> Finally, there is the writing of the city: what is inscribed and prescribed on its walls, in the layout of places and their linkages, in brief, the use of time in the city by its inhabitants.
>
> —Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*

1 Making Claims in Contentious Times

In August 2023, a wall on London's famous Brick Lane became the canvas for supporters and opponents of China's authorities to express their views. The original artwork replicated Chinese government's propaganda in both style and content presenting red stenciled words such as love, nation, harmony, and rule of law. The work was immediately graffitied on, with passersby making small additions such as "without" before "rule of law" and "doesn't love me" after "nation." These additions were soon overlaid with references to the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, along with phrases including: "Free Taiwan," "Free Tibet," "Free Xinjiang/Uyghurs," "No freedom in China," and "Fuck the CCP." This process, whereby a series of anonymous individuals expressed their views on the wall, led to a coauthorship of space where new meanings were made and shared.

Protest walls have played an important role in framing social movement claims, mobilizing public support (McGahern, 2017; Panlee, 2021), and defining boundaries between groups and identities. The collective narration of movement claims along with the physical and ideological conflicts that occur at protests wall sites constitute core elements of contentious repertoire. Hong Kong's Lennon Walls may be the most well-known example in recent years, but the mode of social movement communication through and on walls did not originate in Hong Kong. Similar forms of collective, spatial expression of opinion have been seen across disparate contentious events such as the Chinese democracy movement of the 1970s, the First Intifada of Gaza in the late 1980s, the Egyptian Revolution in 2011, Hong Kong's Umbrella movement of 2014, and Iraq's Tishreen Uprising and Lebanon's October Revolution both in 2019.

To date, uses of walls in protest claim-making processes have been dealt with as isolated events or empirical examples of contentious performance that emerge in a unique sociopolitical context. Given the numerous instances of contentious performance that have involved walls over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we set out to explore two related questions, one empirically based and the other taking a conceptual approach. We begin with the empirical question: *What, if any, social, political, and material elements connect these contentious performances? Do these performances constitute what Tilly (2006, 2008) would call a "modular performance"?* Through a series of comparative case studies we trace universal and localized aspects of the

material and digital form of protest walls; political opportunity structures in place when they emerged; collaborative practices adopted by individuals to coauthor a narrative of resistance in physical and discursive space; and the ritualized responses to protest walls, including opposition.

The second conceptual question asks how *walls can be understood to transcend their materiality in contentious politics.* With this question, we acknowledge walls as objects and places that have become symbolic of protest. We consider how the intersection of object, place, human activity, and meaning making allows the protest wall, ultimately, to be understood beyond the physical form created in contention, and instead as an abstract representation of the claims of the protesters, leaving the focus on the claims rather than on the protesters and their actions.

Conceptual Framework

The Element engages with important literatures to explore how the practices of human actors intersect with spaces and objects during times of protest, thus giving objects meaning and creating new vocabularies. In this engagement, we note that the literature of social movements tends to have two aspects, the one underlining the empirical, providing insights into the practices of protesters, and the other the conceptual, providing ways for scholars to engage with notions of protest in the abstract. To highlight the role of social actors and the ways patterns of behavior can become a language of contention, we draw on Tilly's (2006, 2008) ideas of modular performance and contentious repertoire. We start from these concepts as presented by Tilly, with the intention of extending them. However, we acknowledge influences on our understandings, in particular Wada's (2012) work on the transferability of contentious repertoires. Social semiotics provides a useful analytical tool to explore how meanings can be interpreted from text, visual representation, and even objects. While we begin from the classic works of Barthes (1977) and Hodge and Kress (1988), Abrams and Gardner (2023) work that introduces the concept of symbolic objects to contentious repertoires and Johnston's (2018) analysis of how "material things" come to hold meaning are significant extensions. Once objects and artifacts carry meaning in a contentious context, Benford and Snow's (2000) conceptualization of framing and counter-framing is useful in showing how these artifacts become discursive tools in claim-making processes.

Modular Performances, Transferability, and Contentious Repertoire

During times of collective political struggle, there is a range of familiar and standardized ways in which one group of political actors (claimants) make

claims on another, including but not limited to petitions, marches, and occupations (Tarrow, 2008). These actions are akin to an internationally understood language of protest and are important because of their transferability across different contentious contexts and their consistency in form over time. Tilly and Tarrow (2015) refer to these universal practices of protest as "modular repertoires of contention." These modular performances can be adapted to suit local or issue-specific needs, as Tilly and Tarrow have shown. Over time certain localized variations may come to constitute a "contentious repertoire" or set of actions with meanings specific and unique to a sociopolitical context or group of claimants and their target (Tarrow, 2008; Tilly, 2006, 2008). Whereas Tilly implies that a performance is either modular or not, acknowledging the existence of a dichotomy, Wada (2012: 568) argues that it is more appropriate to consider degrees of transferability of performance across actors, targets, issues, and locations, and suggests the need for cross-national comparisons.

