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#TikTokActivism: Music and Sounds in Political Content

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Abstract: TikTok has seen increasing numbers of users since its rebranding in 2018. Most known for memes, lip-sync, and dance videos, it is also a platform on which political struggles and activist movements are articulated through music and artistic performances. This article analyzes activist TikToks and the use of music and sounds in them. Our findings are based on two ethnographic studies conducted in the summer of 2021, a video analysis of activist TikToks, and our experiences as consumers on the platform. Hence, this essay delves into the question of the role songs and sounds play in activist content. In the data collection, the creators interviewed stated that the axis of their content is the activist or political message they want to convey. In this sense, music is integral to enabling the processes of creation, communication, and further reproduction of the content. For the creators, it assumes a supplementary role rather than being at the core. For this research, we work to integrate the results of these interviews and the findings obtained in the field with concepts such as performativity (Judith Butler and Alejandro Madrid), musical marks (Mark Cobussen), and iterability (Jacques Derrida), in addition to an ethnomusicological and music-sociological understanding (Thomas Turino, Julio Mendívil, and Tia DeNora). In this article we argue for both a "performatic" and a performative approach to the analysis, characterizing sounds and songs as musical marks with an iterable quality. We explore the link of these musical marks to corporeality in the articulation of the political message, the influence of this dynamic on performativity, and the processes that take place in the transmission and the further reproduction of the content. Through this performative approach, we understand music as a means to analyze social and cultural processes and the musical mark as an essential element that has the capacity to navigate different contexts without acquiring a fixed meaning. This mark can be quoted, altered, and recontextualized, and it is because of this iterable character that it stimulates and enables forms of communication and reproduction of the activist message.

Keywords: activism; social movements; performativity; musical marks; corporeality; embodiment; #IndigenousTikTok; #nativeTikTok; #leftistTikTok; music on TikTok; political TikToks

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Introduction

Black TikTokers went on strike in June 2021 in response to *white* social media stars who repeatedly used their content and trending choreographies without acknowledging their authorship. For example, they refused to create dance choreographies to Megan Thee Stallions's song "Thot Shit"[1] and instead created content to address this matter and express their outrage. @theericklouis's (he/him) video is a case in point. The text superimposed on the image reads "I did a dance to this song!" followed by "sike. This app would be nothing without the blk [black] people [crying emoji]," while he moves his middle fingers rhythmically to the beat.[2] This video illustrates the interplay between music, embodiment, and activist message, thus depicting the key aspects of this article. Therefore, the purpose is to analyze political TikToks that use music or sounds to convey their political message.[3] Focusing, on the one hand, on the use of the creators' bodies, the voices and the specific functions of the app and, on the other hand, on the way their content is perceived by the viewers, we discuss the role of music in activist TikToks. We identified a clear distinction between two main functions of music in the context of activist TikToks: music as a means of conveying political messages and music as representation. The former refers to the strategic use of music as a powerful tool to engage a wider audience and spread the desired message on the platform. The latter delves into the discursive aspects intrinsic to the incorporation of music and sounds, exploring their impact on the articulation of political struggles and the establishment and reinforcement of collective identities within such content (see Aguilera, and Schrott in this Issue).[4]

We combine an ethnographic approach highlighting the motivations of creators using music within their content with an analysis of political TikToks with music. We begin with an overview of theories about political activism taking place on social media and TikTok itself[5] and then delve into ideas

about performativity and iterability[6] to gain an understanding of music and examine its role in activist TikToks. We seek to bridge these theoretical ideas with examples of activist videos from @findusmachtrandale (they/them), @shinanove (no pronouns listed), @notoriouscree (no pronouns listed), and @qhalinchapuriskiri (no pronouns listed). The videos are all assigned to different political topics and their actors on TikTok we observed during our initial research in summer 2021. We selected the videos on the basis of their use of music and sounds as well as their level of popularity in terms of a higher number of views and/or likes in comparison to other activist content.

TikTok and Activism

The academic field is actively engaged in researching activism and social media. The first studies on the topic dealt with the benefits and advantages of social media in offline activism,[7] while more recent studies examine social media as a space where activism itself takes place. They examine, for example, a "playful" approach to political issues[8] or individual political struggles and their specific expressions in activist videos.[9] We draw on these perspectives on the activism-platform interplay and the processes involved in determining the role of music in this interaction.

