For the People Hear Us Singing "Bread and Roses": The Myth of a Poem Turned Labor Song

Marit van de Warenburg

Abstract

This article examines the afterlife of the 1911 poem "Bread and Roses," that is commonly associated with a 1912 factory strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and showcases how a 1974 musical rendition of the poem 'stuck' in the cultural memory of (labor) activists. The article demonstrates that the invented story of the song's creation, alongside its 'catchy music,' as well as a range of flexibly applicable values in the song's lyrics, underpin the poem's lasting mobilizing power. In doing so, the article points at the influence of creation narratives and the effective symbiosis of text and sound as key factors in the production of persistent and influential activist songs.

Bread and Roses

As we go marching, marching, in the beauty of the day,
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray,
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,
For the people hear us singing: Bread and Roses! Bread and Roses!

As we go marching, marching, we battle too for men,
For they are women's children, and we mother them again.
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;
Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses.

As we go marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
Go crying through our singing their ancient call for bread.
Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.
Yes, it is bread we fight for, but we fight for roses too.

As we go marching, marching, we bring the greater days,
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.
No more the drudge and idler, ten that toil where one reposes,
But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and roses, bread and roses.

James Oppenheim, 1911

Introduction

James Oppenheim's poem "Bread and Roses" is commonly thought to have been inspired by a historical event. Oppenheim allegedly stumbled upon the slogan "We want bread, and roses too" during a 1912 strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, when a group of women weavers abandoned their posts at a textile mill in protest against a reduction in pay (Moore 374). The strike soon involved about 25,000 workers, mostly women, and almost all immigrants (Ross n.p.). The poem became particularly famous for its 1974 musical rendition, sparking the birth of a popular labor protest song. Today, the poem, song and slogan are still associated with the strike, now popularly called the "Bread and Roses Strike" (Zwick 92). Although scholars have meanwhile demonstrated that the connection between the poem and the strike is a false one, the close association with the strike and "Bread and Roses" has remained paramount in popular culture (Zwick; Juravich). So, how did this poem turned labor song, along with its false historical association, persist in the cultural memory of labor activists?

This article demonstrates how the invented story of the poem's origins—its alleged roots in the 1912 strike—as well as its orchestration and lyrical contents added to its persistence as a popular protest song. In doing so, the article highlights the factors that may influence a protest song's 'stickiness' over time. This article works from a cultural memory studies perspective, synthesizing the memory-activism nexus with musicological and literary scholarship. The memory-activism nexus distinguishes three trajectories in the interplay between memory and activism: memory of activism (how activism is culturally remembered), memory in activism (how memories of early resistance inform new movements) and memory activism (how activists struggle to produce cultural memory, advocating for the remembrance of particular pasts; this trajectory is not applicable to the present study) (Rigney 372). The article also works with the concept of *musicking*, meaning to participate in musical performance in any capacity. This concept, coined by musicologist Christopher Small in preference to the more static designation *music*, allows for acknowledging the social factors that surround and shape music, such as their patterns of re-use and the way this is

influenced by their origin as well as the formal qualities of songs and their performances.

After outlining the genealogy of the poem turned song, this article analyzes the lyrics and the way these add to the song's memorability as well as showcases the 1974 orchestration added to its popularity. Finally, it argues how the invented origin of "Bread and Roses," as crystallized by the interplay of text and music over time, explains the poem's persistence in the cultural memory of labor activists.

From Poem to Song: A Genealogy of "Bread and Roses"

In 1996, historical anthropologist Gerald Sider first questioned the connection between the Lawrence Textile Strike and the "Bread and Roses"-slogan. No photo of strikers, pickets or marches showed "Bread and Roses" or any variation thereof, nor did any newspaper articles or pamphlets (Ross n.p.). The connection was definitively refuted when Jim Zwick located the first magazine publication of Oppenheim's poem: it was printed in December 1911, a month before the Lawrence Textile Strike ("Behind the Song" 92).[1] Still, many contemporary performances of the poem's musical rendition cast it as a direct reflection of the strike. This is partially the result of an early misattribution by American author and political activist Upton Sinclair, who published Oppenheim's poem in the 1915 book *The Cry for Justice: An Anthology of the Literature of Social Protest* alongside a reference to the strike (Zwick, "Bread and Roses" n.p.). Most performances of the song use a relatively recent musical arrangement written in 1974 by Mimi Fariña and first recorded by Judy Collins on her 1976 protest album *Bread and Roses*. The strong and explicit association between the strike and Fariña's version of the song raises the question of how this 1974 version of "Bread and Roses" fits into the larger history of the poem. Existing scholarly work often uses "Bread and Roses" ambiguously, simultaneously denoting the slogan, the song and the poem. Zwick, for example, neglects the question

[1] See Zwick's "Behind the Song"-rubric for a detailed account of other potential events that inspired Oppenheim.

of when the poem was remediated into song, glossing over this process altogether. Was there a song version of "Bread and Roses" before Fariña took it on?

