

# Singing Politics: Freedom Songs and Collective Protest in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Omotayo Jolaosho

**Abstract:** This article examines the continued salience of sung protests in South Africa by investigating the adaptation of anti-apartheid freedom songs along with the emergence of new expressive forms in ongoing community mobilizations. Based on sixteen months of ethnographic research in Johannesburg, this article argues that freedom songs constitute a distinct register that is politically efficacious due to singing's aesthetically embodied effects. Formative elements of antiphony, repetition, and rhythm constitute a musical practice that organizes protest gatherings, allows for democratic leadership, and fosters collective participation. These practices yield a plasticity in the songs that makes them adaptable to changing political circumstances.

**Résumé:** Cet article examine la prépondérance répétée de mouvements contestataires en chansons en Afrique du Sud en étudiant l'adaptation des chansons de liberté anti-apartheid ainsi que l'émergence de nouvelles formes expressives dans les mouvements sociaux communautaires actuels. Sur la base de seize mois de recherches ethnographiques à Johannesburg, cet article fait valoir que les chansons sur la liberté constituent un registre distinct qui est politiquement efficace en raison des effets esthétiquement incarnés du chant. Les composantes primordiales de l'antiphonie, de la répétition et du rythme constituent une pratique musicale qui

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**Omotayo Jolaosho** is an assistant professor of Africana studies in the School of Interdisciplinary Global Studies at University of South Florida. She previously held a postdoctoral fellowship at the Center for Humanities at the University of California, Merced, and received her doctorate in cultural anthropology from Rutgers University. She is currently writing an ethnography on the role of embodied performance within activist collectives opposing neoliberal state economic policies in South Africa. She is a coeditor—with Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez, Pauline Dongala, and Anne Serafin—of the transnational anthology, *African Women Writing Resistance: Contemporary Voices* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 2010). E-mail: jolaosho@usf.edu

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structure des rassemblements contestataires, permet un leadership démocratique et favorise la participation collective. Ces pratiques donnent une plasticité dans les chansons qui les rend adaptables aux changements de circonstances politiques.

**Resumo:** Este artigo analisa a contínua preponderância dos protestos cantados na África do Sul, investigando as adaptações das canções de libertação anti-*apartheid*, a par das novas formas de expressão que se verificam nos movimentos encetados pelas atuais comunidades. Partindo de um trabalho de pesquisa decorrido ao longo de 16 meses em Joanesburgo, o autor defende que as canções de libertação configuram um registo distinto cuja eficácia política provém dos efeitos estéticos que o canto corporiza. Os elementos formais da antifonia, da repetição e do ritmo dão origem a uma prática musical que estrutura as reuniões de protesto, gera a liderança democrática e incita a participação coletiva. Estas práticas produzem canções de tal maneira elásticas, que as torna adaptáveis a quaisquer contextos de mudança política.

**Keywords:** protest; music; South Africa; embodiment; performance; aesthetics; politics

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## Introduction

More than two decades into the country's democratic dispensation, the songs that were central to South Africa's liberation struggles remain prominent in public protests, despite controversy regarding their continued relevance.<sup>1</sup> On one telling occasion, the association of singing with collective protest resonated so deeply that, during an intentionally "silent" march featuring Johannesburg protesters who had symbolically gagged themselves with duct tape, singing welled up to break the silence as soon as the march began. What made song so indispensable for the expression of these protesters? How and why have such political performances remained prominent years into the aftermath of South Africa's democratic transition, the supposed culmination of anti-apartheid struggles?

In accounting for contemporary South Africa, the term post-apartheid is polysemic—at once a chronological marker, signal of rupture, aspiration, prescription, provocation, and problematic (Hayem 2017). Echoing activists with whom I worked, I use the term, above all else, to indicate the present as a provocation: rather than being viewed as a novelty, or as a disruption of the past, the present offers incitements to act in response to dashed hopes, unfulfilled visions, and outright material urgencies. State alliance with a globally encroaching neoliberalism has meant the reframing of political vision as the African National Congress (ANC) has transitioned from a liberation movement into the governing party. Shifting from socialist democratic ideals enshrined in the Freedom Charter, a liberation manifesto adopted in 1955, today's governing ANC has espoused neoliberal economic policies emphasizing privatization, trade liberalization, and deregulation. In this context of neoliberal reforms in which basic service provision is driven by profit and cost recovery, many communities have found that their

struggles for political and economic transformation persist. Access to housing, electricity, water, sanitation, education, employment, and other basic survival needs remain beyond the reach of far too many. Apartheid-era freedom songs offer important resources for activists making claims on the state through multiple strategies including public demonstrations, litigation, and infrastructural opposition (von Schnitzler 2014).<sup>2</sup> Their dissent has been facilitated by community mobilizations, specifically through the emergence of “new” social movements with causes rooted in distinct post-apartheid state politics.<sup>3</sup> While these movements have been critically analyzed for their origins, contentions, varied orientations toward the state, impact, and decline, less attention has been paid to the musical underpinnings of these collective protests (but see Lekgowa 2013; Dawson 2010). Conversely, the scarcity of references on freedom songs as distinct musical configurations within the existing literature on South African music has been readily acknowledged (see for example McNeill & James 2011:200).

This article investigates protest singing as a recurring and sustaining element integral to collective mobilization. It argues that freedom songs constitute a distinct aesthetic terrain—one that leverages cultural forms and historical memory—and that has political salience due to singing’s embodied and emotive effects. In this manner, it builds on interdisciplinary scholarship that has examined the centrality of music to political processes, including election campaigns and politicians’ self-styling (Dorsey 2004; Steingo 2011); shifting state ideology (Chikowero 2011); collective consciousness and identity formation (Byrd 2014; Redmond 2014; Segall 2013); and the forging of intersubjective connection amidst structural inequality (Black 2014). This research is based on ethnographic participation at a variety of collective demonstrations and activist events between September 2009 and December 2010 in South Africa. Part of this fieldwork relates primarily to the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), a post-apartheid social movement that emerged in 2000 to contest the encroachment of neoliberalism on Johannesburg’s municipalities and academic institutions. However, because the protests and events I attended involved activists beyond the APF, my arguments transcend a single organization to offer insight into broader intersections among activists who met across protest events and cultivated shared practices.<sup>4</sup>

Scholarship on the subversive functions of songs often focuses on lyrical content to locate their political significance. One definition of protest songs, for example, outlines these as musical expressions “whose lyrics speak out against a specific social, political or economic injustice” (Lockard 1998:33). Lyrics convey sociopolitical sentiments and reinforce ideological commitments (see Denisoff 1983; Corte & Edwards 2008; Turino 2008:189–224). In this manner, the lyrical content of songs can be avenues of persuasion and recruitment for social movements (cf. Lieberman 1995; Roy 2010:5–6). Singers employ verbal artistry, using repetition, adaptations, and extensions to amplify ideas. Such practices reveal a temporal and spatial emergence through which the relevance of the past is made explicit in the

present, and geographical circulations are audible in the lyrical juxtapositions afforded by song (James 1999:84; Gunner 2009:38–39; Vail & White 1991).

