

The Development of Community and Resistance

Through Traditional Music Culture

In ‘revolutionary times’, as political scientist Erica Chenoweth refers to them (42), the need to form connections and deepen our emotional capacity, in order to forge communities of resistance under the pressures of oppressive ideologies and leadership, becomes a focus of resistance movements. Solidarity becomes paramount to successful resistance. Audre Lorde, in her pivotal essay, “The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” writes: “Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression” (Lorde, 111). Lorde writes multiple essays with this idea in mind, including “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”, defining the erotic as “a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (339). Lorde’s argument hinges on the recognition, acceptance, and utilization of the erotic; becoming in touch with the wider emotional spectrum of the erotic grants women the potential to release their creativity. Lorde’s understanding is that the cultivation of community stems from accessing creativity through the erotic; and it is community that infuses the resistance with enduring strength. One of the most accessible tributaries for the erotic is found in music and dance; between Audre Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” and Barabara Ehrenreich’s *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* connections can be made in their writing between the erotic, creativity in the form of song and dance, community, and social resistance. Traditional song and dance have deep roots in connecting communities and cultures and fostering solidarity in the face of oppression. Lorde and Ehrenreich provide the theoretical and

historical context that will be applied to exhibit how folk music and traditional dance act as vital conduits of resistance movements on the streets.

This discussion begins with the analysis of Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power," as it lays the groundwork for how the historical examples of traditional ecstatic ritual—music and dance—particularly from a gendered, transnational feminist lens, are constructed in connection to practices of protest and resistance movements. Today's use of the term erotic is nearly solely tied to sexuality; while it is not inaccurate to relate the erotic to sexuality, Lorde argues for the much vaster emotional plane that the erotic occupies. She understands the erotic as an emotional fullness, recognition of internal power, and sense of completion in one's day-to day-actions, stating: "For the erotic is not a question only of what we do. It is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing" (340). She identifies women's struggles with their lack of relationship with the erotic due to the effects of oppression women have faced within Western societies. Women are socialised to not express their emotions, as a woman's display of strong feeling is vilified (Lorde, 339). For this reason, women dissociate from their deeper emotional spectrums. Returning to an awareness of one's relationship with the erotic can be liberating and creates a host of new possibilities. Lord states: "[W]hen I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women: of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives" (341). It is here that the argument of this essay begins to take shape. When Lorde speaks of the emotional fullness that is experienced in the

‘doing’, those actions are included but not limited to those that she lists. Notably, she mentions shaping a deeper connection to dancing, loving, and history, born out of the creative energy derived from accessing the erotic in a manner that springs joy and groundedness.

The relationship between the erotic and creativity is key for Lorde as she identifies the use of creativity as a way for women to breach the imposed limitations of difference between one another; “The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference” (Lorde, 341). It is a part of Lorde’s argument that the recognition of difference, via erotically inspired creativity, is the way forward to community building. This argument of hers comes from her experiences as a Black, lesbian, feminist scholar navigating (at the time) primarily white feminist spaces. In those spaces Lorde’s advocacy for Black women was unacknowledged and disrespected, the chasm of racial difference too dramatic to work towards change together much of the time. This is what Lorde is advocating for when asking women to use the erotic to experience creativity and joy both individually and together; she implores women to not only accept difference but acknowledge it and unlearn the threat of difference. Lorde’s work is closely tied with Barbara Ehrenreich’s work on ecstatic practice and history of collective joy, as they both identify group connection through creative joy as a mode of pursuing solidarity found within communities.