In his 2012 book *Tweets and the Street: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*, Paolo Gerbaudo describes the new role of social media platforms in various forms of activism and political movements. Gerbaudo stresses that social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube can be used to mobilize street protests and demonstrations.[10] The development of Web 2.0 enabled activists to participate actively and in a self-determined manner on the platforms. In spreading one's own videos, photos, reports, and memes about a particular type of activism, social media is not just an additional space to organize protests but rather influences the appearance of the activism itself.[11] According to Maik Fielitz and Daniel Staemmler, this co-creation affects the manifestations of activisms that occur exclusively on platforms.[12] This means that political content is discussed and dealt with in so-called "digital communication spaces" (digitale Kommunikationsräume).[13] Therefore, activism and social media have an impact on each other that causes social movements to change.[14]

Like every social media platform,[15] TikTok has its specific characteristics,

which fosters diverse manifestations of activism. TikTok is currently one of the most popular social media platforms, and the number of users has been growing steadily since 2018.[16] The app tries to create an image that is "funny" and "normal" with its ease of use and the higher probability for videos to go viral, thus distinguishing itself from other platforms, like Instagram or Facebook.[17] Therefore, its thematic algorithm becomes a central element. Videos are sorted on the basis of their content and suggested to individual users on their For You pages.[18] This results in a higher potential for videos to go viral, even if the creators only have a few followers.[19] Consequently, interaction is another criterion for TikToks to become viral. For this purpose, there are various functions on TikTok, such as duets, stitches, or replies to comments, allowing one's own content to actively circulate on the platform.[20] For example, stitches can be used to comment on a video, or duets can be used by a creator to react to the first video, as interviewees stated. These functions show on a technical level that adaptability, citation, and fluidity are of great importance for TikToks. Distribution, further development of content, and circulation are also part of the characteristic appearance of the fast-paced app.

Laura Cervi and Tom Divon explain that artful play with sound and TikTok trends exemplify the characteristics of TikTok. They describe that "users choose how to shape their self-made videos using various functions" of the application.[21] This new contextualization of visual, sonic, and embodied elements allows activist creators to add their own stories and political demands and create new content.[22] To create new content, users repeat, modify, and adapt previously seen content. Bojana S. Radovanović explains in their article "TikTok and Sound" how sound can be used and edited in different ways, such as in tempo or pitch.[23] Modification and adaptability of sound and TikTok trends are therefore important aspects of the active co-creation by the audience and the circulation of content typical of TikTok.[24] Similarly, Samantha Hautea, Perry Parks, Bruno Takahashi, and Jing Zeng, among others, emphasize this centrality of sound and music in TikToks and the important connection between audible and visible elements of "successful" TikToks.[25]

In summary, it can be said that TikTok is a platform on which activist content takes place. As a central idea, it can be stated that the platform lives on constant citations, adaptability, modification, and circulation of content; it is very fast-moving and depends on high interaction between creators and their

audience.

Performativity and Performance

In his exploration and analysis of language, Jacques Derrida revisits J.L. Austin's speech act theory[26], he understands languages as a means of action and the creation of meaning. Derrida's perspective explores the implications of language as a system of signs and the inherent instability of meaning. He coined the concept of *différance* and explores how language is structured by differences and deferral of meaning. He criticizes the notion of fixed and stable meanings linked to signifiers, arguing that meaning is always diffuse, never fully present, and constantly changing.[27]

Derrida characterizes this continual shifting of meanings as iterability. This iterability transcends semantics and fixed contexts, and its "transmission," according to Derrida, "is traversed by the intermediation of a dissemination irreducible to polysemy."[28] Similarly, Judith Butler's concept of performativity challenges conventional understandings of how language shapes our understanding of ourselves. She proposes a model based on performativity that focuses on the analysis of gender discourses, defining this concept in her 1993 publication *Bodies That Matter* as "that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena it regulates and constrains."[29] Butler sees gender as a performance that emerges from social constructs and is constituted over time through a series of repeated actions and rituals.[30]

The notion of performativity is also discussed within the realm of music studies. Scholars such as Christopher Small, Nicholas Cook, and Philip Auslander thematize the composition-performance dichotomy.[31] They criticize the traditional perspective of musicology that subordinates the performance to the musical text and propose placing the performer at the center of the analysis, thus raising questions about individual experience and identity. Music is therefore not only sound or written representation but also interaction and corporeality, in which intersubjective and social issues emerge and develop (see Bermúdez in this Issue).

Furthermore, Alejandro L. Madrid proposes addressing the question of performativity beyond musical performance, thus focusing his analysis on what music does and on what it allows people to do rather than on its meaning within these processes. In this sense, considering music as proposed by

Madrid implies recognizing it as a means of understanding social and cultural practices.[32] This approach encourages participation in broader intellectual dialogues and the questioning of traditional assumptions about the meaning of music.

Performativity and Iterability on TikTok

To further examine the importance of music and sounds in TikToks, we would like to extend the foregoing understanding of the concept of iterability proposed by Derrida and link it to the perspectives of Marcel Cobussen. In addition, this offers us the possibility to gain valuable insights into how interpretation is influenced by the interplay between presence and absence, identity and difference. This concept allows us to identify music and sounds on TikTok as "iterable" musical marks or signs, further deepening our understanding of their role in activist content.[33]

Derrida refers to iterable linguistic signs that can be repeated, altered, or decontextualized and that do not depend on a specific context to function. The author observes that

> every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the current sense of this opposition), in a small or large unit, can be cited, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchoring [ancrage].[34]

Moreover, Cobussen stresses the transformative nature of iterability in the performance experience. In his analysis of John Zorn's music, Cobussen examines how musical marks can be separated from their original context, iterated, and given new meanings through creative and inventive recombination. John Zorn quotes and recontextualizes musical elements from different sources, creating unique and unpredictable compositions. This approach allows him to continually transform and reinterpret musical material, resulting in unique and innovative pieces.[35]

To communicate, the musical mark must be able to be quoted, replicated, re-signified, and altered as it is placed in different contexts. The mark performs a particular function in each new context, determined by the creator's purpose for the content and how sounds and songs are placed in it. In this process, the

iterable mark is still recognizable when navigating through and "being cited" in different types of content, but what makes it recognizable does not strictly define it.