While this text-based analytical emphasis has been extremely productive, the political significance of musical expression is not always conclusively revealed by its associated lyrical content (Ahearn 1998; Roy 2010).<sup>5</sup> The lyrics of protest songs might belie any political connection, as was the case with many songs of the U.S. civil rights movement. Understanding the political efficacy of such songs therefore requires more inclusive consideration of the interplay of elements constituting a musical encounter. This study joins with calls for more comprehensive treatments of music and protest (Bensimon 2012:242; Corte 2013; Rosenthal & Flacks 2012). Meeting this challenge of holistic engagement entails grappling with questions of what music is, its boundaries with other communicative forms, and how it is experienced and made meaningful (e.g., Roy 2010; Faudree 2012).

Below, I use the ethnographic context of protest singing in South Africa to explore how the structure of participatory music-making facilitates collective mobilization. Following theoretical and historical overviews, this study shows how formative practices—involving antiphony (call-and-response), repetition, and rhythm—structure patterns of exchange, evaluation, and conduct among singing protesters. These musical features establish a somatically grounded mode of relating among those gathered, thereby supporting key functions such as organizing and sustaining demonstrations and fostering solidarity—with important implications for overall political efficacy. It then describes how, beyond fulfilling such functions during protest events, freedom songs extend politics into more ongoing negotiations of emotions and identity. If, as Margaret Dorsey suggests, we “situate our glance earlier and allow it to linger longer” than the timeframe of events explicitly marked as political (2004:61–62), new insights emerge into music’s role in mediating individual and collective activism through protesters’ emotions and embodiment.

## Embodiment and Emotions in Song

...[Even if] you can’t speak out the verses of the song, but then you feel it, that means it’s in your heart, it’s there, so there’s some other energy which we feel going into our marches, going to our meetings, wherever, that’s the culture we should never lose of song and dance.

—Ndimiso (interview with author, January 22, 2010)<sup>6</sup>

For many South Africans, including the activists I came to work with, protests facilitate utter immersion in the embodied experience of singing, clapping, and dancing together. These are moments in which sound, bodily sensation, movement, and emotion converge. In the epigraph above, Ndimiso’s sensitivity to the felt experience of protest singing as a phenomenon of expressive culture aligns with recent anthropological interventions on the multisensoriality of musical expression. Such interventions include

the emergence of “soundscape” as a key analytic to facilitate greater attunement to sonic dimensions of sociality and to counter a disciplinary partiality towards visuality and textuality (see Samuels et al. 2010). Promoting anthropology’s “auditory turn” towards greater holism, Paja Faudree (2012) advances a musical semiotics that recognizes language and music as part of a seamless complex. This framework “takes as its most basic unit of analysis the socially situated, relationally understood sign, be it sung, spoken, written, performed, or embodied” (Faudree 2012:530). Within such a framework, Steven Black is particularly attentive to sensorial orientation. Writing on a South African choral group, he draws on the concept of intersubjectivity to integrate “the felt experience and semiotic grounding of making music together” (2014:381). With the aim of contributing to these developments, I want to briefly highlight how analysis of aesthetic embodiment further advances holistic engagement with sound and music making.

Emphasis on aesthetic embodiment draws two strands of analytic focus into a nested relationship. Firstly, embodiment highlights human bodily activity as a fundamental means through which we inhabit the world, and as a source of selfhood and agency (Csordas 1994; Mascia-Lees 2011; Farnell 1999). Secondly, the aesthetic is one nested mode of embodiment that is concerned with sensory experience, in particular how senses are enlivened, configured, and mediated, both culturally and politically (Mascia-Lees 2011; Howes 2014; Geurts 2002). As Fran Mascia-Lees (2011:7) notes, “all aesthetic experiences are embodied, not all embodied experiences are aesthetic.” Aesthetic embodiment, then, is a phenomenologically grounded engagement with multiple facets of the sensible, understood as both what makes sense and what can be sensed (see Panagia 2009:3). An analysis of aesthetic embodiment involves attunement to sensory perception, bodily sensation, sensibility, and sentiment as interconnected phenomena within our embodied materialities and socialities. With regard to music, such a theorization privileges the experiences of protesters themselves, offering a connected framework with which to engage music as a corporeal and affective medium.

Music, like much human action, is aesthetically embodied. We produce, perceive, and respond to music sensorially in culturally inflected ways (Downey 2002). Singing, in particular, is a bodily production engaging the mouth, tongue, vocal cords, sinus and nasal passage, lungs, and indeed the whole of an individual’s physical structure. The sound produced is very much dependent on the shape and placement of various elements within this structure (Feld et al. 2004:333–36). It is thus the case that “[t]o hear a voice, a musical sound, is to ‘have knowledge’ of the corporeal and somatic state which produced it” (Shepard & Wicke 1995:180). Tia DeNora (2011:190–91) intriguingly draws attention to the body’s musical affinity, elements of which include physiological rhythms (breathing, pulse and heart rate, blood pressure, and longer term cycles such as sleep), and capacities for variable sonic production. Bodily responsiveness to musical stimuli involves physiological effects including changes in pace, energy, comportment, as well as homoeostatic features such as breathing, heart

rate, and blood pressure. Music's effects are also emotionally perceptible and interconnected with these elements of bodily responsiveness.