Ehrenreich’s *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* is a detailed history of ecstatic ritual through group music, dance, and festivities. Around the world, cultures have a history of spiritual group dance and festivities that connect a group through intense emotional heights brought on by the collectivity of these traditional celebrations. European colonists were offended by Indigenous spiritual practices where the group ritual dancing was perceived as

‘indecent’ and ‘primitive’ in how they moved, yelled, and seemed to enter trance-like states (Ehrenreich, 1). Ehrenreich details how similar practices have taken place around the world throughout time; she particularly focuses on European ecstatic practice, its persecution and repression. Throughout her research, she works towards understanding the uses and meanings of these practices that seem to appear in all human societies and cultures. Historical accounts of some of these practices strike a chord in Lorde’s essay. For instance, a description of Indigenous women dancing together states, “they abandon themselves to all the spirit of dance...soon subsiding again...[they] join in one wild chorus, and sink into each other’s arms” (Ehrenreich, 2). Anthropologists have attempted to form vocabulary for these observed instances, though not without a limiting westernised lens. It is to this point that Ehrenreich states:

What we lack is any way of describing and understanding the “love” that may exist among dozens of people at a time; and it is this kind of love that is expressed in ecstatic ritual...*Communitas* and *collective effervescence* describe aspects or moments of communal excitement; there is now world for the love—or force or need—that leads individuals to seek ecstatic merger with the group (14)

It is in this context, where anthropologists struggle to conceptualise this human behaviour, that Lorde’s concept of the erotic becomes applicable. The innate physical, emotional, and spiritual bond that takes place in ecstatic practices echoes Lorde’s previously stated experiences and understanding of the erotic. Lorde’s erotic does not complete the puzzle, but it perhaps adds more depth and dimension to the concept. The relationship between Lorde and Ehrenreich’s work is direct and only continues to build upon each other exhibiting how the erotic, traditional music and dance, and ecstatic practices strengthen social resistance movements.

The folk tradition—music and dance—are practices that embody the erotic. These traditions are passed down to each generation and make their way around the globe, changing as the traditions record peoplehood and belief systems. In this manner, the practice of ecstatic dance is a phenomenon that can be traced for thousands of years and across continents and cultures, particularly for women participants. The behaviour of collective dance amongst women was referenced earlier in the one description of a dance ritual completed by Indigenous women, however, there are far more recorded instances, such as in Ancient Greece where Dionysian worship and ritual practice took place. Dionysus was a particularly important god for women who did not have access to other social outlets, stifled by Greek society. The dramatised descriptions of Dionysus taking women and inciting massive orgies can be viewed as a societal response to women finding autonomy, joy, and the erotic amongst each other. The Hindu deity Krishna is recorded to have had a similar connection with women and ecstatic ritual (Ehrenreich, 35). In a more contemporary setting, during the early ages of rock music, “Rock struck with such force, in the 1950s and early 1960s, because the white world it entered was frozen over and brittle... physically immobilizing...[and] emotionally restrained...” (Ehrenreich, 214). It was, notably, how rock stars and their concerts affected young women and girls that captured the public’s attention and ire. For women, whose social limitations were so distinctly strict—much like the women of Dionysian cults—they found a way to release a socially imposed strain on their bodies and minds when swaying and screaming along to Elvis, the Beatles, and countless others, much to the dismay of the public. Music and dance contain the erotic; the relief and connection found in these activities is a perpetual event in human history that seems to especially draw in women, a group who are prohibited against such brazen acts of emotional liberation. Complimentary to Ehrenreich’s observations, Lorde writes:

“Another important way in which the erotic connection

functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens in response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience" (341).

Lorde, independent from this historical precedent, gives voice to this occurrence through her own lived experience, succinctly connecting the erotic to the ecstatic practice of song and dance.

The function of the erotic and ecstatic ritual as group practice of unification directly connects to how humans utilize traditional music as a form of protest and resistance.

Anthropologically speaking, it is generally agreed that there is an evolutionary function for the human tendency towards song and dance. Primitive humans have cave paintings illustrating their group dances, showing how instinctual this behaviour was from the beginning (Ehrenreich, 21).

