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**BEYOND BOB DYLAN: A CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF AMERICAN PROTEST
MUSIC AND ITS REDEFINITIONS**

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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Abstract

Protest music is and has been music that seeks to defy and redefine cultural and political norms. Among the issues addressed by protest music are workers' organizing rights, prejudice along racial and gender lines, and a critique of law enforcement. Through defiance and redefinition, protest music seeks to give voice to the many excluded people in society, particularly Black and brown people, and provides a new perspective of what the world could be when these marginalized identities are included. But contemporary understandings of what protest music is suffer from race-neutral or colorblind ideas. This project begins by considering the challenges of defining protest music, with a critical eye on aesthetic entanglements of American folk and protest music from the 1960s and 70s. Colorblind conceptions of folk music from this period obscure the power and centrality that whiteness has played in the structure, the history, the legitimacy, and the presence of the musicians in the literature. Central to accounts of 1960s and 70s music is the archetype of the white, male, acoustic guitar-playing protest musician, which I will term "the figure of American protest music." This project then examines recent music by Black artists including Childish Gambino, Janelle Monáe, and Joel Thompson as a way of exploring and interrogating the category of American protest music. Through analysis of the sounds, lyrics, and images of the recordings and music videos of these musicians, I locate traces of the figure of American protest music. I suggest an understanding of how contemporary American artists continue to redefine protest music in a time where they do not fit established conceptions of what it means to sing in protest.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: “SOLIDARITY FOREVER”	4
CHAPTER TWO: PICTURING MUSICAL PROTEST	17
CONCLUSION: “THE TIMES THEY ARE A CHANGIN’”	24
ENDNOTES.....	27
A REIMAGINED PROTEST TRACKLIST AND LINER NOTES.....	29

No more auction block for me, no more, no more,
No more auction block for me: many thousands gone.
No more peck o' corn for me, no more, no more
No more peck o' corn for me, many thousands gone.
No more driver's lash for me, no more, no more,
No more auction block for me: many thousands gone.¹

-Many Thousands Gone, sorrow song

Chapter One: “Solidarity Forever”

There is currently no sufficient definition for “protest music.” Historian Jerry Rodnitzky has noted, for example, that “there is little agreement as to what constitutes a protest song.”² A useful starting point for conceptualizing protest music can be found in David Dunaway’s definition of “political music” in *Grove Music Online*. He states:

Political music belongs to no one form nor does it fall entirely into any one of the categories of popular, traditional, or art music. Music may be deemed political when its lyrics or melody reflect a political stance or evoke a political judgment in the listener. Thus in some cases, depending on the period, performer, and audience, a single piece may or may not qualify as political music. Any comprehensive definition of political music must also take into account the context in which it is performed.³

This definition makes clear that political music cannot be placed into one musical category and that context matters when determining whether a song qualifies as political. This emphasis on context is relevant for protest music, because if every song that evoked a political feeling in the listener could count as “protest music,” the category would run the risk of becoming all-encompassing and losing its meaning. In theorizing protest music, I would like to advance the idea that in comparison to political music, protest music must specifically involve countering the status quo. Thus, it is not possible for all political music to fall into this category, since not all political music defies established social norms. There would be no need for protest music if there were no power imbalances. When one group is being silenced or marginalized by another group, a way to communicate this frustration is through music. Protest music comes out of communities with little to no social or cultural power who are calling attention to the imbalanced power dynamics present in the community. There are no limits on exactly what this music can sound or look like or who can produce this type of music, because protest music will be relevant and necessary to create as long as social inequalities persist.

Dunaway's idea that context is necessary in defining "political music" can be seen clearly in music produced by the British band Skrewdriver. Skrewdriver was a Nazi-skinhead group that released a single called "White Power" in 1983. The song expresses contempt for a more progressive Britain and uses explicit language to convey this discontent:

"Are we gonna sit and let them come?
 Have they got the White man on the run?
 Multi-racial society is a mess
 We ain't gonna take much more of this
 What do we need?"⁴

To call this music "protest music" in light of the overtly political themes would be misleading and incomplete, because such music upholds rather than counters any dominant structure or foundation of white supremacy. The lyrics seemingly react to the threat of a "multi-racial society" in Great Britain but are actually a response to a perceived loss of social and political power, making this song a political song but not a protest song. The same thinking can apply to music produced and distributed in the United States, where dynamics of resistance and redefinition provide a critical context for protest music. Using a definition that factors in such a context allows for a more accurate way of understanding protest music, since it can incorporate the flexibility of genre and style upon which such music thrives.

Dario Martinelli's article "Popular Music, Social Protest and Their Semiotic Implications" creates a useful framework for thinking about protest music. Similar to Rodnitsky, Martinelli explains that classifying "the protest song" is difficult because the term is so broad. He argues against a definition of "songs of protest" that encompasses all types of protest, including the "wrong" kinds, such as protesting a bad breakup. Martinelli suggests narrowing the definition

by creating the category “songs of social protest” (SSP). He describes the significance of this concept as follows: “We are able to underline the equally important aspects of the ‘explicit disapproval’ of a given state of things (protest), and the ‘social’ dimension of the latter.”⁵

Additionally, Martinelli argues that these songs are hard to categorize into any one genre because the artists themselves are so varied and the music style can thus vary from person to person. The rest of the article further details what SSPs are, why knowing the context of the song is important when discussing SSPs, and how the scoring of the music is undervalued in the analysis of the significance of an SSP. This article and these distinctions are important for the context of the present study in that they point toward a new definition of protest music that depends on social issues, historical context, and power dynamics.

