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## Social Protest Folklore and Student Critical Consciousness

By Elise M. Brenner<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Bridgewater State University undergraduate Introduction to Folklore students, overwhelmingly young and white, with little to no experience with folklore, found a voice to honor and highlight liberatory and social justice-oriented protest folklore in and around the world and in their own experiences. Students in the fall 2020 Introduction to Folklore classes were confronted in life-altering ways with a global pandemic that endangered them and their loved ones and shone a light on hideous health inequities. The relentless killings of black people stripped away any illusions that systemic racism and white supremacy were not daily, ever-present forces. At the same time, Bridgewater State University was making purposeful and intentional efforts to being a social justice university. These factors seem to have led to a transformation of consciousness on the part of many white students, as they moved toward a critical consciousness that is so necessary for ensuring a responsible and accountable citizenry.

Social protest folklore is a vehicle for focusing justified political anger and outrage toward the sources of oppression. Protest folklore has existed, and is ongoing, among people of all historic times and geographical spaces in order to reveal a society's injustices, brutality, and oppressions, while expressing the struggle for justice, compassion, dignity, and human rights.

The social protest texts contributed by Introduction to Folklore students as part of a course assignment represent accusations against a toxic culture and its multiple oppressions. The folklore texts stand for the demystification of all that has been normalized, including gender-based violence, racial oppression, social injustice, denial of human rights. The folklore texts students explored represent a variety of folklore genres including visual art and craft, performance art, spoken word, poetry, song, music, chants, slogans, gestures, and signs. The process of investigating and sharing social protest folklore allowed students a chance to reach for authentic engagement with social suffering, voices of protest, and their own developing critical consciousness.

*Keywords:* social protest, folklore, social justice folklore, critical consciousness, social justice, undergraduate students

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#### \*Student Contributors

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## Introduction

What is it like for young college students at a state university to be alive at this moment in time? In two sections of my Introduction to Folklore class during the fall semester of 2020 at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts (BSU), we discovered that being alive right now has raised the consciousness of young college students. They seem to be moving toward that critical consciousness that is so necessary for ensuring a responsible and accountable citizenry.

Freire (1974) set the platform upon which my understanding of critical consciousness rests and for what I gently invite into the space with my students. As a teacher, I experience critical consciousness as both a developmental and a transformative process for my students. This process entails their ongoing recognition, acknowledgment, and awareness that social, economic and political systems create, hide and perpetuate oppression. Moreover, that these oppressive social forces bring social suffering (Kleinman, et al. 1997) and contribute to inequity and inequality. From this awareness comes the resolve to take action against those oppressive social forces, whether that action looks small, local, or even personal, or large and public. Within the context of a classroom itself, a critically conscious student body makes a difference in how students relate to each other—validating and supportive comments, being one small interpersonal example of making the classroom a better place for all to thrive. I witness these small acts as authentic and not performative posturing.

My fall 2020 Folklore classes represent a microcosm of the Bridgewater State University student and faculty demographics. BSU is the comprehensive university of southeastern Massachusetts and the third largest public university in the state (BSU Factbook 2019-2020). Of the 9,463 BSU undergraduate students, of whom 96% are from Massachusetts, 73% are white students, 27% are students of color, 1,611 are first time freshmen, and 84 are international students. BSU students are taught by a full-time faculty that is 81% white and 19% faculty of color. Bridgewater State University has an overall Diversity Score of 61 out of 100, and an overall Diversity Rank of 1,733 out of 2,475 (College Factual: Diversity).

To my surprise, BSU undergraduate Intro to Folklore students, overwhelmingly young and white, with little to no experience with folklore, found a voice to honor and highlight social protest folklore in and around the world and in their own experiences. The low-stakes, informal assignment I created was to explore, and then share with me and with the class, a folklore social protest performance. This was the first time I had included this assignment, and was, frankly, simply seeking another opportunity for student interaction during online Zoom synchronous classes while the coronavirus pandemic surged around us. This was my attempt at trying to be a bit creative in the online classroom space.

With few expectations, I was startled when I began to receive the students' completed assignments. Here's why: Four years ago, on a Wednesday morning Introduction to Folklore class the day after the Tuesday, November 1, 2016 victory of Donald Trump, I witnessed high-fives all around. And during this fall of 2020, shortly after the social protest assignment was due, 71 million people voted for another four years of President Trump. Knowing the demographics of my students, I was not sure how to explain their felt connection with social protest folklore that is liberatory and social justice oriented.