For the analysis of content on TikTok, we depart from the basis of a corporealized performativity through which the message, together with the sounds, is channeled. There is an interdependent correlation between the corporeality and the musical mark that determines how the message is transmitted, how it is perceived by users on the platform, and consequently, how it is reproduced as new content. The objective of our analysis is to trace both how this sound/musical mark is adapted and how the corporeality of this representation is modified or altered during this process.

TikTok is a social media platform on which music articulates both the "performatic" and ritualistic dimensions of the content, as well as the construction of identities and social discourses framed in political activism. The term "performatic," which refers to the *theatrical* and non-discursive aspects of the content, is used in this essay in distinction from the concept of performativity.[36] The relationship between "performatic" elements and performative aspects is worth considering for analysis of the processes involved in the creation and dissemination of content on TikTok. This approach allows a comprehensive overview of the different roles and functions as they relate to music and sounds in activist content, as well as the different dimensions of users' embodied experience on the platform.[37] It serves to focus attention on the materiality, the embodiment, and the "nowness" of the event, namely its corporeality, that is, on the forms of action as such rather than on what is to be said.[38]

Through this approach and in relation to the above, Madrid proposes to rethink musical processes, considering more than the performance or the musicians themselves. Through the adoption of the concepts of performativity and iterability as a theoretical approach in the context of media practices, especially regarding social media, it is possible to examine in greater depth the day-to-day actions and processes of the people who create and consume content on the platform and the power dynamics and interactions between them, without ignoring the "performatic" aspects. Through an intersectional lens, this theoretical approach affords an in-depth understanding of different dimensions, such as race, gender, religion, and social status, which are of particular relevance in the case of political and

activist content, as they can greatly influence the user experience on the platform and the content generated on it. The emphasis on musical marks and their hand-to-hand work with corporeality in the communication of the message allows us to situate songs and sounds and the role they assume in the context of each video and what we have considered each new "version." The performative is corporeal and that corporeality with sound is what allows us to trace how the function and the representation change the musical mark in political content. Therefore, our purpose is to analyze the way in which musical marks navigate these processes of creation, dissemination, and reproduction.

Like, What?

In the section that follows, we analyze a selection of TikToks in relation to the role of music in them and the discussed concepts of performativity, iterability, and musical marks, as well as the "performatic" elements. The first part of our analysis questions the role of music from a more technical angle. We examine how a new contextualization of a sound can be useful in constructing a political statement. In this section we focus on @findusmachtrandale (they/them) and music as a means of conveying political messages. The second part of our analysis deals with musical marks as representation. Songs and their modified versions can be used to represent people or groups subjected to intersecting oppressions and can give visibility to different political struggles or social movements. Two important points in this section are the interdependence of the performative and "performatic" aspects, which means that theatrical and discursive readings are possible simultaneously.

@findusmachtrandale is one of our interviewees and a leftist and (queer-)feminist creator on German-speaking TikTok. They see the advantage of sound trends in the fact that a political statement can be made with the use of a viral sound from TikTok. The aforementioned thematic algorithm ensures that videos with similar content can be successful. The use of trends increases the chances of going viral. Therefore, activist videos can be featured on mainstream TikTok and reach out to a larger audience to disseminate the political message. According to the interviews, generating trending content on TikTok can be understood as a strategic move, since the

content is "simply entertaining" on the surface but has the potential to channel a complex message based on the creators' political convictions. Furthermore, several interviewees stated that the barrier is quite low for this type of video because creators do not have to speak up, do research, give valid background information, or show themselves on camera.