In sum, existing definitions of political music and protest song have yet to fully characterize what protest music is and seeks to do. In order to give a deeper sense of the possibilities of protest music, its definition needs to incorporate aspects of context and power dynamics. Such incorporation leads to a conception of protest music as music that seeks to defy and redefine cultural and political norms. It involves issues such as workers’ organizing rights, prejudice along racial and gender lines, and a critique of law enforcement. Through defiance and redefinition, protest music seeks to give voice to the many excluded people in society and provides a new perspective of what the world could be when these communities are included.

Historical Foundations of Protest Music

Though not always straightforward to identify as such, protest music has a fairly traceable and somewhat overlooked history in the United States. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when slavery was already well established, slaves in the South would sing during the

day as a means of quiet rebellion. Now commonly known as “spirituals,” W.E.B. du Bois referred to these slave songs as “sorrow songs.”⁶ Sorrow songs had many political uses and meanings, ranging from passing the time while working to communicating hidden messages to runaway slaves. “Follow the Drinkin’ Gourd,” by carrying and conveying these meanings, is a folksong that can be considered an early example of American protest music :

The river bank will make a mighty good road
 The dead trees show you the way
 Left foot, peg foot, traveling on
 Follow the drinking gourd⁷

This song represents both a cultural history and a specific history associated with the Underground Railroad and escaping from slavery. In this verse, the traveler is being shown how to escape North from Alabama by following the “drinking gourd,” or the Big Dipper, with the rivers leading to the Mississippi River eventually taking them to abolitionists. The “dead trees” refer to the marking of trees with what escaping slaves and other abolitionists had available including ribbons, nails, or even wooden stakes as path-markers and guides. “Peg foot” refers to the work done by “Peg Leg Joe” to make the path and place the markers.⁸ While the song functions as a guide, the extent to which the various components of the song represent historical facts is unclear. Peg Leg Joe, for example, is likely a combination of people, places, and events that led to the creation of a pathway to freedom. It is also important to note that this song was collected by white amateur folklorist, H.B. Parks, and published by the Texas Folklore Society rather than being documented directly by fugitive slaves, who transmitted music through oral tradition instead of writing.

Pursuing a similar goal but achieving it through very different means were anti-slavery songs. Around 1840 in the North, the abolitionist movement began to accelerate, and abolitionists were creating and performing anti-slavery songs in order to spread awareness of the

conditions of slavery in the South. As the practice became common, both Black and white individuals participated in singing this music. Many anti-slavery songs would take well-known hymns and change the words to fit anti-slavery sentiments. These songs and groups included “Get Off the Track” by the Hutchinson Family Singers, Susan Paul and her youth choir, and The Luca Family performances. In defying the institution of slavery and seeking to redefine racial norms in the United States, these examples present an early instance of protest music.

Moving forward to the later nineteenth century and the Industrial Revolution, music used to protest social issues came in the form of folk music. This music had easily repeatable lyrics and melodies, making it an essential tool for union organizing. As with anti-slavery songs, musicians would rewrite popular songs to fit labor movement themes. These songs were meant to be spread and to be actively used, so it was important to make the songs as easy as possible to sing. During this time, factory workers were being mistreated and exploited, and music was used by unions to increase solidarity amongst laborers and union members. Workers would sing songs together that carried a union message and would help unite and recruit members. One important musician from this time was Woody Guthrie, who wrote songs including “This Land is Your Land,” “Deportee,” and “Union Burying Ground.” His lyrics influenced many musicians that have become staple examples of protest music, such as Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Arlo Guthrie, and Joan Baez. After requests for a song from a female perspective, Guthrie wrote “Union Maid” to convey the struggles of being a woman and a member of the union. This song was recorded by the New Harmony Sisterhood Band and released on the album *...And Ain't I a Woman* in 1977.⁹ It was common for musicians to perform music that was written by others, which led to multiple versions and styles of the same song performed by various performers. “Solidarity Forever” by Ralph Chaplin is an excellent example of this process, as it was most famously

performed by Pete Seeger but was covered by Utah Phillips and Joe Glazer, and it is still sung at union meetings today. Other examples of labor protest songs include “Eight Hour Strike” by Billy Pastor and “Labor’s War Cry” by Edmund Mortimer.

The American folk music revival that began in the 1940s reified folk music’s community-based ideals, and it further solidified the association between folk and protest music. In the United States, folk music relates closely to the construction of identity with regard to class, nationhood, race, and ethnicity. During the revival, musicians focused on the relationship with their audiences and emphasized the idea folksong as being of and for the people.¹⁰ Their images were carefully crafted: the artists often had an acoustic guitar, they would have the audience sing along with them, and the music was used for various political agendas. As the music gained in popularity, the musicians who got the most attention were white musicians. Over time, “folk music” became synonymous with “white singer-songwriter who plays acoustic guitar” and became conflated with “protest music.” Folk music as a genre came to involve the performance of rural, lower class whiteness, even when figureheads of the genre do not reflect this identity. Folk revival-influenced singers draw upon a specific political, social, and economic viewpoint that is not stated explicitly as white and that elides the whiteness that dominates the genre. In the introduction to *Folk Music USA: The Changing Voice of Protest* by Ronald Lankford, the first page mentions multiple icons of the folk music scene, including Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, and Peter, Paul and Mary.¹¹ None of these musicians are people of color, and they found more commercial success than other artists that the book mentions, such as the Freedom Singers. Since the book equates “folk music” with “protest music,” it risks creating false boundaries around protest music in which musicians such as Dylan become centered to the exclusion of both earlier performers and contemporary musicians of color.