The behaviours humans understand to be pleasurable are species survival factors. In this case, to engage in group dance seemingly may have functioned as defence practice. Collective dancing creates group connection that would have functioned well to keep nomadic early humans in more strongly bonded groups—a group being better odds for survival than the individual (Ehrenreich, 24). Perhaps the most relevant to Lorde's ideas of the erotic and joy, Ehrenreich states, "The joy of the rhythmic activity would have helped overcome the fear of confronting predators and other threats" (Ehrenreich, 26). This is critical to understanding the importance of music and dance in protest. Synchronised singing, dancing, and stomping, galvanises the people and keeps fear at bay while also intimidating the oppressor in a raucous show of force from a crowd. The act of singing and dancing is a human behaviour so instinctual it has lasted from the primitive human to today, utilizing what Lorde would describe as the erotic, to build and defend a community.

In later history, the use of song and dance in celebration would become tied to many more aspects of human life, lending themselves to their uses in resistance. Medieval carnival,

celebrations with song, dance, theatics, costumes, and more, regularly exhibited a “tradition of mocking the powerful...these customs were in some sense “political”, or at least suggestive of underlying discontent” (Ehrenreich, 89). This of course was intimidating, and one of the many reasons those in power began to repress carnival and all celebration related to ecstatic practice. The repression of festivities, and the music and dancing involved, was initiated by the Catholic Church; and would only become more constricting for Europeans with the Protestant reformation, as Ehrenreich states: “Protestantism—especially in its ascetic, Calvinist form—played a major role in convincing large numbers of people not only that unremitting, disciplined labor was good for their souls, but that festivities were positively sinful, along with mere idleness” (101). The ideology surrounding Calvinist Protestantism clearly illustrates how the Western world would become emotionally and physically immobilised. European women were the ones who attracted the most grievances from the Church for their dancing, again exhibiting women’s continued persecution for movement of their bodies and expression of their emotions. The Anglo-European urge to squander festivities became exacerbated over the centuries in the attempt to disperse solidarity amongst the lower classes and maximise productivity. Ehrenreich argues that as much as capitalism and industrialisation greatly affected festivity, social hierarchy is the identifiable root of repression: “When one class, or ethnic group, or gender, rules over a population of subordinates, it comes to fear the empowering rituals of the subordinates as a threat to civil order” (Ehrenreich, 251). European ideology was then exported around the world in the age of imperialism, devastating countless other cultural practices of song and dance. European class power structure—and racism—was imposed on their colonised populations, connecting the social injustice that leads to resistance and the repression of traditional song and dance. European, white, hegemonic repression of the lower classes, of the

Indigenous populations, and of women, is intrinsically linked to the repression of folk art and of the expression of the erotic. With that perspective, the use of folk music and dance, of traditional practices of emotional and creative liberation, and of community, is inherently a form of resistance.

The music of protest is an ingrained and necessary component of resistance. In Erica Chenoweth's book *Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs To Know*, she speaks on how music functions so essentially, writing: "During revolutionary times many people use their creativity to carefully document, record, and publicize various elements of revolutionary process" (42).

She continues to explain that musicians use their music as storytelling of the struggle through folk traditions "to convey unity and civic quality of action" (Chenoweth, 43). One of the most important functions of resistance music in the folk tradition is as a source of communication.

Folk music is ultimately an oral tradition, even when songs are written down, much of the passing on, and down, of songs is through word of mouth (P. Bohlman, 14-15). This is significant because, as recently stated, oppression and the consequential repression of traditional music and dance is due to class conflict. Under oppression from the elite classes, illiteracy becomes an evident problem amongst the lower classes; if portions of a population are illiterate, written announcements of a resistance movement will not mean much. This fact, combined with the regular practice of folk songs, results in the use of music as a newscast of sorts as a solution. For instance, in Mali's 1990-1991 uprising against the Traoré dictatorship there was a group of Malians named 'songsayers' who would travel to villages to relate information about recent protests (Chenoweth, 44). Another instance took place during the American civil rights movement, which was a movement deeply enriched by the folk tradition.

The music of the civil rights movement was of course born out of traditional African music which had taken on new life during slavery, where the music tradition brimmed with spirituals and

freedom songs expressing their frustrations, struggles, and hopes. American activist and political scientist Mary Elizabeth King explains that during the civil rights movement, “A strong tradition of composing during performance, in response to need, meant that new phrases would be added or a stanza changed to take up a specific issue, such as deciding whether to go to jail the next day. Song leading became an organizing tool” (Chenoweth, 43). This is to say that traditional music has a very practical use that again exhibits a motivation for the ruling class to repress such music traditions, as they make it possible for the oppressed to communicate in resistance.