Thus, @findusmachtrandale emphasizes the interaction between image, music, and text in this type of video. Lyrics in sound trends in particular function for @findusmachtrandale as a kind of a "punchline," which, together with the captions and the person's gestures, can create a political statement.[39] Here we can see the elements being assembled. Together they form a video in which elements are detached from their original place of creation. As an example, @findusmachtrandale cites in the interview one of their own videos ("Like, What?"), based on viral TikTok and its sound "chemie by becks" from creator becks with the lyrics: "What's so wrong about me loving a woman instead of a man?" (Was ist so falsch dran, dass ich eine Frau lieb statt 'nen Mann).[40] Most of the videos of this trend use the overlay texts ("POV: ...") together with a lip-synced "what" to describe and question various topics, such as body weight, relationships, depression, or even everyday situations (shaving or washing hair). This illustrates how sounds get altered, adapted, or modified by other creators to be used in diverse contexts. The lyrics of the "original" TikTok are reused in quite different contexts through editing, further development, and modification, placing the sounds in a new or different (political) context, as shown by an example from @findusmachtrandale with the following overlay text: "POV: As a law student, you watch videos of a certain ex-police officer who tries to make you believe that anti-racist educational work is incitement of the people 'against white people' " (Du siehst dir als Jurastudi die Videos von einem gewissen Ex-Polizisten an, der versucht dir weiszumachen, dass antirassistische Bildungsarbeit Volksverhetzung 'gegen Weiße' wäre).[41] According to @ findusmachtrandale, the "what" voiced at the end is used as a punchline that critically questions the statement of the ex-police officer.[42] This is supported by the caption "like, what," the crying emoji, and the creator's gestures and facial expressions, which reflect astonishment or dismay.[43] In these types of videos, @findusmachtrandale emphasizes that "the interplay between statement [text on video], filter [and their physical behavior], and music [sound trend] is then a political statement in itself" (das Zusammenspiel von Aussage zu Filter zu Musik ist dann in itself eine politische Aussage).[44] @findusmachtrandale themself describes

how different elements and musical marks come together to create a new contextualized and politicized video. Central to this are sound, corporeality, and captions. In the case of @findusmachtrandale, the use of sound creates a political commentary on a particular situation that is written on the video and supported by @findusmachtrandale's gestures. The example serves as a technical explanation of how a new contextualization, or rather a politicization through the new composition of the individual elements, functions on TikTok. Moreover, this exemplifies that political activism on TikTok can appear in a certain design aesthetic similar to other viral and to some certain extent non-political videos from very different TikTok worlds to disseminate political convictions.

Music as a Means of Conveying Political Messages

The example of @findusmachtrandale's content shows that music can be understood as a means of channeling the political message. The music supports the political output, and creators think of music in this form both as a strategical device and as an entertainment factor for themselves and other users. During the period in which we consumed and observed activist TikToks, we noticed that most of them consist of education and discussion videos. This coincides with the content of our interviewees, who mainly made these types of videos. The political message was most important to the creators we spoke with, and music barely occupied a prominent position in their online activism. In our experience in the field, we determined that a lot of activist videos consist of sound trends that are recontextualized and politicized through the addition of physical gestures or overlay texts. In this rather technical perspective on music in activist TikToks, music and sounds can be understood as musical marks and therefore as a feature on the app, like stitches or duets. They are part of the appearance of TikTok and support its aesthetic. Using music in this way means that music supports the dissemination of the respective political call. This perspective matches with the statement of most of our interviewees that music is not a primary element that they knowingly include in the process of creating a video. Instead, they focus on their activist mission and political statements.

As we have observed above, music is nonetheless a central element of TikToks. However, it is always connected with other elements, and so

this composition functions as a means of conveying the political statement. With a performative approach from Butler and Derrida and Cobussen's understanding of the iterable musical mark, it is possible to assess music as a central factor for the recontextualization and politicization of sounds. This situates music as a relevant influence in activist videos and shows the unfixed and fluid function of music and sounds within TikToks. Moreover, there are a lot of activist videos including music, such as dance videos or lip-sync videos, that also use music to mediate a political statement or message.

When we look closer at the aspect of channeling messages with music, we can understand TikToks as an assembling of audio, visuals, and description at a certain point in time and place. With our music-sociological and ethnomusicological approach, we understand music in its use or rather in the meanings consumers give or transmit to it.[45] Thus, we focus on what music does and not what music is.[46] The video analyzed consists of sound trends from mainstream TikTok that @findusmachtrandale adapted and modified, in which new contexts are established through new descriptions and performances. Therefore, the sound trends gain a different meaning through this new contextualization. According to our research, the role of music as a means of conveying political messages can be explained by Madrid's and Cobussen's iterable and performative understanding of music as an element that is always in flux, repeatable, and changing.

Indigenous TikTok

In the following we analyze a selection of videos, building on the junction between corporealized performativity and the iterability of musical marks. How are these aspects connected and to what extent do they help in disseminating the political and activist message?

The videos presented were created in the context of #IndigenousTikTok[47] and by users currently active on the platform whose focus is political. Moreover, these videos exemplify different ways of presenting content by using the platform's tools within the "same" context and ways of sharing different quotes from a musical mark as a way of representing Indigenous groups and struggles for social justice. Within this process, songs and sounds understood as musical marks function as a sort of machine that can perform and communicate within a given context.[48] These marks participate in the

performative gear by also influencing the corporeality of the content creator and, consequently, the way in which the content is produced and later presented to the receiver. This involves modifying the auditory qualities and sound elements through repetitive patterns, breaks, or accentuations and connecting the performance and the musical marks to channel the message that the creator intends to convey, thus enhancing and illuminating the close interaction between these marks and the corporeality in the content. The link between these two elements and the underlying processes for the transmission of the content and political messages are key points in this analysis.