I like to think that something happened in those 4 years that was transformative to young people. During the 4 years between the high-fives of 2016 and the social protest folklore assignment of 2020, for one, Bridgewater State University made purposeful and intentional efforts to being a social justice university. In addition, of course, students were confronted in life-altering ways with a global pandemic that endangered them and their loved ones and shone a

light on hideous health inequities. The relentless killings of black people stripped away any illusions that systemic racism and white supremacy were not daily, ever-present forces.

What I witnessed with the assignment, therefore, seemed to be a coming together of five puzzle pieces in the hearts and minds of my students: First, a growing personal and academic understanding that voices can be expressed through folklore texts. Second, a sensing on the part of my young college students that they can express themselves by highlighting the voices of structurally marginalized and oppressed people. Third, a process of demystification of the social reality that is presented to them (and to all of us) by those who exercise power and influence. Fourth, a transformation of consciousness on the part of many white students that racism could no longer be experienced as something far removed from them and given this opportunity to look into social protest folklore, many white students chose Black Lives Matter. Fifth, a heretofore possibly unexpressed yearning for social justice. This submission is a chance to honor and highlight the students for their thoughts, voices, consciousness, and expression.

### **Social Protest Folklore**

*“Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what people will submit to, and you have found the exact amount of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them; and this will continue until they are resisted with either words or blows, or both.”* Frederick Douglass, in a letter an abolitionist associate, 1848.

Anger and outrage are information, emotion, and energy. Social protest folklore is a vehicle for focusing justified political anger toward the sources of oppression. It is virtuous anger directed at the right source, focusing the attention of performers and audiences on the struggle for social justice. The opposite of anger can be despair, powerlessness, silencing, and voicelessness. Protest folklore has existed, and is ongoing, among people of all historic times and geographical spaces in order to reveal a society’s injustices, brutality, and oppressions, while expressing the struggle for justice, compassion, dignity, and human rights.

Social protest folklore performers and audiences are collective agents expressing outrage and hope in the form of story, music, art, dance, spoken word, and material objects. Social protest folklore appears in a variety of folklore genres. For example, social protest may be embodied in a folk narrative such as is known among enslaved Africans in what became the US. Similarly, protest against injustice may take the form of jokes and riddles that poke fun at, and ridicule, the political status quo, such as former Soviet Union forbidden and risky joke-telling ridiculing rulers and the terror, hardship, and authoritarianism of the Soviet political system (Davies 2007). In these cases, the intent may be coded, and not overtly obvious in order to protect performers and audiences. Whether such folktales and jokes have an effect in undermining brutal regimes, or whether they serve as a safety valve that allows the brutalized to win a symbolic victory, they nonetheless represent the voice of people in protest. Many of the texts collected here are, on the other hand, intentional and purposeful struggles to expose structural violence. Structural violence refers to systematic ways in which social structures and social institutions cause harm or otherwise disadvantage and disempower individuals, while at the same time benefiting and privileging those who created and sustain those systems, institutions, and arrangements. Protest aims to change the objective unjust and inequitable

conditions--to transform, repair, and even dismantle, the structures, institutions, values, and policies that dominate peoples' lives and cause harm.

Different genres of folklore are represented in this collection; all of which present lore as a weapon for social awakening. The folklore texts contributed by the BSU students, like all folklore texts, are embedded in larger sociopolitical and cultural contexts. In this case, that larger context is social and racial injustice, racial and gender inequality, and the ongoing struggle for civil and human rights. The social protest folklore students contributed is not necessarily or particularly coded; in most cases anyone receiving the message knows the explicit political meaning. So, the intention of the performers need not be inferred by the audience. In most cases, it is the performance itself that is meaningful, as collective values and attitudes are being articulated via the folklore text.

The social protest texts presented here represent accusations against a toxic culture and its multiple oppressions. The texts stand for the demystification of all that has been normalized, including gender-based violence, racial oppression, social injustice, denial of human rights. Indeed, the texts can be read as both analysis of, and awareness of, structural violence. The texts can also be read as tools to be used to dismantle racism, sexism, and other oppressions.

### **Visual Art and Craft**

Art is a vehicle for demanding justice and change in the hands of the folk, sometimes defying convention (Peter Harmon's contribution) and other times using conventional forms in subversive ways (Jessica Sullivan's contribution). Art literally makes visible structures and systems which have been made invisible, mystified, covered up, suppressed, and silenced (Charles Pacheco and Lynne Turner's contributions). In some cases (Will Migre's contribution), elite high art reflects and expresses a collective voice of social protest, as the art depicts the symbols and images that articulate shared meanings of the people. Whether it is high art or craft (Cindy Barba and Kristen Nicholson's contributions), art has an enduring quality, as it persists through time, offering inspiration for social-political activists of the future (Emerson Kern's contribution).

