

# Introduction: At Risk of Repetition

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## Abstract

The introduction to the colloquy offers a synoptic discussion both of the Women's March and the essays that follow, routing its summary through questions of repetition and emergence, and through questions of pastness and futurity. The inaugural Women's March occurred in a confusing and stressful historical moment, with many strategic questions in flux. The introduction considers what it meant both to organize a protest event under such circumstances, and what it meant for ethnographers to try to study it in that moment. It considers, moreover, how scholars of sound, music, and protest can proceed methodologically when quite literally no one is sure what is happening, much less what will happen next. The introduction describes some of the racial and tactical fissures of the march, especially through questions of repetition, and prefaces the theoretical discussions of agonistic democracy and dissensus that follow in the other contributions.

I did not lose my voice at the Women's March in Washington, DC, in January 2017, but I did lose other people's voices. Somewhere, perhaps on the Metro or the Bolt Bus back to New York, I left my small, weather-beaten field recorder. So I depend now on my memory to recall the sounds of that historic day. Aside from being out a few hundred dollars to replace the recorder, I am remiss that I cannot replay the ten hours of interviews, songs, chants, and ambiances that I documented. But perhaps the loss of these recordings might be instructive for analysis, even more than hearing them again would be. After all, the Women's March had extraordinary effects, yet as little as two years later, it is clear that the political conditions under which it was held have already changed dramatically, that there is effectively no going back. Perhaps we—that is, all of us committed in some way to the political program of the march—should listen for new emergences, recognizing the march not as a settled matter but as part of a dynamic history in which we remain immersed. I therefore thematize the loss of my sound recordings, and the lost possibility of replaying them, as I introduce this colloquy of four contributions written by astute ethnographers of sound, music, and political dissent. In my introduction to their work, I offer a synoptic discussion both of the Women's March and the essays that follow, routing my summary through questions of repetition and emergence, and through questions of pastness and futurity.

The 2017 Women's March was in some ways a singular event. Subsequent anniversary gatherings have been far smaller, and nothing quite like the original has happened since. But the initial march was also multisited, divided across nearly 700 cities and more than 80 countries, and was therefore heterogeneous in tactics and aesthetics. In that sense, it was not singular at all. This should be no surprise. The 2017 event was organized under political duress, as a response to an incoming presidential administration that was openly hostile to women, and vestiges of central organization were only fleetingly apparent. The march was in fact hotly debated from its inception—Who would be in charge? Whose concerns would be centered? What would the participants demand? How, in fact, would womanhood be defined?—but limited time meant that things would move forward before these matters were settled. People had not broadly agreed on what the event meant, but millions went anyway. The march appeared

at first like the beginning of a newly permanent political condition, the sort of gathering that many agreed would need to be repeated often in the ensuing years if it were to become a serious response to the new political order. And yet the questions above only intensified over time, ensuring that the inaugural march would be more first draft than finished product, an opening toward some uncertain politics to come.

The ways in which the event was singular, the fact that it could and would not be repeated in its initial form, is historically notable in its own right. But for the purposes of this colloquy in particular, that singularity also raises compelling questions about ethnographic methods for the study of music, sound, and protest. What are the limits and possibilities for an ethnography of an emergent movement, whose structure will soon radically shift? All of the contributors to this colloquy were present at the march in either Washington, DC, or New York City, as both participants and observers. And all had conducted long-term fieldwork about music, sound, and protest in other geopolitical contexts. But none were seasoned ethnographers of the movement at hand—indeed, no one was, because this movement was nascent. The essays below therefore draw *necessarily* on ethnographic studies of the non-iterative. They are efforts to propose explanations amidst ongoing political change. Even the colloquy itself grows from moments of uncertainty and rapid change. These essays are adapted from a roundtable held at the 2017 Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM) conference, the first SEM at which participants could meaningfully reflect upon the new US presidential administration and its implications for scholarship, teaching, and life more generally. The previous year's conference had been held November 10–13, 2016, in Washington, DC, just two days after the election, with many attendees battling sleep-deprivation and feelings of panic and denial. That year's conference was an unsettling blur, an effort to reckon with events that no one had yet processed and yet from which no one could turn away. The feeling was not too different from that of the first Women's March ten weeks later: urgent but slippery, without ready reference or recourse. A grieving with no avenue toward closure. A determination to act, but a vacuum of options for doing so. A feeling like trauma. One year later, the 2017 conference (and our roundtable) was a halting first attempt at intellectual reflection amidst a still-unfolding situation. Ethnography often asks its practitioners to make thoughtful decisions and to adopt broad perspective despite circumstances that are immersive, cloistered, insecure, and unfinished. But such circumstances resist any bird's-eye vantage. This colloquy therefore presents ethnographic commentaries in which emergence and uncertainty are not noise, but in many ways the heart of the data. From the fieldwork to the roundtable to the colloquy you are reading, we remain in the thick of things.