Transitions and sequences as effects are usually found in trends, allowing creators to generate all sorts of optical illusions in their videos and thus capture the attention of users on the platform. Similarly, sounds and songs on TikTok in their more general use help make these trends recognizable, encouraging the audience to connect and interact with the content as well as to reproduce it and replicate it.

Content creator @notoriouscree (no pronouns listed), in his most viewed video of 2021,[49] presents a trend-based dance video in which he develops a transition from a "westernized appearance" to traditional Cree clothing. It is a full shot with a low angle video with the overlay text "wait for it." In this TikTok, @notoriouscree uses the introduction of the song "The Banjo Beat, Pt. 1" to anticipate and build tension by juggling one of the traditional Cree shoes to the rhythm of the banjo melody. The creator's movements, performance, and delivery adapt in this section of the song to the rhythmic accents on the banjo melody, while supporting the message of respect and appreciation for Cree costumes, dances, and traditional clothing.

As mentioned above, these musical marks have the faculty to act and to adopt certain qualities when placed within a given context. Through multiple possibilities of adapting the musical marks, songs and sounds are commonly found on the platform as quotations in versions either subtly modified or altered almost in their entirety. The song used by @notoriouscree is an adaptation of the track "The Banjo Bear, Pt. 1" [50] by content creator Tia Wood (@tiamiscihk, she/her)[51] In her version, Wood keeps the banjo introduction to four bars, adding a new vocal layer that replaces the original. The modified version of @tiamiscihk is recognized within #nativetiktok and #Indigenoustiktok and had been used by September 2022 in more than

15,000 videos on the platform. The creator first quotes the"original" version and then alters representative sound elements to place the musical mark, the message, and the performance in the context of "Indigenous TikTok." The iterability of the musical marks opens up new possibilities for their use through replication, repetition, and alteration. In this way, these marks fluidly navigate content, and their use and purpose transcend the author of the songs and sounds.[52]

@tiamiscihk creates a duet with an adaptation of the "Banjo Beat" sound. For this video, @tiamiscihk sings what she typifies as an Indigenous song over a part of the introduction to this track. The creator refers to the original version but creates a new context, in which new symbols and meanings are immediately attributed to it. It is worth noting that even within that same context of Indigenous TikTok, the musical mark has the possibility of being altered, thus channeling and conveying a variety of different messages. This version has been used to represent different Indigenous groups, mainly as a way of appreciating their customs, dances, and traditional clothing. Along with the corporeality of each performance, the musical mark enables these processes of representation, as it is quoted and modified to channel the political message. The corporeal representation of @notoriouscree's video is largely different from that of @tiamiscihk, even considering the effects and platform features they use. Tia Wood's version has been adapted to different types of content in various contexts and has generated several different types of interaction with the audience and users, ranging from appreciative comments to duets in which people react to the performances. This emphasizes the notion of co-corporeality with the viewers and their participation—though sometimes not entirely consciously—as collaborators in the transmission of the content, who later reproduce it by creating their own versions.

"Land Back, Please"

In the political and activist content found on the platform, it is common to find videos that use songs that represent political positions in a blunt and concrete manner. Something particular about the example that follows is that it elucidates the way in which musical marks fluidly navigate social movements in different contexts, while remaining identifiable for the users, prompting to a certain extent the citationality of the musical mark, and consequently

affording possibilities for several newer versions and adaptations. This is exemplified in videos from political content creators that use the same song. In the following we analyze three versions of the song "Quechua 101 Land Back Please" by Bobby Sanchez @harawiq (she/they).[53]

The first version is from Shina Nova, a content creator and Inuk throat singer from the Arctic region of North America. In her video,[54] her gaze is fixed on the camera, projecting a certain intensity that accompanies the song's lyrics with a straightforward message of rejection of the colonization of Indigenous groups and its implications to this day. The content creator lip-syncs to the lyrics of the Sanchez's rap:

> "See you genocide us / then you colonized us / see you sterilized us / and now you fetishize us"[55]

As the song progresses and the rhythm of the verse changes, @shinanova develops a transitional sequence with the song's progression by turning her head from left to right to its rhythm, gradually donning different accessories representative of her community, syncing her changes with the changes in the verse and rhythm, reinforced by her lip-sync of Sanchez's chorus.

The creator stays in the same body position throughout the video, exclusively making a slow left-right lateral head movement to prompt changes in accessories, followed by a head shake at the end of the video to indicate disagreement and emphasize and support the message of the song. Although there is no dancing in the video, the creator interacts with the song corporeally, allowing greater fluidity during the transition changes. @shinanova refers here to the decolonial struggle that Indigenous people continue to face today and connects the struggles of different Indigenous groups politically by showing solidarity and support with Bobby Sanchez's song. This video also shows an adaptive form and independence of sounds on TikTok. Here, the music, the images of the video, and the political statement converge seamlessly.