It is important to spotlight the contributions of Cindy Barba and Kristen Nicholson, both of whom use an everyday women's craft—knitting—to embody social protest messages. Barba's "pussy hat" intentionally appropriates language associated with misogynistic male culture (the term "pussy" as pejorative and degrading), as well as stereotypical images of the feminine (the color hot pink) (Radner and Langer 1993: 12-13). In so doing, the "pussy hat" usurps the misogynistic, degrading narrative, and transforms it into an empowering statement of women's collective strength (ibid). Similarly, Kristen Nicholson's knitted and crocheted stuffed uterus uses women's traditional everyday crafts (knitting and crocheting) to create a material form that communicates resistance. The often overlooked and undervalued art of women's textile work is enlivened when these knit and crocheted uterus are sent to senators that oppose women's reproductive rights.

Desiree Fiset's contribution of a female-centered collective protest in Chile is not only a kick against normalizing prevailing gender-based violence and the lack of justice for victims, but is aimed at social change; at altering institutions such as the state, the judges, the police, as well as the values of a society that normalizes the crimes of perpetrators and rapists. By exposing flaws and fault lines in Chilean culture, the protest performance text spells out what needs to be done to repair the harm. This performance text juxtaposes the symbolic blindfolds ("justice is

blind”), the squat position demanded upon arrest, and chants that accuse the state, the president, judges, and police.

### *The Texts*



The art depicted in this picture is the famous painting by Eugene Delacroix, painted in 1830 during the French Revolution. It is a revolution, which is an extreme form of protest. The folk group pictured in the painting is the French Revolutionaries as a symbolic female figure holds up their flag as they claim victory over the monarchy. The symbolic female in the painting is a representation of the people in France at that time. She holds up the revolutionary's flag with the tricolor representing liberty, equality, and fraternity or brotherhood. She represents the togetherness of the people and what they are trying to accomplish. The revolutionaries were trying to accomplish a complete overthrow of the government. That is what they accomplished at the end of the French Revolution. They wanted to overthrow the monarchy and make their own government, taking bits and pieces from the American Revolution that came before them. -- Will Milgre



One of the many vehicles that is used to communicate is art. Many artists use art to convey their thoughts and beliefs. During the cold war, Germany was physically divided by 2 opposing governments. Many people used this wall to express their displeasure about this time in history. Many people tried to escape the Soviet Union by either going over or under the Berlin Wall. This wall depicts a car that was common in the Soviet Union going straight through the wall in a desperate attempt of escape. —Emerson Kerns



In Mexico City, an art collective painted the names of femicide victims on the street. The social protest folklore is the memorial for the victims of femicide in Mexico. The activist art collective known as Colectiva SJF got together to write the names of these victims on the floor of the square of Mexico City square. Over time they were joined by more and more women. This was a protest for not only awareness of the issue of femicide, but to challenge the Mexican government to implement more structural assistance for women living in Mexico. For the longest time the government of Mexico has not only been silencing the issue but dismissing any structural support. Because of this stance the names of these victims were scrubbed off the floor the very next day. -- Charles Pacheco





Reproductive justice is the human right to control our bodies, our lives, our sexualities, our gender, our work, and our reproduction. About 8-9 years ago there was a firestorm of Republican Senators making grotesque statements regarding the female body and reproductive rights. It was clear reproductive injustice. At that time, I belonged to an online knitting group and we decided to knit and crochet stuffed uteruses and mail them to the Senators who had made such comments along with the statement *“Now you have your own uterus to play with, leave ours alone!”* I personally sent the rainbow one to Mike Pence. The red one is still kicking around the house. My son brought it to kindergarten for Show and Tell! -- Kristen Nicholson





