

# Sound and Movement

## *Vernaculars of Sonic Dissent*

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As a global financial crisis rippled through the late 2000s and early 2010s, with mass political movements rising in its wake, many journalists and critics in the English-language press asked an anxious question: *where are the protest songs?*<sup>1</sup> But the question was begged: such songs were already presumed gone. The inquiry itself was ultimately more revealing than any of the answers that those who posed it offered. Its repetition revealed *a fear of dissent's impotence in challenging neoliberal capital*, and especially of the *inability of the culture industries to confront new forms of hegemony*. The inquiry made contemporary musicians into straw men who could be knocked down by mere mention of the performers who gave protest music its generic name five or six decades ago. This allegedly supported the claim that *popular music had lost its political salience*.

Such a claim is straightforward to dispute, and this article spends little energy doing so. It is enough to note that *music remains symbolically necessary to most political movements*. Rather, I wish to recover what might be valuable about the question by reorienting the question of where the protest songs are toward a broader inquiry into sound's relationship to dissent. It is historically evident that protest music is best understood as a genre, limited by its musical structure as well as its era (a point expanded upon later). The anxious question about protest music's demise finds a richer answer when phrased in terms of sound, which is utilized in service of political projects in ways that escape the parameters of any one genre. Phrased this way, the question takes on renewed urgency: *where is the sound of dissent?* It is emergent in many places and doing vital work. I offer

a case study from my own fieldwork on political protests in Thailand to analyze how sound acts, circulates, and refracts meaning in the performance of dissent, returning to protest music—now to be understood as provincial and ideological—toward the end.

As an alternative to the term *protest music*, I propose the term *sonic vernacular* (or *vernacular of sonic dissent*) as an analytic that might aid the recognition of the diverse ways that political dissent is made audible. *Sonic vernaculars are composed of locally trenchant sonic and aural practices and the symbolic meanings that they transduce and mediate*. If *where is the protest music?* seeks a reply in the lingua franca, a universal or hegemonic symbolic register, *where is the sound of dissent?* is a query attuned to the vernacular. As numerous recent studies have described, sound and hearing's role in political dissent is shaped over the course of vernacular histories. Roshanak Kheshti writes of antigovernment rooftop religious chanting in Tehran, Marié Abe and Noriko Manabe each separately describe the connection between antinuclear demonstrations and a history of political and labor gatherings in Japan, Jessica Schwartz analyzes vocality in the activism of women from the Marshall Islands, and Nomi Dave locates silence as a “strategy of communication and being in an authoritarian state,” that of contemporary Guinea, to name just a few examples.<sup>2</sup> This scholarship describes sonic practices that make symbolic and performative sense where they are employed, but perhaps not (or not the same sense) elsewhere.

Crucially, however, the sonic vernacular is *not strictly aligned with the spatially local*.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the notion of the vernacular, like Anna Tsing's “friction,” might loosen the tendency to think about sound and dissent as bounded by geography.<sup>4</sup> The sonic vernacular, like a hidden transcript, cannot be formalized by a state, for instance, and therefore tends not to be fixed by political boundaries. It must be decentralized and even oppositional in relation to hegemonic sonic orders, or what Martin Daughtry calls “auditory regimes.”<sup>5</sup> Sonic vernaculars are formed and utilized in the interstices of the state's sonic order and therefore may leak through that order. In so doing, the vernacular can also become worldly. Pnina Werbner writes that “vernacular ethnic rootedness does not negate openness to cultural difference or the fostering of a universalist civic consciousness and a sense of moral responsibility beyond the local.”<sup>6</sup> The sonic vernacular, in brief, might allow us to think about engagements between sound at hand and sound beyond, to find these in frictional (or circulatory) rather than binaristic relation, to hear sound in dialogue with place but not fixed to it.<sup>7</sup> The structure of this article, in fact, which mixes multiple apparently distinct case studies, seeks to enact just such a dialogue.

Shana Redmond's *Anthem* is among the works that might be said to describe a sonic vernacular. Redmond finds a frictional relationship in

music of the black diaspora. Tracing several African American “anthems,” Redmond details how the effort to imagine blackness in nationalistic terms has been grounded in “shared oppressions and the resistances to [them],” rather than in geography or language. Black nationalism in the early twentieth century was conceived as a nonterritorial nationhood. In key moments of political kinesis, for instance during the Harlem Renaissance and the civil rights movement, commonalities of racial subjugation birthed a symbolic repertoire that performers could draw upon in political demonstrations. Performance practice, however, proved difficult to standardize, as James Weldon Johnson found with the reception of his “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” This anthem was sung by a variety of regional choirs who disagreed about whether the song should be performed in the manner of a prayer or a national anthem. And the piece changed in circulation. The song’s lyrics, for example, were translated into Japanese at a moment of incipient solidarity between African Americans and Japanese against white colonialism. Johnson’s anthem was thus sounded differently throughout a diaspora that it simultaneously helped to expand. “Lift Every Voice and Sing” was deeply enmeshed in understandings of blackness and black politics that were continually and productively unsettled, a scene that Daphne Brooks has described as a “dynamic transatlantic cultural matrix.”<sup>8</sup> Sonic performance fueled this dynamism.