These localized repertoires are not static. Practices and the meaning ascribed to them can change through transformative or "great events" that radically reorganize societal structures (Sewell, 1996, 2005). Here, the status quo is temporarily interrupted giving space for bursts of creativity and innovation in protest action and discourse (della Porta, 2008, 2011). Methods of protest also change through the discrete interactions of individuals which, cumulatively and gradually, shift the internal processes and knowledge that structure social movements (Tarrow, 2008; Tilly, 2006). Protesters often improvise within certain bounds of learned familiarity to make claims that are easily recognizable by the audience, but catch the target off-guard (McAdam et al., 1996; Tilly, 2006, 2008; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015).

Degrees of transferability can be seen in the negotiations that occur between people to reach a consensus, as well as the dialectic interactions between people as claimants and their targets that influence the form the contentious repertoire takes and the trajectory along which it travels. These negotiations and interactions bring into play a set of processes associated with meaning-making, boundary-making, framing, and counter-framing that are fundamental to mobilizing people to participate in contentious actions, and that influence the particular performances adopted.

Meaning Making and Social Semiotics

Processes of meaning making, that is signification and interpretation, are a central element of all social interactions including those of social movements. For meanings to be shared, message senders are reliant on audiences familiar with

culturally and individually specific lexicons, or vocabularies, in order to interpret the intended message (Barthes, 1977; Hodge and Kress, 1988). Signification occurs in many ways, including but not limited to the attribution of meaning to sounds, signs, symbols, and objects. Rather than being fixed into unchanging "codes," signifiers are resources that people use and adapt to make meaning (Hodge and Kress, 1988). The meaning potential of semiotic resources can be vast but is constrained through use in a particular community and in response to certain social requirements of that community (Aielo, 2006: 91). Once a set of semiotic resources is recognized by a community as having organizing principles for meaning making, they can be considered a "semiotic mode" or a complete language system (Hodge and Kress, 1988). Each language system provides a unique set of tools and opportunities for actors to make meaning. This idea is referred to as a "modal affordance." In the context of social movements, each contentious performance type – march, occupation, picket line – will have its own modal affordances that are also shaped by material and social histories.

In the context of contentious repertoires, an "iconography of protest," "symbolic objects," and "cultural artifacts" are recognized by scholars (Abram and Gardner, 2023; Gaufman, 2021; Johnston, 2018). Movement-specific signs, symbols, and objects are developed to convey movement messages. These can take a literal form, metaphoric form, or the form of satire or parody whereby certain traits or events are exaggerated in such a way that new meanings can be inferred. By cross-referencing symbols and the meanings they hold in different social worlds, message senders are able to highlight their stance on political conflicts and draw a boundary between "us" and "them" (Doerr and Teune, 2012). Signs, symbols, and objects can echo a collective action repertoire and have equal importance as action itself (Tarrow, 2013).

Symbolic Objects

Protesters rarely act without objects that hold symbolic meanings and communicate movement aims (Abrams and Gardner, 2023), nor do they choose sites for staging their protests at random. Focusing on materiality, Lofland (1996: 130) suggests symbolic objects are material artifacts that hold the potential to physically express a message to observers. They can be artifacts, places or persons. Johnston (2018) considered a larger category of cultural artifacts, which he defines as objects produced either individually or collectively, such as music, art, and literature that stand alone in their materiality and are available to others after the initial (cultural) behavior that produced them. This definition reinforces the notion that meaning continues to exist beyond human action and its materiality. Both of these conceptual approaches are relevant to this study of protest walls.

In a Tillian vein, some artifacts are universally recognized as symbols of protest such as the placard stating aims or grievances, the fist raised in solidarity against oppression or capitalism. Other material things such as the yellow umbrella in Hong Kong or the yellow vest in Paris are only signifiers of a cause in specific sociopolitical contexts. Cultural artifacts shape actions and imply a prescribed range of appropriate responses (Johnston, 2018). Some objects act as a substitute for the message or claim. For example, the blank sheets of A4 paper held by protesters in China during the COVID-19 pandemic to express their silent resistance against perceived censorship and government control are a good example of this kind of metonym. Other artifacts require the input and interactions of other social actors to fully express claims. For example, the song "Glory to Hong Kong" truly became an anthem of unity for Hong Kongers during the 2019 protests when groups of strangers came together in shopping malls to collaboratively create the piece with their voices and instruments (Li and Whitworth, 2022). Some artifacts can be both metonymic and identifiable as requiring the active complicity of social actors (Johnston, 2018). We argue that people's protest walls are one such example.

Place can be semiotically important in contention, but the intersection between "place" and "object" is not always clear. When symbolic objects are created in a particular *space*, the space is given new social meaning transforming it into a *place*. We draw on Lefebvre's argument (1991) that "place" is socially constructed not only through architectural design and material features but also through the performative acts that occur there. Places can be exclusionary as certain practices or cohorts may not be welcome in them. An individual's race, class, gender, and socioeconomic background shape their experience of place. These different relational experiences of space ultimately contest the meanings of a place.