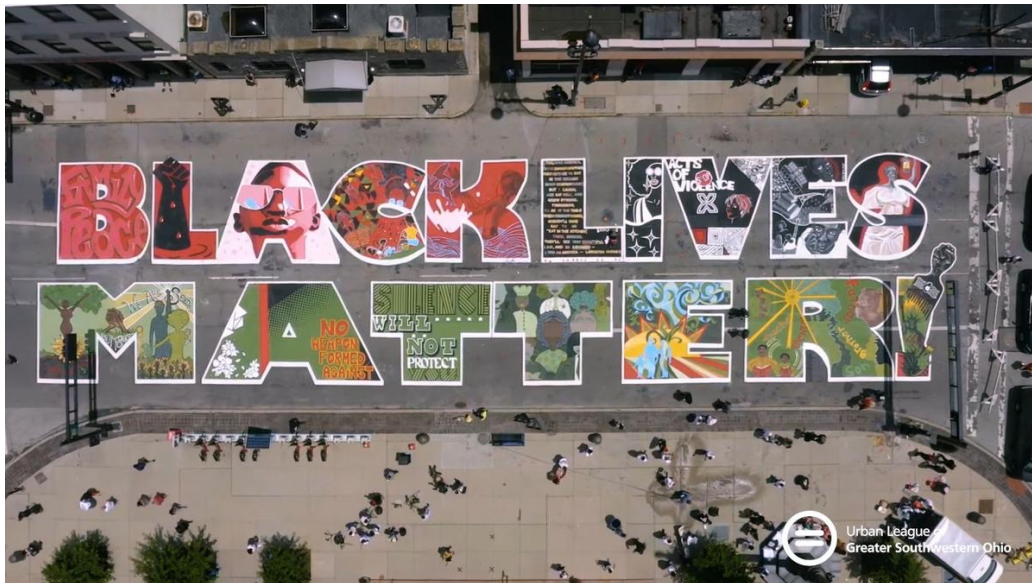
Mithila art is traditionally created by women in Nepal. Through time it has been used to communicate many messages without words, but instead through unique combinations of geometric shapes, color, and themes laid out for interpretation. Among the important themes considered within these pieces have been politics, gender, class, and more recently, terrorism and environmentalism.

This piece I have chosen to present is used to communicate specific ideas about women; therefore, I believe the folk group could be labeled broadly as women, but more narrowly as these Nepalese women artists. These women have managed to take something they have been doing for generations and are now not only able to spread messages that could be interpreted as controversial but are also able to profit from their work through both monetary and merit value. This piece specifically portrays what is conveyed by its title, Education is Power. While maintaining the traditional Mithila art style, the work communicates what a woman can do (pictured in the four surrounding tiles) with education (pictured in the center).

Through art such as this and other Mithila paintings, women are able to carry on with their traditions, but are empowered while doing so. I believe the aspect of protest comes not only from the explicit ideas displayed in the art that blatantly explores gender norms, but also implicitly through the ways in which the art is created - work typically expected of women is now being used by them for their own benefit, something the world is not, and may never be used to.--Jessica Sullivan



My piece of social protest folklore is this bright pink knitted hat that can commonly be found at annual Women's Marches. Though it looks like any other winter hat, these hats are called "pussy hats". The cat ears represent the double meaning of the word, and the reason they are worn is to represent reproductive rights and to stand up against sexual assault. The hats are almost a parody, by turning a negative stereotype against the stereotypers. These hats began appearing at marches in late 2016 to early 2017, right around the time of Donald Trump's locker room scandal. By wearing these hats, participants of the march hope to send a message to the general public as well as make those in power uncomfortable. -- Cindy Barba



Over 70 different members of the organization called Artswave got together to paint this mural. This mural is for the Black Lives Matter social protest. Many young African American males and females have been killed at the hands of white cops for years. The mural is a form of expression from all the hurt, pain, and injustice that occurs for African American people. Artswave is an arts organization based in Cincinnati, Ohio. They have hundreds of members that participate in making murals and other forms of art. It was founded in 1927 by Mr. and Mrs. Taft. They wanted Cincinnati to pop out and look different by displaying all types of artwork. – Lynne Turner

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/jantjes-a-south-african-colouring-book-74151/2>

This is a collection of 11 different images that are meant to be comedic/ slap you in the face with how offensive it was meant to be towards the Apartheid regime. The artist is named Gavin Jantjes and I'm not sure whether to put his folk group as simply artists or as a member of the Apartheid resistance. -- Peter Harmon



“Artivism” is a term that is used by Nikkolas Smith to describe the intersection of Art and Activism. Smith strongly believes that a single image can grab attention and be a catalyst for social and political change. Smith cites Nina Simone’s statement, “It’s an artist’s duty to reflect the times.” In his painting ‘MLK in a Hoodie’ art activist, Nikkolas Smith, makes a political statement based on the photo of Trevon Martin in a hoodie taken on the night he was killed. In his social protest folklore text, Nikkolas Smith depicts Martin Luther King, Jr. wearing a hooded sweatshirt like one 17-year-old Trayvon Martin wore the night he was shot and killed by a neighborhood watchman in Florida. The image of MLK in a hoodie went viral and landed Smith on the national news, where he was quoted, "The message was to say, why does he look like a thug now? Because I put a hoodie on him? It was supposed to convey the message of Dr. King's dream of not wanting anybody to be judged for their outward appearance."