The analytic of sonic vernaculars aims neither for universal principles nor for culturalism. It is meant, rather, **to explain how sound in a given political field is both multivalent and semantically volatile**. I therefore turn next to a case study in which sound producers were deeply concerned with valences but in which multiple, divergent valences were in play, namely, a study of sonic dissent. The vernacular sounds, sonic agents, and listening practices in this example are in some respects specific to Thailand as a geographic entity. For instance, these dissenting sounds had to conform to (or at least contend with) the nation’s laws about public amplification. And the dissenting sound was addressed to people with largely common voting rights as well as shared political histories. These commonalities, taken together, were nearly interior to the borders of Thailand. But in dissent, sounds and sonic meaning tend to resonate beyond such borders, at times in clear trajectories toward specific auditors (say, an international news channel) and at other times more diffusely toward a hopeful but so far undefined *out there*. It is precisely this latter diffusion, marked by a deferral of the production of meaning, that I wish to highlight. Sonic vernaculars emerge and develop in situations of meaning unsettled, not meaning decided. Gatherings of political dissidents are frequently noisy and tumultuous, I suggest, precisely because dissidence is a labor of upending semantics. Noise—sound unmoored from referential stability—represents and indeed actualizes this unsettling. Dissidents

operate in and through noise, in the midst of its upheaval, just as uncertain of the outcome as they are certain of its necessity. What emerges then is a frictional chorus, a vernacular of sonic dissent.

### The Roar of a Speck of Dust

On 19 December 2010, a group of about fifty Thai protesters converged on the outside steps of a McDonald's restaurant in the commercial heart of Bangkok. This cosmopolitan area, called Ratchaprasong, is composed of glassy malls and global hotels crosscut by aerial walkways. The protesters were not wealthy, but nor were they destitute. They simultaneously belonged in this place, and did not. They were middle class, including some professionals, with an average age of about forty, as well as a smattering of families with young children. From every direction, the sound of a large crowd passed over them in giant waves. In one small pocket of the crowd, the fifty protesters acted out a refined and stoic quiet. The massive totality that filled Ratchaprasong and the intimate circle on the steps spoke implicitly to one another.

These fifty protesters were members of a subgroup called Red Sunday, who had gathered at this major event—about fifty thousand people by the afternoon—organized by a national protest faction called the Red Shirts. The Red Shirts, who numbered in the millions nationally, had organized themselves over several years. Their movement existed to oppose the entrenched sovereign alliance of military, parliamentary government, and monarchy that has gripped Thailand for decades with only the flimsiest of democratic commitments.<sup>9</sup> At this event, the Red Shirts surrogated the memory of ninety-one dissidents who had been killed in recent conflicts with the military, many of them in the very intersection where that evening's event was taking place. The Red Shirt movement still exists disjointedly in 2018, though the military junta that seized power in a 2014 coup has largely driven it from public view. But it was, at that time, the country's key antigovernment opposition bloc.

In 2010 and 2011, when public dissent was still allowed, Red Sunday appeared at nearly every Red Shirt rally and often staged separate happenings on its own. I accompanied Red Sunday members at most of these, riding by car from their headquarters to different parts of Bangkok and sometimes by bus to other cities, once or twice a week. I studied the group's dramatic strategies, including its unique sonic practices, and became close with its leaders and main volunteers. At most of the large events, Red Sunday proudly highlighted the humility of their operation, making their smallness into a spectacle. At the 19 December event, Red Sunday's coterie was like a speck of dust, an important metaphor of lowliness in Thai conceptions of hierarchy. They were fifty people among *fifty*

or sixty thousand packed in one intersection. But the vulnerability and apparent powerlessness of the group, its dustlike presence, cast them as vulnerable and sympathetic, especially in the eyes of politically centrist witnesses. This approach was devised after extensive conversations and negotiations among Red Sunday's members about how to generate press coverage while avoiding arrest. To be weak, like dust, was to claim the benefits of liminality.

The deep symbolism of Red Sunday's performance was designed largely by the group's founder, an activist named Sombat Boonngamanong. The protesters on the steps were members of an amateur choir Sombat had recently convened. They had rehearsed throughout the previous week to perform unaccompanied and without amplification in precisely this place. The group had practiced three songs, all recent compositions by a nationally known singer, guitarist, and composer named Jin Gamma-chon, whom Sombat had recruited to enhance Red Sunday's reach. Jin is well known in Thailand, although the style of music he helped pioneer, a genre called *pleng pheua chiwit* (songs for life), peaked in popularity many decades ago.<sup>10</sup> But for the group, there was great symbolic power in including Jin, as well as in having amateur performers and in singing without microphones, amplifiers, or prerecorded backing tracks. The appearance of the choir implied that people were participating organically, an implication redoubled by the presence of Jin, who channeled memories of righteous protests past. By joining, he linked the 2010 performance to a history of violent political repression at the hands of the Thai military, especially dating to the 1970s, when leftist movements were widespread. Reflecting on the performance later, Sombat described these symbolic choices as creating a sense of *sànnèe*, or humanistic charm.<sup>11</sup> Musical amateurism also helped suggest that the movement was of the grass roots, while simultaneously fending off right-wing charges that the Red Shirts were inauthentic, paid stand-ins. These sonic symbolic decisions were Sombat's best-laid plans, and they were clever. At times such efforts succeeded as political tactics. When all went well, recordings of Red Sunday's performances circulated widely online and garnered positive, high-profile press coverage, which legitimized the group's discourses. It seemed, in such brief and rare moments, as if sound and meaning might be stable, and therefore manipulable.