Remarkably, Chenoweth also confirms the connection made between anthropological use of song and dance and group defense stating: “Singing can also reduce fear among protesters, bystanders, or striking workers who fear they’re about to be attacked or will face reprisals later” (44). This ability to bond through music in the face of fear, like with primitive humans, develops from the sense of collective identity the practice grants a group; the people you are singing, marching, and dancing with are your people, whom you must defend and protect. In the sense of political resistance this phenomenon is the embodiment of ‘peoplehood’ within traditional song. Folk tradition preserves a sense of peoplehood through its ability to record and communicate collective memory spanning time and geography. Music tradition grants an individual a sense of themselves, their family, community, and country, due to the stylistic features of music that are unique to a place, the stories, and the language. Moreover, language is often preserved in music where it might not be elsewhere as hegemonic powers try to strip a people of their identity through linguistic genocide. All of these features of traditional music and how it fosters solidarity and community make it very powerful. As Chenoweth states “...because of the cultural power of telling the truth through music, literature, and visual arts, most authoritarian regimes monitor cultural figures and censor their output” (45). Traditional music and its

influence on communities is a direct threat to the power structures in use. Therefore, it is procedure for hegemonic powers to repress the erotic, the creative, ecstatic ritual, and the traditional music and art that fosters a peoplehood and dissuades fear.

After identifying the purpose and power of traditional song and dance as a unifier, with historical and anthropological instances provided by Ehrenreich and Chenoweth, we must address what protest music tradition looks like today. The first relevant example is of the haka performed by the Māori people in New Zealand. The haka is a traditional dance that “involves chanting...stamping, hand movements, and facial gestures” (New Zealand Tourism). It is a source of cultural pride and strength for the Māori, performed at sporting events, weddings, graduations, and more; it is a significant aspect of their sense of peoplehood. For this reason, it is also a protest cry for their rights as the Indigenous peoples of New Zealand. Recently, the New Zealand parliament has been attempting to pass a bill that would significantly strip the Māori of their rights by ‘reinterpreting’ the country’s founding treaty with the Māori. On November 14, 2024, while attempting to pass the bill MP Hana-Rawhiti Maipi-Clarke of the opposition party interrupted the proceeding by beginning the haka and tearing the bill. Other Māori government representatives joined, entering the parliament floor and delaying the vote (The Print, 2024). This action gained notoriety and eyes on the issue, developing into a wave of international support for the Māori. This example of the haka exhibits how powerful traditional song and dance are for these displays of solidarity and peoplehood in fights for rights.

Another important example is the Palestinian dance, the dabkeh. UNESCO describes the dance: “Dabkeh is performed by eleven dancers, regardless of gender. The dancers stand in a straight line or semicircle, clasping hands and shoulders to indicate cohesion. The movements involve jumping and hitting the ground with their feet” (2024). It is accompanied by instruments,

singing, and is performed by both professional dancers and community members spontaneously (UNESCO, 2024). The songs are not uniform either and multiple folk songs, and popular ‘pop’ songs, accompany the dance. This dance has become one of the many symbols of solidarity for Palestinians, “iterations of Dabke are increasingly being performed by communities all over the world to protest the humanitarian crisis facing Palestinian people” (Atik, 2024). The dance is transnational and cross cultural, now with the dance being taught during the 2024 student occupations of university campuses demanding the disclosure and divestment of campus investments to the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestine. The joy and connection expressed as students learn the dance in a video from Cal Poly Humboldt campus during their protests, exhibits the functions of such practices as moral boosters (Humboldt Freelance Reporting, 2024).

