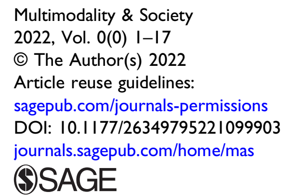
Research Paper

MULTIMODALITY & SOCIETY

Multimodality, cultural production, and the protest event: Considerations of space, politics, and affect in South Africa

Multimodality & Society
2022, Vol. 0(0) 1–17
© The Author(s) 2022
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/26349795221099903
journals.sagepub.com/home/mas



Nomagugu Ngwenya
Institute for Social and Health Sciences, University of South Africa, Johannesburg, South Africa

Nick Malherbe
Institute for Social and Health Sciences, University of South Africa, Johannesburg, South Africa; and South African Medical Research Council-University of South Africa Masculinity and Health Research Unit, Lenasia, South Africa

Mohamed Seedat
Institute for Social and Health Sciences, University of South Africa, Johannesburg, South Africa

Abstract

The high levels of protest in South Africa have produced varied academic literature on the subject. Although political and structural determinants of protest are readily acknowledged, social actors who comprise protest events are rarely centralised within scholarly inquiry. The particularities of protests are thus less considered than the structural issues underlying protests. We therefore argue that studying the multimodality of cultural production within protests affords researchers insight into the socially embedded nature of protest from the perspective of protester as a social actor. When we understand culture as continually being remade with and against different semiotic repertoires, then protest comes to signify a series of dynamic moments wherein cultural meanings are deployed for political purposes. Accordingly, we explore protest in South Africa by examining how the cultural practices of stick-fighting, dance, and song are navigated within the protest as a politico-affective space. Our analysis of cultural production within this space does not diminish the fundamentally political nature of protest, but instead uses cultural registers to expand how we engage the political. We conclude by reflecting on

Corresponding author:
Nomagugu Ngwenya, Institute for Social and Health Sciences, University of South Africa, 1, Southeast Metropolitan Complex, Lenasia Drive M10, Lenasia South, Lenasia, Johannesburg, 1827, South Africa.
Email: noma.li.ngwenya@gmail.com

how multimodal considerations push protest research to explore the internal dynamics of protests and what this means for the understanding of protests more generally.

Keywords
performance, politico-affective space, protest, resistance, syncretic culture

Introduction

Protests can be understood as public demonstrations that demand socio-political transformation of some kind (Suffla et al., 2020). Protests, in essence, are always *against something*. They seek to articulate and alter relations of power and are oftentimes a last resort, employed when other modes of democratic participation are perceived as ineffective (Bekker, 2021). With economic inequality heightening on a global scale, instances of protest have increased sharply since the 2000s (Carothers and Youngs, 2015; Lazar, 2015). The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's global protest tracker, for instance, reported that since 2017, there has been an enormous uptick of anti-government protests all over the world. The global increase in protest is especially pronounced in South Africa (Duncan, 2016; Sikweyiya and Nkosi, 2017). Indeed, between 2015 and 2017, there were 340-375 protests recorded in the country (Swart et al., 2020).

Protest has become an especially popular topic of inquiry within social movement research (Carothers and Young, 2015). Such research has tended in large to focus on the existing dynamics, tensions and conflicts between ruling institutions and the social actors involved in protests (della Porta, 2011). In other words, the structural determinants of protests have received the greater share of attention among researchers. This is not to say that there is uniformity or consensus within this literature. Far from it (see, e.g. Dury et al., 2003; Klandermans, 1997; Tilly, 1978). Instead, the particular accent of this research differs from context-to-context. While the various ways by which the structural determinants of protests have been studied in different contexts is beyond the scope of this article, it is perhaps sufficient to say that the particularities of this research point towards the kinds of context-specific research gaps that need to be addressed.

In South Africa, protest research has shown that most protests occur in poor communities which lack basic infrastructure, service delivery, and overall development (Swart et al., 2020), with economic grievances cited as the main motivation for protest action (Sikweyiya and Nkosi, 2017). As the quality of life of most of the South African population has not improved since the formal end of apartheid in 1994, much scholarly attention has been paid to protester demographics, particularly race which "is often a proxy for income inequality" in the country (Swart et al., 2020: 481). In addition to race, however, age, sex, occupation, education, active civic engagement, and negative perceptions of government performance have also been assessed in the analysis of protest events (Swart et al., 2020). Where age and sex are concerned, protesters in South Africa are said to typically be young males; a demographic which is generally associated with violence (Sikweyiya and Nkosi, 2017). Swart et al. (2020) report that the occurrence of

violence in protests has increased by 36% between 2007 and 2014. Subsequently, protests have increasingly been characterized by (collective) violence as they are persistently portrayed as a rebellion of the poor and inherently insurrectionist, however contrary to these popular perceptions, most protest events in South Africa are not violent (Day et al., 2019; Duncan, 2016; Malherbe et al., 2020).

From the above, we can see that the internal specificities of particular protest events in South Africa remain somewhat neglected within research (although there some exceptions here, such as Dawson's (2012) analysis of 'nano-media' in South African protests, as well as Malherbe et al.'s (2020) video analysis of police-protester interactions). As Bekker (2021) insists, where most protest research in South Africa focuses on the grievances, and thus, the structural issues of protesters, more research is needed on the social actors who constitute protest events. This is not to say that the structural determinants of protest remain unimportant, but rather that protesters' moment-by-moment manifestations of these structures require greater scholarly attention. In this, we can gain nuanced insights into social structures by analysing how these structures are lived, felt, resisted, and reconstituted within a protest event's meaning-making activities.