The 19 December performance went even further symbolically by dramatizing Red Sunday's nonhierarchical philosophy of horizontalism.<sup>12</sup> Since the group was leaderless by principle, traces of authority were downplayed, and egalitarianism was theatricalized. Thus, Jin stood among the ordinary members of the choir despite his relative celebrity. He did not stand above or apart from them. Sombat, a mild, self-effacing everyman despite his serious and often risky activism, went a step further, mingling

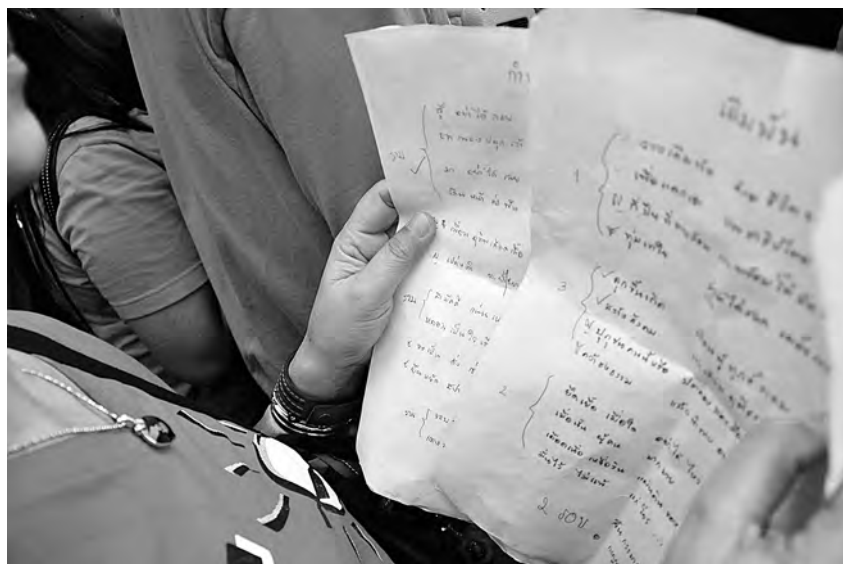


Figure 1. A Red Sunday choir member consults her lyric sheet prior to performing on 19 December 2010. Photograph courtesy of the author.

not with the choir but with the audience on the perimeter. The choir's conductor, by day an assistant to a Thai member of parliament, kept time with one hand and offered pitch references on his clarinet. But he stood below the singers, a powerful signal of his deference, as they lined the steps. Aside from the conductor, the only vestige of organization was that the singers stood in gendered clusters, a decision made by the conductor the previous day in an effort, he explained, to increase the choir's volume. The singers each held three sheets of white paper with printed song lyrics. Most of them lacked musical training, and so they annotated their sheets with hand-drawn symbols loosely indicating melodic movement, rhythm, and elements of form. Everyone had their own system of informal notation.

Before the performance, Jin seemed uneasy. "The concert today is strange," he told me. "It's something that hasn't really been done before, hasn't really been done in this way. We're singing without amplification, just singing with our mouths in a group. Just singing. It offers a new feeling."<sup>13</sup> He paced in front of the steps, smiling only briefly when a fan stopped to pose for a photograph with him. By the early evening, the rally had swelled to about one hundred thousand people. The sidewalk beneath the elevated mass transit line was so crowded that participants could only inch along, willing themselves to patience. The choir had held a practice run earlier in the afternoon, close to the center of the rally, but it had been





Figure 2. Red Sunday prepares for their performance in front of McDonald's.  
Photograph courtesy of the author.

subsumed by the surrounding noise and therefore halted abruptly. For Jin and most of the group, there was a sense of hope mixed with terror about what the evening concert might accomplish, or fail to accomplish.

I asked Jin how he felt when hearing tens of thousands of protesters sing his popular recent political song “Warriors of the Dust” (“Nák sũu thũlĩi din”) all together, as had often happened lately. As in Redmond’s *Anthem*, his response implied that **shared oppression grounded a community that flickered into being in the act of singing and audition.** “It’s like I’m connected to a thousand people,” he said. “As if we have the same mood. The same intentions. The same injuries and pain. The same resentment and sense that we want to fight injustice. The same . . . the same as our friends. It’s like we’ve been friends and relatives forever, and we share the same pain. And so we want to fight.” But what does it mean to share pain, to connect with thousands? How fully can singing in unison serve these ends? Within vernaculars of sonic dissent, symbols are always exceeded by an expanding, refracting field of referents. The concert was strange because Jin—like everyone else present—was unsure of what kind of effect the “new feeling” would produce. By the time of the concert, the political field would be different from when the songs had been rehearsed. The specter of audition would introduce a radical contingency. Even the sonority of the concert was uncertain, amidst the crowd and its roaring, impulsive noise. And what else might happen? How might the meaning

of the concert be transduced in a frictional encounter with events yet to come? Jin did not yet know, for example, that Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian fruit vendor, had immolated himself in the town of Sidi Bouzid less than thirty hours before this rally, on 18 December 2010, sparking what would become the Arab Spring. No one knew about that yet, although within weeks the Red Shirts would be intently focused on the news from Egypt, Bahrain, and elsewhere.

