

#DancingIsNotACrime: Dance as Digital Resistance in the Transnational 21st Century

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Abstract

In a live video posted to YouTube on 2 September 2014, a young woman, dressed in black and standing on a stationary car, dances, unwinds her hijab and fluffs her long hair. The upload, since disappeared, registered over 1 million views, and precipitated a spate of responses depicting young women dancing in public places, eventually spawning the hashtag #DancingIsNotACrime. In many cultures across many eras, dancing in public has been a tool for resistance. Those employing movement as resistance often do so precisely because street dance is portable, mutable, and infinitely viral: capable of transmission by person-to-person contact. Multiple subaltern revolutionary movements have begun in search of safe spaces for dancing, and the repression of public dance has been a locus for authoritarian crackdowns. Drawing upon methodologies from semiotics, musicology, kinesics, and political science, this essay explores #DancingIsNotACrime as a potent, present, and immediate vehicle seeking justice and social revolution.

KEYWORDS: dance, hijab, resistance, women, Iran

This essay is part of an ongoing investigation into the role of street dance as a revolutionary tactic, particularly when employed by subaltern populations for whom

mobility and evasion in public spaces are important survival strategies (1). However, I should also begin with a disclaimer: I am probably not the person to be doing this work. Although I am an ally, I am neither a Muslim, an Arabic or Farsi speaker, nor a woman. Yet the work is there to be done, and *it is urgent*, for reasons I will explain. This is therefore a preliminary investigation, and, in fact, a call to action – specifically, a call to action by music scholars, including myself, in service of independence and social justice initiatives. I cannot speak *for* Muslims or for women, but I can seek to raise my voice, from the Western ivory tower, on their behalf, as an ally and an advocate (2). I will also offer a content warning: there is no “graphic” violence in my visual materials, but there are some deeply disturbing moments and facts which reveal the degree to which, in the modern world, dancing is, in fact, literally treated as a crime.



FIGURE 1. Woman dancing on car (screencap from YouTube; no longer available).

In a live video posted to YouTube in 2014, a young woman, dressed in black and standing on a stationary car, responds to low-fi pop music by dancing, and then unwinding her hijab and fluffing her long hair. That upload eventually registered over 1 million views and precipitated a spate of responses depicting young women dancing in public places, which in turn spawned the hashtag #DancingIsNotACrime. Yet across many historical moments, dancing *has* been a crime; as recently as 2018, Iranian Instagram star Maedeh Hojabri was arrested for posting videos of herself voguing in her home to recorded music. Shortly after the arrest, a grainy, low-resolution video depicted a heavily-veiled Hojabri expressing contrition for her “crime”.

Across many cultures, dancing in public can be a tool of implicit or explicit resistance – to social controls, to enclosure of public space, to dominant culture’s gendered movement expectations. Those who seek to employ sound and movement

as resistance – whether *washoi* dancers at Grant Park during the 1968 Democratic National Convention, drag queens at Stonewall in 1969, or Pussy Riot in Red Square in 2012 – often do so precisely because street performance is portable, mutable and infinitely viral: capable of transmission via person-to-person physical or visual contact (Smith 2019: 152, 154-57; Listengarten 2012: 67-71). Multiple revolutionary movements from the womyn’s movement to hip hop to the Arab Spring have begun in search of safe spaces for dancing, while conversely the repression of public dance has been a locus for authoritarian crackdowns. As Anthony Shay puts it:

Any social action that can raise such powerful negative reactions that periodic attempts are made to ban it in its various forms can be viewed as an activity that is also saturated with potential subversive power. In this context, dance provides a unique lens through which to analyze the dynamics of societal values and attitudes. (2008: 67).

In this essay, employing methodologies from semiotics, musicology, kinesics, and political science, I explore #DancingIsNotACrime as a potent, present and immediate vehicle seeking justice and social revolution, and argue for the analysis of street dance as part of culture studies, sociology and, as well, political science.

