in 2016 sparked high levels of tension and rougher forms of protest than is typical for presidential campaigns or, really, most any form of protest. I do not mean to suggest otherwise. What I do mean to suggest is that the official response to this protest was not to look for ways to allow citizens to express dissenting views but rather to narrow access through practices of intimidation and limiting space. I further argue that these official techniques of encouraging disengagement ultimately work against democracy because, as Thomas Emerson, among others, has argued, free speech in the public sphere has an important safety valve function. That is, the "normal give and take of democratic society provides dissenters with a range of peaceful methods to achieve their goals" and gain attention to their objections, without having to resort to violence

**Figure 1** (Left) Map of the "event zone, approximately 1.7 miles across. The darker brown area near the Quicken Loans Arena is the Secret Service Security Zone, which required special badging to access. Map courtesy of City of Cleveland.

**Figure 2** (Right) Steel fencing surrounded the perimeter of both the event zone and the SSSZ. It was at least 10 feet tall and hard to see through.

(Rienzi, 2000; Emerson, 1970). However, when the safety valve closes, protesters must begin to look for other means of being heard. One choice is belligerence and destruction.[1] Another is mockery and shock.

## The Visual Mechanics of Cleveland's Police Response to Protest

To understand how protest was limited and made nearly impossible in Cleveland, consider first the size and scope of the event zone (Figure 1).

As the map in Figure 1 makes clear, even the smaller event zone was huge and encompassed a space much larger than the area near Quicken Loans Arena, where the main events of the RNC were held, along with the Cleveland Convention Center next door, which hosted media row, the main working site for journalists assigned to the convention. Indeed, the event zone made life difficult not only for protesters but also for anyone who might live or work nearby and so be faced with trying to deal unnecessarily with the rules and regulations set in place by the heightened security. There were the students and professors of Cleveland State University, an active urban campus, even in the summer. There were the denizens of the homeless encampment that had long existed nearby the campus and whose residents owned many items that convention organizers had banned—items including tennis balls, string, padlocks, tents and, even toy guns (City of Cleveland, 2016). Real guns were allowed in the outer perimeter. Ohio state law permits open carry. And there were the everyday residents of Cleveland, who had the simple bad luck to live and work downtown and so had to contend with the mass police presence and questions about whether or not they had the right to be in their places of employment or in their homes.

The perimeter was marked off on all sides by steel fencing. In the few places where fences could not be installed, concrete barricades or waist-high metal gates were used. But these fixes were the exception, not the rule. The only way to get inside the event zone was by passing through a security checkpoint that included a belongings search. At least three to five officers always staffed these checkpoints, and cars were not allowed to pass unless they had high-level clearance evidenced by a special permit, usually issued by Secret Service. Most of the fencing appeared to be at least 10 feet tall; no pedestrians were taller than the barrier, which was also black and nearly impossible to see through (Figure 2). To be inside the zone was to lose visual contact with the external world (Figure 3); to be outside was to be excluded from events inside the fence (Figure 4). Ironically, although it required special privileges—credentials—to gain access to the event zone (Figure 5), the atmosphere was not one of advantage, rights, or freedom but rather law enforcement and continuous threat.

Inside the metal barricades, police were omnipresent. Moreover, the closer one moved to the Quicken Loans Arena, the thicker with law enforcement the space became. Access to the arena was secured by a second ring of fencing that fortified the Secret Service secure zone (SSSZ), accessible only to delegates and

**Figures 3, 4, and 5** (Left to right) In the few places where high metal fencing was not practical, concrete barriers and metal gating were used instead. To pass into both the event zone, and the SSSZ, all visitors had to pass through security check points, including bag checks.

credentialed media. Passage through here required a perimeter credential, just to be on the exterior of the Quicken Loans Arena, and a Secret Service badge, which required a relatively extensive background check that happened in the month preceding the convention. Entry into media row was managed through press credentials (I had one from CNN because they had hired a number of students from my university's political communication program as interns for the week, granting me access). However, these three passes only granted one access to the SSSZ and media row, not the Arena itself. This required yet another badge, issued daily (Figure 6). Just because one could enter Quicken Loans on Monday to hear Scott Baio's speech did not mean access was assured for Thursday, when Trump gave his acceptance address.