Nerves were frayed as the choir fell into line on the long concrete steps. The sun had just set, and the singers stood under the loud lights of the intersection's commercial colossus. Hundreds of orange candles, lit in memory of the ninety-one dead protesters, glowed underfoot. As the choir's performance haltingly began, it was clear that Red Sunday would be acoustically dwarfed by the greater protest event. Despite the Thai government's recent emergency decree, which restricted amplification at political gatherings, protesters had brought impromptu audio systems with large speakers and played car stereos at full blast from every corner of the rally. Others played instruments or shouted. The resulting thrum in a tightly packed space full of wide, echo-prone surfaces produced both substantial ambient noise and constant interruption from impulsive sounds. To sing with fifty unamplified voices in this setting was to toss a cup of musical water into a sonic ocean. This problem had been considered in advance, even honed by the failed practice concert in the afternoon. "The activities of Red Sunday are different from other groups," offered Sombat. "There are already lots of big stages with announcements. I wanted to do something that was different, more visible, and that would make the news."<sup>14</sup> Within the noisy rally, a group that was small and quiet not only stood apart but might even become *newsworthy*. Visibility was predicated on audibility or, in this case, a profound inaudibility. This is perhaps an instance of what Rosalind Morris identifies as the "appearance of a speaking . . . no longer to be understood in the terms of communicative action, because it has entered into a specular arena in a manner that severs that which can be seen from that which can be heard."<sup>15</sup> The inaudibility of Red Sunday's choir took on meaning only in relation to the greater event, in dynamic contrast and combination with other parts of the rally, as a visible consequence of a performed inaccessibility of channels through which to speak. This was its diffident platform.

But Sombat also knew well that the public sphere for this performance spread much further than the boundaries of Ratchaprasong. The choir's singing was, as expected, documented by the hundred or so people who stood on the perimeter with cell phones and digital cameras. Footage of the concert quickly circulated on YouTube, where Red Sunday sounded resilient and sincere (and no longer inaudible). In video recordings, the fifty choir members make a striking entrance to the first song, "The Bet"



(“Dæmphan”). Camera flashes add white pops to the already vivid fluorescent palette of the intersection, and rigid arms hold screens that reframe the scene in real time. Filtered by cell phone microphones that privilege proximity, the enormous sound of the crowd’s totality becomes a steady hum. Fifty voices seem to emerge, by sheer will, from beneath the din.

Formally, “The Bet” is brief, with alternating parts for male and female voices. It is a conventional European military march in structure and lyricism; this is not the sort of emotionally searing work that made Jin famous. It is generic. What made “The Bet” successful, in this instance, was how it was performed, and especially the way that performance was highlighted in documentation. With weak omnidirectional cell phone and camera mics placed near the center of the group, recordings of the event tended to increase the choir’s relative volume, quieting the ambient sound until it was distinct but not overwhelming. In some recordings, the singers nearest the microphone stand out, and the uncertainty of their pitches becomes obvious. There is a striving in every missed note, in every entry just off the beat. In my own recording, the man immediately in front of my sound recorder sings in a register a bit too high for his own comfort. At one point, he misses a few words to clear his throat. Despite being submerged by the surrounding rally when heard “live,” with the right sound edit the group became audibly *sànnè*—seemingly ordinary people struggling without special resources or technology, exactly as Sombat had wanted.

But the proliferation of recordings was also a reminder of the multivalence of audition. Sombat could not guarantee that this performance would, in every instance, make the intended impression. Communicative action did not altogether cease. Rather, communicative channels fractured beyond the point that any single speaker or performer could control them. Whenever Red Sunday staged an action, there was negative press, a warning from the police, or some sign of disagreement from middle-class or politically centrist sources. As a result, Red Sunday was perpetually insecure about its methods, changing them rapidly in search of an ideal formula for convincing listeners of the group’s integrity, for communicating clearly. Such a formula was never finalized. The 19 December concert format was never repeated; the next event the group held, altogether different in its organization and symbology, was a guitar-led sing-along outside of a prison where several Red Shirt activists were being held. This vernacular of sonic dissent remained an experimental project, one that was in perpetual emergence and upheaval.

Of the three songs Red Sunday sang on 19 December, “Warrior of the Dust” was by far the most successful. Jin wrote it in 2010, and the piece quickly became a staple not only of Red Sunday’s appearances (both as a recording and as a tune that could be hummed or sung spontaneously

in crowds) but also of the entire Red Shirt movement, with its millions of members. The song is laden with apparent double meanings. Its protagonist is a nameless “warrior of the dust,” a title that plays on the well-known metaphor of common people as specks of dust on the ground beneath the feet of Thai royalty, who are figured as celestial.<sup>16</sup> Political domination is naturalized in part by the language of sky and dirt. To be a *warrior* of the dust, then, is to refuse hierarchy by refiguring abjection as a wellspring of political power. This reversal—which was also echoed in the Red Shirts’ appropriation of the word *phrây*, or “feudal serf”—thus implied a subversion of Thailand’s political order. In the lyrics, the “nameless warrior” seeks to “change fate” while standing with “pride and dignity on the field of battle.” “Warrior of the Dust” is dark and affecting. The recorded version is more than six minutes long and rises in intensity over several verses toward an anthemic refrain that repeats until the song ends almost cold. A backing chorus, slow-rolling bass drum, and synthesized strings lend it an air of militaristic melodrama. The song recalls Jin’s work from forty years earlier and was quite far from the typical Red Shirt musical canon, which was otherwise heavy on guitar-driven *luk thung*, hip-hop, and *mor lam sing*. It was an effective emotional token of past protest movements.

But so too was its power emergent and volatile. “Warrior of the Dust” makes no explicit reference to the Thai monarchy or to political hierarchy, and both Jin and Sombat have refused to acknowledge a valence that is strongly implied. They are not being coy, however. The Thai ruling elite—that sovereign alliance of military, parliamentary government, and monarchy—is quick to pursue and prosecute citizens for defamation. Jail sentences for public statements that criticize elites often extend ten years or longer, even in cases that may seem quite mild. The law contains many mechanisms for aggressively defending the reputations of powerful people. Red Shirts must distance themselves from their own critical expressions through lyrical indirection and a refusal to discuss aloud anything but superficial meaning. Thus, the political trenchancy of “Warrior of the Dust” was widely felt but never explicitly affirmed. It was, arguably, the song’s suggestion of subversion, of a general structural unsettling rather than any particular critique, that made it politically appealing.