Incorporating Race, Complicating the Mainstream Narrative

As a result of conflating protest music with the music of mainstream folk revival artists, contemporary understandings of protest music remain race neutral and thereby exclude musicians of color from the category. Consider, for instance, the 2006 anthology *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest*, edited by Ian Peddie.¹² This collection features essays from a range of universities discussing topics including sound and place, the parameters of protest, and the privatization of the music scene in the Pacific Northwest. A topic that frequently gets glossed over, however, is the discussion of race. In the section that deals with race the most thoroughly, “Part Three: The Problems of Place,” two of the essays discuss music from an ethnomusicological stance outside of the United States. The first essay, “Protest music as ‘ego-enhancement’: reggae music, the Rastafarian movement and the re-examination of race and identity in Jamaica” by Stephen A. King and the second essay, “‘We have survived’: popular music as a representation of Australian Aboriginal cultural loss and reclamation” by Peter Dunbar-Hall, both convey that music can be both racialized and radicalized when the people producing that music are seen as the “other,” and that legitimizing race in music is acceptable when outside of the United States only. While King and Dunbar-Hall both provide valuable ethnomusicological contributions, the inclusion of these essays in a separate section can add to the problem of colorblind conceptions of American protest music; it implies a sort of exceptionalism when in fact race and protest music have been working hand in hand in the United States for centuries.

The mentions of race in this anthology are frequent, but glossed over and unremarkable. In many instances, authors will credit the formation of new musics to African-American histories without excavating these histories. Another issue is the use of only mainstream musicians to

discuss protest music. Because the pop charts are skewed to validate whiteness, most successful artists are white. In the context of protest music, the archetypal protest singer emerges as a white, male, acoustic guitar-playing protest musician who is influential and deserving of high praise, but the actual realities of the varied musicians who perform protest music are ignored. A clear example of this dynamic appears in an essay in Part One of *The Resisting Muse*. Jerry Rodnitsky's essay "The Decline and Rebirth of Folk-Protest Music" addresses "folk-protest" music, refers to the music popularized in the American folk music revival of the 1960s. The essay begins with a brief history of protest music and the backlash against it by the musicians themselves. Rodnitsky chronicles the music from the 1960s onward, considers the women's liberation movement, and uses the earlier time period as a way of explaining the music produced and released in the 1980s through 2005. Throughout this historical sweep, race is only mentioned once.

The 1960s had brought events and mass movements that called folk guitarists to arms, and the civil rights movement was the catalyst. Martin Luther King's movement was clearly a sing-in as well as a sit-in, campaign. While black Southern activists wrote new songs, and 'We Shall Overcome' became the civil rights anthem, Northern folk singers developed leaders and anthems of their own.¹³

The problem with this statement is that it begins to separate white from Black and brushes past the rich history of Black music in America without acknowledging the power whiteness has historically held. The statement avoids discussing race while developing the North as pioneers in their own sense, which rewrites music history in a particular way. Rodnitsky's essay leaves many unanswered questions for readers.¹⁴ What is the relationship between audiences of color and protest music? Who is allowed to perform protest music? And most importantly, what would a more thorough discussion of race add to our understanding of American protest music?

Recent scholarship challenges the colorblindness of protest music and political music by explicitly centering race in the discussion. For example, standing in contrast to the Peddie anthology, Josh Kun's *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* complicates the mainstream narrative and prompts a reevaluation of previously assumed knowledge of protest music. Kun explicitly asks the reader to think about race in relationship to all aspects of American music; the attempt is to "re-think the relationship between American identity, American race, and American music—an intersection we might summarily think of as the American audio-racial imagination—by focusing on the spaces of music, the spaces of songs, and the spaces of sounds."¹⁵ Kun's approach allows the reader to get a fuller experience of what protest music is and explores racial groups that have previously gone unheard in the music industry. While Kun evaluate music and lyrics, he also brings different fields together to give a richer understanding of American musical traditions. He discusses Langston Hughes as a scholar of literature but also as a Black man in the United States and what it means for him to interact with certain musics. By combining popular figures in American history and culture and placing them in a history of music, Kun creates a music and culture hybrid in which one cannot be understood without the other. This hybrid is immensely valuable in the study of music because it articulates the struggle for validity shared amongst marginalized groups in America. In the context of protest music, Kun's "audiotopia" is especially helpful in adding layers and complexities to the dominant mainstream narrative about what protest music is and how it functions as a societal tool.

When defining what exactly an "audiotopia" is, Kun describes music as a spatial and audible experience. Audiotopias are the spaces "within and produced by a musical element that offers the listener and/or musician new maps for re-imagining the present social world."¹⁶ Kun argues that "music functions like a possible utopia for the listener, that music is experienced not

only as sound that goes into our ears and vibrates through our bones but as a space that we can enter into, encounter, move around in, inhabit, be safe in, learn from.”¹⁷ In Kun’s described audiotopias, racial and ethnic makeup play a critical role because they function as a release for marginalized people to tell their unacknowledged histories through music, and simultaneously add that musical history to the American songbook. “A song is never just a song, but a connection, a ticket,”¹⁸ giving the listener access to the world that songs create. With regard to protest music, acknowledging race in this way validates and properly credits the people who have been producing this music all along. Further, not only does the connection allow access, but by doing so it instills hope and other strong emotions in the listener, creating an audible community accessible through song.

In contrast to established colorblind ways of thinking, Kun challenges us to see American music as a dynamic tapestry that weaves together stories of racial and ethnic difference instead of just one static story. Music exists as a space for us to move and explore, and he shifts the literature to work within this new framework, allowing for intersections of identities to be addressed in the analysis and discussion of American music, and thereby American protest music.