In this article, we argue that a focus on cultural production within protest events can enhance our understanding of how the political and the structural coalesce at different moments within protest. In other words, examining how cultural semiotic repertoires are drawn on and transformed by protesters enables our exploration of the inner dynamics of protests, namely, their interactional features and performative processes. By paying attention to the complex operation of cultural meaning within protest, we can begin to study how politics are shaped by the dynamic and shifting symbolic orders availed by the collectives that comprise protests, and thus shift the focus of South African protest research to the protester as a dynamic social actor (see Bekker, 2021; Day et al., 2019). This approach to protest research seems to sit uncomfortably with the traditional kinds of scholarly inquiry offered by the political sciences and sociology disciplines, where most South African protest research is located. It is, instead, more suited to a multimodal approach, which embraces different methods of conducting, analyzing, and interpreting human interaction and social meaning-making (Collins et al., 2021; Marchetti, 2021).

Although our focus in this article is on the South African context, our proposals have theoretical implications and generalisations beyond this context. The manner by which different cultural semiotic repertoires are deployed within and thus shape the protest space provides researchers with insight into how different histories of struggle, oppression, and resistance manifest in the present. The kinds of cultural meanings that are constructed within protest enable us to study the material-symbolic dialectic in which protesters are engaged. Therefore, our focus on South Africa serves to demonstrate the insights that multimodal considerations can afford to protest research, and how studying the particulars of protest can push researchers to interrogate the different ways by which social structures manifest in the here-and-now and how they move through time and space.

In order to explore how social researchers who are concerned with multimodality can analyse cultural production within the protest space, below we delineate three important theoretical concepts: multimodality, culture, and politico-affective space. Next, we describe how these three concepts can be understood within South African protests, after

which we examine three modes of cultural production (namely, song, toyi-toyi, and stick-fighting) on which protest actors in South Africa draw. We then consider the syncretic nature of culture and how it interfaces with traditions of struggle in the country. We conclude by reflecting on how multimodality can push protest research to explore internal dynamics of specific protests as well as what this means for the understanding of protests more generally.

Conceptualizing multimodality

Multimodality is a complex, multifarious term. Consequently, there is little standardization or certainty within multimodal work (Ledin and Machin, 2019). For the purposes of our analysis, we comprehend multimodality in a particular way. To begin, modes refer to semiotic phenomena, such as images, sounds and movements. A single text is always constituted by different modes. Engaging with the complexity of meaning within a single text thus requires the analyst to examine how different modes intersect, therefore, we must look to the multimodality of that text (Radumilo, 2015). Multimodality speaks to how different semiotic texts produce meaning through one another. Thus, multimodality denotes how modes are co-deployed and co-contextualised to produce meaning within a text (Baldry and Thibault, 2006). The multimodality of a text is not, however, isolated from the environment within which the text is situated. Context unfolds through multimodality and is central to how the multimodal text constitutes itself (Ledin and Machin, 2019).

When exploring multimodality in relation to the socio-cultural nature of meaning-making, Halliday's (1978) seminal work on social semiotic theory is especially useful. In what Halliday (1978) calls the systematic functional model, a text's various modes are considered with respect to how they fulfil basic metafunctions (Ledin and Machin, 2019), i.e. different sorts of communicative functionality (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). Halliday (1978) speaks of three metafunctions. First, the ideational metafunction constitutes people's ideas about the world. These ideas determine how objects are interpreted in relation to one another (Ledin and Machin, 2019). The ideation metafunction can offer experimental meaning, which is the representation and portrayal of experiences, or logical meaning, which includes constructions of societal relations (O'Halloran, 2011). Halliday's (1978) second metafunction is known as the interpersonal metafunction. The interpersonal metafunction projects enactments of social relations between a sign's producer and its receiver (Ledin and Machin, 2019). Finally, the textual metafunction refers to the capacities of multimodal resources to form interpretable and coherent texts. These three metafunctions create different multimodal arrangements that create textual meanings, themes, and motifs (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006).

There are, of course, limitations to multimodality which are exacerbated when we utilise Halliday's (1978) model. For instance, little consensus among multimodal analysts exists. Moreover, the analyses themselves often resorting to excessive technicality, ignore causality, and in some cases overlook those who produced the texts in question (Rose, 2001). Notwithstanding these limitations, the multimodal approach opens up novel, contextually embedded understandings that can afford to us original insights into the

meaning-making practices inherent to complex phenomena. In light of all of this, we must concede that our foregoing analysis does not, in every instance, deploy Halliday's framework with strict fidelity. There are undoubtedly moments where we depart from Halliday, contorting and adapting his work to suit the multimodal phenomena under study. Nonetheless, we believe that the systematic functional model represents an important foundation for how we engage with and understand multimodality. As such, we do not lay claim to a correct or incorrect use of the systematic functional model. Rather, we believe that the relevance of this model lies in the way that it can be used and adapted within different contexts and for different purposes (as, indeed, has been the case in several other instances, see e.g. Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). It is in this very particular sense that we work both with and against Halliday in our conception of and engagement with multimodality.

Conceptualizing culture

Culture, in its broadest definition, has two components. It refers to the socially constructed ideals, beliefs, practices, and lifestyles associated with particular groups, and to the artefacts associated with these groups (Scott and Marshall, 2009). It is both belief and practice, value and product. While culture is part of a society's superstructure, it is always determined by the ever-shifting material practices that occur at the base. As such, the symbolic and material facets of culture are related. Very often cultural values are communicated through cultural works of art. It is with this definition of culture that we can see how, even when cultures are not overtly political, they are always embedded within broader currents of power within a given society (Malherbe, 2020).