Significant for this research is the power of symbolic objects to "store" complex meaning. This power comes from the symbol's "presumed ability to identify fact with value" (Geertz, 1957: 422). In the context of contentious politics, movement actors can summarize what is "known" about the world alongside claims of how the world ought to be, all in a neat signifier that can be easily understood and transported across contexts but also transcend time. Symbolic objects create tangible points of visibility for movements that endure beyond the people and context that produced them. The protest walls, we argue, are symbolic objects in the sense that once created, they exist as sites of dissent even without the continuing complicity of social actors.

Framing and Counter-framing

Every contentious performance is itself a form of communication. At their core, movements are an expression of one group's claims against another. To be successful, movements must "transform perceptions of reality, enhance the egos of protesters, attain a degree of legitimacy, prescribe and sell courses of action, mobilize the disaffected and sustain the movement over time" (Stewart et al., 2007: 19–20). They can meet these requirements through coercion, bargaining, and persuasion. Persuasion relies on verbal and nonverbal cues (or frames) to shift the perceptions, thoughts, and actions of audiences (Benford and Snow, 2000; Stewart et al., 2007). To do this, these cues often frame people or events in a particular light. In other words, framing denotes a process whereby actors intentionally construct and curate presentations of reality in ways that will trigger an emotional response in their audiences, prompting them to take action (Benford and Snow, 2000: 614). At the same time, framing can be paired with or offset by counter-framing, where claimants or the target use the same tools of communication to present a different reality. Framing and counter-framing create narratives that help people give meaning to their experiences. It can also produce "new" collectivities, creating or redefining meanings of action and enhancing the resonance and legitimacy of political actions (Cheng and Yuen, 2019; Gahan and Pekarek, 2013).

Framing (and counter-framing) often utilizes biases and stereotypes that guide individuals to understand and reflect on social events in particular ways and create boundaries between "us" and "them" (Goffman, 1974; Silver, 1997). These frames connect ideas within sources including texts, images, or audiovisual presentation that include a particular interpretation or judgment, making a particular worldview or stereotype more salient (Hardin et al., 2002). The way in which an issue is framed can change the impression and opinions of audiences without altering the actual facts (Bryant et al., 2013) as it draws out a point of view more clearly. In the social movement context, framing occurs through textual and visual processes that link claimants, the object of claims, and a "public" or audience (Tarrow, 2008).

Collective action frames have two important features. The first is an action-oriented function that defines a shared understanding of the problem in question and the source of the problem (diagnostic framing), the solution to the problem and possible future realities (prognostic framing), and who must take action (motivational framing). Collective action frames often contain a moral imperative that recipients feel obligated to act upon (Jasper, 1997, 1998; Eyerman, 2005). The second is the discursive processes that enable the action-oriented functions and in turn reproduce the collective action frames (Almeida, 2019;

Benford and Snow, 2000). The different frames and counter-frames seen in each localized contentious repertoire help us better understand the reasons and emotions behind collective identities and behaviors.

To be specific, this study extends the discussion of protest walls beyond only as a major dialogical site to thousands of citizens or to enhance solidarity and support mobilization. We argue that coauthoring the space through Lennon Wall (Valjakka, 2020) should also consider the evolution and contention that associated with such a coauthoring process. The coauthoring process involves the power dynamics between different actors including protesters, protest sympathizers, the state, and government supporters. In other words, the social actors cocreated a vibrant, agentic, and living contentious repertoire during the movement. Such a repertoire also goes beyond space (as can be seen from the conflicts on the Lennon Wall sites overseas) and over time (as can be seen from the connection with other movements in different periods of time).

Arguments

In the empirical sections, we argue that communication on and through walls has become a "modular" contentious performance (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015), similar to a march, an occupation, or a strike, that is internationally understood as a method of protest. This performance can be adapted into local contentious repertoires anywhere (Tarrow, 2008; Tilly, 2006, 2008). We refer to this modular performance as a "protest wall." The walls become places where discourse between protesters and their targets is not only projected but also reinforced in space. While imitation of the performances of others is a factor in the adoption of a performance across geographic settings, actors, targets, and issues, we noted the influence of access to technologies as well as the structure of political systems on the way a particular protest wall was created (Wada, 2012). We understand each of these performances as arising from social interaction, which in its way involves a measure of creative engagement. Therefore, we adopt Valjakka's (2020) concept of "socially engaged creativity" and apply her definition to the protest wall:

> *the spontaneous, cumulative and voluntary placement of political opinions on walls in prominent public places by many individuals during a time of contention. The cumulative effect of these actions by individuals allows them and others to recognise a co-authorship of spatial and political narratives that creates the opportunities to reclaim space from the state or movement opponents to express their message.*

On protest walls, these creative practices take the protest walls beyond the practical actions of writing, highlighting the ways in which the role of sharing,