The answer: yes. In 2020, sociologist Tom Juravich systematically tracked "Bread and Roses" from its origins as a poem to the "labor classic it has become" by exploring fifty-seven labor songbooks of the twentieth century (81). The fifth edition of the *Little Red Songbook,* published by the Industrial Workers of the World union in June 1912, carried a number of songs that were sung by picketing workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts. "Bread and Roses" was not included (83). Not until 1935 did sheet music and lyrics to "Bread and Roses" in a rendition by composer Caroline Kohlsaat appear in the left-wing *American Rebel Song Book* (83). By this point, the association between "Bread and Roses" (as slogan, poem and song) and the Lawrence Textile Strike was already well-established; Sinclair's misattribution was perpetuated by other activist publications (Zwick, "Bread and Roses" n.p.).

After 1935, the song moved in and out of songbooks. It was entirely absent during the post-war era, and seemed forgotten by the mid-1960s despite the folk boom which revived many labor songs (94)." The resurgent feminist movement, however, gave "Bread and Roses" a "new lease of cultural life" (Erll and Rigney 8), with the slogan embodying the new movement's efforts to broaden women's emancipation to include more than citizenship and suffrage (Juravich 94). Rather than settling for "bread," so to speak, the movement now wanted "roses too" (Oppenheim l. 12). An influential Boston-based socialist-feminist collective took "Bread and Roses" as its name, and the phrase was adopted as the title of various feminist books and articles (e.g. McAffee and Wood; Eisenstein).

Though these examples showcase the comeback of the slogan, the inclusion of Kohlsaat's composition of "Bread and Roses" in *The Liberated Women's Songbook* of 1971 also testifies to the song's re-emergence. Three years later, Fariña set the poem to a new melody. Following the popularity of Fariña's version in the women's movement, the song also returned to the labor movement (Juravich 94), and by 1983, Fariña's version appeared on the first page of *Songs of Labor* (96). Characteristics

that had kept the song out of post-war labor song repertoires—its female perspective and its focus on cultural, rather than mere material change—made it "ideal not only for the women's movement but also for a changing labor movement in the 1980s that increasingly rejected business unionism" in favor of an emphasis on cultural and social liberation (97). The song—remediated—was back. It was picked up by 1970s and 1980s folk singers and is still performed today, almost exclusively with explicit reference to the Lawrence Textile Strike.[2] But what specific conditions—either musical, lyrical or contextual—underpin this lasting mobilization? In the next sections, this article zooms in on these types of conditions and their implications for the 'stickiness' of the poem.

The Rising of the Women: Repetition of Lyrics as Ritualized Practice

How memorable are the lyrics of "Bread and Roses," what do they remember and what reproduction do they afford? The song guides its audience through a series of images, values, and feelings of empowerment in four verses with AABB rhyme. The performers assume the role of the protesters, reflecting on their identities and describing a protest in present tense. Each verse starts with an image of marching and closes with a variation on the "Bread and Roses"-phrase. The marching motif adds a temporal dimension; though the individual verses address different aspects of the protagonists' struggle for bread and roses, they are all introduced in the framework of a march. The repetition of the word further illustrates the action it implies—"marching, marching"; four syllables, four footsteps.

Despite the song's repetitive, accessible structure its verses are lyrically complex. They remember textual traditions and reference 'real world' events. The metaphor of bread and roses functions as a template in which past and present struggles are recounted. As Gwen Moore puts

[2] An excellent example is Utah Phillips' introduction to "Bread and Roses" on his 1983 album *We Have Fed You All a Thousand Years*. Protesters too, as well as audiences, relate their encounters with it to the context of the strike. Below the *YouTube* video depicting a scene from the movie *Pride* in which "Bread and Roses" is performed, commenters write: "from the great textile strike 1912 Lawrence Mass" and "my great aunt was in the strike" (Taylor).

it: "basic provision of bread points to the right to have fundamental human needs met while roses symbolize the right to dignity, art and love" (375). Read in the historical context of early twentieth century factory work, then, the song suggests that the (female) working class was denied not only wages, but also the time to indulge in "small art and love and beauty" (Oppenheim, l. 11).