The initial inspiration for this investigation was my chance encounter with that video of dance by a woman on the roof of a car, and eventually doffing the hijab. Uploaded by Lisa Daftari in 2014, since disappeared and reappeared, and obviously shot with a low-resolution hand-held cell phone camera, it struck me, a historian of (among other things) subaltern dance, as profoundly interruptive, intentionally disruptive, and exceptionally powerful (3). I subsequently discovered that there is a body of similar videos, uploaded by dancers from across the Muslim world, in which the hijab, conventionally associated in public contexts with conservative gender values, is occupied by the vocabulary of embodied dance (Meftahi 2016: 133).

These performances read as especially powerful in the context of theocratic regimes’ public policing, by official, paramilitary, or voluntary arbiters of gendered conduct – Meftahi speaks of a “network of surveillance” consisting of the whole devout populace (2016: 133). Thus I have focused for purposes of scope and topic upon material centering hip hop dance in the context of Iran, though there are many analogous examples elsewhere. I am seeking what Ruba Salih and Sophie Richter-Devroe describe as “thick description of the broader political, cultural, and economic contexts in which cultures of resistance emerge”, which in turn necessitates “situating the artwork, music, internet, or other forms of creative protest in the global and local material and structural contexts which enable and constrain them” (2016: 13-14).

The medium of social media dancing as an expression of women’s human rights appears to arise from earlier manifestations of hip hop as a global resistance strategy, and of its use as an emblem of personal and social freedom going all the way back, in the USA, to the Clinton Administration. Calling it “a genre conceived as outsiders’ protest against the system”, Cynthia P. Schneider, writing in *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, said, with a degree of bourgeois presumption, “hip-hop resonates with those marginalized from the mainstream”, and described a 1980s “Syrian audience

[who] became so carried away that even the security guards joined in, pantomiming living in a glass cage as they danced" (2006: 198).

As the above reference makes clear, hip hop was often deployed as part of American international diplomacy – and covert subversion – precisely because of its semiotic mapping as “American” and “multi-cultural”. We can debate, in another context, the ethics of both the United States government’s covert subversion and of the semiotic readings they imposed upon these genres. As had been the case of jazz and rock ‘n’ roll, it was employed as emblematic of “democratic free expression”, as part of United States State Department international policy (Dillard 2012; Freund 2015; Schweikart 2010).

Dance – breaking, popping, locking, krumping, and a range of related and borrowed moves – is an integral part of the hip hop complex, but its appearance as an international performance of resistance, especially by women in heavily-gendered theocratic contexts, is a more recent trend, roughly contemporaneous with the Arab Spring (Martin 2016; Matsue 2013; Salih and Richter-Devroe 2014; Salois 2014). This paper therefore seeks to theorize these guerilla videos of hijab-wearing women dancing hip hop and the “shuffle dance” in public settings in Iran as resistant noise, as grit intentionally thrown into the gears of authoritarian and centralized social structures (4). As Abraham Moles describes “noise”, whether sonic or visual:

Shocks, crackling, and atmospherics are noises in a radio transmission. A white or black spot on a transmission screen, a gray fog, some dashes not belonging to the transmitted message, a colored spot of ink on a newspaper, a tear in page of a book, a colored spot on a picture are ‘noises’ in visual messages. A rumor without foundation is a ‘noise’ in a sociological message (...) A noise is a signal we do not want to hear (1968: 78).

A particularly visual public manifestation of this resistance is captured in the body of material, widely distributed on social media, with the hashtag #dancingisnotacrime. However, while that hashtag was significantly more visible in the wake of the arrest and then tearful repentance of Maedeh Hojabri, the use of Western secular expressions, and especially of hip hop sounds and motion, has deeper roots in pan-Muslim resistance movements.