Although there is a burgeoning literature on emotions and social movements, the role of music in the "emotion work" (Gould 2009) of collective protest is still an emerging area of scholarly intervention (Corte 2013; Summers Effler 2012). In one example of such work, Moshe Bensimon (2012) demonstrates how genre-specific features can contribute to music's shifting emotional and corporeal effects. Within the context of resistance against Israel's 2005 disengagement from the Gaza Strip, he examines the use of three musical genres (event songs, folk songs, biblical songs) to serve corresponding emotional needs (raising morale, venting rage, mourning loss) as these unfolded in the face of external threats of physical removal. While the musical genres varied in Bensimon's empirical context and the mobilization aims differ markedly, in South Africa, there is a historically entrenched repertoire of songs that are firmly associated with collective protest. These are known as the "struggle songs," or in isiZulu, *iingoma zomzabalazo*. These songs affectively mediate protesters' experiences before, during, and after protest events (recall Ndumiso's description above of "some other energy which we feel going into our marches"). Such effects are underpinned by a structure of participatory music-making involving antiphony (call-and-response), repetition, and rhythm, elements I will discuss at length. But first, I situate the historical context of contemporary activists' performances.

### South African Protest Singing and Expressive Cultures of Liberation

South African freedom songs were so connected to struggles for an emerging nation that the late acclaimed trumpeter Hugh Masekela once theorized that the loss of the decisive Anglo-Zulu war in 1879 was due to Zulu warriors singing on the battlefield.<sup>7</sup> In our interview, Ndumiso spoke knowingly of these historical underpinnings of singing practices among South African protesters. Echoing Masekela, Ndumiso asserted that protest singing "is like fighting a battle. You can't go to war without song, because that's the only thing that will keep you going" (interview with author, January 22, 2010). Freedom songs in South Africa have served as tactics of liberation struggles against the ravages of war, against colonialism, and, most notably, against apartheid. Their origins can be traced to historical forms, such as Zulu *amahubo empi* or war songs (prominent in precolonial and colonial warfare), and to oral art in general that is embedded in daily life (Mthembu 1999:1; Xulu 1994). Occasions when people gather—including weddings and funerals—have provided opportunities for singing that have both inspired, and have been inspired by, the development of many freedom songs. Seminal studies by David Coplan (2008 [1985]), Veit Erlmann (1996), and Deborah James (1999), among others, identify music as historically interwoven with the everyday. Thus, the theatre practitioner Duma Ndlovu describes how song permeated daily practices under apartheid to the extent that "our parents would break into song at the slightest provocation.

When your mother couldn't figure out what to feed you for that night because she didn't have any money, she came back from looking for a job, she would break into a dirge that would be expressing how she felt" (in Hirsch 2002).

Today's freedom songs are also indebted historically to religious singing; many protest songs are adaptations of church hymns. As the playwright Fatimah Dike explained, "People had faith in God so much that they even took hymns and used them as songs of protest in testing the waters of apartheid" (interview with author, June 7, 2007). The implications of such adaptations go beyond a singular invocation of religious faith. Many songs adapted the moral grounding of Christian hymnody to query the apartheid system and seek divine intervention. The political aspect complicating the link between song and religion appears in Dike's own statement of an all-consuming concern in her activism: "If we are the children of God, why does God allow what just happened in South Africa to happen?" Freedom songs came to reflect growing disaffection with the church by integrating its theology with perspectives from the anti-apartheid struggle. For example, many song adapters replaced Jesus in ascriptions of salvation with struggle heroes and leaders. One song, which originally asserted "somlandela, somlandel' uJesu [we will follow Jesus]," was changed to "somlandel' Lutuli [we will follow Lutuli]." This song helped popularize the leadership of Albert Lutuli, the prominent president of the African National Congress. It also helps to illustrate the plasticity of song in cleverly leveraging religious tradition to serve political aims.

While certain individuals such as Vuyisile Mini<sup>8</sup> and Reuben Tholakele Caluza<sup>9</sup> are recognized as composers of particular songs, the identities of many composers and the origins of most songs are unknown. As "songs of the people," the composition of many freedom songs, like their performance, is participatory and collective in nature. Protest events, as collective gatherings, provided intrinsic opportunities for songs to develop and circulate across multilingual communities.<sup>10</sup>

When I arrived in South Africa for fieldwork in 2009, there existed well-established and flourishing repertoires of freedom songs articulating post-apartheid grievances. These songs were intrinsically political and embodied expressions among South African protesters, as Khanyisa, a male activist in his 50s, attested:

If I go to a march and the songs are not good I will tell you there is something not good with the movement because it means they are not together, it means they don't march a lot. Yes, they might all know the song but it doesn't move them, it's not spirited... So it tells you, you know. Creativity needs a febrile mind. So this is a mind in ferment, a mind which is moving, kind of in motion, which has got hope. It might not have hope in the starry-eyed way but it might be hope based on the discomfort of feeling the badness, the sadness. (Interview with author, November 14, 2010)

Febrile creativity was crucial to the conscious attempt by activists to adapt apartheid-era freedom songs to post-apartheid struggles. Recognizing the

legacy of freedom songs as culturally sanctioned practices that interrogate the existing state of affairs, articulate common grievances, and mobilize toward shared visions, many community activists sought to highlight post-apartheid inadequacies through song. This post-apartheid repertoire drew on the sanctioned authority of anti-apartheid singing practices, while at the same time offering distinct shifts in sentiment that cannot be taken for granted.

