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FEELING LIKE A MOVEMENT: VISUAL CULTURES OF EDUCATIONAL RESISTANCE



Image 1. All photos and images are from the 2012 Chicago Teacher's Strike. All photographs reproduced with the permission of Sarah Jane Rhee (Images 1, 2, 3, 4, 8 and 9) and the Chicago Teachers Union (Images 5, 6 and 7).

Introduction

Who wasn't glued to the 2012 Chicago teacher's strike? We, two university-based educators in the city were riveted by it, and we were not alone. From *The Guardian* and *Al Jazeera America*, to the *Chicago Tribune* and blogs representing a wide political spectrum, the whole world seemed to watch as thousands

¹ This is a co-authored article. The order of our names reflects a publishing rotation.

of red t-shirted teachers and their innumerable allies, including young people, parents, and other union members, sang, chanted, and marched in the streaming autumnal sunshine throughout the nine day strike.

While highlighting core contractual issues such as how teachers were hired, evaluated and compensated, the strike also aimed to create and visualize a strong resistance to the corporate, top-down, anti-union, and anti-community educational agenda of Mayor Rahm Emanuel by centering the actual conditions of teaching and learning in Chicago Public Schools.



Image 2.

In 2010 the Chicago’s Teachers Union (CTU) was revitalized by a progressive group of educators, the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE). The seeds of CORE germinated two years earlier in the form of a discussion and study group organized by Jackson Potter, a politically active history teacher on the Southside of Chicago. As a caucus, the group initiated activities that articulated new directions for the union, including bringing teachers together to fight school closings and “turnarounds” (where all school employees were fired), and shifting the culture of the union from primarily providing member services to organizing with communities (Bartlett, 2013). With a vision that strong students and schools need strong—well-informed, well-supported, and energized—teachers, CTU members handily elected CORE.

This revamped CTU understood the initiatives of the Emanuel administration as bad for teachers, parents, children, and communities. The “reforms” were devastating: a ramping up of the city’s tiered school system, with elite, well-resourced, restrictive enrollment schools populated by disproportionate numbers of high-income white students and under-funded neighborhood schools attended by poor youth of color; mass closings of vital neighborhood schools; attempts to pit teachers against parents by elongating the school day without increasing salaries for the additional work; and support for non-union charter schools. CTU leadership, and many teachers and community members knew, as well, that to counter and stem policies and programs supported by “hedge-fund billionaires” like Bill Gates and Sam Walton, the Obama administration, and other powerful interests (Bartlett, 2013, para. 19), CTU members would need to be fully engaged and committed to a view of public education as both a necessity and a possibility for all the city’s children.

While the strike aimed to “win” key contractual issues, it also sought, and succeeded, to draw national attention to the failure of corporate-driven privatizing educational reforms, and illustrating that public education, under siege across the nation, is a common good worth fighting for. Central to this goal of

undertaking popular education about public education, and in particular of shaping ideas about teaching, was a proliferation of visual products.



Image 3.

This Chicago's teachers strike made full use of digital technologies and social media; teachers and supporters rallied themselves and each other with a steady stream of catalyzing images: well-designed posters, tweets, funny and snarky hand-made signs, powerful photographs of seas of red-shirted protesters flooding downtown streets. Pictures of children and young people standing up for their teachers, parents rallying to prevent school closures, and bored and dismissive school board members and politicians worked to educate, entertain, and mobilize supporters. The images, art and artifacts—memes conveying ideas—produced by teachers and their accomplices, mobilized people because they made them *feel*.



Image 4.

Affect, or our bodies' ways of responding to the feeling intensities of the moment (Shouse, 2005), is not simply ephemeral. "Emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 119, emphasis in the

original). “[A]ffective modulation[s] of the populace” are effective (Massumi 2005, p. 32). For example, George W. Bush’s administration used post-September 11, 2001 grief, fear, and anger to fuel the racialized “war on terror” that legitimized torture, the restriction of civil liberties, and unending war. His “compassionate conservatism” contracted public services for poor people, and eased the public’s acceptance of privatizations of the social welfare state