Culture, like any text, is multimodal. Multimodality can allow for insights into a culture's semiotic repertoires, that is, the linguistic and non-linguistic modes that constitute a cultural text (see Kusters et al., 2017). Understanding the various semiotic repertoires which constitute a culture in relation to Halliday's (1978) social semiotic theory can help us both situate a culture and engage critically with how and for what purposes cultural meanings are deployed. Multimodality thus offers an especially suitable approach for engaging the contested and ever-shifting nature of cultural meaning-making.

Speaking to the post-apartheid South African context, Mistry (2001) calls on researchers to shift their perspective of culture from an abstract entity that operates from above, to something which is tangible and traceable in our everyday lives, forming social actors just as they, in turn, form culture. As Tateo and Marsico (2018: 1) proclaim, "the construction of generalized knowledge about human culture can be developed only through a pluralistic, polyphonic, syncretic, innovative, passionate and collective contribution". That is to say that no culture is pure, cohesive, or homogenous. We cannot locate culture's singular origin or authentic endpoint. Rather, culture is always dynamic and determined by the actions of a host of social actors who are very often competing for cultural hegemony (Malherbe, 2020). Once again, the multimodal researcher is well-placed to examine the contestations and power dynamics contained within these cultural moments by engaging the semiotic repertoires upon which people draw, and the metafunction these repertoires seek to fulfill at different moments.

Throughout history, culture, multimodality, and protest have tended to take form through the registers of one another (see the Harlem Renaissance, the Surrealist movement, and the Négritude movement for some clear examples here). Although some consider protests to be modes of cultural production in and of themselves (e.g. Cabral, 2016), taking a multimodal approach to studying cultural meanings within protests compels the researcher to consider which cultural semiotic repertoires are deployed in protest settings and why. This is especially useful as protesters themselves are so often from a variety of cultural backgrounds (Tateo and Marsico, 2018). The fundamental hybridity of culture thus allows for a useful entry point into how different; often culturally diverse social actors make meaning together, within and against the political backdrop of a protest event; complementing, borrowing, and remaking semiotic repertoires in concert. The melding of views and practices from different cultures to construct a singular, multimodal cultural form is what Tateo and Marsico (2018) refer to as syncretic cultural production.

The deployment of a culture's semiotic repertoires within the context of a protest can signal moments of counter-hegemonic cultural practice, whereby social actors seek to wrest a culture away from dominant institutions. When culture is deployed in the context of protests, its meaning becomes politicized. Corporate media or commodified cultural products need not determine what culture or even protests mean (as is so often the case in South Africa, Duncan, 2016). Those actors who practice culture for its own sake, rather than for that of the culture industry, can thus use protests to reclaim culture (see Malherbe, 2020).

The manner by which tradition sits and is remade within contemporary culture is important when considering protests in South Africa and how they relate to the agency of protesting actors (Cornell et al., 2019). As Malherbe (2020: 212) writes, linking the "psycho-material substance of historical memory to individual and collective experiences of oppression" can enable us to engage with cultural traditions (and the semiotic resources which constitute these traditions) in contemporary protest actions. Certainly, protesters in South Africa today are, by large making similar demands for equality, dignity, and freedom that their forebearers were during the apartheid and colonial eras. Traditions of struggle are passed down and lived through the cultures that are reproduced in contemporary protests. As such, we see both historic continuity and changing social circumstances reflected in contemporary South African protests (Annist, 2020; Day et al., 2019), with syncretic cultural production signifying an important conceptual means through which to engage the shifting temporarily of meaning within a protest event.

It would seem, then, that we can understand culture, as it is produced within the context of protests, as an insurgent deployment of multimodal meaning. It is because culture is deployed within the context of protests that this meaning becomes politicized. In the following section, we consider the effects of producing culture within protest spaces that are marked by political and affective meaning.

Politico-affective space

Politico-affective space can be defined as “a space in which affects circulate and are exchanged between persons, binding them into a politicized multitude” (Suffla et al., 2020: 353). While neither affect nor space is inherently political, it is when each coalesces with the other, at particular moments, that they form politico-affective space (see Chan, 2017). With respect to the protest event, the manner by which protests disrupt, take up and reclaim space, while adhering to some spatial constraints and rejecting others (see Day et al., 2019) allows for politics to unfold through space. This politico-spatial unfolding is always affectively charged in that it engages with traditions of resistance (which were fundamental to constituting the modern South African state) as well as present-day structures of oppression – both of which signify existential imperatives for the majority of South Africans. Indeed, the continuation of anti-apartheid protest tactics, strategies and even demands carries much affect, just as the high levels of police brutality repeat, in the present, the kinds of trauma on which apartheid rule relied (see Cornell et al., 2020). We might then say that the protest space evokes particular affects for protesters in South Africa, and it is within this affective space that individual actors exercise political agency. As such, affect, politics and spaces are all formed and reformed through one another at protest events to form different politico-affective spaces. Protest spaces in South Africa are, today, constructed in the present, summoned from the past, and look towards the future. As with culture, the notion of politico-affective space can capture this multi-temporality while centering the protesting actor. Considering the intersection of politico-affective space with cultural production thus allows the researcher insight into the dynamism of meaning-making within protests, offering a view of protests as a series of intersubjective moments, replete with shifting meaning, rather than a utilitarian reaction to structurally determined grievances. We have an imperative to consider multimodality in relation to protest and politico-affective space if we are to engage with the complexity of a protest’s syncretic cultural production. Although there are different ways to do this, for our Hallidayian conception of multimodality, spatial repertoires and semiotic assemblages represent two especially pertinent entry points. Where spatial repertoires indicate the available semiotic repertoires that emerge from repeated shared practices within a space (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2014), semiotic assemblages are the momentary clusters of semiotic repertoires that form within and between a particular space and at a particular time (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2017). By considering these concepts, researchers can utilise the multimodal approach to engage the minutiae of cultural production within a protest event’s politico-affective space.