The built space of Red Sunday’s performance comprised yet another layer of meaning’s fluctuation. Ratchaprasong intersection is a major financial, spiritual, political, and royal site that has been called “an amalgam of the entire scope of sociopolitical and cultural forces in Thailand.”<sup>17</sup> Ratchaprasong, though appearing to be mainly a shopping area, has nevertheless become the city’s strongest magnet for political expression. Because the land and buildings of Ratchaprasong are owned by a combination of royal, military, and business interests, the area reflects precisely the order of sovereign influence that the Red Shirts hoped to churn

up. To protest in such a place was an obvious affront to the ruling elite, particularly when—as happened for several consecutive months—nearly the entire area was shut down by protest occupations. After May 2010, when an armed crackdown by the military against Red Shirt protesters compelled some protesters to loot and burn a large mall, rumors flew that the fires were an act of vengeance perpetrated by angry ghosts. In widely forwarded chain emails, people referred to numerological coincidences to suggest that a minor prince who once lived in a palace on the land was now expressing his outrage at the royal area's takeover by capitalists. Spirits in Thailand are animist, often enjoying strictly local purviews, such as a tree, a plot of land, or a canal—in this case the spirit acted on behalf of the land now occupied by the mall. The rumor about the prince spirit was persistent enough that *Matichon*, one of Thailand's most reputable newspapers, published a roundtable on the topic.<sup>18</sup> The protesters had to navigate the spirit of the nineteenth-century prince, as much as they did acoustics and sightlines, ordinances about public gatherings, and memories of the political past.

But after the military crackdown against protesters in May 2010, Ratchaprasong also became a site of mourning for the ninety-one murdered Red Shirts. Sombat used the word *sàksit*, meaning sacred, to describe Ratchaprasong as a neglected gravesite still active with restless ghosts.<sup>19</sup> Red Shirts widely claimed that their slain comrades still roamed the place and often performed in ways that addressed or surrogated these spirits, including gruesome reenactments of their deaths. Protesters wearing corpse makeup occasionally staged die-ins, collapsing to the ground together at an hour and minute that commemorated a specific atrocity, falling upon piles of theatrical viscera and bright red brain matter. And among the performances that first raised Sombat's profile and drew considerable attention to Red Sunday was an address to the dead. At Sombat's invitation, a crowd of a few hundred stood on the sidewalk of Ratchaprasong and repeatedly intoned "there are dead people here" (*thii nii mii khon taay*). The chant made a new and controversial claim to the historical meaning of the area. The site was countermemorialized through the invocation of dozens of slain Red Shirt protesters.

Like the ghosts of Ratchaprasong, the sonic meanings described in this case study were churned up by the performance of dissent. While shared meanings could be mobilized in clever and fortuitous acts of political theater, these meanings were transformed and multiplied by frictional encounters. Audition in particular destabilized sound. In sound studies, there has recently been some effort made to locate stabilities through terminology.<sup>20</sup> This has been joined by a much needed effort to pay greater ethnographic attention to local contexts of sonic meaning.<sup>21</sup> But there is a simultaneous need for methods that take stock of sound's profound

instability, especially amidst dissent. Vernaculars of sonic dissent operate in contrast to the lingua franca of a term, *protest music*, that is better understood as a historical genre and that tends to obscure both particularities and instabilities. I quote Daphne Brooks once again, in a faraway but resonant context, when she asked the musician Solange Knowles in an interview, “How are you defining protest art and black protest music? Black folks are expected to articulate a certain kind of affective comportment and express themselves in a particular way. If you are resisting in a way that is not legible or conventional or along the lines of a kind of mainstream tradition of resistance, then one might presume that it’s not protest music.”<sup>22</sup> Brooks’s question reaffirms the inadequacies of *where are the protest songs?*, a question that seeks conventional expressions and particular articulations. To better explain how a given sound of dissent functions—equally so that of black popular music or Thai public protest—it is necessary to tune one’s methods to noise and contestation, to processes of unsettling, to dynamic matrices. In the final section of this article, I return to protest music as a historically situated genre that can best be explained not as a universal sonic category but as its own vernacular form—albeit one that seeks to refuse semantic unsettling.

### The Etymology and Ideology of Protest Song

Sonic dissent is neither semantically stable nor geospatially contained, as I have suggested. With this in mind, the remainder of this article examines how protest song developed as both a genre and an ideology of how dissent should be expressed. The term *protest song* or *protest music* should, I argue, be understood as its own vernacular of sonic dissent. (The two terms are italicized when discussed as terms, but not when discussed as genres.)

Though sometimes applied ex post facto to earlier historical music, neither *protest song* nor *protest music* appeared in printed English until 1941.<sup>23</sup> This aligns chronologically with other compound forms in which the word *protest* functions as an adjective, such as *protest march*, *protest poetry*, and *protest vote*.<sup>24</sup> Thus, *protest song* and *protest music* refer not to a transhistorical phenomenon but specifically to post-World War II conceptions of music’s role in political movements within the United States. When the term *protest music* first appeared in print, it was often placed in scare quotes, or otherwise qualified, signaling its novelty. This underscores the connection between the music as a genre and its political concerns—initially, the problem of totalitarian governments rising in Europe. For example, one author noted that “[Dallapiccola’s] *Songs of Captivity*, composed between 1938 and 1942, may be considered for its stylistic qualities and its extraordinary effectiveness of expression the highest form reached by the so-called ‘Protest-Music’ composed during