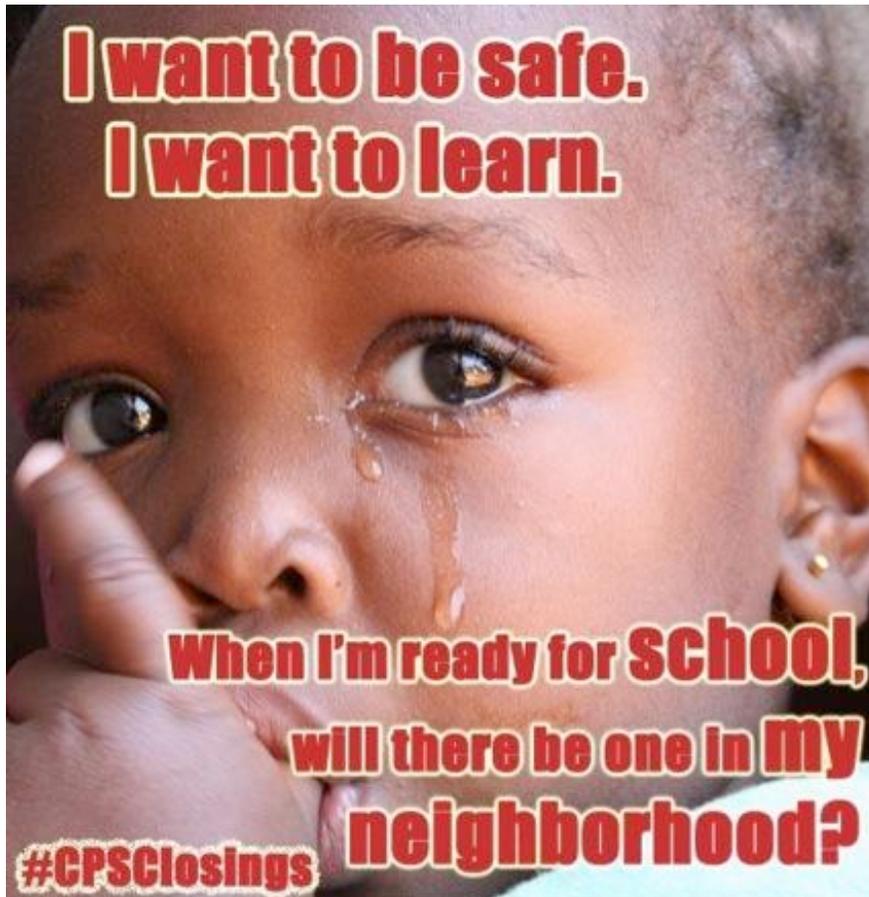


Image 5.

Political feelings, like *all* feelings, are personally experienced, yet can trigger and support actions (Shouse, 2005). Through pointed humor, prodding sarcasm, heart-tweaking and playful forms, data visualization, and more, the CTU strike art shared online displayed and transmitted feelings. This visual culture nurtured a collective disposition: *willfulness*, or a “style of politics [that] means not only being willing to not go with the flow, but also *being willing to cause its obstruction*” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 8, emphasis in the original). In this case, images rallied mass numbers of people to take to the streets in support of teachers and public education. In other words, social media helped to orchestrate and narrate the political feelings that scaffolded the strike; the visual culture of labor conveys emotion and a politics shaping the movement. This was exciting to experience; internet memes circulated rapidly and those that were particularly powerful were infectious. These images often felt like play, albeit with serious intent; they were omnipresent and apparently effortlessly created. Yet, who *were* the creators and chroniclers? And why, in a movement about valuing labor, was this labor so invisible?



Image 6.

While many participated in creating the potent visuals of the strike and related resistances, and in fact, support for an insurgent “Do It Yourself” (DIY) culture was central to the power of CORE, to explore our questions about the relationship between affect, images and the labor of movements for justice in this essay, we highlight two workers who played central roles in creating and archiving the critical art and documentation of the 2012 strike and surrounding educational justice events: educational social movement documentarian Sarah Jane Rhee and social media tactician Kenzo Shibata.

Sarah Jane Rhee is an immigrant to Chicago from Seoul, Korea. A photographer from her youth, Sarah, defines herself as a narrative photographer whose practice is dedicated to documenting movement building—rallies, protests, and the ongoing work of local organizations focused on social justice—in Chicago. Kenzo Shibata taught high school English in the Chicago Public Schools for almost a decade before starting a career as a digital strategist for the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union strike (“New Media Coordinator”), and now as the Media Director for the Illinois Federation of Teachers. He is also a writer, blogging for the Chicago Tribune Media Group and kenzoshibata.com, and has published with *Gapers Block*, *Beachwood Reporter*, *AREA-Chicago*, *New Politics*, *Alternet*, *In These Times*, *Jacobin Magazine*, *Huffington Post*, *Labor Notes* and *Truth-Out*.

Through interviews with Rhee and Shibata we identify key concepts represented in the cultural products created for the strike and related political events and in the documentary images. In particular our exchanges focused on exploring the powerful, creative, and often witty pairings of text with images in posters generated by teachers; the specific role of internet-based art in generating energy and conveying political ideas (meme development) and the disposition to act; and the emotional and often invisible labors attached to social media work in movement-building.