In passing, I think it worthwhile to distinguish here between what I would perceive as a dispute regarding the definitions of gender in public versus private space: for example, in Hojabri’s case, the debate perhaps revolved in part around whether Instagram is perceived as a private context like a family or all-female private celebration, or a public space like the street. Or, is it an in-between space like the radio or television studio? #DancingIsNotACrime itself, like a good deal of social-media-based activism reaching back to Lower Manhattan (#OWS, 2011), Tahrir Square (Cairo, 2012) and Taksim Gezi Park (Istanbul, 2014), was precipitated by individuals’ intentional or unwitting transgressions of disputed contextual boundaries (see Jenzen et al. 2020; Muhammed 2015). With the popular rebellions that erupted in several countries across the Middle East and North Africa from 2011 onwards, street protests – in the form of ordinary people’s creative and challenging artistic expressions – could

no longer be left unnoticed. In this period and across these examples, public spaces came to be inhabited by “graffiti, music, art, and performances, which engendered and conveyed new affective and political ties” (Salih and Richter-Devroe, 2014: 11). Movement was central to these public occupations.

Dance has been a part of many types of life-cycle celebrations in Persian and Iranian culture for centuries, and most particularly in female-only events that celebrate inclusivity and female empowerment (Torab 2006: 97-98). As is common in many contexts, even in the modern world, gender expectations operate very differently in single-gender and/or private versus public contexts. Speaking of the “private” medium of home video versus the public venue of the cinema, Merás says:

Dance and music performed by women *only* can happen in private spaces. Therefore, home movies featuring family celebrations contain images of all that is forbidden in Iranian cinema: the voices of female performers, men and women socialising and dancing together, and women not wearing the hijab. Making and watching home videos, as much as participating in those dances, are forms of escapism that allow people to break away from the moral restrictions of outdoor activities. (2018: 179; emphasis added).

In contrast, the propriety of the female body – especially the female dancing body – had been a topic of debate from various sectors of Iranian intellectual and religious thought throughout the 20th century; in 1936, for example, as part of Reza Shah’s modernization campaign, the hijab had been formally prohibited in public (Moghadam 2011: 139). Social conservatism remained strong, however, and throughout the reign of the Pahlavi dynasty, there was deep suspicion that cities, and Tehran in particular, represented zones of *shahvat* (eroticism) which threatened *’iffat* (chastity); as Meftahi puts it, “the presence of unveiled women in public was supposed to have societal sexual effects” (2016: 132-33; see also Afary 2009: 295). Religious conservatives inveighed against female visibility and most especially against the prohibition of hijab:

It was the mandatory unveiling that in particular irked Khomeini, who believed that it symbolized all the evils committed by the ousted Shah. Khomeini warned: ‘The unveiling of women has caused the ruin of female honor, the destruction of the family, and untold corruption and prostitution.’ (Burki 2013: 270-71).

In turn, after the 1979 revolution, and despite efforts in the 1990s on the part of Ayatollah Moajerani to ease social strictures, purging of perceived *shahvat* in the public environment remained a part of the post-revolutionary agenda. Public dance – by women – was especially prohibited:

Since the majority of religious people associated it with promiscuity and frivolous attitudes towards life, dance became the most demonised art form after the revolution and the secrecy surrounding it became so intense that for a while nobody even dared to utter the word *raqs* (‘dance’) in public spaces. (Mozafaril 2013: 99-100).

A foreboding, then, of Maedeh Hojabri's experience was that of six Tehrani Zumba dancers who in 2014 were publicly excoriated, imprisoned and sentenced to corporal punishment for a video of themselves dancing to Pharell Williams's "Happy" (Associated Press 2014). It is notable that this particular crackdown occurred at a moment of political tension between Islamic hardliners and the more moderate President Hassan Rouhani, who was seeking reelection; such authoritarian crackdowns tend to be *equally* performative and equally sensitive to particular historical moments. Similarly, the rapper known as Amir Tataloo (real name Amir Hossein Maghsoodloo), whose followers on Instagram and Facebook numbered in the millions, was arrested and briefly detained in 2013. He subsequently released a video, "Nuclear Energy", sung in Farsi and subtitled in English, which explicitly endorsed an Iranian military presence in the Persian Gulf – the day before official announcement of the lifting of international sanctions on 14 July 2015 (Yazdanpanah 2016).