The song opens with an image of dark spaces touched by the radiance of the sun, bringing to mind the classic trope of the rising sun as a metaphor of change and hope. The protagonists' actions are closely tied to this sentiment; the "darkened kitchens" and grey mill lofts are not only brightened by the sun but also by the marchers (l. 1-4). The second verse highlights the key role of women in the protest. Their dual identity is introduced: they give birth to men, and love and nurture them (roses), while also providing food (bread).

The third verse furthers this gendered perspective. It remembers earlier generations of women and at the same time creates a sense of continuity between these former generations and the current marchers, making them not only a memory of past activism (memory *of* activism), but also a mobilizing factor in a contemporary struggle (memory *in* activism) (Rigney 372; Eyerman 80). In the lines "unnumbered women dead / go crying through our singing their ancient call for bread" (l. 9-10), the memory of earlier generations resounds in the singing of the current protesters. Their "ancient" struggle for food is channeled in the song and march.

In the fourth verse, the call for protest in the present is explicated. This is a call for an equal share of art and beauty as well as food. Women's roles are once again highlighted: "we bring the greater days / the rising of the women means the rising of the race" (l. 13-14). Their battle is a battle for everyone. In sum, then, the song places itself in a (perceived) longer tradition of struggle and uses the memory of this struggle to mobilize people in the present. This remembered struggle, however, is not a specific instance from the past—though the poem's imagined rootedness in the 1912 strike, may lead us to believe so. Rather, the song refers to all protest that emerged from values of respect and dignity, female empowerment and moral struggle. By referencing past

protest, the song lyrics are inscribed with these values, giving a sense of gravitas; it uses memory in activism (Rigney 372).

Though "Bread and Roses" is performed at on-site protests today, the intricate song lyrics sometimes prove a challenge for large group performances. At a 2015 British Conservative party conference in Manchester, a group of women affiliated with creative labor union Equity took to the stage to perform "Bread and Roses" (Mazonowicz, "Bread and Roses at the Anti-Austerity Protest 2015"). Most performers read the lyrics from smartphones or lyric sheets. This was also the case in a 2017 Women's March in West Virginia against Donald Trump, a 2014 protest flashmob against poverty and landlessness in Manila, and a 2018 march for the NHS (#Justice4NHS) in Leeds (Justahillbillynut; Enriquez; 999 Call for the NHS). In all cases, the performance was planned (indicated by the flashmob-format, the presence of lyrics and prepared sound systems), at times rehearsed (the anti-austerity version is harmonized, indicating a predetermined key and arrangement, while the participants in the Manila flashmob reveal their T-shirts saying "Stop Corporate Land-grabbing" in a choreographed move) and conducted by a specific and limited group of protesters. As these examples suggest, "Bread and Roses" is not a song easily picked up on by large groups, with intricate lines such as "no more the drudge and idler, ten that toil where one reposes" (Oppenheim l. 15). Rather, it requires preparation. This condition is exemplified by the Manila flashmob: although the women enthusiastically start with "as we go marching, marching," they descend into mumbling halfway through the verses, only to pick up the pace again at the recognizable "Bread and Roses"-phrase closing each verse (Enriquez 1:38-2:10).

The poem's title, then, does have memorable qualities. It functions as a frame of reference; protesters manage to get back into the song when the phrase appears towards the end of each verse. The lines survive and continue to mobilize because of their poetic function, to follow Roman Jakobson (Tsur 2). This attractiveness of the lines invites *musicking* processes; it fosters all sorts of engagement that stretch beyond mere singing and listening (witness for example the song's re-use in the soundtrack of the 2014 movie *Pride*, as well as its continued popularity as a picket sign).

Unsurprisingly, "Bread and Roses" also lends itself well to (professional) studio recordings and performances in front of attentive audiences, both of which also require elaborate preparation.

There is one further way in which the lyrics influence the song's affordances: it is mostly sung by women, reiterating the largely female participants at the Lawrence Textile Strike. Though a handful of male folk artists have covered the song, the lyrics primarily invite gendered re-use. This specificity, along with the song's explicit integration of memories of the past with actions in the present, allows for a strong statement when used in specific contexts. By performing "Bread and Roses," British women protesting conservative policies, Filipino women protesting land expropriation, and American women protesting the Trump presidency give their own actions a sense of rootedness in past struggles, often explicitly referencing the Lawrence Textile Strike. Performing the song lyrics, then, functions as a "ritualized practice in and through which meaning and significance are embedded" (Eyerman and Jamison 35). It must be noted, at this point, that the many versions of the song discussed exclusively take on Fariña's version. This begs another question: what role does the song's music play in its mobilizing power?