The Interviews

We emailed our questions to Shibata and Rhee in the early summer of 2014, almost two years after the strike, identifying some prompts as priorities and others as optional, and asked for responses in a month. These were edited for length and clarity and then we returned the draft of our article to the artists for feedback and revisions. What follows are the final versions of some of the questions we posed and their responses, including images.

How and why do you the work you do? How do you define the work you do?

Kenzo Shibata: The ultimate goal of the work I do is to amplify the voices of regular folks. When we first formed the caucus [CORE], mainstream media attention was hard to attract. We needed teachers, parents, and students telling their own stories. Once those stories started bubbling up and particular issues became salient like school closings, charter schools, and merit pay, bloggers take note. When the bloggers take note, the mainstream media soon followed.

When social media became an integral part of peoples' lives, I knew that we had to penetrate those channels. The average person may not trust what an activist they don't know has to say about an issue, but they will trust their friends and family. We organized rank-and-file teachers to tell their own stories online and create dialogs with the people they trust.

Sarah Jane Rhee: I am a photographer and document local grassroots struggles and movement building in Chicago. I do this primarily by photographing rallies and protests and the ongoing work of local organizations related to various social justice issues. I don't consider myself a photojournalist, because although I am more likely to be holding a camera than a sign, I deliberately do not lend a neutral presence to these environments.

I do this work because I think that it is crucial to document a visual history of resistance and social movements, and many of the struggles that I have been documenting in detail are not the kind of stories that mainstream media are likely to cover in depth. I also do this work because these photographs contribute to the narratives of people I have grown to love, people whose stories I want to be known and remembered, people whose lives matter.

Select one image that you created / used during the strike that you think was most effective/powerful. How or why was this image powerful? What audiences do you think this image reached/moved?

Kenzo Shibata: One of the most effective images that we used during the strike was a handmade sign that simply read "Rahm Emanuel Likes Nickelback."

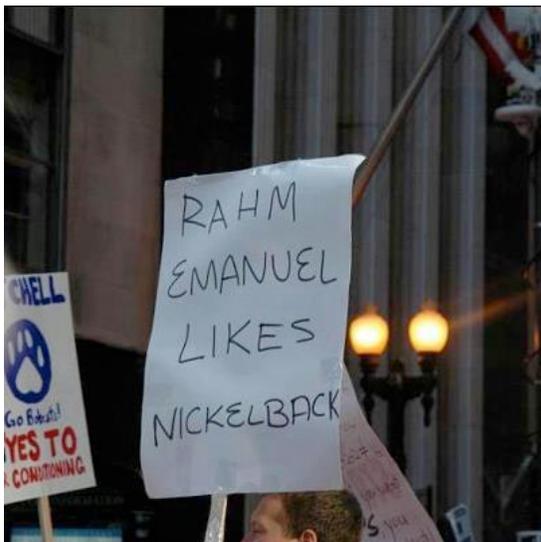


Image 7.

Sarah Jane Rhee: It's hard to pick just one photo, but this image stands out in my head because it was from a march that took place on the west side, near Marshall High School, in one of the most disinvested neighborhoods in the city.



Image 8.

The image breathed a bit of humor into a really intense time. We pushed that image through social media and it took off instantly. It was mentioned on Conan O'Brien's show. The Mayor's office issued an official response refuting the claim. It was a piece of media that was almost self-perpetuating. Before the strike, there were politicians and pundits who tried to paint the union and the tool of the strike as old, stodgy things from back in the day. The idea was that charter schools and other neoliberal reforms were "hip and progressive" and collective action was a thing of the past. This image, very simply turned that image on its head. It made use of pop culture to simply "burn" the Mayor. The sign was made by a first-year teacher in his early 20s. To me, and I feel like to many, this image said, "The union movement is back."

I felt that it was significant that the CTU had chosen this part of the city for its first neighborhood march, and the fact that thousands of teachers from across Chicago came together to march in this specific neighborhood was an indication of the unity amongst the rank-and-file member of the union and the growing recognition that one couldn't strive to just save one's own school, but that everyone had to unite to save all the schools. It was also clear that the CTU connected the dots between historic disinvestment in certain (mostly black and brown) neighborhoods and the closure of schools in those same neighborhoods and the systemic racism that created both these conditions.

When you popularized images during the strike how much attention did you pay to the prevailing tropes surrounding education? For example, the child (Black or brown) harmed by school closures?