As many struggles emerged from an oppositional stance to the policies of the democratically-elected ANC government, it was a prolonged challenge to popularize oppositional sentiments. Because songs lingered often unchanged from the anti-apartheid era in the immediate post-transition period (1994–early 2000s), activists within new post-apartheid social movements, such as the APF, needed to distinguish an emerging class struggle from the foregoing racial one. They used song to clarify the changing stance of the ANC in its shift from a liberation movement to a governing party. Vuyiswa, a female APF member who had been actively involved, described the emergent moment:

Moving people from that position of seeing the ANC as the savior was a long process. So while you're conscientizing them theoretically the songs also played its role. For instance you'll be in a protest or in a workshop... and you have many people and some are still members of the ANC and let's say you start a song and people will be like, "We can't sing this song, we are full members of the ANC!" But then gradually people understood and were like, "Ok, we are members of the ANC but we don't have electricity, we don't have water while these guys live in Sandton [an affluent suburb of Johannesburg] and other areas and what is there to gain if we don't sing this song?" So it was a process that ran parallel with theory and song. And eventually you have now a solid group that now knows that the ANC is actually failing the poor and that can be seen in all aspects of life. (Interview with author, November 15, 2010)

Through spontaneous and organized formations, the anti-apartheid songs gradually shifted to confront the present. In their organized practice sessions, struggle-aligned performance groups—including Sounds of Edutainment, Bophelong Youth Choir, and Sedibeng Concerned Artists—adapted older songs and created new expressive forms (including new songs, poems, and plays) to update repertoires. More spontaneous adaptations of freedom songs during protest events were particularly aided by the plasticity of song form enabled by the antiphonic, repetitive, and embodied rhythmic structures that are hallmarks of the genre. As Vuyiswa recalled:

I would come to a protest and then just in my mind work the lyrics [to preexisting tunes] and then try them out and then people join in, you know... sometimes you are protesting and then something happens and then you're just carried away and quickly you look for a tune to fit the words and then it fits and then people get to join you. And then the next protest they say, "Let's sing that one." Sometimes you forget the lyrics,

[and] they'll be the ones reminding you...That's how the songs grow.  
(Interview with author, November 15, 2010)

Although some freedom songs were made relevant to current struggles through lyrical transformations, this was not always necessary. A translation of sentiment—in which preexisting lyrics newly encoded current grievances—helped activists and their audiences relate in the current moment to an apartheid-era song. By the time the APF released its album of freedom songs, *Songs of the Working Class Volume 1*, in 2007, South Africa's collective oppositional singing culture had not only survived the country's democratic turn, but was a fertile resource for protesters who creatively deployed these practices.

### The Musical Structure of Protest

The musicality of collective protest singing demonstrates how song functions not just as a discursive site for articulating protesters' sentiments through their lyrics. The musical components of freedom songs additionally reveal that politics, as it manifests in protest events, is aesthetically constituted and motivated. Songs are perceptible by feeling and produced through embodied collaboration. The use of antiphony (call-and-response), repetitive variation, and embodied rhythm establishes a somatic mode of relating among gathered protesters, and structures patterns of exchange, evaluation, and conduct.

#### *Antiphony*

At the march in Orlando East, where I first met Ndumiso, organizers delivered their speeches from a traffic rotary. A young woman standing on a makeshift platform read a memorandum of grievances drafted by the march organizers. On that especially hot day, many young people, *gogos*, and *'mkhulus* (grandmothers and grandfathers) held an assortment of colorful umbrellas over their heads to ward off the scorching sun (see online supplementary materials: item 5). Others wore wide-brimmed hats, which left their hands free to display cardboard posters bearing messages such as:

“Step Down To All Councillors: Ruby, Vusi, Queen,”  
 “You cut electricity, we shoot to kill, be warned,”  
 “Ruby and Ruth [municipal councilors] have title deeds, Orlando residents  
 have toilet papers,”  
 “Stop stealing houses from grandmothers.”

These commentaries, echoed in the memorandum of grievances, accused municipal councilors of corruption and financial mismanagement, particularly in the handling of housing allocations, and asked them to step down.

Organizers did not want the grievances of the residents to be overtaken by the agenda of any specific political organization, so the march was

framed as a non-partisan gathering. Attendees nonetheless declared their varied political affiliations with t-shirts (see online supplementary materials: items 1, 2, 3, 4, 6). Some bore symbols of the governing alliance that read “Do it For Chris Hani/ Vote,” recalling the ANC struggle hero who was killed in the run-up to South Africa’s first democratic elections. The back of the shirt listed “Six Reasons to Vote ANC.” Another t-shirt displaying support for the ANC read “Born in the Struggle and Baptised in Revolutionary Fires.” Oppositional movements were also represented. APF supporters in particular wore red t-shirts bearing the logo of the APF both on the front and back and that proclaimed “APF says: Stop Electricity Cut-Offs/No to Privatisation.” Another t-shirt bore the logo of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee. Some bore no explicit organizational ties. The woman reading the memorandum wore a t-shirt identified with a location rather than an organization: “Orlando East state of mind,” it proclaimed. Protest marshals wore vests emblazoned with the acronym FIFA, harkening to the 2010 World Cup competition, at that time still months away. These sartorial choices were indeed forms of embodied performance, allowing activists to position themselves with respect to one another, and with bystanders.

When the crowd’s cheers died down upon the conclusion of the memorandum, Ndumiso was first to raise a song. He exchanged the vuvuzela he was blowing for a bullhorn and began: “*sithi lelizwe elabogogo bethu* (this nation belongs to our grandmothers).” He moved rhythmically as he sang, lifting one bent leg after another, marching in place in line with the song. “*Asoze*,” the crowd responded, joining his easy sway and clapping along. “*Asoze saphela ’mandla* (never shall it lose power),” Ndumiso completed the phrase. “*Asoze saphela ’mandla*,” the crowd brought the exchange to its melodic conclusion. “*Sithi Orlando elabogogo bethu* (Orlando belongs to our grandmothers),” one woman now assumed the lead. “*Asoze*,” the crowd assented, with Ndumiso now joining its ranks. He dipped his torso in dance as the song continued. One of the marshals offered his bullhorn to another marshal who sang the leading line as “*sithi Orlando, elabomkhulu bethu* (Orlando belongs to our grandfathers).” Upon the conclusion of the stanza, marshals held up their hands in a signal to stop singing.

The foregoing exchange exemplified a fundamental feature of South African freedom songs: their use of antiphony (call-and-response), a critical organizational element of collective protest singing. An antiphonic pattern structures a musical exchange among those gathered—a leading line can raise a question, offer a comment, or it might offer an incomplete starting phrase that the responding line finishes. Such an interaction organizes a proceeding: when somebody raises a song, it provides everyone gathered an opportunity to come into synchrony—recognizing the song at hand and their place in its musical framework. It thus eliminates the need for a conductor to coordinate the group.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, it highlights the interdependency among individuals in the creation of community. Protesters will often reinforce or harmonize with the original song leader’s voice, especially

if the song particularly resonates with them. This reflects the particularly democratic nature of song leadership. As Khanyisa noted, “Anyone can sing, and songs are democratic in the sense that no one is elected to start the tune. We don’t have our songster who always starts the song” (interview with author, November 14, 2010).