Feigned Folk, Female Voices: The Musical Transformations of "Bread and Roses"

Although Kohlsaat is the first composer known to set Oppenheim's poem to music, Fariña's melody is most popular today. This next section showcases what "Bread and Roses" musically "remembers" and how the different *erinnerungsräume* found in each version impacted the memorability and 'stickiness' of the song. A musical 'erinnerungsraum' is a memory framework constituted over the course of a piece of music (Assmann 93). In such a framework, all musical occurrences have consequences and "something"—melodies, motives, chord progressions—develops and resolves. In this development and sense of resolve, a close interaction between the composition itself and the perception and expectation of the listener takes place (93). As such, reconstructing

a song's 'erinnerungsraum' gives insight into the memorability and 'stickiness' of the song.

Kohlsaat's version is set in F major and should be played "hopefully" (Fowke and Glazer 70). Juravich argues that Kohlsaat's version was not difficult to follow in a sing-along but that its orchestration, which was more of a lament, lacked a sense of purpose and defiance (95). A close reading of the music, however, showcases that the song was, in fact, difficult to sing along to due to its unpredictable structure in phrasing and melody. The first two lines of the song start with the same melodic structure (f-g-a-a-a-a-a-g), creating the expectation that the second line will develop like the first one. This expectation, however, is not resolved. At the word "thousand," Kohlsaat's melody returns to the tonic—the keynote of the scale (an f in this case) which serves as the focus for the melody and the harmony (Britannica n.p.), and which is integral to the predictability of a song. A return to the tonic at this point in the melody is alienating; it brings the melody "home" before the phrase has ended. The final word of the second line, "gray," is set to the third note of the scale, an a. This creates the sense that the line is unfinished, even though the sentence has, in fact, ended. This lack of resolve would suggest that the song's musical homecoming is postponed to a later point. This, however, never happens. Even though the extension of expectation is a technique commonly used in some styles of music to create tension, it can make for a difficult sing-along. Furthermore, the melody has large interval changes that occur in surprisingly spontaneous leaps—particularly in the phrase "Bread and roses, bread and roses" (l. 16), which sees an octave change between "Bread" and "and." Such intervals may catch the participant by surprise, and make the song challenging for an untrained performer.

Compared to Kohlsaat's, Fariña's version offers more predictable patterns. It has a marchlike rhythm, historically used to aid soldiers to walk in close ranks. Marches often have a pace that is a multiplication of the average heartbeat (116 to 120 beats per minute). For the listener, such rhythmic structures are easy to follow. In the case of "Bread and Roses," the walking movement, combined with the major key in which

the song is set, reinforces a "declamatory articulation and forward moving sense" (Moore 382). The melody has a stepwise movement complementing this marchlike rhythm: think of the up and down movement in the phrase "as we go marching, marching" (d#-d#-e-f#-d#-g#-f#). In this phrase, all syllables, spare the first two, are set to a different note than the one preceding it. Additionally, the song has relatively slow chord changes, making its structure easy to follow (382). Finally, the end of each phrase returns to the tonic—making the lines develop predictably for both the listener and singer.

The Manila flashmob underscores this element: even though the women lose grip over both lyrics and melody in the middle of the verses, the tonic at the end draws them back to the same key (Enriquez 1:38-2:10). Similarly, in the Manchester flashmob, the tonic allows for a 'coming home' together—although the melodies around the middle lines of each verse are sometimes a little pitchy due to melodic diversions (Mazonowicz, "Bread and Roses Flashmob" 2:15-2:20). Fariña's orchestration, then, increased the accessibility of the song due to its predictable structure.

Beyond being memorable, one may contemplate to what extent the song itself reproduces, or *remembers*. As stated above, the rhythm of Fariña's version references a march—a ploy that underscores the textual references to marching. Many of the re-uses of the song highlight this rhythmic element. A case in point is the "Bread and Roses"-cover by female vocal group Women of the World. Their rendition of Fariña's version is performed a capella while the women move their feet and fists to the beat of the song. Through this "embodied performance," the women utilize the march rhythm to remember the struggles of previous generations of women (Eyerman and Jamison 35).

