

## Dance and Protest Special Issue Editorial

Rachael Gunn

Macquarie University

*rachael.gunn@mq.edu.au*

Serouj Aprahamian

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

*serouj@illinois.edu*

MiRi Park

California State University, Channel Islands & UCLA

*miri.park@csuci.edu; miripark@ucla.edu*

Shamell Bell

Harvard University, Theater Dance & Media

*shamellbell@fas.harvard.edu*

### Introduction

The succession of protests and uprisings following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of (now former) Minneapolis police officers overwhelmingly included dance as a protest tactic (1). While dancers have long engaged in cultural acts of resistance, this iteration in the #blacklivesmatter movement stemmed directly from the efforts of dancers/activists who participated in the protests following the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Ezell Ford, and Michael Brown. Dancer/activist/scholar/mother Shamell Bell deemed “Street Dance Activism” (Easter and Saldivar 2017) as a protest tool to celebrate Black Joy in the face of Black death, and renowned dance scholar Brenda Dixon-Gottschild (2020) has noted how such actions have gained

increasing visibility over the last decade. Internationally, we have also seen the rise of dance actions such as the Māori haka performed in honour of and in solidarity with the victims of the Aotearoa/New Zealand mosque attacks (Abedi 2019), traditional Kurdish folk forms performed in protest over Turkish cultural repression (Nyberg 2012), and in Chile the Las Tesis song and dance to protest against patriarchy and sexual violence that went global (2019). More recently, we have seen a resurgence of house music and dance not only during Covid lockdowns, but also in street protests (Eleode 2022). Across these examples, dance and music have worked together to amplify political messages, create solidarity, and highlight inequalities and inequities in our social and political structures.

While a popular music studies approach to studying these examples of protest might examine the lyrics, musical notation, or meaning-making practices of fans and participants, dance studies might examine the choreography or circulation of dance motifs. While these different approaches can work to situate such practices in broader histories of dance and music, we think there is great value in bringing these two domains together, particularly in studying the act of protest. By 'protest', we not only refer to the political defiance, rebellion, and resistance of dominant social and political order, but also the organised struggle, solidarity, and counter-cultural movements that predicate and enable these acts. And so, this Special Issue of the IASPM Journal gathers a broad range of scholarly and artistic perspectives on the topic of dance and protest within the context of popular music studies. It brings together often separated discussions of dance or music as protest in order to show the ways in which they interrelate, overlap, intertwine, and bolster political expression.

Both dance and music, separable and inseparable, are key to acts of protest. Our attempts to examine them are aimed at reframing key questions about how we respond to, make sense of, and decide to act in the face of social and political upheaval and disenfranchisement. More specifically, we wanted to shed light on the interrelationship of dance and music in personal, political, and collective expression. In this special issue, we asked: How is dance and music used at protests to enhance political messages and statements? How can dance and music unite people in solidarity, and engender a greater sense of community? How is dance and music used to inspire people to act, to facilitate calls to action? How might protests themselves be examined as a form of performance? And conversely, how might performance be examined as a form of protest?

Importantly, our questions aimed to expand discussions of protest within the fields of dance and music beyond institutionalised forms of expression. That is, beyond political works of art – be it dance or music – that were designed by formal artists and choreographers in response to particular social crises. Instead, we wanted to shed light on the everyday, the people, living rooms, streets, and the viral videos, where protests so often manifest. We wanted to reveal the spontaneous and (re)shared moments of protest facilitated and inspired through dance and music, and that often culminate in the amplification of a political movement. This is not to say that these moments are not organised or pre-planned, but rather that they exist outside of institutionalised spaces and are not designed for commercial consumption or economic profit. Instead, they are grassroots forms of activism that place community togetherness and wellbeing at their centre.

With this in mind, this special issue has brought together examples of dance, music, and protest from around the world. From twerking in Argentina, public dancing in Iran, hip hop performance as activism, the Umbrella protests in Hong Kong, and hardbass masked dances in the Czech Republic, this special issue reveals the complex and nuanced ways that dance and music intersect in the performance of protest on a global scale. However, our special issue does not simply bring together examples and analyses of protest but has also been coordinated as a type of protest. In an attempt to contribute to the destabilisation of the privileging of the English language in academia, one of the articles featured is in Spanish. We also feature artist statements in an effort to further render visible the activist voice, which is often absent from spaces and platforms of academic privilege. These artist statements share insights into the transformative potential of dance, whether through performance or therapy. Finally, we believe that the interdisciplinarity of this issue is a kind of protest in the bringing together of dance studies and popular music studies. Our editorial team is a mix of scholars working in the fields of dance and popular music studies, resisting, and expanding notions of what it *is* to be a popular music studies scholar and/or a dance studies scholar.