-- Taylor Deas

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsGpDowkfrw> for an interview with Nikkolas Smith.

### **Performance Art/Spoken Word/Poetry**

Movements for social justice focus protest on demands for fair treatment, dignity, equitable participation, civil rights, and human rights. Social justice protest, as the Bridgewater State University students demonstrated, may take the form of visual art, as seen above. Similar to visual art, performance art takes the power and embodies the power to question social injustices and express resistance to structural racism (Keshori Ellis, Charlie Yoder, Kaleigh Roche, and Alicia Delaney’s contributions), sexism (Maia Williams’ contribution), toxic elements of popular culture (Jill Sims’ contribution), oppressive workplace conditions (Jaylen Louis’s contribution), and an urgent call for unity amidst divisiveness after tragedy (Elizabeth Higgins’ contribution). Fueled by rage and outrage, performance folklore combines public spaces with politics and participatory activism, engaging both performers and audiences.

## The Texts

*Narrative with no photo or link.*

My Aunt works at Southern Jamaica Plain Health Center in Boston. She and her coworkers kneel for George Floyd in front of their workplace. They kneel for 8 minutes and 46 seconds. The same amount of time the police officer knelt on George Floyd's neck. Then they stand for 12 minutes. This is done every Thursday at 4:40pm and every Friday at noon. It takes place at two different clinics. My aunt says kneeling hurts, but it is nothing compared to what George felt. While doing this they hold a sign that says Black Lives Matter, they also make the symbol with their fist. On the Back of their sign they have the LGBTQ symbol to show that they support that along with Black Lives Matter. She said that 95% of the time they will get a lot of support by drivers, even the UPS truck drivers. There are also a few cases where someone opposes to what they are doing and calls them racist. – Ayla Jette

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5AAscy7qbI>

A Chilean protest song, '*A Rapist in Your Path*, about rape culture and victim shaming has become an anthem for feminists around the world. *Un Violador en Tu Camino – A Rapist in Your Path* – was first performed in late November as Chile's nationwide uprising against social inequality went into its second month. The performance is a female-centered experience aimed at calling out the oppressive sources of male power and domination. Here's a look at how the song, and its accompanying dance moves, have spread across Latin America and the world. Note the blindfolds worn by the performers, to symbolize that gender-based violence and its victims have been silenced and made invisible. But now, this social protest is shaking people up to see the sources of the injustice, oppression, and domination. –Desiree Fisette

The lyrics are:

*“The patriarchy is a judge that judges us for being born.  
And our punishment is the violence that you don't see.  
It's femicide.  
Impunity for my killer.  
This disappearance.  
This rape.  
And it wasn't my fault, not where I was, or what I wore.  
The rapist was you.  
It's the police.  
The judges.  
The state.  
The president.  
The oppressive state is a macho rapist.  
The rapist is you.”*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=1&v=8B6DVdCzwy0&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=8B6DVdCzwy0&feature=emb_title)

The piece I chose for presenting social protest folklore is “Comment #1”, a poem by Gil Scott-Heron. Heron was a civil rights activist and speaker who lived through the desegregation of the United States. In this particular poem, he is protesting on two fronts: both the treatment of black people by the government, as well as the political activism of white people. Heron believes that this support by white people is misplaced and he makes it very clear that he believes it is



detrimental to his cause. In one section of the poem, he speaks directly to one of the white activists saying, “You silly trite motherfucker, your great grandfather tied a ball and chain to my balls.” This malcontent is justified, as he describes the causes that the white supporter is fighting for. Heron paints his struggle to live to have a family and a home, versus the student activist who is fighting for legalized marijuana, lower voting age, and other seemingly trivial issues. -- Charlie Yoder

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwl\\_\\_XJzII0&feature=share](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwl__XJzII0&feature=share)

The folk group in this video is the group of dancers that share the same interest in the Black Lives Matter movement and what it truly means to be Black in America at this point in our lives and how we deserve equality and equity like every other race. -- Keshori Ellis

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hJIuVvVQKk>

"The Truth Is" put out by the NBAPA is a video created to show The NBAs' stance and action in the social protest movement of Black Lives Matter. The video shows the NBA players taking a stand at protests and being social leaders. – Sean Lavalee

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVT8H6FZkJI&feature=youtu.be>

This spoken word piece written by me about the fabrication of famous instamodels and such. Love my memes, man, but social media can get irritating or even destructive if you aren't paying attention. Now to be completely hypocritical. Jill Sims  
9/11 Spoken Word ‘When God Happens’ (Mark Rosen)