Aside from its organizing functions, an antiphonic pattern also fosters evaluation based on sensory perception. The strength of a collective’s response demonstrates their evaluative assessment of the call. “If you don’t like [the message], you say so... and we give each other permission to act in that way because that is the cycle of communication” (Ysaye Maria Barnwell, interview with author, May 11, 2009). A lukewarm or absent response communicates a lack of support. With such considerations, antiphony is significant as musical play that crafts power. To borrow from ethnomusicologist Kyra Gaunt, protesters “learn to improvise with what it means to be dominant and subordinate in musical and nonmusical relationships” (Gaunt 2006:14). The play of leadership and adherence is revelatory of power-laden internal dynamics that can manifest as uneven participation. In such sonic interplay, silence withholds and is as perceptibly meaningful as sound. Raising a song is therefore a proposal of sentiment that can be vocally affirmed or suppressed. As S’bu Nxumalo noted, anyone can raise a call, “It is only the master orator however that can ignite an unarmed gathering into a response that strikes fear in the hearts of military men. The cry must read the signs of the time. Capture the mood of those gathered and resonate with a response that sets the intended tone of any protest gathering” (Nxumalo 2003:n.p.). While song leadership can be democratically claimed, it is a practice rendered powerful by skillfully assessing and responding to the needs of the gathered collective.

### *Repetition*

Repetition underlies the antiphonic pattern of freedom songs (cf. Snead 1981:150). In Orlando East, as the march itself proceeded from its point of origin, Sizwe, one of the organizers, ran ahead of the crowd with a bullhorn in hand, ready to lead the march. A police van drove ahead, clearing traffic for the marchers. A few individual police officers lined the road, carrying video cameras and cell phones to record and photograph the marchers. The APF activist who had invited me to the march explained that it was standard police procedure to record the faces of marchers. Marshals in their orange and neon-green vests held one another’s hands to form the front line. Those gathered fell in behind them, but it was not until Sizwe raised the call—“*sithi kudala*”—that the march began in earnest (see online supplementary materials: item 9). “*Kudala sisebenzel’ amabhunu*,” the crowd responded stepping forward and clapping in beat with the song.

Call: *Abasebenzi*—

Response: *’Basebenzi mas’hlngane*.

“For too long have we worked for the whites. Workers, let’s unite,” the song urged. Just those two repeated melodic phrases—“*kudala sisebenzel’ amabhunu*” and “*abasebenzi mashlangane*”—formed the entirety of the song, a song marchers sustained for almost six minutes.

How can two lines repeated in one pattern sustain a march for so long? John Miller Chernoff describes shared aesthetic features in African-derived music: “In almost all African music there is a dominant point of repetition developed from a dominant conversation with a clearly defined alternation, a swinging back and forth from solo to chorus” (Chernoff 1979:55).<sup>12</sup> The alternation between lines or “swinging back and forth” between leading call and group response is only one manifestation of repetition. Songs often repeat lines to the extent that some songs consist entirely of one constant refrain. “*Senzenina*” is one example. “*Senzenina?*” the call queries, “what have we done?” The collective response repeats the question, “*Senzenina? Senzenina?*” The song thereby consists of that one question repeated over and over again in musical exchange between the leader and a collective chorus. South Africans ascribe a wealth of meaning to this unceasing repetition. Sibongile Khumalo, for example, interprets the incessantness as an unsettling incitement to action: “It’s like hammering somebody. [With such unease,] you have no other option but to stand up and go and fight” (in Hirsch 2002).

Repetition is also the bedrock of improvisation. With the assurance of an underlying refrain, a song leader can lyrically, melodically, and rhythmically expand, as long as it does not disrupt the shared framework. In this way, “a call-and-response sequence may go on for several hours, with apparently monotonous repetition of the same short phrase sung by a leader and answered by the chorus, but in fact subtle variations are going on all the time” (Small 1977:54–55). Repetition with variation generates new commentaries, interpretations, and sentiments. Many songs, particularly those relying on chants, do not have fixed lyrics; leaders improvise lyrics in the moment with the group providing a responsive refrain. Consequently, repetition with variation enhances the plasticity of song to changing socio-political circumstances. In one example of both the generative and evaluative elements of song, one protester I interviewed commented on his attempt to introduce a new “slogan” that he felt was needed in the present:

It was off of “*dibaka mona dibaka mona rebulay’inja*”—stop this side, stop that side, we are killing these dogs. It’s not good saying you’re killing dogs. Basically I was coming up with a slogan that was “*dibaka mona dibakamona rebulay’icapitalism*”—stop this side, stop this side, we are overthrowing capitalism. I was coming up with a slogan like that but people didn’t consider it I know because of the sensation—I could hardly hear [the slogan taken up]. (Interview with author, May 26, 2010)

Many apartheid-era protesters referred to white opponents as dogs, a reference that carried over in the song. My interviewee, Khabane, found capitalism to be a more appropriate target of present ire. In the repeating

refrain, he exchanged “*inja*” [the designation of dog in isiZulu] with “*icapitalism*” within the same melodic frame. He had hoped that with repetition the new “slogan” would demonstrably widen in adoption. But based on what he perceived sensorially, he concluded that there was a dearth of support for his proposition. Nonetheless, his attempt to change the crowd’s responding line exemplifies the ongoing adaptations enabled by the patterned antiphony and repetition with variation.

### *Embodied Rhythm*

The third structural element regards the rhythmic embodiment of singing. Kofi Agawu recently described conceptions of rhythm among Northern Ewe in Ghana as indicative of rhythm’s entanglement with other embodied processes. Agawu notes rhythm’s association with “stress, duration, and periodicity... Rhythm, in other words, is always already connected” (Agawu 2003:63; see also Agawu 1995:5–7).<sup>13</sup> Beyond the physical basis of sonic production, song, via the organization of sound duration and emphasis, is further embodied through rhythm and elicited movement. For many with whom I worked, rhythm is the way through which music *moves* them, the way in which music is danced. One person interpreted it this way: “When you listen to music there’s got to be rhythm, when you are dancing it’s got to go with the rhythm, when the rhythm goes this direction you can’t just go that direction” (interview with author, January 22, 2010). In a separate interview, Khanyisa stated: “You sing with your mouth and your chest and your lungs but that is only one part of you so when you start moving then the whole of you is involved... Now the song has got you, the song moves you like literally. So even an old man, a granny with a stick, you’ll see them swaying” (interview with author, November 14, 2010).