Meanwhile, the authors also draw attention to particular relationships between music, sound, and politics. Their essays are only obliquely about music as an isolatable object of study. Perhaps most notably, the figure of the protest musician is decentered as an agent of political transformation in favor of a reading of sound as a material of *dissensus*.<sup>1</sup> Dissensus, and the related notion of “agonistic democracy,” draw upon Chantal Mouffe<sup>2</sup> and Jacques Rancière.<sup>3</sup> For Mouffe, power is inherent to politics. Power cannot be checked or avoided, no matter how putatively rational the actors in a given public sphere may be. There is

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<sup>1</sup> Dissensus is defined by Sonevytsky, via Rancière and Mouffe, as “a manifestation of politics through the eruption of something previously inaudible.” Dissensus is an appearance of difference and dispute where these things are not supposed to be, according to the geographies and hierarchies of power maintained by the state. Dissensus is thus contentious, but also necessary to any politics worthy of the name. Manabe adds that dissensus “occurs when the people who have no voice challenge the logic of exclusion.” The forum contributors as a group find the analytic of dissensus especially compelling, and invoke it throughout the forum in auditory terms. The ideas of Mouffe and Rancière were not predetermined as threads for the colloquy, but were instead chosen independently by multiple contributors.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Maria Sonevytsky.

<sup>3</sup> See especially Shayna Silverstein and Noriko Manabe.

no ground for conducting politics, no system of rhetoric so logical and universal, that would allow political negotiations to circumvent power imbalances and other forms of human difference. Because pure rationality is impossible, the notion of consensus can only ever be a fiction that obscures the operations of power in political relationships. Therefore, agonism—a mode of political engagement in which adversarial relationships are acknowledged and accepted—is the best way to mediate between actors whose differences can never be fully reconciled. Dissensus, then, after Rancière, is the condition of agonistic disagreement in which true adversarial politics remains possible. A protest event that manifests dissensus by reframing the political visibility of marginalized people, for example, is for Rancière genuinely political. Such an event does not merely display difference, but reorganizes power and visibility in favor of the excluded. This is the progressive result of dissensus. Each of the essays in this colloquy asks what sound does or can do in political demonstrations to remake place and politics dissensually, to open new possibilities and agencies for excluded subjects. And here the function of sound as a catalyst for dissent and dissensus is foregrounded, as opposed to a more conventional focus on musical works, songwriters, and mediums of circulation, as is often seen in studies of protest music. Nevertheless, the colloquy does not seek to celebrate sound for its allegedly unique capacity to unsettle political structures. Rather, the authors think suspiciously about sound, control, and political change. What seemed to occur at the Women’s March (a new movement descending on the capital, making loud demands) is not the full story at all. Volume does not always correlate with power, ethics, or even the likelihood of transformation. These essays think through sound, dissent, and dissensus in subtler ways.