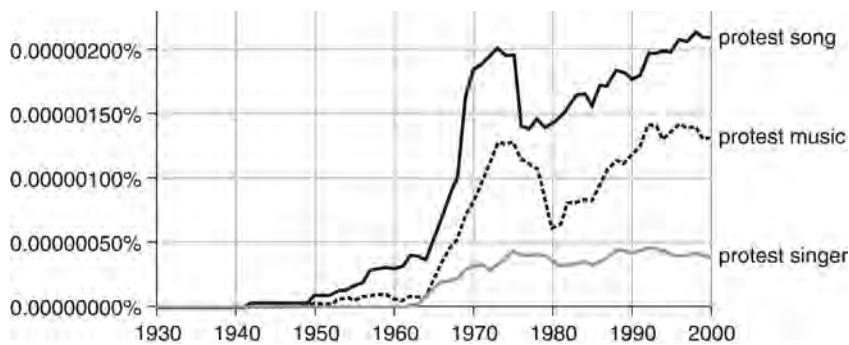


Figure 3. The steeply rising prevalence of the terms *protest song*, *protest music*, and *protest singer* from 1920 through 2000, from nearly none before 1940 until the terms became common in the later 1960s. Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer.

the period of totalitarian oppression.”<sup>25</sup> The term *protest song* arose in the same general period and was used mainly by folklorists documenting American music. John Lomax and Alan Lomax, among others, applied *protest song* to the music of labor, union life, prison, and African American experience, all of which they themselves were invested in recording. Within a decade or two, however, *protest music* and *protest song* had become mostly synonymous. Both came to refer to performance on the street, at spontaneous events, or in popular recordings rather than in the concert hall. *Protest song*, by the 1960s, was firmly associated with mass movements rather than high art. But it remained in essence a genre description. In the ensuing years, use of the two terms rose dramatically in print. Figure 3 shows that they were all but nonexistent in the young century and gained minimal currency in the 1940s and 1950s before exploding in the 1960s and peaking around 1973.

The arc in figure 3 tacks with an increase in domestic protests in the United States, especially those of the civil rights movement and in opposition to the Vietnam War. However, *protest music* and *protest song* did not disappear in the later 1970s, even as public political gatherings waned; indeed, their usage dipped briefly only to return to or exceed previous levels, implying that their emergence in language in the 1940s and 1960s was the genesis of a new and lasting conception of sonic dissent. *Protest song* as it is today used in North America and Great Britain in scholarship, journalism, and everyday speech, emerged only recently.

Certain assumptions are embedded in the term *protest song*. Among them is the idea that dissident music will communicate ideas efficiently. Sound, in its noisy material presence, has thus posed a nagging problem for the discussion and even the performance of protest song. Peter Wicke, in an important edited volume on protest music, treats sound as ineffable,

holding it at analytical arm's length. He writes that "music is a medium which is able to convey meaning and values which—even (or perhaps particularly) if hidden within the indecipherable world of sound—can shape patterns of behavior imperceptibly over time until they become the visible background of political activity."<sup>26</sup> Music and sound here are considered as distinct agents of political force—the former contains settled meanings, while the latter molds action in a way that the author suggests cannot be fully analyzed. But both, together, convey meaning, which appears to pass through them without being altered in the processes of sounding and audition. For Wicke, sound is a black box between two communicative nodes, the semantically settled musical text on one end and the complicit ear on the other. Similar assumptions about communication often occur in scholarship on sound and dissent. For example, a recent article on music in the Egyptian revolution of 2011 describes "protest music" as an expression of the mass will of Egyptian dissenters.<sup>27</sup> The unity of the protesters' collective will is described, implicitly, as stable. Music "articulates emerging desires," "voices perceptions of social change," and "reflect[s] the aims and ideals of the revolution."<sup>28</sup> The authors' choices of verbs to describe musical force—it articulates, voices, and reflects static desire—imply a common political sensibility among Egyptians that could be sounded in the world without being transformed by noise and misapprehension. This is the analytical opposite of Redmond's and Brooks's respective schemas, as it bypasses the materiality of sonic expression altogether.

*Protest song* also bears ideological scars acquired during the political battles of the twentieth-century United States. Protest song as a genre was an important precursor to the folk revival, a musical movement of the mid-twentieth century political left whose members felt that music held tremendous political force.<sup>29</sup> Folk revivalists understood their movement as emanating from the experiences (and musical expressions) of labor activism and African American oppression. Before and during the Great Depression, Populist politicians, the International Workers of the World, and the Communist Party of the United States of America used music for recruitment and campaigning.<sup>30</sup> Progressive political parties and labor unions sought to use music in two primary ways: first, to attract members through music's magnetic or affective power, and second, to diffuse slogans and concepts.<sup>31</sup> The idea of a magnetic function fit with then-current theories of crowd behavior, while the idea of music's diffusive power regarded songs as a means to communicate discourse, virus-like, from a political party or union leadership to the rank and file.<sup>32</sup> Music was propagandized in order to transmit language quickly and indelibly. The folk revival, in drawing on twentieth-century labor songs, understood music as having exactly this political utility. Protest song, a major part of



the folk revival, was thus freighted with specific ideas about what music does to and for its listeners as subjects of political communities.