Before we introduce the works of this special issue in greater depth, we want to first discuss the ways popular music studies, and then dance studies, has engaged with the theme of protest. We hope that this discussion not only provides a starting point for scholars from both disciplines to begin to engage with key texts in the other field, but also that it facilitates conversations and dialogue across these two domains. In many ways, both dance studies and popular music studies have been marginalised in the academy, and yet both fields offer vital tools to understanding how we engage with and make sense of popular culture. How does the music we listen to, the movements we gather through, and the combined expressions we manifest help us create a sense of identity, a mode of distinction from others, a community? Both dance studies and popular music studies can help us answer these important questions.

## Protest in Popular Music Studies

To begin, perhaps one of the more obvious ways that popular music studies engages with the theme of protest is by looking at protest music. That is, songs that are associated with a socio-political movement. Writing from the late 1960s, R. Serge Denisoff was one of the first scholars to critically examine protest music. Denisoff's many works called attention to how songs can function as part of broader political movements in terms of their potential for persuasion or propaganda. However, Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison sought to expand this definition in their groundbreaking work *Music and Social Movements* (1998). They argued, "in social movements, musical and other kinds of cultural traditions are made and remade, and after movements fade away as political forces, the music remains as memory and as a potential way to inspire new ways of mobilization" (Eyerman and Jamison 1998: 2). They highlighted the lasting resonance of music beyond the specific time and place in which it emerged, and the potential for music to not only invigorate but also maintain social movements. Eyerman and Jamison highlighted the importance of examining the broader consumption contexts of music. Such an approach is now commonplace in popular music studies, as researchers seek to

locate how practices and rituals around music become the means through which listeners/fans can engage in processes of identity construction.

An important figure working on the relationship between music and politics, is John Street, who has published extensively in this area. Incorporating an array of international examples, his book, *Music and Politics* (2012), maps the ways music is at the core of political order, how it has been restricted, censored, used as propaganda, even torture, as well as a mobilizing force, a means for people to articulate dissent. Throughout Street's body of work, he looks beyond the role of music in merely conveying a specific message, and questions why certain music becomes significant in particular ways, and how music shapes and focuses the experience of the audience. George McKay is another key writer in this area, taking a more focused approach to the cultures of popular music. Covering topics like hippies, punks, jazz, community music, music festivals, DIY culture, he uses these cultures to discuss notions of resistance, social activism, and forms of protest (see for example McKay 1996).

Edited collections have been an important way to engage with the topic of popular music and politics. For example, Jonathan C Friedman's edited collection *The Routledge History of Social Protest in Popular Music* (2012) is an important text to understand the specific musical formats and rhetorical devices that connect and illuminate the human condition, what social protest music is – the shared characteristics and attributes – and how it has evolved over time. More recently, Catherine Hoad, Geoff Stahl and Oli Wilson's extensive edited collection *Mixing Pop and Politics: Political Dimensions of Popular Music in the 21st Century* (2022) offers an innovative account of the complex ways popular music interacts with politics in such times of flux – in a seemingly 'post-truth', 'post-politics', and 'post-pop' era. Addressing a broad range of topics, including climate change and environmentalism, diasporic identity, feminism, the far right, conservatism, civic engagement, and political parties, the collection engages with a diverse array of international musical genres and artists. From Korean rap to Polish punk, to vaporwave to ecometal, the collection reveals the diverse ways popular music is political, while also pausing to reflect on what popular music studies *is* in the current climate.

Our summary of key texts here is by no means a comprehensive list of the ways popular music studies has engaged with the theme of politics. In fact, readers might like to explore other more focused texts, such as Lockard's (1998) examination of music and politics in Southeast Asia, Manabe's (2015) discussion of music and antinuclear politics in post-Fukushima Japan, Orejuela and Shonekan's (2018) edited collection of music and the Black Lives Matter movement, Kunreuther's (2018) discussion of the sounds of democracy, and Martin Cloonan's many works on censorship. But we want to highlight that throughout these examples of popular music studies texts, the interrelationship between music and protest is clear. From articulating the frustration of a social movement, to comforting people in their grief, rallying people together in solidarity, telling stories that offer new insights and perspectives to lived experiences, popular music has always been the soundtrack and anthem to how we live and engage with politics in our lives. It has also become entangled with its own politics of censorship, moral panics, copyright, and public policy.