The second version is from Qhalincha Puriskiri (@qhalinchapuriskiri, no pronouns listed). She is a Quechua teacher who generates anti-racist, decolonial, and anti-sexist political content. In our interview, she refers to her work both inside and outside the platform to prevent Quechua from becoming an object of consumption in the West. Puriskiri duets Bobby Sanchez's video featuring the song.[56] The creator starts by lip-syncing fragments of the Quechua verse of the song and part of the English verses

that precede it. The English lyrics refer clearly and directly to colonization and its implications to this day, exposing both the artist's and the creator's defense of the Indigenous groups directly involved.

@notoriouscree also has a duet version using Sanchez's song.[57] The creator features on green screen images that support the message of the rapper's song, setting its content and the music—in this case central to the content—in the context of the struggle of Indigenous groups in Canada.

Bobby Sanchez's song exposes a problem with which different Indigenous groups represented on the platform by various content creators feel identified. This shows how the musical mark, within the theme #Indigenoustiktok, adapts to the different contexts of Indigenous groups from different regions of the world, channeling a message of indignation and resistance while demanding to "give the land back."

Music as Representation

As highlighted by the case in point, the musical mark takes on the representation of these Indigenous groups and activist struggles, which, while constituted in a similar context, correspond to complex and unique struggles hundreds or thousands of kilometers apart from one another.

Furthermore, we can witness the narrative quality of music showcased in these examples catalyzing processes of representation.[58] In relation to political activism, music can be linked to identity narratives of groups or individuals that highlight categories such as race, class, and gender, giving visibility to social justice struggles and people subjected to intersecting oppressions (see Aguilera in this Issue). Understanding this through the lens of performativity challenges essentialist notions of identity[59] and contributes to a better understanding and appreciation of the dynamic and ever-changing nature of music.

Echoing Derrida's linguistic signs, the role of the musical mark is temporary in each context and can be influenced by a certain scenario and the intention of the content creator by means of the message they want to convey. In the analyzed content, musical marks can either attenuate or amplify a message as well as "viralize" it. This content is created in response to specific events that take place on TikTok and other social media platforms, but also "offline" in

rallies of activist groups and demonstrations, both framed in the struggle for social justice. The volatile, unstable, and fluid character of these events and struggles is also exemplified in the content that is created and in the forms of dissemination and reproduction.[60]

The political and social relevance of music can contribute to the definition and grounding of identities and subjectivities, to a collective notion of body politics, as well as to the creation and constitution of activist movements.[61] These phenomena are manifested in specific events on and off the platform that stimulate the creation and reproduction of content, in which music acts as a binding element that articulates these discourses. Songs are created and existing ones are even "appropriated" to represent these struggles, and the musical mark is set in a new context depending on what is to be represented. As this musical mark is reproduced and quoted, the content is altered and modified not only by the discursive features but also by the "performatic" elements. This is particularly evident in the musical elements of newer versions of songs and sounds, as the structure, tempo, and pitch (among other elements) are altered to create a sort of "remix" that matches and supports the tone and mood that the new content presents.[62]

Moreover, gestures, movements, and facial expressions portray the emotions and feelings of the content creators, as well as their attitude and position about what is being discussed. The content creators embody the music and lyrics of the song, corporeally expressing their thoughts and emotions and ultimately their position on the subject matter in the videos. This exemplifies the interrelation between the corporeality of those creating the content, the musical mark, and the way each of these elements assumes a role and function, working in mutual support to channel the message that is intended to be imparted. For example, although the song "Quechua 101 Land Back Please" is sung partly in Quechua, it is still adapted to represent other Indigenous groups of North America by how the musical mark is used and its combination with the other elements that assemble the audiovisual content. These creators take selected fragments of the songs and work together with corporeality to build a narrative that allows different types of audiences to connect and relate to the content. The videos analyzed in the last section show the role of music as a representational function of social groups and their political struggles. According to our theoretical framework, this representational role is based on the performative function of music within these videos. Furthermore, our interviewees explained that this type of video

gives the groups and their struggles a wider visibility.

Conclusion

Considering the observations presented, the lack of “anchorage” allows the musical marks to navigate different contexts without limiting their functionality or confining them to a particular meaning. This fluidity is consistent not only with the changing character of the content but also with the volatility of the events inside and outside the platform that trigger these struggles for social justice. This is related to the eventual absence of the author and the quality that the musical mark has of positioning itself within the “performatic” as well as the discursive. The @qhalinchapuriskiri duet of Bobby Sanchez’s video is one example of how the embodied experience of the creator in this dynamic process, as expressed in the corporeality, establishes a link with the users who consume the content. Their impressions and experience with it generate new bodily possibilities, new forms of mediation, and new contexts entailing the modification, alteration, and de-contextualization of the musical mark. Trending sounds and songs play a fundamental role in the interaction of consumers with political and activist content. These trends promote the active participation of more “passive” users, stimulating the creation of new contexts within the platform where political struggles are articulated and amplified. This is exemplified in the songs and sounds with a more direct and explicit message, which in our analysis we characterize as playing a representational role. This role is established in the need to mediate the political message, and the musical mark is then placed within that framework.