The myth-shrouded anecdote about Bob Dylan's performance at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965 can help demonstrate the sonic ideology of the folk revival, and thus of protest music. The Newport story contends that, by using electrification for the first time at the festival, as well as on his recently released album, *Like a Rolling Stone*, Dylan alienated fans accustomed to his acoustic setup, and especially the folk revival's cognoscenti. Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison note that, "during the set, musically conservative members of the Festival Board of Directors, Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger, tried, and failed, to have the volume turned down. It was more the noise than the electric guitars and the drums in themselves which they were opposed to."<sup>33</sup> Noise obscured Dylan's lyrics, without which his music lacked political potential. Lyrics, ideologically, were the only meaningful signal, so a lack of clarity was a fatal problem. Eyerman and Jamison describe Dylan as a quasi apostate to the political movements that claimed him as a spokesperson.<sup>34</sup> The panic about Dylan's performance was for these authors less a knee-jerk objection to aesthetic change, as it is often depicted, than a defense of the ideological assumption that protest music should be free of noise. This principle is also audible in the clarion timbre of the typical folk revivalist's vocal delivery, full of clear diction, even airflow, and sharp consonants. Clarity is everywhere emphasized. As in the propagandistic music of the labor movements on which the folk revival drew, musical sound was to be clear and semantically unambiguous.

Race was also crucial. Both academic and popular histories of protest song posit a genealogy that spans from International Workers of the World singer Joe Hill in the early twentieth century, through Woody Guthrie and later to Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan.<sup>35</sup> African American musicians are included, too, although often on highly paternalistic terms. For example, in 1936, a few years before *protest music* appeared in printed English, a white activist and communist named Lawrence Gellert published a collection called *Negro Songs of Protest*, one of several archives compiled by whites of black music in those years. As Steven Garabedian quotes Gellert, "I wanted it for propaganda . . . I wasn't interested in just music for its own sake, but rather music 'as a weapon' in the service of black freedom."<sup>36</sup> Black musicians, in forms such as spirituals and the blues, had developed their own vernacular responses to racial inequality and violence. But these responses were conscripted by Gellert, whose goals may not have been shared by the musicians. As Brooks suggests, the boundaries of *protest music* as a lingua franca even in the present continue to selectively exclude illegible (but no less potent) expressions of African American dissent.

In the mid-twentieth century, African American songs that employed political double meaning or extended metaphor were dismissed as regressive by some white folk revivalists, including Charles Seeger, who “[initially] viewed these songs as anti-political symptoms of false consciousness, marking a belief among slaves that they would endure their lot in life in order to get their ‘pie in the sky when they die.’”<sup>37</sup> African American music was a crucial element in the development of protest song but, for folk revivalists, only some of it counted.<sup>38</sup> Even “We Shall Overcome,” perhaps the single most iconic protest song, reveals racialized assumptions about protest music’s generic limits, as Barry Shank has argued.<sup>39</sup> The pronoun in the title of that anthem—adapted from a spiritual—was changed from “I” to “we” to reflect a transracial universalism that white members of the movement found more palatable. *Protest music*, then and now, has been ideologically and generically narrow. It is a provincial form, a genre, rather than a category that can encompass the many and varied expressions of sonic dissent. For these, something akin to the analytic of vernaculars of sonic dissent is necessary.

## Conclusion

Despite moments of consensus, there is no singular desire, perception, or ideal in a given political movement, only fleeting alignments of hope. Sound draws our attention to semantic instability because it is deployed, in dissent, precisely to induce such instability. For those who have experienced them, protest events often seem more noisy and confusing than sonically intentional. Indeed, sonic upheaval lies at the heart of how public dissent is experienced and, indeed, of why it is usually staged at all. Recent notable examples of sounded dissent bear out the necessity of theorizing sonic dissent as vernacular. Members of the Russian punk collective Pussy Riot were arrested for playing just a few seconds of their song “Punk Prayer: Mother of God Drive Putin Away” in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior in 2011. This performance led to the arrest and prosecution of three of their members and received substantial international attention. Although the song is thick with clever references, musical details cannot fully explain why its performance was so controversial (and ruled illegal) in Russia.<sup>40</sup> Pussy Riot in fact only mimed using their instruments. The song played on a small boom box, and its sound diffused softly up to the cathedral dome. Nevertheless, the performance was heard as a severe threat. Its potency depended on the reception of punk rock by political conservatives, on norms of gendered speech, and on the increasing sacrality of the Russian Orthodox church. But it also depended on the technology of YouTube and on remixes that would later be made from video footage of the event. It depended on the seeing and hearing of

that footage by global audiences whose reception could not be predicted. Meanwhile Kheshti, cited earlier, offers a sound studies analysis of the chanting of “god is great” (*allah-o-akbar*) in protest against Iran’s disputed 2009 presidential elections.<sup>41</sup> This chant, in addition to being the opening of the Muslim call to prayer, has a long history within political struggle in Iran and the Middle East, but it assumed new meanings in 2009. By shouting from rooftops toward other rooftops and the street below, often anonymously and under cover of night, protesters challenged the boundary between feminized domestic space and masculine public/political space. This act of sounding dissent was routed not only through the history of the chant and mournful Shi’a practices of Ta’ziyeh but also through the gendered architecture of Tehran. Its effects were emergent, uncertain, and, quite appropriately, sounded out in pitch darkness.

One hears, at last, synchronous reflections, vernacular expressions that travel. Red Sunday is not walled off from Pussy Riot or Solange Knowles. Globally disruptive economic events suggest similar political possibilities in different places. Thus, silence fertilized the dramatic expressions of one Thai Red Shirt who sat in wordless meditation at every protest, drawing crowds; in Istanbul’s Gezi Park, a resolutely silent “standing man” became iconic in the same manner. As Rosalind Morris argues, these soundless figures honed their specular practices under similar circumstances and for similar reasons. These synchronies do not necessarily herald a global uprising in common cause. But instigations and methods align, as dissidents in different corners notice at once how discourse, habit, and the ear and eye of mediation may be put to use in the work of unsettling political structures. Sonic protest vernaculars thus assume cosmopolitan orientations. The term *protest song*, though it was always historically situated, may have at least aimed at a musical *weltgeist* of the middle twentieth century. But something else is emerging now.