Several of the contributors pursue questions of repetition directly, remarking upon the relationship between the Women’s March and forms of political memory. Manabe notes, for example, that many of the chants heard at the march had roots in movements as far flung and apparently disconnected as the American Civil Rights movement, the anti-Pinochet rallies in Chile in the 1970s, and the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle. The fact that chants, including those heard at the Women’s March, are freighted with such histories is at once a source of power and tension. These histories can at times even become a source of embarrassment, especially at protests staged by certain factions of the American left, which is in some corners self-conscious about appearing to repeat its own historical tactics. When venerable chants are powerful, it is often because their familiarity enables them to be used in what Manabe describes as a “folk praxis,” a participatory type of engagement that feels accessible and inclusive. This is because almost anyone can join a chant that they already know, or that is easy to learn. Accessibility has long been a guiding principle for chanting at protest events, and Manabe in her transcriptions of various popular calls at the New York Women’s March found many examples of rhythmically simple, reliably eight-beat patterning. The US labor movement, among others, pioneered this kind of chant-making many decades ago by prioritizing simple, familiar tunes (often adapted to the context at hand) that enabled mass participation. This is one way that repetition and predictability can serve sonic dissent, despite the risks that repetition carries. But not the only way. Sonevytsky notes, for example, the astute performance of Janelle Monáe, who at the Washington, DC, march invited the mothers of children murdered by the police onstage so that the crowd could, for each victim, “say their name.” This is a tactic that has been

described as “surrogation,” or a dramatizing of wrongs that have not yet been addressed.<sup>4</sup> Surrogation is an unyielding type of repetition, a mode of dissensus that has especially characterized the protests of the Movement for Black Lives in recent years. Manabe explains these surrogations as intertextual expressions—past events called back in the present. The murders of Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, and many others have been routinely surrogated at recent mass protest events; the repetitions of specific chants (e.g., “I can’t breathe!”) have rekindled the dead themselves. The effect of this has been an insistence that those unjustly killed will not be fully laid to rest without reparations for their deaths. Repetition in such cases functions as a sonic haunting or, in Silverstein’s terms, the emergence of “protest spaces” through “tactical bodies.” Sonic repetition is useful in these and other ways.

Such referrals to history—the repetition of old songs, the tenacious resurrection of injustice—are potent; marchers feel that potency as a sobbing rising in their chests and filling their sinuses. Repetition and collective memory create binding affects. But repetition, as noted above, also carries risks. If a chant feels generic, for example, too clearly part of a genre or too closely associated with a past movement understood to have failed or grown archaic, then that chant can make its speaker sound feeble. Silverstein writes incisively of Andre Lepecki’s notion of choreopolicing and choreopolitics to explain this trap, and it is a powerful explanation indeed. When protesters are heard (including hearing themselves) as slipping into predictable choreographies of dissent, the power of speech to initiate a dissensual or agonistic political moment may be lost. Treading too close to historical repetition, marchers risk being heard (or ignored) as little more than echoes of past failures.

However, it is worth asking whether the fear of repeating historical dissent is somewhat specific to the American left, and perhaps even more narrowly to its bourgeois wing. Manabe notes the unusually high value of “sonic innovation” at protests in the United States. Such taste for innovation is not only globally unusual, but far from universal even within the Women’s March. Perhaps the desire to create innovative chants and design innovative posters signaled a concern about historical repetition, a fear that this new movement might be hindered by seeming too much like past movements. One blogger, describing a march a few weeks prior to the massive January 2017 event, echoed a common sentiment when she wrote that “the search for an effective response to Trumpism has been frustrating thus far. I’ve been disappointed by recent rallies. A women’s strike on a Monday during the holidays was of course not well attended. I was confused that the loudest voices were singing outdated chants rather than focusing directly on the politics of today. I nearly left. Then I saw a great sign stating—Make Protest Great Again. In that moment, I realized resistance to Trump has yet to be defined and attending this rally was my opportunity to define it.”<sup>5</sup> For this blogger, overly familiar chants did not usefully link protesters to leftist movements of the past. To the contrary, such chants marked a failure to respond adequately to the unique challenges of the present. Novelty should reign instead. This mandate seemed evident in the posters that many people carried. Part of the pleasure of attending the Women’s March involved listening for clever, original chants and watching for equally clever signs. These creative objects were documented and then shared on social media as examples of ingenious individual expression. (I noted (and retweeted) one

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<sup>4</sup> Daphne Brooks, “‘All That You Can’t Leave Behind’: Black Female Soul Singing and the Politics of Surrogation in the Age of Catastrophe,” *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 8, no. 1 (2008): 180–204, <https://doi.org/10.2979/MER.2008.8.1.180>; Vanessa K. Valdés, “Spaces of Sounds: The Peoples of the African Diaspora and Protest in the United States,” *Sounding Out!* blog, December 12, 2016, <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2016/12/12/spaces-of-sounds-protest-in-the-united-states-and-the-peoples-of-the-african-diaspora/>.