It is important to understand the zoning and badge system of the convention because it

**Figure 6** Entry into the SSSZ required badges, and different areas required different badges. The badging system itself demarcated who was safe and not; belonged and did not.

worked as a continuous visual cue throughout the event for signaling to both law enforcement and participants who belonged and then, by deduction through the lack of proper credentialing, who did not. Badges were only necessary to get inside the SSSZ. Anyone willing to pass through a gate checkpoint could enter the event zone. However, as is always true with permits and authorizations, having them suggested importance—they were the mark of being safe, of being on "the list." As such, I argue, individuals with badges represented the "in crowd" and so acted accordingly. Throughout the four days of the convention (and also during the preparatory weekend days before it), badge wearers often thanked the officers for their service of standing in protection of them. More than once I heard someone make a comment to the effect of, "thank you for putting your life on the line for us." Three times, while riding a bus to or from a nearby press center especially set up for broadcast media, passengers broke out into applause for the Secret Service officer on board, whose only job was to ride back and forth from the main media row site to this extra space. While the officers always remained professional in light of these expressions of gratitude, I argue that their natural effect was to create a sense of solidarity between law enforcement, delegates and, even the media. These were the individuals who obviously—and this is the key—belonged. In the outside event zone, this left those who had come simply to gawk, or to protest, seem all the more suspicious or out of place. But in retrospect, this is odd because national conventions are rituals of democracy (Carey, 2009). While political parties are private organizations, and so access to the conventions can be controlled, they are ultimately about electing a president, which necessarily raises support and indignation from citizens of varying ideologies. That these citizens should feel unwelcome—or via such a tightly controlled space and police presence actually be unwelcome, despite rhetoric to the contrary—was conspicuous and gestured to the practical absence of legitimate care in creating appropriate

**Figures 7 and 8** (Left and Center) There were so many police roaming around the event zone, many appeared to have little to do. Mounted police stop to let delegates pet and admire their horses.

**Figure 9** (Right) Bicycle patrols formed human fences to block and control pedestrian traffic. Photo courtesy of Timothy Fadek.

measures for time, place, and manner for assuring citizen rights to dissenting speech.

In fact, there were so many officers in the event zone that some appeared to have little to do. They would stand in groups among the crowd, mulling, watching (Figure 7). They rode on horses seeming to have nowhere to go and so became willing to stop to allow delegates to gape and pet the animals (Figures 8 and 9). Others were on bicycles and could congregate in long lines to act as physical fences, refusing entry to passersby (Figure 10).

Finally, there were the matters of the designated parade route and the so-called speakers platform, which was located in Cleveland's Public Square. The parade route neatly snaked behind the SSSZ. For all intents and purposes, it was invisible to delegates and media, unless these individuals accidentally happened to be walking by on their way to the convention or intentionally sought it out by having prior knowledge of when a parade protest was taking place. To wit, during the four days of the convention, I never heard a single person mention having seen such a parade.

Public Square sounds like an appropriate place for demonstrations. However, it too was mostly out of sight from the main convention events, a good half-mile walk from Quicken Loans Arena through heavy crowds and past barricades. At the Square, the presence of law enforcement was again ubiquitous. They ringed the plaza. Officers forbade citizen entry, except through small openings between them on the north and south side of the Square. When I went there, I struggled to discern how to enter the protest space, and when I approached an officer with my camera to ask, he refused to answer but held his arm out, with his palm toward me, in the universal stop symbol, indicating that I could not pass by him. Once I finally made my way in, there were yet more police—on foot, on bicycles, everywhere. Their number easily matched the number of protesters present, whose messages ranged from anti-Trump, to anti-police, to anti-queer. There was no unification of message, nor was it entirely clear what area of the Square represented the so-called speakers platform.