Kenzo Shibata: During the strike, posts receiving the most engagement were pictures and videos from the picket lines. Teachers holding signs related to the classroom were popular. Small class sizes, air conditioning, and funding were shared and retweeted at high rates. The school closings campaign was different. The most repeated concept during the school closings campaign revolved around the dangers of forcing students to cross gang lines to get to their new schools.

In this political and media moment we are seemingly saturated with images; we can and nearly all do create them and they are made available to us through ever-increasing means. How do you negotiate and position your work within this media-proliferating landscape?

Kenzo Shibata: This is what separates tweeting/Facebooking from digital organizing. My work is to train people to use digital media for advocacy, find people who are already doing it, and building space where their work will have an audience. I employ traditional organizing methods (meetings, phone calls, face-to-face encounters) in addition to an every-increasing stable of digital tools.

The CTU strike was an intense and prolonged moment of “crisis.” How did you feel working in this moment? What sustained you?

Kenzo Shibata: For me, working in a crisis makes me anxious because of the opportunity it creates. I constantly ask myself, "Am I doing everything I can." Once awareness was raised that the schools had issues that were brought on by the administration, we had to use that moment to show the world exactly how bad things were. We had to show the public also the power of the union. There was so much going on, so many media opportunities happening at once, you have to constantly pick and choose which ones to work on.

What sustained me was being part of a community. We had a team of members and staff who worked tirelessly to get the message out.

Sarah Jane Rhee: I had been documenting the struggle around school closures and education justice in Chicago since the Fall 2010 Occupation of La Casita at Whittier Dual Language Academy in Pilsen, so I had watched the momentum build up towards the strike during the couple years prior to it.



Image 9.

Sarah Jane Rhee: Years of organizing by (and of) rank-and-file teachers, parents, students, and community members as well as coalition building amongst these groups laid the foundation for the strike to be as successful as it was. I think we all knew that we were part of history in the making during that strike, and being a witness to that was exciting to me, personally. I spent hours every day of the strike either documenting or editing photos, and I know I often felt physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted during those 9 days, and yet I knew how significant this specific moment, this specific struggle was, and I was compelled to document what was going on around me.

There were several factors that especially kept me going during those days. First, I knew we were on the right side of history, that this struggle was just, and that being there to document in the midst of it all was an honor I did not take lightly. Second, most of us supporting the strike knew that the CTU was fighting for more than a fair contract, that the union recognized the intersection of economic, racial, and education justice, and that by standing up to Rahm Emanuel’s push to bust the unions and to privatize the schools, the strike not only galvanized numerous groups to support and join in the struggle but also sent an important message to the mayor that the teachers, parents, students, and community members would not sit idly by while he bullied them. Third, the people who were in this fight—the rank-and-file teachers, the CTU staff and leadership, the parents, students, and community organizers—many of them were people I personally cared about deeply and respected immensely, people alongside whom I was willing to fight and struggle. I heard from many other people—whether

teachers or supporters—that they also felt this sense of solidarity and community, and I think that was a sustaining factor for all of us.

What are the effects of doing this work on other parts of your life - possibly your family, your health, and other work you do?

Kenzo Shibata: I think I've fallen into the same trap that many activists do, online or traditional. I became so wrapped up in my work that I stopped taking care of myself the way I did before I got involved. Daily trips to the gym became every-other-day, which became twice a week, then twice a month. I would try to get a few more hours of sleep in the morning because I was up all night working on a campaign and then wouldn't pack a healthy lunch. Later that day, I would feast on the volunteer pizza or donuts at the meeting. It took me a few years to learn balance and I'm still struggling with that today. I'm now consciously practicing self-care.

Sarah Jane Rhee: This work has actually been an integral part of my being able to build community. Most of the people who are currently part of what I consider my chosen family are folks I have met along the way while documenting these struggles. I am a single mother half the time (I have my daughter Cadence every other week), and the relationships I've developed doing this work have made it possible for me to build a community family for my daughter and myself that is predominantly queer women of color, which is really important for me as a mother in how I want to raise my child.

Sarah Jane Rhee: Nevertheless, there are times when this work is draining, emotionally and physically. I am prone to getting migraines, and oftentimes, photographing a strenuous march or rally (often without adequate food or water) and then staying up late to edit the photos means a migraine attack in the morning. I experience chronic physical pain in various parts of my body from carrying around my gear. Additionally, being a witness to so many people struggling for things such as the right to a good neighborhood school, or the right to a trauma center that is closer than 10 miles away, or the right not to be separated from their families due to immigration policies, or the right to be young and black or brown and not be harassed by the police on a constant basis, or the right to just live with dignity...being a witness to all this over and over again does take an emotional and psychological toll.