<sup>5</sup> Antonia Ferraro, “Make Protest Great Again!” *Momtropolis* website, December 21, 2016, <https://themomtropolis.com/make-protest-signs-great-again/>.

handmade poster that cleverly showed the Rotten Tomatoes rating for the B-movie *Paul Blart: Mall Cop* to be higher than Donald Trump's approval rating). *Cosmopolitan*, *The Cut*, *Slate*, *Huffington Post*, *Teen Vogue*, *Buzzfeed*, and many other publications each ran lists of the "best," "most clever," or most "badass feminist" signs from the march. The fashion for creative novelty contrasted with the Janelle Monáe-led "say their name" chant, which figured the past not as "outdated," as something to be creatively surpassed, but as a subject of ongoing political contention, in continuity with the present. To add a further comparative example, I note that the demand for creative expression at contemporary United States protests is distinctly higher than it was at protests in Thailand during my own recent fieldwork there. In Thailand, censorship is far more acute than in the United States. There, a protester might join a chant that is thoroughly familiar and longstanding, not at all inventive, and yet still quite provocative, even to the point of inviting arrest. "Moments of rupture" that achieve dissensus will not always be moments of novelty.<sup>6</sup> Different contexts assign different values to repetition, and from these assignments emerge different fields of dissensual possibility.

Speaking of the non-West, this forum helps to situate and even provincialize the Women's March by reflecting upon it comparatively. All four of the other contributors place the march in conversation with case studies outside of the United States, including Ukraine, Syria, and Japan, while Benjamin Harbert also describes the march in terms of broader geographies of gentrification and rurality in the United States. These gestures of national and international comparison are especially vital in a moment when a state of perpetual emergency exhausts media consumers with a politics from which they may feel ethically unable to turn away, and which tends to force people into a posture of critical and political isolation. Faraway genocides fall below the fold while trifles flow through feeds; readers/viewers are solicited by being loudly insulted, and the machine that hails us has no volume knob. Under this assault, even the left has retreated to the oxygen-starved citadel of America-first, as ethnonationalist threats pass through the gates. Under these conditions, it is vital to remember that the United States is not the center of all worlds. Silverstein reminds us that while "the grammar of Syrian protests may register as somewhat familiar to our Western sensibilities, the ontological-political conditions of protest in the Syrian regime are extraordinarily different." She describes the constraints of public gathering in Syria, as well as their transformation during the Arab Spring, in ways that do not readily map onto the constraints that abide in major American cities, where choreopolicing at the level of the street as well as the more diffuse choreopolitics of political power are idiosyncratic, not a reflection of how things work everywhere in the world. Manabe provides a clear comparative example that reveals how the production of protest sound functions differently in Japan, where the police have a habit of shunting crowds into isolated, fractured lines to minimize their visual presence, thus necessitating the use of multiple loud noisemaking devices. The colloquy, as a whole, reveals what a starkly different kind of event protest can be from place to place, and from state to state. Placing the January 2017 Women's March (and its aftermath) in comparative study with other movements in other places can help illuminate what the march did and did not accomplish, how it did and did not function, and perhaps, referring to Sonevitsky's conclusion, how it might eventually help instantiate a public sphere of genuine agonistic democracy.