Despite the interdisciplinary nature of popular music studies, there has been little direct engagement with dance practices that accompany these musical expressions. This is despite the fact that the cultures and genres popular music studies share much overlap with the cultures and genres studied in dance studies. In their introductory chapter to the edited collection *Popular Music Studies*, David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus write:

The study of popular music is, at its best, a uniquely interdisciplinary area of research, drawing significant contributions from writers within a number of academic fields including musicology, media and cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, ethnomusicology, folkloristics, psychology, social history and cultural geography. (Hesmondhalgh and Negus 2002: 2)

As you can see, this extensive list of influential fields does not include dance studies. Other examples of the specific influences on key popular music texts include Andy Bennett's *Cultures of Popular Music* (2001), which he firmly positions within cultural studies and media studies, as well as drawing on research from sociology. While these texts and authors do not represent the diversity of scholarship in popular music studies, they do point toward an underprivileging of dance within the field.

This is not to say there has been no discussion of dance in popular music studies. Indeed, Sarah Thornton's groundbreaking study of electronic dance music, *Club Cultures* (1995), and Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson's *Discographies: Dance, Music, Culture and the Politics of Sound* (2002) have drawn attention to the identity formation and positioning of power that takes place when music and dance meet in contemporary contexts. Popular music scholars such as Daphne Brooks (2006) and Sherlie Tucker (2014) have also made interdisciplinary contributions to our historic understanding of performance and politics as they relate to theatrical culture in the nineteenth century and swing dance during World War II, respectively. Our own work has also attempted to bridge this divide by exploring how the reciprocal relationship between music and movement in hip hop culture shapes notions of community, identity, and resistance to hegemonic structures (Arahamian, forthcoming; Bell, 2019; Gunn, 2016; Park, 2022). This special issue aims to put these developments in popular music studies in closer conversation with their corresponding and growing stream of scholarship in the field of dance.

## Protest in Dance Studies

Dance studies has tended to look at protest through the lens of professional choreography and theatrical criticism, with many of the leading texts on the topic being framed in terms of the embodied choices made by demonstrators and the meanings received through their physical actions. Susan Leigh Foster's influential 'Choreographies of Protest' (2003) leads the way in this regard, arguing for the use of dance studies in analysing the organisation and orchestration of demonstrations. Scholars such as Rebekah J. Kowal (2004), David Gere (2004), Danielle Goldman (2010) have likewise drawn connections between performance practices and the techniques of nonviolent protest, while many recent treatments of the #blacklivesmatter movement have emphasised the symbolic meanings of physical

gestures used by participants (Hendricks 2022; Kedhar 2014). Yet, these studies mostly focus on analysing protest actions through the lens of dance and performance studies, rather than looking at dancing itself within protests.

Various studies have also examined dance in broader terms of resistance against oppressive regimes and human rights violations, both in community-based settings and theatrical performance contexts. Anthony Shay (1999) famously coined the term “choreophobia” to refer to opposition against dance practices deemed to be a threat to dominant ideologies, specifically in Iran. Ida Meftahi (2016) has similarly explored the role of female dancers in challenging state power in Iran, a topic which has particular contemporary resonance given the current uprisings in the country. Researchers have also looked at the contestation over dance in areas such as Palestine (Rowe 2010), the broader Middle East (Martin 2016), South Africa (Erlmann 1996), and Brazil (Browning 1995). Though the topic is still developing in the field, scholar Dana Mills (2017; 2021) has contributed two wide-ranging books exploring dance activism throughout the world, and the edited volumes *Dance, Human Rights and Social Justice: Dignity in Motion* by Naomi Jackson and Toni Shapiro-Phim (2008) and *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics* by Rebekah J. Kowal, Gerald Siegmund, and Randy Martin (2011) offer important primers.

As with other facets of activism, dance has been employed to entrench power just as much as it has been to challenge it and numerous scholars have examined this former phenomenon. Naima Prevots’ (1998) *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War* demonstrates how the US State Department funded tours of dance companies as part of its cultural exchange programs during the onset of the Cold War, with this exertion of soft power having implications for the country’s professional dance establishment. Shay (2002) was also the first to study how governments use folk dance ensembles for propaganda purposes, often attempting to divert attention from atrocities and repression at home with essentialized portrayals of choreographic practices abroad. Christina Ezrahi (2012) has also explored how Soviet authorities employed classical ballet for political purposes and how those involved in the dance sought to circumvent such state control.

Nevertheless, few of these studies detail the role of music or listening in their discussions of dance and politics, leading to a partial assessment of the interwoven processes at play. Just as sociological studies of music and culture have tended to avoid discussions of dance, the same has been true in the case of music within studies of dance and movement (Fogarty 2015). In his chapter on the subversive power of hip hop dance, scholar Thomas DeFrantz (2004) emphasises the need to consider these two factors together, as movement both responds to and provokes the percussion of hip-hop, and it is in this reciprocal relationship where the culture’s spiritual and communicative power manifests against oppressive forces. Turning to Black expression, more generally, DeFrantz (2004) suggests that any treatment of its political potency must attend to the close interconnection between dance and music manifested within it historically. As we see more and more protest movements today incorporating dance and music as a central component of their political actions, we similarly believe that analyses of political action should

incorporate the rich tools and research contributions provided to us from both fields.