Cultural production within the protest event’s politico affective space

Roy (2010) highlights that social movements both inform and appropriate semiotic resources - such as art, music, drama, and literature - across cultures (again, the Harlem Renaissance and the Négritude movement are instructive here). To demonstrate how protesters reproduce culture within the protest event as a politico-affective space, we refer to the four dimensions of social relations, outlined by Roy (2010), within which protesters

enact culture, namely: (1) the division of labor, (2) the relations of power, (3) tuning in, and (4) embeddedness. These four dimensions are, themselves, always situated within, and produce forms of, politico-affective space within the protest event, and thus serve as useful for multimodal researchers who seek to understand a protest event via its social actors rather than protester grievances (see Bekker, 2021). Indeed, it is at the intersection of syncretic cultural production and politico-affective space that protesters use the protest event to create meaning.

Coplan's (2008) *In Township Tonight!: Three Centuries of Black South African City Music and Theatre* details how, during South Africa's apartheid era, many Black mineworkers from different national and provincial backgrounds exchanged culture as they settled in Kimberly; the capital city of South Africa's Northern Cape province. As recreation increasingly became a necessity, musical evenings were hosted where the diverse group of laborers would showcase the varying semiotic repertoires of their cultures. This not only became a popular source of entertainment, but also served as a space that gave Black people a stage to express themselves in the height of repression by the racist regime that depended on the fragmentation of the Black population (Coplan, 2008). Performing arts and artists at the time subsequently fueled the need for unification amongst African migrants and immigrants and simultaneously established a dynamic and syncretic 'Black culture' in which various semiotic assemblages could communicate under one blanket culture. This new culture was, in considering Halliday's (1978) textual metafunction, identifiable, dynamic, and broadly coherent. It therefore endured and helped mine workers momentarily escape the racial and social hierarchies that existed outside of this space; enabling them to stand in solidarity with each other and exchange political ideas and strategies (Coplan, 2008). Within these spatial assemblages, then, semiotic repertoires like song and dance served to entertain, however, such entertainment became part and parcel of the miners' struggle for justice, dignity, and a better life. In this way, different cultural modes were repurposed within a particular time and space.

From the miners' syncretic cultural production, a broader performance culture emerged which found expression in different anti-apartheid resistance efforts, such as the Black Consciousness Movement in the 1970s and 1980s (see Biko, 1978). This syncretic culture, when deployed within protest settings, became "the signifying system through which a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored" (Mistry 2001: 2). The affects that these cultural performances produced were inherently political and allowed people to transport a visceral, *felt politics* into different spaces namely, a politics imbued with the ideational metafunction's logical and experimental meaning, (see Halliday, 1978). These spaces were thus politicized via the emotional intensity that syncretic culture could provoke. In other words, culture imbued politics with affective intensity, and this intensity was mobilized within and moved through different protest spaces. Simultaneously within these spaces, culture was itself transformed and repurposed politically through different semiotic resources. It is in this sense that cultural production and politico-affective space merged within protest events in South Africa.

Returning to Roy's (2010) four dimensions; although there was certainly a division of labor among these cultural workers (some would dance, some would play instruments, others would perform drama), such cultural production was designed to invoke pride and

radical politics outside of white supremacist power structures. In considering Halliday's (1978) interpersonal metafunction, there was not an unmovable delineation between cultural worker and audience member. Both would traverse this boundary in different ways. Politico-affective space was thus activated when audiences and performers tuned into and created a syncretic culture, embedding such a culture and the feelings that it produced, within protest settings.

Today, the legacy of cultural production within, through, and for politico-affective space can be observed in contemporary South African protest culture (see e.g. Langa and Kiguwa, 2013), with the visual and performing arts continuing to propel today's resistance movements as they unfold in real time (SAHO, 2011). Cultural production thus enhances the participatory, democratic, and performative nature of politic-affective protest spaces. We might, then, concur with Mistry (2001: 18), who contends that "cultural production is based on the aspirations to see socio-economic growth, nation building, the development of social and moral stability as complementary, simultaneous projects". That is to say that the affects that such syncretic culture produce are drawn into the politicized spaces that are facilitated by the protest event.

Syncretic cultural production and politico-affective spaces today

Although there are, today, a range of cultural semiotic repertoires that are observed within South African protests (Day et al., 2019; Schneider, 2020), we focus in this section on three especially prominent cultural forms here, namely; songs, toyi-toyi (dance), and stick-fighting rituals. We examine how each of these serve to deploy a syncretic culture and integrate with other semiotic modes within the politico-affective spaces of contemporary protest events, what the effects of this are, and what this means for a multimodal inquiry. We also draw attention to how protesters use the affective dimensions of culture as a memory-laden tool that brings forth a psychological component to protest events as sites of social meaning-making. It should be noted that culture, as it is deployed and constituted within protest spaces, is not beyond contestation. There is, for instance, a history of cultural production within protests that glorifies militarism and violent masculinities (Langa and Kiguwa, 2013). However, our point is not to moralize culture within protests, but to engage with how protesting actors construct and reconstruct cultural traditions of resilience and pride within particular politico-affective spaces, and what this reveals about the broader societal structures which protests occur within and against.