Shana L. Redmond’s book *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* builds on Josh Kun’s work by focusing on one example: the diverse and vast audiotopia of the African Diaspora. *Anthem* discusses songs such as “We Shall Overcome,” “To Be Young, Gifted and Black,” and “Ol’ Man River” as they relate to issues including gender, race, and geography. In *Anthem*, Redmond argues that the music most essential to important moments of black diasporic political history serves as a tool central to the understanding of Black solidarity; such songs are Black anthems. Music “creates collective engagement in

performance and contributes to a dense Black performance history that continually configures Black citizenship through shared ambitions and intersectional identities,”¹⁹ which echoes Kun’s idea of audiotopias as a place of learning and connection. Redmond unpacks Black sounds and Black songs, considering how the songs originated, the background of the musicians, and the role of the music within the African Diaspora. This process leads to a discussion of how each song emerges from specific social and political contexts, as well as how the songs end up being the aural sites where Blackness can be both asserted as power and contested.

Redmond combines disciplines in her book to provide multifaceted and effective ideas. She uses both descriptive analysis (a critical ethnic studies approach) and musical analysis (music theory) to discuss the examples in her book²⁰, but does so in a way that registers for both audiences instead of isolating readers who lack technical musical knowledge. While adding a layer of validity to her well-researched argument and making the book accessible, such methodological variety also can encompass a wide range of music. She builds on Kun’s progressive analysis by grounding herself in the field of music and also considering broader cultural contexts. Specific and intentioned while also being well informed and widely applicable, *Anthem* can function as a model for future work on American protest music. Applying Redmond’s framework to a discussion of protest music allows us to reconsider what an “anthem” is, while also demonstrating how to trace protest music’s histories and contexts.

Looking Ahead: Toward Redefinitions of Protest Music

One of the reasons the conversation around protest music can be difficult is due to the lack of a concrete definition. When asked to define the phrase “protest music,” it is likely that every person will have a different understanding of what this phrase means. “Protest music” has

become a vague term that encompasses a variety of sentiments depending on one's personal context. This is due in part to race-neutral or colorblind conceptions of protest music that emerged from the popularization of protest music during the folk revival and continue to underpin scholarship. By adopting such conceptions, scholars have crafted a system that centers whiteness in the structure, aesthetics, political value, and legitimacy of American protest music. To get beyond this oversight, it is important to critique various definitions of protest music, and to redefine it to include context, consider history, and center race. Rachel Vandagriff, for example, claims that if we reconceptualize what protest music is, there is room to include various themes including narratives and testimonies, calls to action, and the embodiment of protest.²¹

The discourse on American music and specifically American protest music is expanding in a promising way. Thanks to scholarship such as that of Kun and Redmond, the discussions around music are beginning to center the music and musicians previously left out of the dominant conversations. When these frameworks are applied to discussions of protest music, we can begin to re-center the musicians who were foundational in the creation of protest music but who have never gotten the recognition they deserved simply due to their race or ethnicity. Discussions of music and race can lead to a reconceptualization of what it means to sing in protest and in solidarity.

In what follows, this thesis will examine ways in which protest music is being redefined and artists who do this political protest work within their music, including Childish Gambino, Janelle Monáe, and Joel Thompson. Thompson. Childish Gambino is known for combining protest and the format of a music video to produce "This is America." This video includes violent depictions of murder against Black communities, a critique of police violence, and caricatures of Black men all while Gambino lip-syncs the words to the song, demonstrating how

protest music is not limited to sound but also benefits from the visual. Janelle Monáe blends Afrofuturism and Black queerness to produce the visual and auditory musical experience, *Dirty Computer*. She explores themes of Black queer liberation, a utopic Black queer future, and rejects dominant prescriptions of what her life is supposed to be through explicit costumes and musical settings. Joel Thompson's composition *The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed* interrupts both Western classical music and current academic understandings of protest music by using a textual structure from Haydn and incorporating real last words of unarmed Black men, making those words the only text in his piece. These musical examples illustrate how protest music is not as limited as it has previously been made out to be, and they point toward a more forward-looking and productive redefinition of the concept.

Chapter Two: Picturing Musical Protest

Combining musical sound, visual information, and political protest is not a new concept. Black artists in the United States have been using visual culture as a form of protest since at least the mid-eighteenth century. As I referenced earlier, it is believed that some sorrow songs were combined with hand-drawn visual images and visual signals to help lead enslaved people to the North, helping to secure their freedom. Additionally, abolitionists in the North would hold meetings and events that would feature anti-slavery songs sung by many different people. These songs were sung by Black and white abolitionists as well as children's choirs and family music groups. Using inspiration from their ancestors, contemporary Black artists have incorporated visuals into their music and political protest to create music videos and musical films. These creators ask the question: how can protest music be heard and how can this experience be envisioned? What does protest music look like and how do sounds and images come together in this music? One major way these questions get addressed is through protest music videos. Protest music videos have increased in popularity in the 21st century due to the rise in use of internet technology and accessible streaming platforms like YouTube and Twitter. These videos tend to combine a powerful image of some kind (a first-hand documentary video, a dramatized version of events, etc.) with a song in order to capture the attention of multiple generations, get a political message across in a small amount of time, and honor the communities it is protesting for. Music videos allow for intention through all aspects of production including costuming, music and lyrics, and editing. All three of these aspects are critical when creating a music video, especially when the goal is ultimately calling people to action. Although they have less of a documented history than audio recordings due to a constant increase in technological advances, specifically the development of Spotify, SoundCloud, and YouTube, protest music videos are

useful tools for understanding Black American thought and unpacking the cultural moments that they represent. In this regard, music videos are essential when discussing American protest music, and their intentional deployment of imagery resists colorblind interpretations.