My intention in having detailed the setup of the event zone and the SSSZ is to describe how the system of fencing and barricades, along with the overwhelming presence of law enforcement, together worked against a spirit of democracy, debate or—especially—dissent over the four days of the Republican National Convention in Cleveland in July 2016. Instead, the atmosphere was of a kind of police state that ultimately emphasized three things. The first was a sense of threat and the need to protect the country. The RNC was no exception, despite rhetoric in the lead-up to the convention that the creation of the event zone and the speakers platform was meant to "balance between safety, security and the constitutional rights of people" (Tobias, 2016a). The second point of emphasis had to do with the way official credentials bifurcated the convention population between an in-group and an out-group. This was not necessarily intentional but rather the natural outgrowth of heightened security. The need to issue badges to participants to help quickly identify who had permission to enter different convention venues created a solidarity based in gratitude among media, delegates, and law enforcement and so made nonofficial participants, including protesters, seem extraneous, unnecessary, unwelcome, and part of the potential threat. After all, the possibility that the protests could become rowdy or violent was part of the justification for the mass presence of the officers. This, then, points to the third emphasis that resulted from the temporary police-like state: the feeling that dissent, itself, was dangerous. This meant that it was mostly moved out of the sightline of the delegates themselves. Moreover, police literally circled the area near the speakers platform and filled much of the space inside. This made it hard

**Figure 10** (Left) Police ringed the area around Public Square in Cleveland, where protest demonstrations were allowed to take place. Photo © Jim Lo Scalzo.

**Figure 11** (Center) Not all of the protests were from the left. Many were religious, or came to protest gay rights and the recent Supreme Court decision favoring gay marriage.

**Figure 12** (Right) A local Cleveland improv comedy group appeared, and mocked the very act of protest itself. Photo © Ann Nickoloff.

to see or understand much of the protest that was happening. Instead, the message seemed to be that the protest was unwelcome, and the better choice was to stay away. After all, when I approached, the closest officer did not help me enter or understand what was happening but rather used a gesture to turn me back.

The net effect of these three emphases was that there was very little protest or disruption at the RNC in Cleveland. As a *Los Angeles Times* reporter whose beat for the convention was to do nothing but cover those who came to dissent wrote, although "[t]here is enough international media in Cleveland to cover a nuclear catastrophe, it's starting to feel like we're all photographing the same 50 protesters antagonizing one another" (Pearce, 2016). Thus, while technically the city and the Republican National Committee had met the letter of the law in allowing for protest establishing appropriate time, place, and manner regulations, the net effect was a discouragement of speech, particularly in the form of dissenting opinion.

Nonetheless, some still found ways to protest and, among those who did, the strongest messages tended to emanate from shocking, mocking, and creative presentations. There was no way to outshout the police presence. Mass demonstration was made impossible through officer presence and space constraint. However, this power inequality became for protesters a means of contestation that they enacted through Dada-like techniques of dissent.

## Dada in the Public Square

I noted at the start of this essay that the Dada movement was born among artists out of revulsion to the nationalism that gave rise to World War I. As the artist Hans Arp, a German-French pioneer of Dadaism explained, "Revolted by the butchery of the 1914 World War, we . . . devoted ourselves to the arts. While the guns rumbled in the distance, we sang, painted, made collages and wrote poems with all our might" (Young, 1981, p. 14). To some, particularly to those who held traditional values, those whom today we might call the political establishment, creating art as a response to war might have seemed like folly, an impossibly small and illogical response to a worldwide calamity. This is especially true in so far as the art strayed from convention and meant to break norms so as to garner attention by way of shock value. The art of Dada remains easy to notice. However, it does not always follow that it is easy to understand or take seriously. With Dada, "the nonsense factor rings true" (Esaak, 2017).

In much the same way, the means of protest have had to shift toward the outrageous in the contemporary United States, in order to gain visibility or purchase. This, I argue, is largely due to an ever-emergent police presence, which has been justified by calls for increased security in the aftermath of September 11, and rising sentiments of nationalism that terrorism tends to spark (Lieven, 2012). The protests that took place at the RNC were emblematic of this shift. There I saw an activist wearing an adult diaper (unfortunately I was not camera ready). I saw many posters warning me of a coming apocalypse (See Figure 11), and improv comedy groups (See Figure 12), who made a mockery of protest itself. Another protester had haphazardly taped the message "Vets vs. Hate" on the back of his camouflage combat fatigues, using literal red tape. When I took his picture, I asked him why he chose to send his message using this tape. He shrugged said, "If I shout, no one will notice. But this

**Figure 13** This man wrote his message in red tape, to protest both the Republican message and government incompetence in general.

looks weird enough that you're taking my picture. And you're not the first one. And everything government does is just red fucking tape" (see Figure 13).