On that account, understanding music to explore social and cultural practices by focusing on actions and processes rather than meaning allows us to analyze the musical mark from its iterable quality. The videos analyzed exemplify how sounds and songs, and even fragments of them, can be adapted and politicized to be placed within the framework of an activist struggle. The musical mark can carry and disseminate a political message by politicizing sounds and musical trends. This more strategic use or functional role of the musical mark has a relationship with the representational role in how they overlap with each other in certain types of content and work together hand in hand.

Notes

1. Trevor Boffone, *TikTok Cultures in the United States* (London: Routledge, 2022).

2. Theericklouis (@theericklouis), "If y'all do the dance pls tag me [smiley with big eyes] it's my first dance on Tik tok and I don't need nobody stealing/not crediting," TikTok; all links accessed June 19, 2021.

3. During the revision of this article, we noticed that the video had been removed. The fact that sources may disappear is due to the fast-moving nature of social media and TikTok in particular. We have also discovered this with other videos. The video by @theericklouis went viral, so the topic of appropriating dances by Black creators or rather the lack of acknowledging them was addressed in several articles: Kalhan Rosenblatt, "'Give Credit Where it's Due'", *NBC News*, June 24, 2021; and Earl Hopkins "Black Dance Creators' Strike on TikTok Sparks. Online Appropriation Conversation", *The Columbus Dispatch*.

4. Catherine Cheng Stahl and Ioana Literat, "#GenZ on TikTok: The Collective Online Self-Portrait of the Social Media Generation," *Journal of Youth Studies* 26, no. 7 (2023): 925–46.

5. Paolo Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* (London: Pluto Press, 2012); Maik Fielitz and Daniel Staemmler, "Hashtags, Tweets, Protest? Varianten des digitalen Aktivismus," *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegung* 33, no. 2 (September 2020), 425–41; Samantha Hautea et al., "Showing They Care (or Don't): Affective Publics and Ambivalent Climate Activism on TikTok," *Social Media+Society* 7, no. 2 (April 2021); Elena Pilipets, "Hashtagging, Duetting, Sound-Linking: TikTok Gestures and Methods of (In)distinction," *The Journal of Media Art Study and Theory* 4, no. 1 (2023); Jing Zeng and Crystal Abidin, "'OkBoomer, Time to Meet the Zoomers': Studying the Memefication of Intergenerational Politics on TikTok," *Information, Communication & Society* 24, no. 16 (2021) 2459–81; Laura Cervi and Tom Divon, "Playful Activism: Memetic Performances of Palestinian Resistance in TikTok #Challenges," *Social Media+Society*, (2023).

6. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988); Alejandro L. Madrid, "Why Music and Performance Studies? Why Now? An Introduction to the Special Issue," *TRANS-Transcultural Music Review*, 2009.

7. Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets*; Fielitz and Staemmler, "Hashtags, Tweets, Protest?".

8. Cervi and Divon, "Playful Activism," 4.

9. Hautea et al., "Showing They Care (or Don't)"; Zeng and Abidin, "OkBoomer."

10. Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets*, 10–14.

11. Ibid.; Zeng and Abidin, "OkBoomer," 2470.

12. Fielitz and Staemmler, "Hashtags, Tweets, Protest," 426–27; 429.

13. Fielitz and Staemmler, "Hashtags, Tweets, Protest," 437. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are our own.

14. Maik Fielitz et al., "Digitaler Aktivismus: Hybride Repertoires zwischen Mobilisierung, Organisierung und Vermittlung," *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegung* 33, no. 2 (2020): 397.

15. Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets*, 2.

16. Hautea et al., "Showing They Care (or Don't)," 3.

17. Ann-Kathrin Allekotte, "'Why didn't her team tell her TikTok is just mean social activist kids': TikTok und Instagram zwischen Tanzvideos und politischer Kommunikation," in *Jugend, Musik und Film*, ed. Kathrin Dreckmann, Carsten Heinze, Dagmar Hoffmann, and Dirk Matejovski, Acoustic Studies Düsseldorf 4 (Düsseldorf University Press, 2022), 321.

18. Judith Ackermann and Leyla Dewitz, "Kreative Bearbeitung politischer Informationen auf TikTok: Eine multimethodische Untersuchung am Beispiel des Hashtags #wws," *MedienPädagogik: Zeitschrift für Theorie und Praxis der Medienbildung* 38 (2020): 73; Hautea et al., "Showing They Care (or Don't)," 3.

19. Ackermann and Dewitz, "Kreative Bearbeitung," 73; Hautea et al., "Showing They Care (or Don't)," 3.

20. Daniel Le Compte and Daniel Klug, "'It's Viral': A Study of the Behaviors, Practices, and Motivations of TikTok Social Activist," *arXiv.org*, (January 2021): 2–4.