Songs of struggle

As demonstrated by Coplan (2008) in his detailed account of how struggle songs united migrant workers in South Africa, songs constitute an important aesthetic mode which weave together the different concerns of aggravated community members who seek to protest their disenfranchisement in concert. It is through protest songs that contemporary protesters can access traditions of resistance wherein oppressive powers are mocked, insurgent citizenship is prioritized, and comradeship is drawn upon for purposes of solidarity and collective mobilization (Langa and Kiguwa, 2013). In the context of a

protest's politico-affective space, these songs form part of broader semiotic assemblages. They are transformed by politico-affective space while, at the same time, constitute part of this space.

Jolaosho (2019) describes how anti-apartheid freedom songs, and their embodiment of aesthetic affect, are oftentimes adapted and repurposed to suit contemporary political concerns and to foster collective participation. Gillespie and Naidoo (2019) demonstrate this in their description of how struggle songs acted as the glue that bound together the protesting students who comprised 2015's Fallist movement in South Africa, the wave of student protests which have come to be referred to as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall. In considering the interpersonal metafunction, the protest song's producers and receivers were often one in the same. Those who performed and listened to the song did so in order to strengthen social relations among protesters. These students would sing what Gillespie and Naidoo (2019: 227) call the "decolonized national anthem", which was a re-composition of the South African national anthem "*Nkosi sikelel' iAfrica*" (God Bless Africa) by renowned South African composer Enoch Sontonga. Sontonga's song was adopted as the official hymn by the African National Congress (ANC) and other liberation movements during the struggle against the apartheid government (Gillespie and Naidoo, 2019). The Fallist movements' student protesters rejected the Afrikaans and English verses of the anthem that were added to the song during South Africa's transition to democracy in the 1990s, thus symbolizing their refusal of the neoliberal compromises made by the incoming ANC government at the time. This version of the anthem spread through social media amongst protesting students across the country and became popular for its ability to invoke the long lineage of political mobilization that the song has come to embody. Simultaneously, the adaptation of the song spoke to the dynamism of syncretic culture, and its ability to speak to the political concerns of the moment as students singing the decolonized version of the anthem actively highlighting how the current democratic government has not achieved the aims declared in its Freedom Charter[1] since the disbanding of the apartheid government (Gillespie and Naidoo, 2019).

The affect and the affective histories of collective resistance; embodied by the protest song, can travel across space and time to politicize different protest events in particular ways. These songs therefore represent how social actors make, remake and deploy meaning for political purposes, evidenced by how singing struggle songs like Nkosi sikel' iAfrica can be seen as calls to action when sung in conjunction with hand gestures; for example, 1. an up-held palm which signifies the salutations previous freedom fighters done in their training, 2. a raised fist which symbolizes what was once conquered can be conquered again, or 3. raising two fingers to imitate a gun symbolizes the need to return to the militant tactics of previous struggles (Gillespie and Naidoo, 2019). When combing protest songs with these visual modes, as well as a host of other semiotic repertoires (e.g. singing protest songs alongside dancing to raise morale, or introducing symbols of intimidation, like weapons, with song) we can see how protest songs are multimodally deployed in politico-affective spaces for different purposes.

Returning to our focus on song, Gillespie and Naidoo (2019: 227) state "when politics are made, when history is felt, it is sung". That is to say that struggle songs that are sung at political events such as protests are, "understood to evoke genealogies of protest and

political meaning, each song offering a place to recraft its inherited associations for the current context" (Gillespie and Naidoo, 2019: 227). There is thus a continuation of struggle; but present-day forms of oppression shape how such struggle is remembered, with culture shaping and being shaped by particular politico-affective spaces. Multimodal researchers are challenged to consider how protest songs, as an aesthetic cultural form, have traveled across space and time, and how their inherently affective nature (i.e. their affective composition and their ability to provoke affects between protesting actors) influence the material unfolding of particular protest events. It is the way that these songs combine with other modes that determine their meaning, and give us insight into how meaning travels, how it is adapted, and for what political purposes. Struggle dances present a similar set of concerns for multimodal meaning-making.

Dancing in demonstration

Although there are many kinds of dance that can be observed at South African protest events, perhaps none is more ubiquitous than the toyi-toyi. The toyi-toyi is described by Alexander and McGregor (2021) as a high-kneed, foot-stomping dance which rhythmically occurs alongside chants and songs. It is an inherently interactive performance and is propelled by a call-and-response structure. The toyi-toyi incorporates the ideas, practices and traditions of the different military cultures that characterized the African anti-colonial movements out of which it emerged in the twentieth century, and in this sense conveys both the logical and experimental meaning of the ideational metafunction. Thus, what was once a military drill aimed at improving toughness and fitness in one camp can be utilized as a display of physical strength in another or be used as a means to instill loyalty and discipline in another region. Indeed, historically, the toyi-toyi has formed an important part of South African protest's semiotic assemblages.

As the dance and its transmitted ideas moved through different military camps in various designations, variations in the dance and the songs that accompany it were birthed, giving each toyi-toyi its own symbolic meaning and character. That is to say that the toyi-toyi varies in its textual metafunction and that the meaning of a particular toyi-toyi is determined by how it interacts with other modes. Nonetheless, there are several consistencies across the toyi-toyi's textual metafunctions. For example, each variation has in common masculine constructions of militarism in the fight for liberation (Alexander and McGregor, 2021).