While not exactly a conventional “music video,” there is a visual recording of Nina Simone performing her song “Mississippi Goddam” that does similar work to that of a protest music video²². A protest music video moves you, teaches you something, and hopefully through the powerful visual, prompts you to action. Nina Simone was a classically trained pianist barred from classical pianist stardom due to her ethnicity.²³ The image of Simone, a dark-skinned Black woman, playing a grand piano while singing “Mississippi Goddam” , a song she wrote in response to the murder of Medgar Evers and the children at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, is an incredibly powerful statement. Viewers at the time were reconciling with newspaper clippings from the 1960s that were inundated with news reports about the racially motivated violent murders of Black men and perhaps were unexpected to be confronted with a racist reality while in the perceived safety of the nightclub. We see Simone’s authentic reactions to the lyrics of the song prompting us to reevaluate what she is saying and why she would be so moved to sing it the way she does. When she sings, “everybody knows about Mississippi, goddamn,” the viewer feels her eye roll that accompanies the pounding of the piano keys. When Simone rhetorically asks “can’t you feel it, it’s in the air”, we can feel that the air in the room has gotten tense, even while being so physically removed from when the recording was made. This is a true snapshot of the moment Simone was living in making this video a good starting place when discussing visual protest music.

The more conventional type of protest music video is the one that is intentionally reflective of the lyrics of the song. These videos are typically community-based, have an obvious

message, and address some sort of inequality imparted by white supremacy. “Self-Destruction” by the Stop the Violence Movement is exemplary. The Stop the Violence Movement was organized in 1988 by rapper KRS-One as a response to the death of a fan at a Boogie Down Productions and Public Enemy show.²⁴ KRS-One hoped that the formation of this group and the video they produced would encourage the end of violence within the Black community across the United States, but specifically on the East Coast. The “Self-Destruction” video premiered in 1988 on MTV and featured many popular East Coast artists like MC Lyte, Heavy D, Public Enemy, and Doug E. Fresh.²⁵ The video itself combines scripted scenarios with footage of jails, police raids, and the aftermath of violence to impart the message of community building and healing. This video embodies the message of protest right away by using the voice of Malcom X and using specific lyrics. For example, when KRS-One begins rapping he says, “Well, today's topic, self-destruction / It really ain't the rap audience that's bugging.../ So to crush the stereotype here's what we did.”²⁶ He knows that while this song is meant to instill positive change and growth within the Black community, it is also about destroying the projected image white people were placing on Black individuals. Songs like “Self Destruction” and the West Coast rival version “We’re All in the Same Gang” protest through acts of community sustainability and cooperation, leading people to thrive.

Similarly, N.W.A. used music videos to reestablish a bold voice for the Black community. Their videos pushed against white expectations placed on Black men while reminding viewers that Black individuals are constantly suffering at the hands of white supremacy in all its forms, which in the late 1980s included the police state and the D.A.R.E./War on Drugs programs. N.W.A’s success also marked the first time a well-known band name used the "N" word as yet another layer of protest, in this case involving linguistic

agency and pushback against censorship. N.W.A.'s music video for "Express Yourself," also released in 1988, reflects the violence Black men faced at the hands of the police state. The music video starts with a black and white recreation of slaves working on a plantation, then moves to South Central following the band members and the community. This environment depicts one where Black people are stifled creatively as seen by the "No Rapping" sign and the mounted officer patrolling the crowd. There are cuts to rapping in prison (an allusion to the prison industrial complex), references to the political climate (political assassinations, executions, photos of Martin Luther King, Jr.), and images of the South Central community and its members.²⁷ This video protests multiple things at once—the song's lyrical message argues for free expression and against censorship laws, the visuals argue for a better life for Black Americans, and the band's name forces white audiences to confront their history of racism—while still engaging with and centering South Central.²⁸

Moving forward three decades, Black artists are still using music videos to convey messages of political protest. In 2018, Childish Gambino released the music video for his polarizing single "This is America".²⁹ Gambino utilizes the history of racism and white supremacist violence against Black Americans by the police, the government, and other citizens and combines it with dramatized but poignant visuals in order to create a video that protests the way Black people in the United States continue to be treated. Inspired by N.W.A. and the increase in bluntness through music, "This is America" critiques the commodification of the Black body but goes one step further and uses overt physical violence juxtaposed with joy to shock the audience into action. Gambino spreads out characters throughout the video including gospel singers swaying and dancers doing popular street moves like the shuck and jive, and he subjects them to gun violence at seemingly random moments to prove that Black life is not

sacred to white Americans and can end at a moment's notice. Gambino uses violence as a weapon but also a protective tool, showing white viewers what is being done to Black people daily and putting the onus on them, not Black Americans, to change something. While I understand the use of this tactic, it also makes me wonder who the audience of this video is. Black people already know the impact of violence on the Black community so why depict it so violently unless non-Black people were the audience? Additionally, this song depends on the visuals to impart the message. In the previous examples, the songs did the talking. Here, Gambino uses almost purely visuals to get his message across. This is unabashedly a protest music video, and one of the effective things about it as such is that it impacts each viewer in a different way depending on who they are and what their experience is. Despite these potential differences in interpretation, though, the main purpose that emerges is to critique ideas of what Blackness is told and sold to be.

Janelle Monáe conceptualizes Black protest music videos differently. Her use of Afrofuturism and Black feminism centers ideas of a hopeful, inclusive, and almost utopian future for Black women. As a Black queer woman, Janelle Monáe uses her platform to navigate personal and political explorations and identities. Her most recent work, *Dirty Computer*, contains themes of empowerment, acceptance of queer relationships, and Black girl joy through an Afrofuturistic lens. In the music video that accompanies the album, called the “Emotion Picture”, Monáe's character is controlled by a higher power that tries to take away her agency, her Blackness, and her identity. She resists this and ultimately triumphs, allowing for a new future for her character.³⁰ In one of the videos, “Pynk”, Monáe overtly defies conventional depictions of straight womanhood in the music industry with her use of costuming and storytelling. The song is sung almost all in whisper-like tones, and she proudly stands in the

middle of the pack wearing pink vagina pants and flirting with Tessa Thompson, another queer Black woman. Using subtle queer imagery and overt costuming, Monáe reestablishes her place in the music industry and sends a clear radical message about Black women loving Black women. Monáe's protest is overt, yet overlooked by many as just music about womanhood and friendship. This type of erasure is not uncommon in the music industry and that Monáe has stuck with her artistic vision despite not getting the same type of mainstream recognition as her male, predominately white counterparts only further shows her power as a protest artist.