In contrast, I would argue that the Iranian women dancing *in public* (especially hip hop dancing) in these guerrilla videos represent a different, much riskier proposition, and it is this latter phenomenon – which the sad accuracy of my analysis has subsequently confirmed – that is my focus of interest and attention (Lohlker 2013: 122; Shay 2008: 76) (6). There is no ambiguity about public versus private here; indeed it is *precisely because* the street – in the midst of traffic! – is inarguably a public space that this dancing is explicitly disruptive, irruptive and subversive.

This is the subaltern's temporary "occupation" of public space with movement and sound, with visual and sonic noise, which pushes back against social controls. Foucault suggests that dominant-culture oversight and control of space – first in hospitals and prisons, later in the "public" spaces of cities – is ineluctably part of the machinery of urban life:

One doesn't have here a power [that is, space] which is wholly in the hands of one person who can exercise it alone and totally over the others. It's a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised (...) Power is no longer substantially identified with an individual who possesses or exercises it by right of birth; it becomes a machinery that no one owns. (...) This is so much the case that class domination can be exercised just to the extent that power is dissociated from individual might (1980: 156).

Asef Bayet (1997, 2003, 2015), Rüdiger Lohlker (2013), Abdoulaye Niang (2010), Sunaina Maira and Jil Oslo (2013) and Usama Kahf (2007), among others, have written extensively about rap in the Muslim world, with perhaps a particular focus on the content of MCs' rhymes and personae. Though there does not appear to be much scholarship in English, French or German which deals with the subset of female hip hop dance in Muslim and specifically Iranian world public spaces, the wider investigation of street resistance is useful to the present discussion (7).

In "Plebeians of the Arab Spring" (October 2015), for example, a discussion of street resistance in Egypt and Tunisia, Asef Bayat suggests that a "social nonmovement" – that is, "a collective action [by] noncollective actors" – can yield "individualized

encroachments”, within which, for example, “the youth of the dispossessed, those who are shunned as ‘dangers’ to the public, assert their presence in the main streets and squares” (2015: 35). Thus, momentary “encroachments” by individuals, spontaneously or at least momentarily erupting in public spaces, represent a tactic for the reassertion of underclass identity. Similarly, in a 2003 essay for *Middle East Report*, Bayat calls “street politics (...) the modern urban theater of contention *par excellence*” (2003: 11). While he is speaking of vendors, food and tax protestors, and other small, explicitly municipal or political street protests, Bayat’s model for Arab World street resistance seems equally applicable to the case of Iranian hijabis hip hop dancing. He likewise articulates precisely why young people – university students and others – may be a particular target for authoritarian crackdown, because “the moment [they] decide to come out into the street,” forces of public morality intervene in order to “keep the protest a local [e.g., low-profile] event” (2003: 15). In a little-viewed video (159 views as of 29 July 2021), cross-posted to YouTube from activist Masih Alinejad’s Instagram account on 5 August 2018, a scarf-wearing woman dances impromptu to the street busking of a duo of nay (bamboo flute) and zarb (wooden goblet drum), who cease playing, and a poignant dialog between player and dancer ensues:

Nay player: Excuse me! Sorry if I have to say this. I’m not being rude or something.

Dancer: No problem! I see.

Nay player: They’ve forbidden dancing really. I didn’t want to stop you. I swear down I’d love to watch you dance.

Dancer: I see (bows).

Nay player: I’d enjoy you dancing, but I had to promise not to play happy songs which is impossible. But dancing is particularly forbidden. I’m ashamed too that I can’t dance. Last night, we had tourists from Shiraz, they danced and it was okay. The other day, we had foreign tourists too. We couldn’t help it, it’d be so rude. Anyway, I’m sorry everyone. Give her a round [of applause], please! (Peter 2018).

(8)

The dancer, who is aware of the camera, immediately grasps that her impromptu response has placed the musicians in a difficult legal position; she swiftly acknowledges his request. The nay player, in turn, expresses clearly that his concern has to do with theocratic restrictions upon women’s dance; as he says, “tourists from Shiraz” and “foreign tourists, too” can be permitted to dance. It is, specifically, the conduct of citizens of Iran, and of Tehrani women in particular, which is most repressively scrutinized.