Sarah, as an largely unpaid activist who creates visual representations of social and political movements, can you comment on the “doubled lens” of chronicling a teacher strike and the erasure of forms of racialized and gendered labor in teaching, coupled with the seeming erasure of your own labor as a movement documentarian (as a woman of color)? What does it mean to try to capture these images of public education (women, often women of color, trying to be treated fairly as workers) when this is also your struggle?

Sarah Jane Rhee: This question made me think of the following quote: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” (Aboriginal activist group, Queensland, 1970s)

One of the values that I adopted early on when I first became politicized was that of viewing struggles

through the lens of collective liberation. Therefore, I do see the struggle of these teachers as related to my own struggle as a woman of color working to survive and thrive in a system that was not set up for us. In my work, I strive to center the voices (or images) of those who are most marginalized in our communities, so documenting the fight of Chicago’s public school teachers, many of whom are women of color, makes sense to me, and I see my role on some level as a co-struggler working in solidarity with the teachers.

I’m also reminded of Gloria Anzaldúa’s piece “Speaking In Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers” in which she writes about the perpetual erasure and co-optation of lived experiences that women of color face: “I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you.” This statement really resonates with me when I think about why I document local grassroots struggles. I don’t want these struggles to be erased or forgotten or co-opted. As a parent of a child in CPS, I have deep-felt gratitude for the work that teachers do, which I see as being crucial. This is work that often goes undervalued or even demonized by mainstream media and politicians/policy makers who want to privatize public education, and when the work is being done by predominantly women, and women of color at that, it seems more likely that the work will be outright erased, pushed aside, caricatured, misrepresented, or co-opted, and that is why I feel compelled to document the work that I see them doing as they fight not only for their rights as workers but for quality learning conditions for their students, which was largely what the CTU strike was about.

That being said, I do feel some tension as an artist documenting a labor struggle and having my work used to support that struggle while generally not being paid for my work. I wonder if union activists who also fight for workers’ rights while working extra-long hours also feel that tension. The road we make while walking in any struggle is never smooth or very straightforward, and I don’t have a good answer as to how to hold these complexities. One thing I do know is that working in solidarity with and amplifying the stories of teachers who are fighting for education justice and not just a fair contract helps me sleep better at night, and I don’t know if that is something I can place a price tag on.

Thinking outside of public education, what visual tools in parallel and interrelated political movements interest you? Move you? What can folks working within social movements that seek justice in public education learn from these visual tools and movements?

Kenzo Shibata: My education justice is intersectional and cannot be extracted from racial, economic, and gender justice. We cannot talk about schools without talking about the social context they exist in. The images shared across social media of the rash of murders of young black men at the hands of cops moves me deeply and are completely connected to the work I do in education. The inequality that exists in the school system is a product of a racist, classist society. A system that allows school closings to happen only in predominantly Black and brown schools is one that allows police to stop-and-frisk Black and brown children. A system that feeds the school-to-prison pipeline is one that continues to build prisons at the expense of schools. I try my best to show these connections in the work I do.

Other Futures

Conveyed online, art and media play vital roles in social movements for justice; they carry ideas, develop propensities, and generate actions. As the CTU strike demonstrated, these visual forms are extensions of our willfully waving arms and unruly tongues; they signal and stimulate our willingness to disobey, to go against the flow, to speak out and to get in the way of business as usual (Ahmed, 2012). A failure to recognize and name this work of building “emotional epistemologies” (Feel Tank Chicago, 2008)

engenders risks. Ignoring the direct linkages between visual cultures of protest movements and public feelings consigns “art” to a narrow and static arena and denies its affective potential. Refusing to recognize the labor associated with digital organizing and archiving reproduces the same power relation that justice-centered mobilizations often seek to address: the dispossession of the worker. In this political moment, despite the horizontalization suggested by the flexibility DIY moment, building visual cultures that are affective engines and political archives must be acknowledged as work. “Digital organizing is labor” (Shibata, 2014). Celebrating and critically engaging the “artists,” a term used by Julio Salgado in their Undocuqueer Project (<http://juliosalgado83.tumblr.com/>), that create radical images to support immigration organizing, gender and sexual self determination, is needed now more than ever, as we continue to design, archive and educate toward the world we need.

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CREDITS

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More of Rhee’s work can be seen here: <http://www.loveandstrugglephotos.com> and <http://communitysafetychicago.tumblr.com>

Shibata’s CTU media can be viewed here: <https://www.facebook.com/ctulocal1>

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