Movement cannot be separated from song. The integration of the two serves as a means through which protesters unify (see online supplementary materials: items 7, 8, 10). According to Gatsha, a male protester from Orlando East:

Dancing when we sing creates a rhythm within the space, and people get along with the rhythm, it brings another incitement within the people, the space just becomes more positive with connective energy, having the same aim or objective. So you cannot separate dance from music. (Interview with author, January 22, 2010)

Considering that freedom songs involve polyrhythmic layering—“the simultaneous use of two or more contrasting rhythms in a musical texture” (Agawu 2003:79–80; see also Rose 1994:66)—an individual’s rhythmic perception and enactment can be idiosyncratic even when inflected by communal expectations. Movement serves as a collaborating force in song production through usage of the body to emphasize perceived rhythms and produce new ones (e.g., stomps, clapping, guttural punctuation). The results of individual rhythmic perception and interpretation can be chaos.

Embodying a shared rhythm through movement—by clapping, stomping, and swaying together, while producing corresponding vocal punctuations or gestures—becomes a resource for entrainment (Black 2014:385–87; Clayton, Sager, & Will 2005).

The musical elements discussed above together constitute a framework through which collective participatory singing unfolds during protests. While these elements are integrated during performance, the aesthetic experiences enhanced by each are worth noting for analytic clarity. Antiphony affords an experience of sequential interrelationship through an exchange that offers sensory feedback. Repetition with variation sustains collective singing over prolonged moments, facilitating a liminal suspension of time (cf. Small 1977:54–55) during which emotional ripples can continually undulate within the individual as well as collectively.<sup>14</sup> Finally, rhythm orients those gathered to music through movement, generating connective energy. These effects are interdependently manifested during protest performances. Singers and their audiences might describe the overall encounter with song as one of being stirred up—“*basivusele usinga*” in isiZulu (Innocentia Mhlambi, personal communication).

### Affective Circulations in Sung Protest

Even ahead of scheduled protest, song plays a critical role, generating an affective pull for activists towards the event due to the aesthetic encounters previously described. In our 2010 interview in Orlando East, Ndumiso recounted how, right before attending protest marches, he felt a level of anxiety over potentially brutal police response that would paralyze his will to attend. These concerns were, however, superseded by “this envy [where] you have this feeling that no, I have to be there.” Ndumiso’s introspection exemplifies the affective mediation around protest events that many activists confront. His bodily vulnerability to unforeseeable state violence created dread, a fear-driven aversion to the planned event. Yet this distancing was countered and overcome by a sense of potential reward from knowing that “once you’re there, a whole new world opens to you, somebody is just on you shining a bright light.” Songs open the individual to this bright new world and drive protester energies, producing such desirable sensations that Ndumiso did not want to begrudge others by being left out. This desire to experience for himself the intensity of the protest encounter, particularly as facilitated by song, explains Ndumiso’s use of “envy” as the feeling that “no, I have to be there.”

Jeffrey Juris describes the empowering dimensions of protest as opportunities to live “moments of freedom, liberation, and joy” (Juris 2008:66). The height of these feelings, ordinarily absent from routine interactions, can thus be experienced as personally transformative (Juris 2008:66; Routledge & Simons 1995). It must be noted, though, that the sensations of activists during protests, while amplified, were not necessarily pleasant. Upon arrival, Ndumiso, concerned for his security, experienced a hyperawareness of the environment: “Your blood boils, you sweat a lot...

even your heart doesn't beat at the same normal rate because you don't know what's coming, you can't foresee what's coming, if only you could foresee [what the police have planned]." He interpreted his bodily reactions as indicating the presence of anomalous spiritual elements: "When you invade such spaces, you should be alert at all costs, that here there are other elements playing their role."

Perhaps in reaction to the pressing discomfort, song remained a crucial mitigator—"That's the only thing that will keep you going," Ndumiso noted. His sensitivity and hyperawareness lend to Ndumiso's analysis of protest as a battle that is waged in and ameliorated by song. Ndumiso's perspective on song as spiritual warfare could be explained by his earlier experiences growing up in the Zion Christian Mission.<sup>15</sup> As he said:

When you sing truthfully from the bottom of your heart, there are spirits within you which nobody else can relate to in a way but then you can feel yourself that no, something is inside me, you know. That's why you find when you go to churches like the one I used to attend when I grew up, the church I grew up in, you find people when the song, the rhythm is going and the song is going on for long, people faint...and stuff like that, because they've just fought a battle. (Interview with author, January 22, 2010)

For Ndumiso and other protesters, protest singing presented a parallel phenomenon in which song shored up individual and communal strength, reinforced their motivation to continue, and thereby provided crucial armament within protest events. The transformative significance of these emotionally embodied dynamics helps explain individuals' attachments to freedom songs. Repeating songs across events can thus become an act of re-constituting previous emotional achievements and aesthetic sensations (Yang 2000; Juris 2008; Samudra 2008).

Such profound affective mediation is of necessity interior, taking place within the self. When protesters seek to transcend the constraints of their individual subjectivities, song also offers the possibility of such traversal. Consider the experience of a female elderly protester during a December 2009 march to express solidarity with Abahlali baseMjondolo, a Durban-based shack dwellers movement whose members had been targeted and attacked in their homes a few months prior. The elder, commenting on her sorrow that "now we're fighting against the black government that we voted for," described how singing enabled her to "take out the pain" and transmit its exact qualities to those who heard her.<sup>16</sup> Through its transmissive capacities and in its affective circulation, song becomes an element of transcendence for the individual that is generative of intersubjective connections.