Within sociopolitical activism, social media content can function as a decentralized resistance communications channel, like YouTube in Palestine in the late 1990s, Twitter during the Arab Spring from 2010, and as the internet itself was originally designed to function (9). Erupting into the “public square” of international social media, as the hijabi shuffle dancers erupt into the street settings of the videos, this rebellious content is fleeting, temporary, mobile, and decentralized (Willis 2005: 241-48; Lohlker 2013: 131) (10).

I am working here with the idea that dance itself, like other vernacular expressive arts including contrafacta texts, MCs' texts, children's rhyming songs, and the cultural associations of certain sounds and timbres, may all be theorized as intentionally contagious and indeed "viral", and that activists' strategy, tactics and political insights may be illuminated through this analytical frame. The use of disruptive noise and movement as part of pop-up resistance actions is an existing trope in various conservative societies, especially those which seek to control the visibility and the bodies of minorities including gays and women; in fact, the performance of gender defiance was/is an existing body of work on social media. Yet the particular intersection of hip hop dance, hijab-wearing women, public settings transmitted via social media strikes me as unique and uniquely powerful: an interpretation which would seem to be confirmed in the severity of various regimes' authoritarian response. This performance of authoritarian hegemony is essential to the state's construction of its public self, and cracks in that façade are ferociously policed. Rena Effendi says:

For a young person to feel free in the Islamic Republic of Iran, they must break the law. Holding hands in public is punishable; the sight of a woman smoking cause for arrest. Being different, whether by sexual orientation, religion, musical taste or style of dress, is prosecuted. (2010: 75). (11)

Video dancer Sahra Afsharian was arrested, along with Sara Shariatmadari and Niloufar Motie, on 8 October 2019, and was tried in "a court presided by the head of the 28th branch of Tehran's Islamic Revolutionary Court" (Radio Farda 2019) (12). Those arrests were followed within the month by additional crackdowns on other dancers. Afsharian, who was likely targeted precisely because of the size of her Instagram following (94,000 followers at the time of her arrest) was sentenced to two years imprisonment in Qarchak Prison near Tehran (Associated Press 2014). In the wake of those arrests, similar acts of resistance have expanded and continue to proliferate on social media both within and beyond Iran's borders. Those pop-up actions have in fact expanded to include not only dancing, but also singing – another activity prohibited for women – in public spaces (13).

As of this writing, and to the extent that such things are knowable from a geographic and experiential distance, Sahra Afsharian and a number of other dancing activists remain in limbo (14). There are lessons here, and few are comfortable. To wit: authoritarian restrictions against and retaliations upon social dissent remain actively in force in a wide diversity of states around the world; theocracies and oligarchic regimes continue to repress minorities; movement – whether liberatory or repressive, whether the movement of hijab-doffing soloists in the streets of Tehran or the performative would-be mob rule of the assault on the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 – continues to be perceived as politically powerful or threatening; and there are limits to cultural relativism, especially when "belief" is employed as a tool to repress or abuse (D'Avolio 2004). Human rights are always at risk. Dominant culture relentlessly exploits and represses subaltern communities. And, in entirely too many ways and contexts around the 21st century globe, dancing continues to be regarded as a #crime.

Endnotes

(1) I am indebted to the existing literature authored by the scholars cited this essay and must particularly acknowledge the deeply- and experientially-grounded scholarship of Ida Meftahi, whose *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran: Biopolitics on Stage* (2016) and subsequent articles and lectures have strongly influenced and contextualized my own thinking. Meftahi's work has centered upon theatrical, cinematic, and cabaret dance; my own goal in this article is, specifically, to concentrate upon the medium of street dance and social media video. In addition, a strong inspiration comes from Rosemary Martin's eloquent writing about the "intersecting vectors of locus, culture, politics and dance: censorship, surveillance, occupation, restrictions, suspicion, borders, freedom, choice, and the presence of the female dancing body" and from Martin's centering of women's own words in telling these stories (Martin 2016: 18). Anthony Shay likewise warns of the limitations which an outsider's perspective may impose: "Because the individual western writer/reporter often does not possess a comprehensive overview of how dance intersects with existing historical perceptions of dancing, and other societal activities, such as feminist struggles and its myriad context, their accounts remain partial, and ultimately unsatisfying" (2008: 68).