Regarding Genre

In an attempt to differentiate it from political music, Rachel Vandagriff argues that there is a need for a nuanced understanding of what is called “protest music”. music and protest music and by doing so, we create the space to include in the analyzation of this music narratives and testimonies, calls to action, and the embodiment of protest.³¹ I argue that this should go one step further and call for a new discussion about genre and protest music. Up until recently, the conversation surrounding American protest music had been whittled down to a conversation about solely folk and labor music, thereby excluding all other forms of musical protest. There was no discussion of issues like race, and genre as well Taking up these issues, Joel Thompson successfully intervenes within both Western classical music and current academic understandings of protest music through his piece *The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, which protests the extreme police brutality against Black men in the United States. The piece comprises seven short movements, each dedicated to a different Black man murdered by the police.³² “Last Words” is arranged two ways: one with a male choir, piano, and string quartet, and one with a male choir and full orchestra. For the purpose of this analysis, I will be focusing on the

arrangement with the full orchestra, as that version was recorded by Dr. Eugene Rogers and the University of Michigan Men's Glee Club and has been critically acclaimed³³.

The first movement of *Last Words* is “Why do you have your guns out?”, referencing Kenneth Chamberlain, whom police in White Plains, NY killed in 2011. What is immediately striking about this movement is the sonic contrast between the orchestra and the glee choir. Thompson has deliberately incorporated silence into the piece in order to fully deliver the impact of the words, while also reflecting a sorrow and a disconnect between the words and the listener. For many of the predictably white, upper class members of a classical music audience, this is their first exposure to the last words of these men, and it is at a time they are least expecting it. At 1:22 of “Last Words”, the orchestra reaches a climax and the choir takes over singing the word “officers” over and over, layering until it is impossible for the audience to ignore the reality of the piece as a documentation of Black murder. Thus, the use of classical music is a critical means by which the piece functions as protest music. Beyond this one movement, this piece is especially powerful because it counters often distorted media accounts of who the men were, their ages, and innocent disbelief about what was happening before their untimely murders. *The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed* acts as an archival tool for Thompson to remember and honor these men in their totality, and he conveys this process to his audience by approaching protest music through the lenses of genre and race.

Conclusion: The Times They Are A Changin'

The title of this thesis is “Beyond Bob Dylan: A Critical Discussion of American Protest Music and its Redefinitions” and while I have analyzed a few aspects of protest music and theorized about the directions in which protest music is headed, I have yet to address the Bob Dylan of it all. Many of the questions I received while workshopping this project asked me to consider a vast range of musicians from the 1960s and 70s to convince me that protest music was being practiced by communities other than white folks during this time. Odetta, El Teatro Campesino, “A Grain of Sand”, and Chunky Sanchez are some of the many musicians and albums I was urged to research and write about. Of course, communities of color were protesting through song during this time, that was never a question for me. What I question is who the focus of the protest music conversation always ends up on, which is Bob Dylan. During my research, I found that almost every article, book, and op-ed about American protest music had at least one mention of Bob Dylan and referenced him as a sort of cultural touchstone or model for other protest artists. The image of whiteness domineering music can be seen explicitly during a story documented by K’naan, a Somali rapper and MC from Brooklyn, on his mixtape. J. Period and K’naan created a mixtape to honor people who inspired them. This mixtape, “The Messengers”³⁴ is a tribute to Bob Dylan, Fela Kuti, and Bob Marley. In one of the tracks, “Introduction to Bob Dylan” track 24, K’naan mentions that one of the reviewers of his work said that his work was “Dylan-esque” but that he himself had no idea what that meant or who Bob Dylan was until he did some research. He was then inspired by Bob Dylan and his work reflects that.³⁵ However, by calling K’Naan “Dylan-esque”, the effort K’Naan put into his work is then attributed to Dylan and makes K’Naan’s music seemingly less valuable. Why did the interviewer think to associate K’Naan with Dylan? Is it important to consider younger musicians in the context of the music

industry's past or is that only a hindrance to the progression of music? This thesis questions why Black folks are perceived as merely entertainers while white folk singers are perceived as “thinkers” and “analysts”.

I understand Dylan's importance and relevance to the field, but it is clear that this far along in the academic conversation about protest music, we as scholars are moving on. Instead of the Bob Dylan-esque archetype of American Protest music, scholars are writing about solidarity in African diasporic communities and Ferguson-era Black rage music, just to name a few. Scholars like Shana Redmond, Rachel Vandagriff, Elizabeth Wood and more are expanding our conceptions of protest music by incorporating critical race theory, queer studies, class studies, and other multifaceted approaches into these musical discussions. It is my intent that this thesis is only a step on my academic journey, and I will continue pushing this conversation forward during my academic career. I am excited about the future of this project and all the possibilities it allows for future study of resistance music.