By the 1980s in South Africa, the toyi-toyi was imparted from detained soldiers in Robben Island prison to young male groups from the townships who began enacting the toyi-toyi when they were confronted by police or when attending political events and protests. These young men would then use this dance to link their current protests to the glories of armed resistance. It was during this time that the toyi-toyi became one of the most recognizable performances of the anti-apartheid struggle (Alexander and McGregor, 2021). Today, the toyi-toyi can be seen at many protest events in South Africa (Cornell et al., 2019), evidenced by its recurrence throughout the Fallist protests which widely display students *toyi-toying* to amplify the politics of racial subjectivity and their refusal to assimilate to the standards imposed on them by the mainstream post-apartheid education

system which still maintains white supremacist ethos in its curriculum (Gillespie and Naidoo, 2019). The meaning of a toyi-toyi is, therefore, determined not only by the various other modes with which it interacts, but also the politico-affective space in which it is enacted, and the purpose it serves in the creation of this space.

Because the dance symbolizes warfare and summons protesters to amplify their fight against the authorities that aim to suppress them, protest scholarship has conceptualized the toyi-toyi as a socio-political catalyst for change (Day et al., 2019; Schneider, 2015). This is due to the toyi-toyi's ability to connect protesters to a tradition of struggle within the protest space, thus harnessing the kinds of politicized affects associated with this tradition (Day et al., 2019). In Halliday's (1978) model, we would say that the toyi-toyi enhances the interpersonal metafunction, inviting only protesting comrades into its politico-affective space in order to strengthen the social bonds between protesters. The toyi-toyi thus amplifies the affective relations within the protest space by connecting these spaces with memories of warfare and militarized struggle. Moreover, the participatory nature of the toyi-toyi invites others into its politico-affective space, and thus into a collective effort to reconstitute memories of struggle within the present, drawing on the available semiotic repertoires (e.g. song, architecture, bodily gestures) to do so.

For multimodal researchers, the toyi-toyi presents a useful analytic moment of syncretic cultural production that in many respects acts to physically intervene within a protest event in order to create a politico-affective space that connects with histories of struggle. Studying how dancers and audiences engage the toyi-toyi and bring it into the field of other semiotic repertoires affords insight into the ways by which protesters make protest and infuse it with meaning, taking our understandings of protest beyond a purely utilitarian or structural frame. The toyi-toyi, in other words, facilitates the social study of protests through the autonomy, semiotic constructions, and historical memories of the individual protesters who act collectively.

Stick-fighting

Carton and Morell (2012) argue that in the early nineteenth century, stick-fighting was a commonly recognized way of preparing young Zulu men for battle. Although stick-fighting was previously deployed in battles for territory, it is today a symbolic performance that speaks directly to a cultural past that was devalued and demonized by centuries of white colonial rule (Carton and Morell, 2012). Coetzee (2000) emphasizes that the elements of stick-fighting performances today are thus theatrical in essence, evoking historical memory through dramatic and rhythmic movement.

Within the protest space, stick-fighting's ritualistic performances emphasize that protest is, itself, not only a modality of democratic participation, but also a space that holds much affective value for many South Africans. Stick-fighting serves as a cultural means by which to pay homage to the lessons of the past (see Carton and Morell, 2012) and honor traditions of struggle and resistance within and beyond Zulu culture, thereby signifying a syncretic cultural medium through which politico-affective spaces are constructed. In other words, stick-fighting within protest events draw on culture not as a commodity or spectacle; but as a means of evoking the histories of struggle and the kinds

of pride and collective insurgency in the face of systemic oppression which are associated with these struggles. It is in this sense that such cultural production is suitably evoked within protest events to underscore the value that the protest tradition holds for many South Africans. In the same way that stick-fighting signified the pride of Zulu people's victory against colonial forces (e.g. at the Battle of Isandlwana in 1879), stick-fighting today emphasizes that the fight for justice of struggling South Africans is the latest iteration of a long struggle against oppressive rule. When we consider the interpersonal metafunction, it is important to note that the effectiveness of stick-fighting performances does not depend on the stick-fighters or their spectators having an intimate knowledge of the historical struggles evoked by this dance. Rather, people connect to the dance's symbolic nature, i.e. the manner by which it speaks to a perhaps unnamed, but certainly felt, political aesthetic. We engage the stick-fight primarily through feeling. When we do engage it through knowledge, it is always a felt knowledge. Thus, it is Halliday's (1978) logical meaning, rather than experimental meaning, that is most pertinent to the stick-fight.

Stick-fights (and the traditions thereof) therefore form part of protest events, but their performative nature also renders them events in themselves. They are usually initiated by a call that signals a break from other protest activity (such as songs and dances). There is typically an introductory moment to gain the attention of onlookers and signal the official start of the stick-fight (Coetzee, 2000). As such, we need to understand stick-fights within protest not as forms of resistance, but as cultural modes of drawing the protest into a particular tradition of meaning-making that is charged with an affective attachment to political resistance. Hereby, stick-fighting can strengthen people's identifications with the protest event in which it is enacted by evoking histories of victorious struggle (Annist, 2020).

Stick-fighters draw on the available semiotic resources to make meaning and establish democratic participation in a protest's politico-affective space. For example, a dynamic form of contact and communication is instated between stick-fighters and spectators via battle cries known as *izigiyo* (see Coetzee, 2002). Here, the stick-fight extends beyond the individual fighters as well as the delineated cultural limits of the stick-fight to create politico-affective space within which protesters can connect with one another through a syncretic cultural form. Again, as an interpersonal metafunction, stick-fights invite protesters to participate in remembering political struggle in South Africa in a collective and affectively charged manner, thereby imbuing the present protest space with similarly visceral and participatory qualities.