<https://youtu.be/S2Ks06A18c0>

This video of a spoken word poem is an example of social protest folklore. The folk group is New York residents at the time of September 11, 2001. It is an example of social protest because the opinion and experience that the poet talks about in this poem is vastly different from what much of the country was reported to feel at that time. While the country expressed their outrage in the form of an us-against-them state of being, Mark Rosen, a New York City-based poet and educator (and a young boy in 2001) expresses a call for peace and unity instead:

*“That day had no black or white...no one country...”*

*“No war is helping us find the victims’ remains. Your war just adds to the list of boys still waiting for their fathers to come home.”* -- Elizabeth Higgins

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bn6ufR9bmg>

Oppressive workplaces are, unfortunately, common worldwide, from agriculture to mining to factory work to Amazon warehouses today. In late August of 2020, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos hit a landmark milestone with his net worth surpassing \$200 billion, making his one of the richest people in history. While this might be good news for him personally, this has set off quite a few employees that work for his company. With working conditions being less than optimal (especially within the warehouses) and hours being forcibly extended due to the massive demand of packages thanks in large part to the pandemic, several Amazon employees have been rallying and protesting in efforts to get the minimum wage changed to \$30 an hour at the company given that it's CEO is more than capable of doing so. While these protests have been going on for quite some time, the news on Bezo's net worth ended up spiking the frequency and severity of these protests, with several employees gathering at Bezo's apartment and building a makeshift

guillotine out front to threaten him. By protesting publicly, this performance gives a voice to the ordinary employee, expressing outrage against workplace injustice and exploitation. At the same time, this performance in a public space creates awareness among bystanders as well as among those viewing media sources that captured the performance. This harkens back to painted graffiti in Paris in the late 1960's, with slogans such as "*The boss needs you, you don't need him.*" -- Jaylen Louis

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsSn\\_-NRwBQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsSn_-NRwBQ)

I have chosen a written poem/performance from a former high school classmate, Zakai Taylor-Kelly. She was performing at an annual Louder Than A Bomb (LTAB) competition. Her poem was about the fear of leaving home and having to attend college where things might not be safe. Rape often gets swept under the rug in institutions. Her social protest was about men or women not preying on her while she attends college, making her or anyone the next victim. -- Maia Williams

### **Songs and Music**

Music amplifies a message and forges solidarity and emotional energy among folk group performers and audiences. Music lyrics and chants make demands, expose truths, build identity and commonality, and demystify power structures, all in a participatory way (Gabe Alexander, Fiona Bell, Harrison Zamilus, and Andrew Disher's contributions). Social protest chanting and singing are participatory and collective actions, not merely a top-down performance of one musician (Mimi Phan, Katelyn Amaral, and Emma Shanley's contributions). From the American protest songs of the 1950s - 1970s that emerged from the civil rights movement and the upheaval generated by the Vietnam War, to hip-hop today, old and new protest songs accompany marches and demonstrations in public spaces.

1. Pete Seeger's 1963 version: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdJh0F\\_vYs8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdJh0F_vYs8)
2. Mave Staples' version:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZWdDI\\_fkns&has\\_verified=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZWdDI_fkns&has_verified=1)
3. Sweet Honey and the Rock version: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D\\_tcZAqQUAg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_tcZAqQUAg)

Keep Your Eyes on The Prize was a protest song during the Civil Rights Movement. The song was sung when segregation and the white supremacists supporting it had suppressed, oppressed, and brutalized black bodies and minds. It was likely adapted from the spiritual hymn, "Keep Your Hand on the Plow," by civil rights activist Alice Wine in 1956, becoming "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize" inspiring determination and persistence in the face of ongoing racial injustice. -- Gabe Alexander

Ballads from the Santhal Revolt of 1855. One text/item of social protest folklore that I discovered and found worth sharing comes from the ballads that rose from the Santhal Revolt of 1855. Clearly, this took place nearly 200 years ago and may not appear to be as relevant today. But I think a lot of what is taking place today can somewhat be traced to what happened then, especially regarding the ways in which people attempted to cope with it – through songs/art/an overall genre of self-expression.