It is crucial to me that a project in American Studies is rooted in community and accessibility, and I hope to incorporate this practice through the creation of a digital Instagram archive inspired by Jorge Leal and the Rock Archivo LA. This archive would incorporate submissions from communities creating their own protest music and historical and archival facts and documents. Future work will address the roles of the music industry in the cultural history of protest music. How did labor music go from being sung in union halls to recording studios? How has capitalism helped create this archive of American protest music? I question how capitalism and racism interplay to create something “sellable” to wide audiences. I hope to study the rise of accessible music technologies and streaming services, making international music in the United States an extremely important discussion during these charged and violent political times.

The theme of this project is looking beyond white capitalistic conceptions of successful protest music in order to expand and redefine this rich category. I have included a playlist of music after the endnotes that incorporates various themes of protest including protest against the police state, protest against American patriarchal society, and xenophobic cultures. This playlist features artists mentioned throughout this thesis including Gambino, Monáe, and Thompson, but also highlights the voices of established and emerging protest musicians like M.I.A., Kendrick Lamar, and Moda Haydar. The artists featured are emblems of hope for their communities and are constantly redefining what it means to be protest artists. As the nature of American protest music is to evolve and adapt to the current social and political climate, it is imperative that the scholarly conversations reflect this constantly developing change.

- ¹ Henry Edward Krehbiel, *Afro-American Folksongs: A Study In Racial And National Music* (London: G. Schirmer, 1914), 20.
- ² Jerry Rodnitzky, "Protest song," in *Grove Music Online* (16 Oct. 2013).
- ³ Dunaway, D. (2016, May 25). Political music. *Grove Music Online*. Retrieved 8 Oct. 2019,
- ⁴ Skrewdriver, "White Power" (White Noise, 1983).
- ⁵ Dario Martinelli, "Popular Music, Social Protest and Their Semiotic Implications," *New Sound* 42 (2013): 42.
- ⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. (Chicago: A. G. McClurg, 1903).
- ⁷ "Follow the Drinking Gourd," arr. Lee Hays. In Joel Bresler, "Follow the Drinking Gourd: A Cultural History" (2008-2012), www.followthedrinkinggourd.org.
- ⁸ Bresler, "What the Lyrics Mean" and "Collection Story," in "Follow the Drinking Gourd: A Cultural History."
- ⁹ Liner notes to New Harmony Sisterhood Band, *...And Ain't I a Woman?* (Brooklyn: Paredon Records, 1977).
- ¹⁰ Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: the Folk Revival* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1996), and Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2000).
- ¹¹ Ronald D. Lankford, *Folk Music USA: The Changing Voice of Protest* (New York: Schirmer, 2005).
- ¹² Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California, 2005),
- ¹³ Jerry Rodnitzky, "The Decline and Rebirth of Folk-Protest Music," in Peddie, *The Resisting Muse*, 18.
- ¹⁴ An earlier essay of his does more to address questions of race. See Jerry Rodnitzky, "The Sixties between the Microgrooves: Using Folk and Protest Music to Understand American History, 1963-1973," *Popular Music and Society* 23, no. 4 (1999): 105-122.
- ¹⁵ Kun, *Audiotopia*, 25.
- ¹⁶ Kun, *Audiotopia*, 22-33.
- ¹⁷ Kun, *Audiotopia*, 2
- ¹⁸ Kun, *Audiotopia*, 3.
- ¹⁹ Shana Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (New York: NYU, 2013), P.13
- ²⁰ See, for instance, p. 73, where Redmond provides a detailed analysis of the rhythm in "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing."
- ²¹ Rachel Vandagriff, "Talking about a Revolution: Protest Music and Popular Culture, from Selma, Alabama, to Ferguson, Missouri," *Song and Popular Culture* 60/61 (2015/16): 333-349.
- ²² "Mississippi Goddam" by Nina Simone Recording session: Live in Antibes, July 24-25, 1965
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJ25-U3jNWM>
- ²³ Salamishah Tillet "Nina Simone's Time Is Now, Again - The New York Times." June 19, 2015. Accessed May 2, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/movies/nina-simones-time-is-now-again.html>.
- ²⁴ Adams, Dart. "How Stop The Violence Movement's 'Self Destruction' Became One of the Most Important Rap Releases." Okayplayer, July 30, 2019. <https://www.okayplayer.com/music/the-making-krs-one-stop-the-violence-movements-self-destruction-single-89.html>.
- ²⁵ Forman, Murray. 2002. *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*. Pg 240-243. Wesleyan University Press. (This was notable because MTV was hesitant to show this video due to its overt political messages. They opted instead to play pop music like Michael Jackson, Prince, and Madonna.)
- ²⁶ "The Stop the Violence Movement – Self Destruction." Genius, January 15, 1989.
<https://genius.com/The-stop-the-violence-movement-self-destruction-lyrics>.
- ²⁷ N.W.A. - *Express Yourself (Official Video)*. March 27, 1988, Accessed May 3, 2020.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u31FO_4d9TY.
- ²⁸ Gaye Theresa Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.
<https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520275287/spaces-of-conflict-sounds-of-solidarity>.
- ²⁹ Childish Gambino. "This is America", Manhattan, New York, 5 May. 2018.
- ³⁰ Janelle Monae. "Dirty Computer", Brooklyn, New York, 27 April. 2018.
- ³¹ Vandagriff, Rachel S. 2015. "Talking about a Revolution: Protest Music and Popular Culture, from Selma, Alabama, to Ferguson, Missouri." *Song & Popular Culture / Lied Und Populäre Kultur* 60 (61): 333-49.

³² <https://sevenlastwords.org/about/>

³³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdNXoqNuLRO>

³⁴ J.Period and K'naan. *"The Messengers"*, Brooklyn, New York, 22 Sept. 2009.