(2) The currency and reality of these threats by state forces against activists seeking women's human rights is confirmed by the July 2021 revelation, well after this essay was proposed and accepted, of a plot by Iranian intelligence officials to kidnap Masih Alinejad, the author, *Voice of America* broadcaster, and anti-hijab activist behind the "My Stealthy Freedom" site on social media (Weiser 2021; see also Alinejad 2018, 2021; and Zakaria 2018).

(3) The screen capture is from a downloaded version of the video, which has once again, as of 7/29/2021, disappeared from YouTube.

(4) The most common step, the "shuffle dance", which is now a common movement trope throughout ten years of these guerrilla videos, derives from EDM (Electronic Dance Music) movement vocabularies, and in turn from hip hop and jazz dance footwork. The early (uploaded 27 February 2011) and little viewed (4784 views on 30 July 2021) "Islamic Hijab Dance!", a short clip of a hijabi seemingly video-recorded in a university classroom, performs the shuffle dance to Kelis's "Milkshake" (from her album *Tasty*, Stark Trak/Arista, 2003) (GOODxOLDxTIME 2011).

(5) See, for example, Torab 2006.

(6) Speaking of a Senegalese Muslim context, Rüdiger Lohlker has articulated an analysis suggesting that hip hop expression may be especially prone to hardline fundamentalist crackdown precisely because of its associations with "westernization", especially as regards to women's behavior (2014: 122).

(7) I may add, in passing, that I would be very glad to hear of such scholarship that I might well have missed. I should also add that my investigation, and my outreach to both scholars and activists, is ongoing.

(8) Translation original to the video.

(9) For Palestinian hip hop, see for example Tamer Nafar's DAM (Da Arab MCs; Arabic: دَام); DAM (uncredited) c2017). For Twitter in the Arab Spring, see for example Al Jazeera 2021; Berkowitz 2011; Stepanova 2012.

(10) Paraphrasing Paul Willis, Lohlker emphasizes that the “symbolic creativity” which hacks technology for subaltern resistance “uses technological devices and products of the content industry in a way not intended by the creators of these devices and products” (Lohlker 2014: 130). Lohlker describes use of YouTube as an uncensorable publication channel: “A new development in Islamic and Muslim hip hop is to use YouTube as a channel for distribution of the music. Even videos featuring ‘Underground Muslim MCs’ are published on YouTube creating an own sub-category and exploiting the gangsta cliché of hip hop” (Lohlker 2014: 131).

(11) Although the focus of the present essay is upon the sub-set of viral videos featuring women dancing without the hijab, it must be noted that persecution of LGBTIQ+ and other subaltern groups is equally ferocious (Radio Farda 2019).

(12) “A website affiliated with the Islamic Republic monopolized and state-owned Radio and TV network, Young Journalists Club (YJC) reported on Tuesday that the three, dubbed as ‘Instagram Dancers’, would be tried soon in a court presided by the head of the 28th branch of Tehran’s Islamic Revolutionary Court, Mohammad Moqisseh (Moghiseh) (...) Based on international human rights organizations, Moqisseh is one of the judges who frequently issues harsh verdicts against journalists, civil and political activists under the influence of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps’ fearsome intelligence organization” (Radio Farda 2019).

(13) For “illicit” female singing in public spaces, see Fassihi 2020.

(14) A few lone voices on social media continue to speak Sahra Afsharian’s name, but at the time of writing (July 2021) she continued to be, essentially, invisible. See https://twitter.com/search?q=%20afsharian%20&src=typed_query&f=live Accessed: 28 July 2021.

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