In an article titled, “The Forgotten Santhal Revolt of 1855”, Kritika Sarada writes, “After the Battle of Plassey in 1757 CE, the control of Bengal passed to the British East India Company ... [they] auctioned away large tracts of land belonging to the Santhals to anyone who would guarantee them these fixed revenues.” The Santhals lost the rights to all of their land and were reduced to being hired as laborers working in fields for their new owners. Four brothers of the Murmu clan, Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairav, headed the rebellion and a massive number of Santhals gathered in a field in Bhognadih village, taking an oath to fight “till their last breath against the British and their agents,” (Sarada). Between 15,000 to 20,000 Santhals were killed by the British and they were ultimately defeated.

The ways in which this ties into folklore is through the number of ballads that have been translated from the time of the revolt, one of them centering around the brothers who started the movement and the events that led them to it: “*Sido, why are you bathed in blood? / Kanu, why do you cry hul, hul? / For our people we have bathed in blood, / for the trader thieves / have robbed us of our land*”. In another song, it is written, “*They brought down all the houses and mansions to dust/ they chopped the residents of Kumrabad like kumro (yellow gourd)*”. – Fiona Bell

(Works Cited: Sarada, Kritika. “The Forgotten Santhal Revolt of 1855.” Live History India: Stories That Make India, Live History India, 14 July 2017, [www.livehistoryindia.com/snapshort-histories/2017/07/14/the-forgotten-santhal-revolt-of-1855](http://www.livehistoryindia.com/snapshort-histories/2017/07/14/the-forgotten-santhal-revolt-of-1855); Ignou: The People's University. “Unit 4: Folk Forms as Protest.” [egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/38856/1/Unit-4.pdf](http://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/38856/1/Unit-4.pdf)).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leJCX1DIgk0&list=WL&index=3>

“*Everybody's Got A Right To Live*.” The folk group is activists seeking racial equality. In the year of 1969, the racial tensions in the US were about to take a massive push towards the right direction. In this song here we have two members of the many civil rights activists who are pouring their soul into this composition piece. The two singers of this piece are Frederick Douglass Kirkpatrick and Jimmy Collie who both have unfortunately died at this time. Nevertheless, their message holds strong even to this day, with the duo’s powerful song “*Everybody's Got A Right To Live*” crying out to the racial pain that blacks have been subjected to over the length of the civil rights movement and even before it started. This song is also a Guardian Angel in a sense because it's still prominent in today’s society as racial violence is still happening today. —Harrison Zamilus

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfZVu0alU0I&ab\\_channel=TheBestOf-HomeOfClassicMusic](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfZVu0alU0I&ab_channel=TheBestOf-HomeOfClassicMusic)

This video matches the song *Eve of Destruction* by Barry McGuire with a series of images and short film segments that help emphasize the context of the song. The song was actually written in 1964 by another man named Phil Sloan, and Barry McGuire only covered it in 1965. Many other people had tried covering the song, including the Byrds, the Turtles, and others, but the McGuire's version is the one that seemed to strike a chord with the American people and carry the appropriate tone for the lyrics, which was a tone of desperation and frustration.

The song speaks of controversial topics in America during the 1960s, two of which are the protests for civil rights (chiefly desegregation and voting rights for African Americans) and the ongoing Cold War with democracy pitted against communism. There was much frustration among the black community that came from the unwillingness of people in power to extend to

them the rights they were owed. The idea of 'separate but equal' was a farce, and as much as those in power tried to paint an image of fairness and good intentions for segregation, the truth was evident that the black community was being treated horribly and unfairly, just as slaves were in the previous centuries, and those in power wanted that way. This idea is conveyed in the lyric "I can't twist the truth, it knows no regulation. Handful of senators don't pass legislation." The song also addresses the Vietnam War (and likely the series of proxy wars that were fought by the United States) and war in general in the lyrics "The eastern world, it is exploding. Violence flaring, bullets loading." It also mentions the fighting between Israel and Jordan with the lyric "and even the Jordan River has bodies floating." The song is clearly an anti-war sentiment.

The folk group associated with this song can be mildly ambiguous to an extent because it is not solely concerned with American affairs, but also those in the Middle East, China, and the USSR. But the folk group is certainly the American people who stand with democratic values and equal rights, not including those who would use democracy as a facade for ulterior motives, whether they be racism or imperial power.