By far, the most Dada-esque of the protests I saw happened on the west side of the Public Square late Tuesday afternoon, July 19. Demonstrating there was an African American man, Stevedore Crawford, Jr., holding a megaphone, in front of an assembled line of Cleveland police. He was wearing a white T-shirt that he wrote on with a permanent marker. On the front appeared, "TAMIR RICE ONLY." On the back was, "TAMIR RICE HE CAN NEVER RIP MURDERED BY A PIG." Assembled with this protester were three other African Americans, individuals who appeared to be his daughters. These included a young woman in her late teens who was wearing a handmade shirt proclaiming, "TAMIR RICE SON" on the front and red ink seeming to represent blood running down the front and the back; a younger adolescent, maybe 12 or 13, wearing a white sweatshirt with the word BLACK spelled out in block letters; and a younger girl still, maybe five or six, with a shirt whose message closely matched that of her father's (see Figures 14 and 15).

Tamir Rice was a 12-year-old boy who was shot in a park by a Cleveland police officer in 2014. In November of that year, a neighbor had called 911 when she saw Tamir playing in the park, claiming that he had a gun but that it might be a toy. Officers soon thereafter arrived on the scene and gunned Rice down only moments later. The Cleveland Police Department later admitted that it made many mistakes in the case, from failing to relay to the officers who went to the park that the gun was "probably fake," to failing to let them know the person in the park was "probably a juvenile," but successfully transmitting the information that the situation was a "'Code 1,' the department's highest level of urgency" (Dewan & Oppel, 2015). The city ultimately paid the family a $6 million settlement as recompense for what happened, but neither of the officers involved was indicted in the child's death (Smith, 2016).

In fact, the Tamir Rice case was one of the reasons some people, including the ACLU, did not trust the Cleveland police to be fair to protesters and to take their civil right to free speech as seriously as they did the need to provide security during the convention (Graham, 2016b; Ross, 2016). And it was against this backdrop that Crawford's protest on July 19 took

**Figure 14** (Left) Stevedore Crawford, Jr., and two of his three daughters, pictured from the front.
**Figure 15** (Right) Crawford, Jr., from the back, speaking into a megaphone to assembled police.

place. However, speech of objection had been made so difficult and so invisible that it had been almost shut down.[2] Moreover, the Public Square had many competing messages, progressive and conservative alike: supporting and opposing Trump, supporting and opposing LGBTQ rights, supporting and opposing capitalism, and so on. While there was an official "speakers platform," it was not clear where that was or how that orator was privileged above the others. Everyone sought to be creative, and most did so in absurd and nonsensical ways.

However, Crawford's speech about Tamir Rice was shocking beyond the rest. He was also indefatigable. He had begun speaking before I arrived at Public Square at 3:15 p.m., and when I had to depart for a meeting nearly two hours later, he had not stopped. The target of his speech was the very police officers who made up the ring around Public Square. He moved toward them and shouted. He backed away from them and shouted. He bent down to the ground and shouted. He jumped up and down and shouted. He lay down flat on his back and shouted. "Which one of you is a pig?," he asked.

He walked up and down the line of officers staring them in the eyes. He stopped and looked at one of the officers in particular. "Are you a pig? Would you shoot a 12-year-old without thinking? Nah. I guess you wouldn't."

On the far-right end of the line of officers in Crawford's line of sight, there was a pile of dung left behind from one of the mounted police horses. Certainly, Crawford could have avoided the manure by choosing a different lineup of cops for making his presentation or simply moving around it in making his speech. It's what most people would have done. But to do so would have been neither shocking nor outrageous. Crawford began to make the excrement part of his protest (see Figure 16).