## Special Issue

The texts in this special issue couple the study of dance and music in protest movements in a number of different ways.

We begin with Christopher J. Smith's article '#DancingIsNotACrime: Dance as Digital Resistance in the Transnational 21st Century,' which looks at Iranian women using dance and social media activism to challenge the moral restrictions and political repression taking place within their country. Drawing links between the use of disruptive movement and noise as forms of resistance, Smith highlights the particular role bodies in motion play in challenging societies intent on controlling movement and visibility. He also points to the virality of these dance displays, noting how their spread and engagement makes them effective tools for activism, something which has been reaffirmed by the current Iranian protests against the draconian "morality" police of the ruling regime.

Anthony Blacksher and grace shinhae jun's 'ILLEGIBLE Representations, Collaborative Protests' tackle the issue of visibility and repression as they are occurring in the United States, namely through the criminalization and devaluation of Black life. As artists involved in the #blacklivesmatter movement, they address the skewed representations of Black bodies in popular culture and the compulsion toward containment shaping racism and police violence. Their paper provides an autoethnographic case study of how hip hop's artistic expressions, broadly defined, can combine the power of bodies, voices, and music to cope with trauma, counter anti-Black stereotypes, and lend support to social justice activism.

This is followed by Maggie Leung's 'Lyricism of revolution: A choreographic analysis of the 2003 and 2014 protests in Hong Kong,' which applies a traditional dance studies approach to analysing the organisation of movement and meaning in two notable street demonstrations. In addition to discussing the embodied performances of protesters, Leung looks at the contrasting sensual, emotional, and social experiences generated by each wave of protest, arguing that the 2014 "Umbrella Movement" – itself named after the choreographic response of demonstrators – represents an important awakening that holds considerable revolutionary potential, despite the movement's purported 'failure' to affect policy. Aiding this analysis of how participants relate to each protest is popular music studies' emphasis on the psychic and emotional dimensions of experiencing music, as Leung directs readers to the often-overlooked dimensions of collective consciousness and imagination generated by these resistance movements.

Ondřej Daniel's 'From street parties to hardbass: dance and protest in postsocialist urban space' sheds further light on dancing as a political tool, namely by analysing how various groups in the Czech Republic have moved to electronic music in their public demonstrations. He shows how—as with virtually any other political tactic—dancing can be used for both progressive and reactionary causes, for both empowering and intimidating citizens, and for both liberating and confining public spaces. Rather than romanticising dancing as protest, Daniel's research traces its historical development in the post-socialist sphere, nuances debates surrounding its use, and connects its appropriation to broader issues of

resistance and commodification. His article is a reminder of the importance of carefully contextualising the meaning generated by movement and music in today's era of populist politics.

Then Mercedes Liska's 'Mi culo es mío: políticas de género y significaciones recientes de las eróticas de baile, del meneaíto al twerking', which translates to 'My ass is mine: gender policies and recent meanings of the erotics of dance, from meneaíto to twerking,' takes us to Latin America, where dances previously deemed to be 'erotic' are increasingly being conceptualised as emancipatory expressions of female sexual sovereignty. Through an in-depth analysis of movement practices such as twerking, Liska investigates the role of both singers and dancers in feminist reconsiderations of 'erotic' dance in Argentina and other countries throughout Latin America. Her revelations have important implications for our understanding of how class, culture, sexuality, and gender intersect in contemporary movements for social change.

We then have our two artist statements: Erin Bryce Holmes's 'Protest is Mental Health: Afrocentric Healing in a Dance Movement Therapy Session' and 'Embodying Resistance' by Rose Pasquarello Beauchamp and Donna Davenport. Both of these statements speak to the healing power of dance as applied in the face of racial and political oppression. Holmes explores the codified pan-African dance technique of *Umfundalai*, while Pasquarello Beauchamp and Davenport discuss "social somatics," applying the integration of body and mind practices in dance to engage audiences and affect social change. As such, both pieces offer practical examples of how – and, just as importantly, *why* – dancing can be used as an effective tool in organising efforts.

Taken collectively, these texts integrate dance and music studies to better understand the multifaceted forms of protest that continue to proliferate around the world. As activists embody resistance on the streets, it is important to understand the processes of healing, community building, awareness raising, and joy in play within these movements. We hope that this Special Issue will serve as a catalyst for further interdisciplinary studies that lead to a broadening of how each field engages with the theme of politics and protest.

## Endnotes

1) See the 'Dance Protest list June-July 2020' for a detailed list of examples where dance has been used as a protest tactic.

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