## Notes

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1. A representative list of articles (and their interrogative titles) includes Kot, “Where Are All the Protest Songs?”; Margolis, “Where Have All the Protest Songs Gone?”; Wilson, “Is the Protest Song Dead?”; and *New Musical Express*, “Is Protest Music Dead?”

2. Kheshti, “On the Threshold of the Political”; Abe, “Sounding against Nuclear Power in Post-3.11 Japan”; Manabe, *Revolution Will Not Be Televised*; Manabe, “Music in Japanese Antinuclear Demonstrations”; Schwartz, “Voice to Sing”; Dave, “Politics of Silence,” 2.

3. Bhabha, “Unsatisfied.”

4. Tsing, *Friction*.

5. Daughtry, *Listening to War*.

6. Werbner, “Vernacular Cosmopolitanism,” 497.

7. For a treatment of *circulation* as an explanatory mechanism for understanding sound’s value in cultural transit, see Novak, *Japanoise*.

8. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 4.

9. Sopranzetti, “Owners of the Map.”

10. Somsak, “‘We Fight.’”

11. Sombat Boonngamanong, interview by the author, via Facebook (in Thai), 10 July 2015.

12. Sitrin, *Horizontalism*. Horizontalism, a variation of which has been employed by anarchists in movements like Occupy Wall Street, was conceptualized in Argentina around 2001. Red Sunday borrowed from it philosophically, although the Red Shirt movement as a whole did not.

13. Jin Gammachon, interview by the author (in Thai), Bangkok, Thailand, 19 December 2010.

14. Sombat interview.

15. Morris, “Theses on the New Öffentlichkeit,” 95.

16. Thongchai, “Changing Landscape of the Past.”

17. Unaldi, “Politics and the City,” 218.

18. *Matichon*, “Remembering Five Years.”

19. Sombat, interview.

20. Novak and Sakakeeny, *Keywords in Sound*.

21. Steingo and Sykes, *Remapping Sound Studies*.

22. Knowles, “‘Everybody Still Wants to Fly.’”

23. Although the Oxford English Dictionary entry dates *protest music* to 1949, when it appeared in *Musical Quarterly*, and *protest song* to 1953, slightly earlier instances occur in the corpus. Specifically, in reference to Schonberg’s “Ode to Napoleon,” the *Christian Science Monitor* used *protest music* as early as 1944, followed by the New York Philharmonic’s use in program notes from 1945. Aunt Molly Jackson, quoted by Alan Lomax, used the term *protest song* in 1941. See, for example, Lynskey, *Thirty-Three Revolutions per Minute*, in which the author tends to characterize all music linked to dissent, regardless of its era or form, as “protest song.”

24. The earliest instance of *protest* as an adjective in a compound phrase is *protest meeting*, dating to 1852. This is an outlier; most of the compound terms first appear between 1890 and 1960. The term *protest song* may have been calqued from the German *protestlied* or *protestationslied*, both of which existed at least a century before *protest song*. Although the German terms likely also carried connotations of resistance (as opposed to the other sense *protest*, that of a proclamation), they suggest a composed work as opposed to a piece developed spontaneously or by the *volk*, sung collectively in dissent. The sense of *protest song* birthed by the folk revival has no apparently direct musical or historical connection to *protestlied*.

25. Vlad, “Music,” 112.

26. Wicke, “‘Times They Are A-Changin’,” 81.

27. Valassopoulos and Mostafa, “Popular Protest Music.”

28. Ibid.

29. The concept of music's political force is drawn from Shank, *Political Force of Musical Beauty*. For Shank, music wields political force when it "reveals the political significance of sounds previously heard as nothing but noise" (3).

30. Neuman, "Music, Politics, and Protest."

31. Denisoff, *Sing a Song of Social Significance*.

32. Kizer, "Protest Song Lyrics as Rhetoric," 7. Kizer cites literature from the 1970s in speech and communications, describing one possible effect of protest music on listeners as that of "contagion."

33. Eyerman and Jamison, *Music and Social Movements*, 125.

34. *Ibid.*, 127.

35. See, e.g., *ibid.*; Garofalo, *Rockin' the Boat*; Lynskey, *Thirty-Three Revolutions per Minute*; and Neuman, "Music, Politics, and Protest."

36. Garabadien, "Reds, Whites, and the Blues," 182.

37. Neuman, "Music, Politics, and Protest," 9.

38. Works such as Lynskey, *Thirty-Three Revolutions per Minute*, canonize songs with highly direct lyrics, such as Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," rather than songs that utilize indirection or subtext. Many journalistic articles that bemoan the decline of "protest music" suggest that its absence is especially glaring in African American music. In response to such suggestions, Vann R. Newkirk II describes a nontextual play of referentiality in African American music that allows commentary to emerge through implied citation of events past and present. For example, Newkirk ("What's Going On") suggests that Kendrick Lamar, D'Angelo, J. Cole, and Kanye West are in tacit conversation with Sly and the Family Stone's 1971 *There's a Riot Goin' On* and Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, which were already linked to each other as a kind of call-and-response.

39. Shank, *Political Force of Musical Beauty*, 61.

40. Browning, "This Balaclava Is Too Hot."

41. Kheshti, "On the Threshold of the Political."

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