³⁵ J.Period and K'naan. *"The Messengers"*, Brooklyn, New York, 22 Sept. 2009. Specifically see tracks 24-33

Beyond Bob Dylan: A Reimagined Protest Music Tracklist with Liner Notes

What follows is a reimagined compilation of American protest music. I included the pieces discussed in the project and added more to round out an album. While most of the songs/musical works are from the last twenty years, I have included some music from 1960-2000 that I find to be significant for reasons stated in the liner notes. Linked at the bottom of this page is a Spotify playlist where you can find all of the songs.

1. Antipatriarca by Ana Tijoux

- a. ¡A liberar! See Chapter x for more information about this song. Further listening: Antifa Dance, Shock, Somos Sur

2. Catcall by Slut Pill

- a. An example of a very recent protest song. Released January 2020, Slut Pill tackles a varying range of issues faced by women, non-binary, and trans individuals. Watching out for them!

3. Sound of da Police by KRS-One

- a. Oldie but a goodie. Mentioned in Chapter One in conversation with the Stop the Violence Movement.

4. The Whitest House by Jasiri-X

- a. Pittsburgh-based. Started as a spoken word poet and you can see the influence in the rhymes. Very pro-Black and speaks on issues facing Black Americans. Further listening: Free the Jena 6, What if the Tea Party was Black?, Film the Police

5. Pynk by Janelle Monáe

- a. See Chapter 2 for more about Janelle Monáe. This one is all about the visual! Further listening: Q.U.E.E.N., Dirty Computer: The Emotion Picture (visual and can be found on YouTube!)

6. This is America by Childish Gambino

- a. See Chapter 2 for an analysis of the music video for This is America.

7. Red, Black, & Dreams by La Bruja, Nejma Nefertiti, Gizelxanath Rodriguez

- a. Great example of 2020 protest music. A clue on current feelings and attitudes about the administration held by young people.

8. The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed by Joel Thompson

- a. See Chapter x for more information on Joel Thompson and this piece.

9. Paper Planes by M.I.A.

- a. There is probably a paper written about this song. It is just that good.

10. Hijabi (Wrap my Hijab) by Moda Haydar

- a. Mona Haydar threads microaggressions through the first verse to jar the listener and then responds with a bored, unimpressed attitude toward the ignorant messages. It is a very upbeat song and the video features a range of different hijabis.

11. Not My President by CNG

- a. Another song that became iconic because of the visual, Not My President evokes images of CNG and his crew waving the Mexican flag and yelling “Fuck Donald Trump” in a clear protest of the current US political administration.

12. Solidarity Forever by Pete Seeger

- a. When I think of one song that is emblematic of American folk style protest music, I think of labor organizers singing and chanting “Solidarity Forever.” This song has been covered and sung many times, but I chose to include Pete Seeger due to his activist and labor history. Pete Seeger has been with me since Peace Camp and I am glad he made it with me to the end of this journey.

13. Killing in the Name by Rage Against The Machine

- a. A protest of the LAPD treatment of Black men, specifically Rodney King in 1992. A comment on institutional racism and a study in music making your body tense.

14. Fight Like a Girl by Zolita

- a. This song was new to me but the line “a revolution’s waking up” stuck with me and merited its inclusion in this list. This song uses Donald Trump’s misogynistic language in a power reversal and constantly restates her power. She uses red head to toe cover ups and more red imagery to convey a cult-like, feminist spirit that helps empower them.

15. LAND OF THE FREE by Joey Bada\$\$

- a. Off the album All-Amerikkkan Bada\$\$, which is the only album other than What’s Goin’ On that I recommend in completion. Bada\$\$ states that “Obama just wasn’t enough” alluding to increasing white supremacist violence against Black Americans in the US and colorblind thoughts erasing the realities of race related violence. He critiques both the system and the people who benefit from it. Bada\$\$ is blunt, overt, and direct just like N.W.A. and Public Enemy, artists I reference in Chapter Two.

16. Standing in the Way of Control by Gossip

- a. Gossip said gay rights!!

17. American Terrorist by Lupe Fiasco

- a. I heard it in a class once and here we are.

18. Alright by Kendrick Lamar

- a. Kendrick Lamar should have a section of this thesis or whatever future project dedicated to him. I get a lot of questions about Kendrick Lamar and his ability to bring protest into the mainstream (ie. Pulitzer prize). I fully understand where those questions are coming from and I agree, but I also want to complicate the idea of protest having to be mainstream to be validated in the first place. That, at the core, is what my thesis is about. The need to be validated by some sort of white standard of success erases and rewrites American protest music history.

19. What's Goin' On by Marvin Gaye

- a. This is one of those songs where the entire album should be included, but I couldn't include all of that. Multilayered, something for us all.

20. Say it Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud) by James Brown

- a. Joy as resistance is something that appealed to me in my Junior major seminar and this song encapsulates this perfectly. James Brown makes it so people can sing about being Black with pride and joy instead of being expected to apologize for it.

21. FDT by YG and Nipsey Hussle

- a. A great example of Trump-era protest music. Included for contemporary reference and relation to LA.

22. We The People by Tribe Called Quest

- a. To honor my mother.

23. Pa'lante by Hooray for the Riff Raff

- a. This song pushed me to reconsider active protest, in a way. Hooray for the Riff Raff samples "Puerto Rican Obituary" by Pedro Pietri and calls for radical rest in the face of oppression. Pa'lante argues that Puerto Ricans and Puerto Rican Americans have been put through so much ("colonized,...sterilized, dehumanized") that radical rest is the answer for the temporary right now. Further listening: Rican Beach

24. El picket sign by El Teatro Campesino

- a. See Rolas de Aztlan: Songs of the Chicano Movement for more music about this topic.

Spotify Link:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2QSAIL4BRkKoPMbfmtDPdE?si=CGyLfBmNR96fskRy4SVrJQ>