Beyond interpreting the lyrics, the idea of the song is protesting injustices and speaking out against political hypocrisy in multiple forms. The need for this song, as with many protest songs, arises because of a failure of formal processes to address such injustices and to listen to the people. This song is particularly incredible to me because it manages to address so many issues at the time with so few words and capture the feelings of so many. – Andrew Disher

### **Chants, Slogans, Gestures, and Signs**

Slogans, chants, gestures, and signs starkly reveal and express the actual purpose and cause for which the group comes together. These short, stirring, and thought-provoking written, verbal, and non-verbal messages focus the collective voice toward the oppressive forces. Slogans, chants, gestures, and signs are potent, awakening "weapons" wielded to express the essence of the protest message (Mimi Phan's *'I can't breathe'*;" Emma Shanley's *"This is what democracy looks like!"* "What does democracy look like?" *"This is what democracy looks like;"* Katelyn Amaral's: *Let the crickets be heard;* Kaleigh Roche's, and Alicia Delaney's *Fist in the Air* gesture and signs and chants from the Black Lives Matter Movement).

#### ***"I can't breathe"***

In our prior months, we have had protests all over the country for Black Lives Matter. One of the main chants people had announced was ***"I can't breathe"*** after the death of George Floyd. These three words have become so powerful in our history because people are once again standing up for their rights and are trying to create a change for the future generations. This movement wasn't only focused on the death of George Floyd, but for the many unannounced names who still suffer injustices. -- Mimi Phan

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ue6CovRPa48>

This video is from a May, 2020 BLM protest in Sacramento, following the police custody death of George Floyd in Minneapolis earlier that week. This is an organized protest and march, but the art signs that people are carrying and the chants that the people are chanting can be considered social protest folklore texts. -- Kaleigh Roche

The signs that the protestors are holding read:

***“Respect Existence or Expect Resistance”***

***“Tired of this B.S. I can’t breathe.”***

***No Justice. No Peace.” kkkk***

***“Convict Killer Cops”***

***“No More. Enough”***

***“Stop racist Police Terror”***

Protesters’ Chants:

***“Say his name. George Floyd.”***

***“I can’t breathe.”***

***“Fight for freedom.”***

***“Justice now.”***

***“Black Lives Matter.”***

***“This is what democracy looks like!”***

***“What does democracy look like?”***

***“This is what democracy looks like.”***

On March 24, 2018, I attended the March for Our Lives in Boston. The protest was one of many throughout the country that called for governmental action regarding gun control after the school shooting that killed 17 students and staff in Parkland, FL. I attended the march with 2 of my high school friends during our junior year. There were many chants that we yelled during the march. One that has stuck with me was: ***“This is what democracy looks like!”*** An organizer would yell through a megaphone ***“What does democracy look like?”*** and we, the sea of people, would chant back ***“This is what democracy looks like.”*** It was an empowering and emotional moment as people of all different backgrounds got together in support of one thing: gun control and a better world. --Emma Shanley

The signs that the protestors are holding read:

***“A system can’t fail those it was it was never designed to protect”***

***“My skin is not a sin”***

***“I Can’t Breathe”***

***“Black Lives Matter”***

The chants are:

***“No justice no peace, no racist-ass police”***

***“Say their names.”***

Gesture: The act of raising your closed fist in the air



Solidarity, June 30, 1917. The Hand That Will Rule the World—One Big Union.

The folk group represented here includes all those who are oppressed, suffer from injustice, but are fighting. The folk item is the performance of the fist in the air.

Raising a fist in the air is prominent nowadays among those who are participating in, and in support of, the Black Lives Matter movement. This is not a new thing. The act of raising your closed fist in the air has been present throughout history for a really long time. One of the first times it was seen was in 1913 during a strike in New Jersey. The man who did it was named “Big Bill Hollywood”, a union member who was fighting for “working-class solidarity across all races and trades” (Stout, James. “The History of the Raised Fist, a Global Symbol of Fighting Oppression.” National Geographic, 31 July 2020). This man put his hand up with an open hand, then closed it and said a closed hand has more force, as a metaphor for how people who join together are a larger force. Since then it has been used as a symbol for people who are fighting. One popular time it was shown was during the 1968 Olympics, Tommie Smith and John Carlos put their fists up on the podium as the salute for Black Power. Other earlier times, the raised fist was a symbol of fighting fascism and supporting the Popular Front, and the Spanish Republic raised their fist of solidarity with the Lincoln Brigade. Fighting against fascism is also fighting against racism. It was done throughout the Civil Rights Movements and it is still being done today. It still has the same message of the desire for solidarity and the fight against racism. -- Alicia Delaney



When my mom protested at the state house to protect teachers' pensions, she and everyone else designed shirts for all of the teachers. Each district had its own personalized shirts with signs that said the same thing. They also were chanting each district of education for example, "Pawtucket". They had the districts on the back of the shirts.

Many teachers in Rhode Island came on school buses to go to the protest.

They chanted: ***Let the crickets be heard!*** Even though individually each of us are small, as a large group we will be heard. —Katelyn Amaral

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