Like protest songs and the toyi-toyi, stick-fighting and the enjoyment that protesters may attain from it does not eviscerate the fact that protests can be painful and/or inconvenient for many protesters. As Bekker (2021) emphasizes, protests are frequently a last resort for many. However, it is through these kinds of cultural production that such a last resort can be made into an especially meaningful event that is constituted with and through other modes, such as songs of struggle, the dancing body, and other ritualistic expressions. When we consider how each of these semiotic repertoires convey messages of conquest, resilience, and pride from past contexts, we acknowledge the ways in which

protesters assert themselves and their histories in the spaces they seek to disrupt; transforming both the space and how history is recalled in the present.

Protesters use culture to make protest events into politico-affective spaces that are meaningful and participatory. The task for future multimodal research is to interrogate how such meaning and participation are negotiated and agonized over by protesters themselves, which is to say, social research work must not be hesitant to engage the contestations that exist over cultural production within protests. Meaning-making and inter-subjectivity are never static, and the hybrid, ever-shifting nature of culture and politico-affective space compels protest researchers to engage such fluidity. Our analysis contains a call for future work to look deeper into how syncretic cultural meaning is created within specific protest events, that is, how protesters use culture to create meaning and advance a political agenda through the formation of different semiotic assemblages.

Conclusion

Protest research in South Africa tends to focus on the structural character of protesters' grievances rather than how protesters as political actors make meaning within the protest event. In an attempt to examine how protest research can approach protest in a manner that centers the protester as an autonomous subject who acts within and against particular social structures, we focus on cultural production (i.e. the deployment and combination of different cultural semiotic resources) within protest events, as well as how culture is used to establish politico-affective space within the protest event. It is within these spaces, we argue, that protesting subjects make meaning which, in turn, shapes the character of the larger protest event. Once again, we must emphasize that this multimodal approach to studying protest is not a turn away from politics; but looks to understand the political character of protest through the registers of culture and space, and in this process expanding our conceptions of the political.

When we acknowledge the embodied public performance and dynamic, participatory spatial practices which occur during protests, we can better engage them as sites of contestation that contain a range of intentional cultural practices (and perhaps, at times, unintended meanings) that aim to remake space and remembrance for explicitly political purposes (Annist, 2020). When we study how aural, visual, kinetic, and spatial modes of cultural performance are melded together in protest events, we can view protests as one of many practices and sites of meaning-making. In this we seek to understand protests by engaging the protester as a social actor. We can, in this way, strive to understand protests as complex phenomena that are comprised of several symbolic and material elements, all of which are composed and enacted by protesters within and against broader societal structures.

Focusing on song, toyi-toyi, and stick-fighting rituals within protest events, we have attempted in this article to understand how syncretic cultural production influences politico-affective space, and what this means for how memory, performance and meaning are approached by multimodal protest research in South Africa (an area of study that remains neglected within broader protest research in the country). We have thus attempted to demonstrate how cultural production can re-call venerable resistance strategies to bring

the past to bear on present-day enactments of resistance. Studying the deployment, combination and production of syncretic cultures, and the relation of such culture to politico-affective space within protest events can, we argue, shift the terrain of protest research so that it is the protester as an actional subject that is able to offer insights into the internal composition of protest events, and how people make meaning within and against these events. We call on prospective research, within and beyond South Africa, to draw on multimodality to examine a range of syncretic cultural practices and how these can transform and become transformed by politico-affective spaces within protest events. In this, we can begin to develop nuanced understandings of the inner dynamics and anatomies of protest, which is to say, how the very constitutive elements of protest reflect and oppose the socio-historic structures against and through which protests are directed. In so doing, we can use the hybrid nature of culture to shift how the political facets of protests are approached within research.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. In 1955 the Freedom Charter was adopted in South Africa. It was a statement, banned by the apartheid government, that delineated the democratic, anti-apartheid principles of the African National Congress and its allies.

References

Alexander J and McGregor J (2021) The incredible journey of the toyi-toyi, southern Africa's protest dance. The NewsHawks. Available at: https://thenewshawks.com/the-incredible-journey-of-the-toyi-toyi-southern-africas-protest-dance/ (accessed 13 April 2021).

Annist A (2020) Performance, power, exclusion, and expansion in anthropological accounts of protests. *Conflict and Society* 6(1): 183–200.

Baldry A and Thibault PJ (2006) *Multimodal Transcription and Text Analysis: A Multimedia Toolkit and Coursebook*. London: Equinox.

Bekker M (2021) Protest as an act of love. *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 15(1): 1–33.

Biko S (1978) *I Write what I like: Selected Writings*. IL: University of Chicago Press.

Cabral A (2016) *Resistance and Decolonization*. MD: Rowman & Littlefield International.

Carton B and Morrell R (2012) Zulu masculinities, warrior culture and stick fighting: reassessing male violence and virtue in South Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38(1): 31–53.

Carothers T and Youngs R (2015) *The Complexities of Global Protests*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/2015/10/08/complexities-of-global-protests-pub-61537 (accessed 9 April 2021).

Chan RB (2017) *The Edge of Knowing: Dreams, History, and Realism in Modern Chinese Literature*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Coetzee MH (2000) Playing sticks: an exploration of Zulu stick fighting as performance. *South African Theatre Journal* 14(1): 97–113.