Another musical reference is related to the song's genre. Juravich proposes that the myth of the song's origins during the Lawrence strike enhanced the belief that "Bread and Roses" had been there all along (96). I extend this assertion by suggesting that the musical traditions 'remembered' in Fariña's version served an important function in enhancing such a belief. Though written in the 1970s, the song took to the genre of the traditional folk ballad—a song with simple chord

progressions, an accessible key, a narrative arc and repeated lines. In doing so, Fariña gave the song a sense of tradition, connecting a "usable past with the present" (Eyerman and Jamison 29). As a result, "Bread and Roses" has frequently been performed alongside much older folk songs. Strikingly illustrating this point is activist singer-songwriter Si Kahn's re-use in his 1991 song "They All Sang 'Bread and Roses'":

> Whoever thought the Sixties
> Would be called the good old days?
> (…)
> And we all sang "Bread and Roses," "Joe Hill" and "Union Maid."
> We linked our arms and told each other, we are not afraid.
> "Solidarity Forever," would go rolling through the hall,
> "We Shall Overcome" together, one and all.
> (Kahn)

Si Kahn lists a number of songs that were allegedly sung in the 1960s: "Joe Hill" (from 1938), "Union Maid" (written in 1940 by Woody Guthrie but to the melody of the 1907 standard "Red Wing"), "Solidarity Forever" (a 1915 union anthem) and "We Shall Overcome" (first published in 1901 and revived in the 1940s). "Bread and Roses" is seamlessly added to a list of songs belonging to an older folk tradition. Juravich's genealogy proves that during these particular "good old days," "Bread and Roses" (then still in Kohlsaat's version) had, in fact, drifted to the background. Still, "Bread and Roses" is the name-giver of Kahn's song, and the song's intro re-uses melodies from Fariña's ballad (Kahn, 0:00-0:06). Kahn's re-use underscores how the music to Fariña's "Bread and Roses" enhanced the belief that the song stood in a longer tradition of folk ballads; the musical style, referencing past musical traditions, provoked a sense of authenticity.

Conclusion: The Myth of "Bread and Roses" as Mobilizing Power

The above analysis of the lyrics, music and performances of "Bread and Roses" points to the 'stickiness' of the song's creation narrative, Fariña's folk orchestration, and the general values inscribed in the "Bread and Roses"-slogan. It showcases the significant and multifaceted role that memory plays in the reproduction and resonance of protest music, thereby highlighting the relevance of applying the memory-activism nexus to protest music, a topic that in itself has not yet gained wide attention in the field of memory studies.

First off, the song's creation narrative is the result of an invented story, a myth, devoid of historical roots, but perpetuated by discursive repetition, making it into a memory that clung to the song. Any re-use invoking the memory of the Lawrence Textile Strike, then, becomes part of a lineage, connecting the new moment of performance to the "original" event. This lineage forges an affective attachment, to speak with Sara Ahmed, aligning the *musicking* participants with the past and making that past "alive in the present" (126). Feelings of inspiration, solidarity, pride and a sense of connection accompany the memory of the Lawrence Textile Strike and inform the mobilizing power of "Bread and Roses." There was a period in which "Bread and Roses" seemed to drift to the background and did not generate any re-uses. Its revival in the 1970s, however, showcases how Fariña's composition added to the emotional attachment to the song's perceived past and gave it new momentum.

Secondly, the new orchestration changed the interactions between the song's participants (listeners, performers, YouTube commentators) in two ways. One, it made the song more retrievable by way of its catchiness and accessible musical qualities and two, the folk-style made it come across as more authentic, re-attaching the memory of the Lawrence strike to a composition that resonated with the musical traditions of the strike's historical context. This process fostered a more solid link between the strike and "Bread and Roses" and garnered a sense of authenticity and ritualized practice, furthering the emotional attachment addressed above.

These attachments are also fostered by a third quality: the title and its inscribed values. The lyrics of "Bread and Roses" convey images of moral struggle, female empowerment, dignity and respect—values connected to the march that is "remembered" in the song. The memory encapsulated in the title proves a flexible one, to be re-arranged and deployed according to the cause for which the song is re-used, thus leading to a myriad of attachments. The sense of female empowerment conveyed in the song spoke, for example, to the 1970s women's movement. The values of dignity and respect gained further traction among left-wing groups that interpreted emancipation beyond material redistribution and enfranchisement. The struggle inscribed in the song also spoke to the labor movement. These three elements underpin the lasting mobilizing power of this 1911 poem. This not only underscores the rhetorical power of creation narratives, but also the importance of a productive and meaningful symbiosis between text and sound in the production of persistent and influential activist songs.

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Biography

Marit van de Warenburg is a PhD-candidate at Utrecht University. Her project "Between Adaptation and Appropriation: When Heritage Becomes Contested" (made possible by the NWO PhDs in the Humanities Program) focuses on cultural memory in debates on cultural appropriation. This article is based on her MA-thesis, which focused on the interplay between memory and protest music.