"This river of shit runs from me to you," he shouted into his megaphone. Tamir Rice was my son. He was my son, and he was your son, and he can never rest in peace. He can never take a dump again. You don't want to hear that, do you? You don't want to see me standing here in this pile? You don't want to look! Which one of you is a pig? Are you a pig? Would you shoot a 12-year-old without thinking?"

And then he lay down and used the dung for a pillow, kicking his feet against the concrete. After about five seconds, he got up and walked toward his children. "Tamir was my son. He was their brother. He was our family. Are you a pig? Are you a pig? He was my son! He was my son!"

This protest was both hard to watch and impossible to look away from. The police for whom Crawford was primarily performing stood stoically in front of him and did not react to either his words or his actions. Most people, including me, scrambled to take as many pictures and as much video as they could. But from a rhetorical standpoint, and bearing my argument that this protest worked as a Dada-like performance in the face of too much nationalism and too many police, what Crawford's speech did was use mockery and shock to level the power dynamic by revealing the absurdity of the situation. That is, in speaking to the police force directly about their own actions of injustice, and in using language to their faces that disrespected them in the same ways that he felt disrespected, knowing full well that they could not respond to his queries, Crawford gave onlookers—especially those who identified as White—momentary access to how the Black community in the United States is having neither the same conversation nor

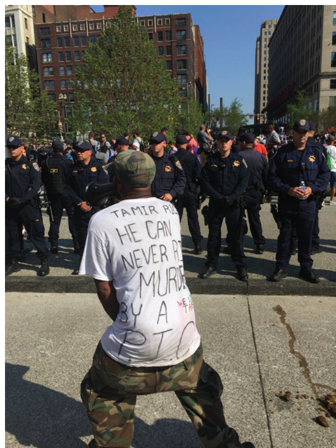

**Figure 16** (Left) Crawford, Jr., next to horse dung left earlier by mounted police. Crawford, Jr. incorporated this excrement into his protest, as a means to shock listeners and passersby into stopping to hear his dissent.

**Figure 17** (Center) A mother and her baby daughter wear matching pussy hats to the Women's Day Marches in Washington, D.C., on January 21, 2017. Photo © Brad Serber.

**Figure 18** (Right) A protester wears a pussy hat and carries a pussy sign at a Women's Day March in Oakland, California, on January 21, 2017. Photo © Cheryl Magat.

the same experience as are the police when it comes to practices of justice and law enforcement. Then, in including excrement in his speech, an apparently ludicrous decision that most would avoid at all costs, Crawford visually distilled the urgency and outrageousness of the African American position vis-à-vis the police. Is incorporating horse dung into a performance of dissent more shocking than a 12-year-old boy shot dead in a park? Here too, the powerlessness of the police added to the rhetorical situation. In watching Crawford perform with the excrement, one could not help but feel that if a member of the police would respond to his queries, then he would be able stop.

But, of course, they could not.[3]

## Conclusion

In his famous dissent in Abrams v. United States, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote:

> . . . the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas . . . the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market; and that truth is the only [measure that matters]. (*Abrams v. United States,* 1919)

This is the genesis of the famous marketplace of ideas. But the marketplace only matters so long as there is not so much deference granted to government when it comes to time, place, and manner restrictions—even when it comes to matters of national security—that there is little room left for free speech, even objectionable speech.

Thankfully, speech in the public sphere has proved difficult to quell. As I have demonstrated in this essay, there remain speakers determined to find fluid and creative ways, in the spirit of the Dada movement, for pressing back against power and authority, even in the face of barricades, constrained space, and very nearly militarized zones. Indeed, since the surprise election of Donald J. Trump, Dada-like expression has moved mainstream. This is evident, for example, in the prevalence of the so-called pussy hats that appeared at the Women's Marches that were held in all 50 states and around the world on the day after Trump's inauguration (see Figures 17 and 18). These hats, of course, referenced back to Trump's claim that surfaced during the campaign that he could grab female genitalia at his will. The hats, however, are part of a movement to reclaim Trump's insult, to turn his words into a movement of power.[4] Prior to the emergence of the so-called Billy Bush tape, most people tried not to use the word pussy in public, particularly in polite conversation, but the more Trump insulted women throughout his campaign, and the more he did not seem genuinely contrite for his invectives, the more "pussy grabbed back." Knitted pink hats began to turn up at rallies across the nation—as one friend of mine put it, it was "pussy knit-iv-ism"—suggesting that Dada-like speech has gone mainstream. Mothers made hats for their daughters and their babies. Sisters