Dissensual possibility, meanwhile, is also a product of geographies of race and class, which produce nodes of radically different experience and possibility, as Harbert describes. This point directs us to a critique of the Women's March that need not be an outright dismissal, but that cannot be ignored. Namely

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<sup>6</sup> Silverstein.

the march, following both Sonevysky and Silverstein's citations of Moss and Maddrell, appeared largely as white, cis, hetero, and bourgeois. Historian Ashley Farmer warned, even before the march (and she was far from alone in doing so), that "calls for solidarity often ring hollow for black women ... many black women see the recent election as the latest iteration of white feminists' betrayal."<sup>7</sup> As a result of this wariness, the congratulatory post-hoc representation of the event as non-violent by its organizers and some participants fell flat for many observers, who like Farmer noted a long history of representation-without-inclusion for women of color within American leftist movements. The march thus threatened to obscure the fact that violence is overwhelmingly initiated by the state, and almost always visited upon marked and vulnerable people, who were not understood to be in control of the 2017 event. It was thus arguably a *privilege* of the Women's March, not an *achievement*, that it was managed with traffic-direction and high-fives rather than batons and handcuffs by the notoriously vicious DC police, as Silverstein notes. Perhaps this lack of friction ultimately limited the march's capacity for dissensus and dissent. After all, what kind of productive agonism, what kind of reorganization of power, can emerge when constraints are not violated, when boundaries are not transgressed, when an event plays close to a choreographed pattern of smooth consensus between the police and citizens? This is not a call for violence, but an empirical observation about where dissensus can and cannot occur. And it is noteworthy that dissensus, where it did occur at the march, was not achieved by novel chants or the avoidance of repetition. Creativity was insufficient to truly provoke the state. Silverstein claims, after Anusha Kedhar, that counterintuitively "Black Lives Matter protestors stage cooperation as a form of disruption." One might add that at the Women's March, Janelle Monáe and others also staged repetition as an effective form of disruption.

I conclude, finally, with a word about assholes, no small part of the focus of the march and its sounding. I wish to briefly consider the auditory logic of assholes, especially as it is discussed by Silverstein, before returning to repetition. The chant that sticks most firmly in my memory from the march, that I can somewhat recollect but never quite rehear, is that of the word "asshole," voiced by the crowd in a low, descending minor-third interval as we passed in front of the president-elect's own hotel on Pennsylvania Avenue. I made a point of reflecting on the asshole chant, which even in that moment seemed especially consequential. Perhaps I knew that I would never be able to hear it again as I was hearing it in that moment, even if I had not lost my recorder. The long low waves of the word lingered in the canyon of buildings. We trudged slowly through that lingering layer of echo, refreshing it with our voices as we passed someone else's citadel, a redoubt of power that would only ever engage us antagonistically, not agonistically. We wanted desperately to violate its sanctity, perhaps to undo the hardened and misogynist distribution of power that it signified. Suddenly, on a high floor, three children appeared behind a window, pushing aside the curtain so that they could see the march. They stood and watched us. But could they hear? The window must have been thick, and the children were many floors up. Were our words audible? Were the children interpellated as assholes? Were their parents? Was the president? Perhaps, but to be an asshole is to already know one's own impunity, and nonetheless not to care. Following Silverstein's discussion of the asshole siren, an alert that is unapologetically louder than necessary, we may identify assholery as the mode of governance that rushes into the void left by the absence of an agonistic public sphere. Assholery is a mobilization of power without shame or reflection, a knowing foreclosure of the possibility of dissensus. Assholery moreover resists hearing its own

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<sup>7</sup> Ashley Farmer, "The Long History of Black Women's Exclusion in Historic Marches in Washington," *Black Perspectives*, January 4, 2017, <https://www.aaihs.org/the-long-history-of-black-womens-exclusion-in-historic-marches-in-washington/>.

identification. Naming an asshole, however inventively or originally, does not in itself diminish that asshole's power. The asshole chant, alas, produced shit in which we chanters ourselves were left to wallow.

In this colloquy, the four contributors whose pieces follow this introduction offer cogent sonic analyses of the Women's March in January 2017, including its successes and its failures so far, but above all its emergences. "What we hear," writes Sonevystky, "is that there is work left to do." This scholarship is acutely necessary because there will, quite soon (maybe even as you read this), be a next time, and this next time will not be a repetition of the last time. If there is one thing to know from listening to political movements, it is that movements do not stand still; they move.

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