21. Cervi and Divon, "Playful Activism," 4.

22. Cervi and Divon, "Playful Activism," 4.

23. Bojana S. Radovanović, "TikTok and Sound: Changing the Ways of Creating, Promoting, Distributing and Listening to Music," *INSAM Journal of Contemporary Music, Art and Technology* 9 (2022): 56.

24. Allekotte, "Why didn't her team," 318.

25. Hautea et al., "Showing They Care (or Don't)," 3; Allekotte, "Why didn't her team," 317; Ackermann and Dewitz, "Kreative Bearbeitung," 79.

26. L.J. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 5 sqq.

27. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), 247.

28. Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 14.

29. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 19.

30. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 179.

31. Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meaning of Performing and Listening* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1998); Nicholas Cook, "Between Process and Product: Music and/as Performance," *Music Theory Online: The Online Journal of the Society for Music Theory* 7, no. 2 (2001); Philip Auslander, "Musical Personae," *The Drama Review* 50, no. 1 (2006): 100–119.

32. Madrid, "Why Music and Performance Studies?"

33. Marcel Cobussen, "Deconstruction in Music," *Deconstruction in Music* (blog), n.d.

34. Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 79.

35. Cobussen, "Deconstruction in Music".

36. Madrid, "Why Music and Performance Studies?"

37. Jnan Blau, "More than 'Just' Music: Four Performative Topoi, the Phish Phenomenon, and the Power of Music in/and Performance," *TRANS-Transcultural Music Review* 13 (2009).

38. Sybille Krämer, "Was haben 'Performativität' und 'Medialität' miteinander zu tun? Plädoyer für eine in der 'Aisthetisierung' gründende Konzeption des Performativen. Zur Einführung in diesen Band," in *Performativität und Medialität,* ed. Sybille Krämer (Munich: Fink, 2004), 18–20.

39. Findusmachtrandale, Interview by Tessa Balser-Schuhmann, July 15, 2021.

40. Becks (@becks), "Zwischen mir und ihr stimmt einfach die chemie," TikTok.

41. During the review process, we noticed that the video "Like What" analyzed here was taken down by the creator themself. This process clearly shows the risk of online research. Especially on TikTok, it is difficult to treat videos in the long term, because there is a chance that the videos will be taken down by the creators themselves, banned by TikTok, or that entire accounts will be deleted. Especially in the realm of activist content, we have observed this several times. The last access to the video mentioned was on 15 September 2022. Findusmachtrandale talked about this specific video, as well as videos in a similar style, in detail in the interview with Tessa Balser-Schuhmann on July 15, 2021, so we consider the central information to be secured.

42. The ex-police officer TikTok creator has sparked controversy on German-speaking TikTok, with left-wing TikTok creators calling attention to his dubious opinions.

43. Findusmachtrandale (@Findusmachtrandale), "Like What," TikTok.

44. Findusmachtrandale, Interview by Tessa Balser-Schuhmann, July 15, 2021.

45. Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: University Press, 2009), 6–7; Julio Mendívil, "Auch Lieder entwickeln soziale oder verpersönlichte Biografien," *systhema* 21, no. 1 (2007): 83–85.

46. Madrid, "Why Music and Performance Studies?"

47. Our initial research was based, among other things, on different hashtags and trends on the platform, e.g. #IndigenousTikTok, #nativeTikTok, or #leftistTikTok, all connected to political struggles and their participants and/or groups. We understand Indigenous TikTok as such a group/bubble or community that creates and consumes content connecting to Indigenous reality, discussions, and political struggles around the world on TikTok.

48. Derrida, *Limited Inc*.

49. Notoriouscree (@notoriouscree), "27 million," TikTok.

50. Ricky Desktop (@rickydestop), "The Banjo Beat, Pt. 1," TikTok.

51. Tia Wood (@tiamiscihk), "Here's the audio," TikTok.

52. This raises questions of authorship of sounds and songs on a platform where the elements that make up the audiovisual content are subject to the possibility of modification even without the authorization of who owns the rights to the song.

53. Bobby Sanchez (@harawiq), "Quechua 101 Land Back Please," TikTok; Bobby Sanchez (@harawiq), "Quechua Native Rap," TikTok.

54. Shina Nova (@shinanova), "Had to redo this with my new tattoos," TikTok.

55. Shina Nova (@shinanova), "Had to redo this with my new tattoos," TikTok.

56. Qhalincha Puriskiri (@qhalinchapuriskiri), "Pueblos indígenas Unidos," TikTok.

57. Notoriouscree (@notoriouscree), "Decolonize," TikTok.

58. Philip V. Bohlmann, "Music as Representation," *Journal of Musicological Research* 24, no. 3–4 (2005).

59. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*; and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

60. Krämer, "Performativität," 17.

61. Óscar Hernández, "The Semiology of Music as a Tool for the Social Study of Music," *Cuadernos de Música, Artes Visuales y Artes Escénicas* 7, no. 1 (2012).

62. Cobussen, "Deconstruction in Music."