exchanged them as Christmas gifts, with patterns published on the Pussyhat Project Web site, which branded itself as a place for women to find ongoing ideas to resist the Trump presidency, as much as it was a knitting resource.[5] Cate Blanchett wore a hat to one of the hundreds of Women's Marches held in all 50 states and around the world, the day after Trump's election. Blanchett wore hers in New York (Terry, 2017).

What the pussy hat example shows, and what I have tried to argue in this essay, is that there is a kind of creativity in free speech that allows democracy to flourish, even when the flourishing is hard. Very often this creativity feels threatening to those in authority, and this is a problem: If the First Amendment only protected the ideas the majority favored, it would have left the civil rights movement off to the wayside, along with the music of Elvis and the Beatles (Strossen, 1991). So while there is no doubt that the world is an unsafe place, and so security matters, there is also good reason to keep the streets and parks open for speech. The temptation is always for barricades and more police. But barricades and more police will always bring more injustice. What we know now, more than one hundred years after Cabaret Voltaire and Hugo Ball's Dada Manifesto, is that injustice provokes Dada. As Ball wrote of Dada in his 1916 manifesto, "To make of it an artistic tendency must mean that one is anticipating complications" (Ball, 1916). To this, Richard Huelsenbeck would later add,

> Dada does not jest, for the reason that it was experienced by revolutionary men and not by philistines who demand that art be a decoration. . . . I am firmly convinced that all art will become dadaistic in the course of time, because from Dada proceeds the perpetual urge for its renovation. (Motherwell, 1989, p. 281)

This perpetual urge was present in Cleveland's Public Square, and with it, the Dada spirit of distrust, contradiction, and absurdity was unmistakable, too.

## Notes

[1] While it reaches beyond the scope of this article, there is little doubt that violence as a form of protest is very communicative. One need only look at the pictures and read about the riots that happened in Ferguson, Missouri, in the aftermath of the death of Michael Brown and the failure to indict Darren Wilson, the police officer who shot him, for his death or the riots that happened in Baltimore in the aftermath of the death Freddie Gray to understand this, even if one does not condone it. As D. Watkins wrote in an opinion piece for the New York Times about Baltimore and why the Black citizens there took to the streets,

> "Some people might ask, "Why Baltimore?" But the real question is, "Why did it take so long?". . .
>
> We are all starting to believe that holding hands, following pastors and peaceful protests are pointless. The only option is to rise up, and force [the mayor] to make what should be an easy choice: Stop protecting the livelihoods of the cops who killed Freddie Gray, or watch Baltimore burn to the ground. (Watkins, 2015).

[2] The one notable exception happened on Wednesday, July 20, when 18 people were arrested during a scuffle with police during a flag burning event, which is Constitutionally protected speech (Associated Press, 2016).

[3] It is worth noting that many other people, including journalists, saw and wrote about Crawford and his protests at the DNC. He was a very visible presence in Cleveland, and as I have written here, there were far fewer protesters than expected. As well, Crawford was always a very animated character. That said, he was not always as dramatic as I have portrayed him here, and he seemed to have a relatively good relationship with the police. This fact, I argue, only adds to the sense of social disequilibrium of his performance on July 19. He moved past what was expected of him to shock and speak out, even if doing so was strange or might be received as utterly dissonant and irreconcilable by members of law enforcement he actually knew. For another brief account of Crawford's time in Cleveland, and his seeming friendly rapport with police, see Matt Pearce's (2016) piece in the Los Angeles Times, "Please Ignore the Man with the Bullhorn."

[4] For Judith Butler, this is the heart of resignification—converting the insult into something that is affirming and powerful to the once offended (see Butler, 1993).

[5] https://www.pussyhatproject.com/

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