Song, moreover, has historically constituted an embodied, aural, and emotive shield marking a distinction between the collective and its other. The affective circulation of song establishes the boundaries of collectivity at the location of external opposition and observation. For example, in a 2003 reflection, Gillian Slovo, an anti-apartheid activist, highlighted the disparity

between experiencing protest from within—as a vibrant collectivity—and experiencing an external intimidating force. She was referring specifically to the dynamics of the *toyitoyi*, a protest form emphasizing jumps from foot to foot while simultaneously pumping one’s fist in the air. The *toyitoyi* combines movement, chant, and the improvised commentary of a leader whom the crowd endorses with repeated assents. Unarmed protesters using this form would often intimidate armed soldiers and riot police of the apartheid government.<sup>17</sup> Gillian Slovo reflected:

From its centre, [the *toyitoyi*] is a joyous, collective demonstration of togetherness. What had not occurred to me, however, was what it must have felt like from the outside. The white nation’s nightmare—a huge black crowd, armed only with imitation AKs, voices and thumping feet, and yet surging forward as if it were they who held the power. (Slovo 2003:n.p.)

Such anecdotes of anti-apartheid protest highlight the contrasting emotional significance embedded in one social action—the impenetrable joy of togetherness among protesters contrasted with the terror experienced beyond the boundaries of the group. The circulation of sound accumulates in affective intensity, thereby delimiting boundaries around participants.<sup>18</sup>

Similar dynamics persisted into the present. One activist articulated this aspect by noting that singing together as a group “creates its own environment” (interview with author, November 18, 2010), a demarcation that sets activists apart from outsiders to the collective’s experience.<sup>19</sup> Yet what uninformed outsiders may find inscrutable are in fact elaborations of patterned behavior. By singing together over time, activists create a shared framework that grounds collective action, improvisation, and emotional mediations among one another and during confrontations with opponents. This shared framework provides orientation such that each protest performance can be created anew based on cultivated expectations. Community is constituted quite evidently through singing practices when protesters from different areas come together. In these instances, familiarity cannot be taken for granted, as each group would have unique performance approaches that must be negotiated to form a larger collective. Through such encounters, activists learn from one another and adapt the singing practices of other groups to reflect their own collective sonic identities.

### “Not Letting Her Song Die”: Singing and Self-Construction

I’m emotional but you know when I talk about music, about struggle, I get really emotional. It’s when I can really be what I am.

—Khanyisa (interview with author, November 14, 2010)

In accounting for music’s political efficacy, it is worth considering that the most significant impact might be on individuals themselves. Just as collective identity is sonically performed, individual identity is

constructed through singing as a form of self-expression in which each individual voice is patterned by a unique frequency; this uniqueness is further styled through tonal and embodied rhythmic articulations. In collective protest singing, individuals experience and construct a keenly-felt sense of self. Activists express their fervent concerns in an amplified manner in which the person becomes more than the contours of their individuality. Describing this heightened embodied experience, some say they feel *unlike* themselves in that they act in ways they would not otherwise; others, like Khanyisa, discuss feeling *more* like themselves. Despite these different interpretations, the sensation often becomes a signature one that is immediately identifiable and sought-after. Those individuals who had been inactive from marches for months, maybe years, would comment on “getting that feeling again, that feeling of being me” from their first, however brief, re-immersion into collective protest singing. A friend, who was no longer able to attend protests due to his work at a social movement NGO, commented on missing this experience in off-hand communication with me. He asked, “What are they [his employers] doing to us? Keeping us at this desk?” Through this rhetorical question, he characterized his work routine as one that denied this desired experience of self.

Individuals come to claim a particular song as their favorite, or become associated with one specific song because they repeat it across protest events with concern for how well it is sung. Such identifications endure in life and in death such that song can be a compelling commemoration. Ayize, an activist with the black lesbian women’s organization FEW (Forum for the Empowerment of Women), discussed the murder of her friend, who was also an activist. Since her passing, Ayize has intentionally raised her friend’s favorite song at every protest she attends. Ayize attested that “Nantsi Mellow Yellow” was a song that she could not let die (interview with author, May 27, 2010). Were her friend still alive, she would still be singing the song, so Ayize’s continuation has furthered her friend’s spirit and work. Ayize’s efforts recall an insight shared with Frederick Klaitis during his fieldwork with an Apostolic congregation in Botswana: “A person’s song...remains with us as the word dwells in the flesh; when a person is absent or has passed away, his or her song is a memorial (*segopotso*, literally, something that causes ‘remembering’)” (Klaitis 2010:69).

### **Conclusion: “The Songs Are Free”**

In an interview that aired on PBS in 1991, Bernice Johnson Reagon, a historian and activist in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, commented on the impact of freedom songs within that collective struggle. “The songs are free,” she asserted, “and they have the meaning placed in them by the singers. It can just as easily be a resistance song as it can be this internal nurturing of the soul.” My discussion of freedom songs has demonstrated precisely that while freedom songs register protest by South African

collectivities, these cultural performances constitute emergent expressions that often exceed one singular function or domain of impact. As much as they present protesters' contentions, freedom songs are also avenues for individual and collective emotional mediation, intersubjective transmission, identity construction, and commemoration.

Contributing to more holistic consideration of musical practice, this analysis has shown how this polyvalent impact can be understood through a framework of aesthetic embodiment, one that engages with interconnected dimensions of sensory perception and sense-making. Music generates embodied effects *and* is a sensorial medium that activists can shape (through communal negotiation) to desired outcomes, considerations not to be overlooked in accounting for the ongoing political efficacy of song. Formative elements of antiphony, repetition, and rhythm coordinate collectives with significant resonance for individuals, dynamics essential to the organizational work of social movements.

Elaborating the role of music in the emotion work of social movements, this discussion stresses song as a crucial mitigator of affective states amplified by protest. These affective states include uncertainty and dread amidst vulnerability and bodily exposure, along with sorrow and disquiet brought on by current struggles. Yet, through song, activists experience protests as moments of invigoration that reaffirm connection to others and to a purposeful self. Song conducts feeling within and beyond the individual while simultaneously establishing boundaries around a collective through the renewal of deep-rooted practices. The impact of such encounters with music extends beyond the time-frame of scheduled events and influences activists' lingering aesthetic investments in movement participation—they seek after feeling (recall, for instance, how Ndumiso's envy pulled him to protest despite its risks). The strength of such attachments, and the plasticity of the form, make song an indispensable and inexhaustible resource for ongoing mobilizations.