Coetzee MH (2002) Zulu stick fighting: a socio-historical overview. In: Yo: The Journal of Alternative Perspectives on the Martial Arts and Sciences. Available at: https://ejmas.com/jalt/jaltframe.htm (accessed 13 April 2021).

Collins S, Durington M and Gill H (2021) Multimodal anthropologies: the uncertain present and the multimodal future. *American Anthropologist* 123(1): 191–193.

Coplan D (2008) *In Township Tonight!: Three Centuries of Black South African City Music and Theatre*. IL: University of Chicago Press.

Cornell J, Seedat M, Malherbe N, et al. (2020) Splintered politics of memory and community resistance. *Journal of Community Psychology* 48(5): 1677–1695.

Cornell J, Malherbe N, Suffla S, et al. (2019) Racialized interactions, contestations and (re)presentations of South Africa's "protest culture. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. Epub ahead of print 16 February 2019. DOI: 10.1080/14780887.2019.1577519.

Day S, Seedat M, Cornell J, et al. (2019) A multimodal reading of public protests. *Politics and Space* 37(6): 1005–1023.

Dawson MC (2012) Protest, performance and politics: the use of 'nano-media' in social movement activism in South Africa. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 17(3): 321–345.

della Porta D (2011) Eventful protest, global conflicts. *Distinktion Journal of Social Theory* 9(2): 27–56.

Duncan J (2016) *Protest Nation: The Right to Protest in South Africa*. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

Drury J, Reicher S and Stott C (2003) Transforming the boundaries of collective identity: from the 'local' anti-road campaign to 'global' resistance. *Social Movement Studies* 2(2): 191–212.

Gillespie K and Naidoo LA (2019) Between the cold war and the fire: the student movement, antiassimilation, and the question of the future in South Africa. *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 118(1): 226–239.

Halliday MAK (1978) *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. London: Edward Arnold.

Jolaosho O (2019) Singing politics: freedom songs and collective protest in post-apartheid South Africa. *African Studies Review* 62(2): 6–29.

Klandermans B (1997) *The Social Psychology of Protest*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Kress G and Van Leeuwen T (2006) *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge.

Kusters A, Spotti M, Swanwick R, et al. (2017) Beyond languages, beyond modalities: transforming the study of semiotic repertoires. *International Journal of Multilingualism* 14(3): 219–232.

Langa M and Kiguwa P (2013) Violent masculinities and service delivery protests in post-apartheid South Africa: a case study of two communities in Mpumalanga. *Agenda* 27(1): 20–31.

Lazar S (2015) "This Is Not a Parade, It's a Protest March": Intertextuality, Citation, and Political Action on the Streets of Bolivia and Argentina. *American Anthropologist* 117(2): 242–256.

Ledin P and Machin D (2019) Doing critical discourse studies with multimodality: from metafunctions to materiality. *Critical Discourse Studies* 16(5): 497–513.

Malherbe N (2020) Articulating liberation psychologies of culture. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* 40(4): 203–218.

Malherbe N, Day S, Cornell J, et al. (2020) Exploring police-protester interactions. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 26(3): 236–246.

Marchetti F (2021) Exploring embodied memories of terror through a multimodal research-creation practice. *Multimodality & Society* 1(3): 366–390.

Mistry J (2001) Conditions of cultural production in post-apartheid South Africa extraordinary times, IWM junior visiting fellows conferences, Vienna, Austria. *Extraordinary Times* 11(8): 1–20.

O'Halloran KL (2011) Multimodal discourse analysis. In: Hyland K and Paltridge B (eds) *Companion to Discourse Analysis*. London: Continuum, 120–137.

Pennycook A and Otsuji E (2014) Metrolingual multitasking and spatial repertoires: 'pizza mo two minutes coming'. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 18(2): 161–184.

Pennycook A and Otsuji E (2017) Fish, phone cards and semiotic assemblages in two bangladeshi shops in Sydney and Tokyo. *Social Semiotics* 27(4): 434–450.

Radumilo ST (2015). Multimodality and (moving) image. *Investigating Culture* 1.

Rose G (2001) *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*. London, Sage.

Roy WG (2010) How social movements do culture. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 23: 85–98. DOI:10.1007/s10767-010-9091-7.

Schneider TD (2020) "Dancing on the brink of the world": seeing indigenous dance and resilience in the archaeology of colonial California. *American Anthropologist* 123(1): 50–66.

SAHO (2011) Towards a People's Culture, Art and Resistance under Apartheid. *South African History Online*. Available at: https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/towards-peoples-culture-art-and-resistance-under-apartheid (accessed 9 April 2021).

Scott J and Marshall G (2009) *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology*. 3rd edition revised. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sikweyiya Y and Nkosi S (2017) Violent protests and gendered identities. *African Safety Promotion Journal* 15(1): 1–7.

Suffla S, Malherbe N and Seedat M (2020) Recovering the everyday within and for decolonial peacebuilding through politico-affective space. In: Acar YG, Moss SM and Uluğ ÖM (eds) *Researching Peace, Conflict, and Power in the Field: Methodological Challenges and Opportunities*. Cham: Springer, 344–364.

Swart L, Day S, Govender R, et al. (2020) Participation in (non)violent protests and associated psychosocial factors: sociodemographic status, civic engagement, and perceptions of government's performance. *South African Journal of Psychology* 50(4): 480–492.

Tateo L and Marsico G (2018) The synthetic and syncretic nature of human culture. *Human Arenas* 1: 1–8. DOI:10.1007/s42087-018-0004-z.

Tilly C (1978) *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Boston: Addison-Wesley.