Lastly, it is important to include a discussion on union songs. Union songs contain a lot of power and a long legacy that remains in use. Their power is only more acknowledged by how they are persecuted; Joe Hill, a prolific union songwriter of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was imprisoned and convicted for ‘murder’ and executed. His highly publicised last words remain a symbol: “Don’t waste time mourning, organize!” He remains the most famous IWW member and a folk hero to this day; his songs, including melodies put to his final will, are rallying cries for union movements in the 21st century (Zinn Education Project, 2024). Union songs are some of the most regularly used and most well-known folk protest songs, with examples like ‘Bread and Roses’, ‘Which Side Are You On?’, ‘The Diggers Song’, ‘There is Power in a Union’, and ‘Solidarity Forever’. Union music is continuously sung on picket lines; it is a form of protest music that is upsettingly timeless as labour rights continue to be a significant issue. Billy Bragg, a famous Union songwriter and singer spoke and performed at a Starbucks Workers United Rally in Buffalo, New York in 2022 where he spoke on his song

‘There is Power in a Union’ saying:

“What we’re doing today is part of a grand ol’ tradition...if there is any of you here who are songwriters, who are musicians if you stand where I’m standing, if you support this strike or any other you are also part of that tradition. Whatever song you sing, it don’t matter what songs you sing, you stand in solidarity with workers when they strike, you are part of that tradition” (Buffalo.FM).

This short part of his speech exhibits how the folk process functions and how it can carry generations of memory and strength of the people, and how important the music tradition is to unionising efforts.

It is in these few examples, along with the historical events discussed in this essay, that Lorde’s writing on the erotic release of creativity as a mode of fostering community can be applied in the contemporary context using Ehrenreich’s work. Lorde’s erotic theory, in turn, supports Chenoweth’s reporting on the importance of protest music as a tool of solidarity. Chenoweth also provides a civil resistance lens to Ehrenreich that further exemplifies the primary argument of this paper—that traditional song and dance are fundamental for resistance movements, and that the connection with the erotic is a crucial facet to the success of this mechanism. Lorde argues, “Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama” (343); and Ehrenreich argues for much of her book, that ecstatic ritual—song and dance—are a pillar of human connection through all time and geography, instinctual to some extent. In terms of the gender theory that Lorde infuses her argument with, Ehrenreich, multiple times, describes the relationship women have historically had with ecstatic practice, and how the repression of such practices have been disproportionate. This aligns with Lorde’s understanding that the socialisation of women, to repress their emotional cues and needs, is the reasoning behind so many being unacquainted with the erotic. It

is important to add that through Chenoweth's research of civil resistance movements, she found that women are a regular presence at the front of civil resistance movements and "Having women involved in civil resistance campaigns is vital to their success" (Chenoweth, 96). The relationship between gender, the erotic, ecstatic practice, and protest folk music is evident amongst these studies, and theoretical arguments.

The purpose of this essay is to illustrate the connections between Audre Lorde's theory on the "Uses of the Erotic", traditional music and dance as observed in ecstatic ritual, and how both are applied to resistance movements through protest music and cultural dance practices. As can be seen throughout this argument, folk music and dance transcend time and geographic location. Music continues to galvanise and bond the people in solidarity against hegemonic powers. The marches, encampments, and picket lines around the world are perpetually sharing and performing music with one another. We dance amongst each other, the drums and chants echo off city buildings, and crowds hold each other and laugh, and weep, and yell, exhibiting the synchronicity of ecstatic ritual that binds a group together and instills it with purpose. Music and dance are ways for the individual to access the erotic, and in doing so open themselves up to others, creativity, and community. Folk art, in all its forms, will continue to be influential to the revolutionary times we find ourselves in. Historian Howard Zinn is quoted, stating "They have the guns, we have the poets. Therefore, we will win" (Chenoweth, 45) and this is an excellent line to rest this argument. Understanding how innate the use of music and dance is to human sociality, and the mechanisms for resistance that it provides, how the erotic emotional spectrum is embodied and released within it, will only better determine how to use it in solidarity with one another. Music alone will not be the reason a movement is successful, it is the people who will successfully motivate their communities towards meaningful and lasting social change.

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