## Supplementary Material

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.16>

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## Notes

1. The revival of polarizing songs by some politicians has spurred debate and legal action over the continued role of freedom songs in a desired post-apartheid democratic dispensation. Opponents argue that freedom songs are time-bound compositions of the anti-apartheid era, and that the images they invoke grate against the present epoch of governing a peaceful democracy in a post-apartheid climate of national governance and reconciliation (Lekota 2007; see also Gunner 2009). Yet, as I will describe, these songs continue to have meaning in grassroots efforts directed at contemporary issues in South Africa.
2. The case I present provides an alternative perspective to Shana Redmond's portrayal of protest anthems as "reformed and tamed in the postdemocracy moment in South Africa" (2014:20). Marginality and political exclusion remain a critical analytic of the salience and efficacy of liberation music, as freedom songs continue to foreground counter- and trans-national pathways of belonging and collective formation that, as Redmond herself notes, "[remix] the modalities of the state in order to foster alternative exercises and experiences of freedom and justice" (Redmond 2014:4).
3. A significant body of work details the emergence and ideologies of South Africa's new social movements, so named to distinguish these collective mobilizations from

- the country's foregoing anti-apartheid liberation struggles (see Ballard, Habib, & Valodia 2006; Bond 2006; Desai 2002; Gibson 2006; Naidoo & Veriava 2005).
4. The events I attended included protest marches, public hearings, community forums, organizational planning meetings, and other collective activities. Activists offered insights from their participation in a number of political collectives including Landless People's Movement, Pan Africanist Congress, Soweto Concerned Residents, Orlando Concerned Residents, Earthlife, and People Opposing Women Abuse, among others.
  5. The persuasiveness and effectiveness of lyrics in conveying contentious messages is increasingly under debate (Roy 2010:13). Lyrics, however, are more accessible to scriptocentric modes of analysis and knowledge production.
  6. In order to protect the confidentiality of those with whom I worked, I either withhold activists' names or use pseudonyms, with the exception of public figures and previously published accounts.
  7. In an interview featured in the documentary film, *Amandla!* (Hirsch 2002), Masekela noted: "I think part of the reason why we lost the country to a certain extent is that before we attacked the enemy, we'd sing and then they'd know where we are. You know, I don't know if you ever saw the movie *Zulu* and [referring to the battle of Rorke's Drift] there are the Zulus all over these mountains you know, and like at dawn they sang so beautifully. There were a few British guys but they said before we hit them, let's let them finish this song, it's a nice song, you know what I mean?"
  8. Vuyisile Mini (1920–1964) was a South African trade-unionist, often tagged as the father of freedom songs. He was arrested and hanged by the apartheid regime. Reportedly, he went to the gallows singing the song he is now well known for, "nants' indod' emnyama, Verwoerd," translated as "here comes the black man, Verwoerd."
  9. Reuben Tholakele Caluza (1895–1966) was a South African composer who trained and taught at the Ohlange Institute, a private college outside Durban.
  10. These songs mix a variety of the different languages that performers speak—including isiZulu, seSotho, isiXhosa, seTswana, English, and Afrikaans—reflecting the popular accessibility and adoption of this form.
  11. I am grateful to Ysaye Maria Barnwell for this insight.
  12. In the discussion of African music that follows, it is necessary to note that African musical practices do not constitute a monolithic phenomenon although early scholarship tended to uncritically generalize features as representative across the continent, a phenomenon Kofi Agawu discusses as unanimism (Agawu 2003:58–62). Such uninterrogated unanimism and a concern with African difference underpins racially essentializing concepts including of "African rhythm" (Agawu 2003:55–96; see also Burdick 2013:23–24). The designation of "African music" is not to be completely discarded, however. Critical analysis of music originating in African communities is needed all the more in confronting the politics of knowledge production, the ethics of representation, and the incongruities of postcolonial lived experiences globally (Waterman 1991; Falola & Fleming 2012; Erlmann 1996).
  13. Aiming to capture the synesthetically integrated nature of vocal musical expression suggested here, Coplan proposed the term *auriture* "to represent vocal art in which verbal text, sonic qualities, and rhythm are interdependent expressive resources" (Coplan 1991:190n1).
  14. One key consideration regarding repetition as an aesthetic phenomenon of freedom songs lies in the contrast between a teleological approach to music

- production (as in music based on tonal harmony in which a piece is expected to progress towards a defined end or final cadence) and an approach that focuses not on a linear push to the ending but the prolonging of shared experience through repetition and “cuts” back to the beginning (see Rose 1994).
15. Ndumiso’s and other reflections comparing protest singing to religious experiences including that of church services exemplifies how freedom songs exist in continuum with other spheres of participatory singing.
  16. An emotional ideology pervades South African narratives regarding the necessity of expelling pain from the individual body. This was evident particularly among the female activists with whom I worked who viewed harbored sorrow, anxiety, and pain as particularly destructive to physical health (Jolaosho 2018). Such a phenomenon is further exemplified in Cole’s interview with Nomonde Calata, the wife of a murdered anti-apartheid activist whose wailing cry during her testimony before South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission has become iconic as the defining sound of the commission. When asked her response to this association, Calata explained that she screamed in that moment of her testimony “because I wanted the pain to come out. I was tired of keeping it inside me” (Cole 2010:79–80). In her scream, she sought a similar transmission as the female elder, for people to “feel as I felt that day” (Cole 2010:79).
  17. In the documentary *Amandla!*, a group of white apartheid-era riot police officers discussed how terrifying the *toyitoyi* was particularly for young recruits who needed further exhortation to stand their ground in confrontation with surging crowds.
  18. Sara Ahmed discusses how affective value accumulates and intensifies, such that passion is therefore “that which is accumulated over time.” She notes that affect is not a positive feature of objects or persons, but moves through them and in that movement accumulates value. This is an economy of affect in which “feelings appear in objects, or indeed as objects with a life of their own, only by the concealment of how they are shaped by histories, including histories of production (labor and labor time), as well as circulation or exchange” (Ahmed 2004:120–21).
  19. Reflecting on this phenomenon within the context of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, Bernice Johnson Reagon noted that as long as activists were singing together, “they [law enforcement officers] cannot change the air in that space, the song will maintain the air as your territory.” This clip is available via the following link: <http://vimeo.com/43608959>.