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In search of unbordered homelands: Exploring the role of music in building affective internationalist politics of solidarity

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Abstract
As racial nationalist regimes across the globe consolidate their power through their interconnections, so their efforts to divide people along lines of ‘race’, ethnicity, faith, nationality, immigration status and differentiated citizenship laws continue apace. With social media trolling and ‘fake news’ increasingly used as additional sources of power for the radical right, challenging racial nationalist narratives requires innovative forms of affective politics. One among these that can build transnational solidarity and also potentially celebrate working-class cultures is music. This article explores connections being made through music within and across national boundaries and across time. Case studies include music developed by those struggling against discriminatory (anti-Muslim) citizenship laws and state violence in India, and socialist internationalist Yiddish music – originally developed to protest against both anti-Semitic pogroms and exploitative employment conditions and currently being revived in the US, Europe and elsewhere.

Keywords
borders, citizenship, music, racial nationalism, resistance, transnational solidarity

The world is getting hotter and we’re running out of both space and time; there’s nowhere to escape to and no more room for prevarication. Almost everywhere, in the face of this fatal entanglement, societies are turning inward – to the nation, to the sovereign state, and especially to its power to exclude and punish. It is easy to imagine the millions or billions of deaths that climate change will cause this century as deaths caused by drowning, natural disaster, scarcity or disease, but most of them will be caused by conflict, by poverty and by borders. Those lethal...
borders are built and sustained not only by guards and fences and checkpoints, but by ideological structures which determine who qualifies and who does not, based on the convenient, and necessarily ever more closely policed, fictions of race, nationality and belonging. These fictions always take a local form. . . (Mitchell, 2021, pp. 6–7)

This article is part of an ongoing conversation between two people whose very different lives and commitments stretch – when permitted – across the borders of nation states. We have thought together over several years about the connections between the increasingly exclusive nationalisms of regimes in power in the countries that we live in and have moved between, as well as the entanglements of these with racial nationalist movements and state regimes elsewhere, and with capitalist exploitation, oppression and dispossession. Because such connections and entanglements reinforce the power of states, militaries and large private corporations, and thereby render pathways to progressive, emancipatory change within any single nation-state ever more limited, it is important to explore the potential for transnational solidarities of struggle.

If, as Diarmaid Kelliher (2021, p. 6) maintains, ‘solidarity can establish new relationships across social and geographical boundaries’, such solidarities are nevertheless fraught with challenges. We can never take them for granted, and never should, but keep working at them. ‘There are friends I will make/And bonds I will break/As the seasons roll by/And we build our own sky’, Joan Baez wrote in ‘A Song for David’. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2020) puts it, ‘We have to be attentive to the many different kinds of factors, places and processes through which people come to consciousness through fomenting liberation struggle. It’s a form of solidarity; it’s making solidarity. Solidarity is something that is made and remade. It never just is.’ Transnational solidarities are even more difficult as there are inevitable tensions and contradictions arising from the legacies of European empires which often mean that, even within movements of resistance, some people and countries have much greater voice and power than others (Featherstone et al., 2022, pp. 6–7). But, in spite of such challenges and differences, transnational solidarities and resistance are always in the making. In this article we attempt to maintain our different voices and different locations in history and society, but in a spirit of solidarity, or, as Kelliher (2021, p. 207) puts it, ‘to articulate commonalities without submerging differences’. Together, we explore examples of places and times when the medium of music has contributed to intersectional struggles towards an internationalist, universalist politics. We are talking specifically about music because music as resistance was at the root of our first connection and it is what we have continued to share through these years.

In what follows we retain our individual voices using the conversational format. The article thus offers a creative, affective and performative practice of solidarity through discursive interaction and sociality. We both engage with how songs emerge, change, are translated, listened to, heard and performed in multiple context-specific ways. We begin with Ben describing his first encounter with Moushumi at a performance-presentation of hers in the days following the UK’s 2016 vote for Brexit, and how her work reconnected him with the sense of home he felt in 1970s London’s musical multiculture. This flows into Moushumi discussing the genesis of her song ‘Bari Kothay?’ (Where is Home?) in the context of her arrival in London at the turn of the century, having left behind a home
and a fulfilling job in Kolkata. She reflects not only on where home is to be found but what it is, exposing the state indifference to violence in India at multiple scales and, in particular, to the violence of the border. Ben then picks up the theme of state violence: from deadly violence against Black people in the US to the Nazi Holocaust in Europe. He explores how polymath singer-activist Paul Robeson contested racist oppression in multiple contexts including struggles against European colonialism and protest against the purge of Jewish activists, artists and intellectuals by the Soviet state from the mid-1930s (McGeever, 2019, p. 215). Ben then turns to his ongoing and deepening encounter with the unbordered, revolutionary songs of Yiddishland. In the closing section, Moushumi opens up the conversation to some of the limitations of transnational solidarity, highlighting how and why some songs migrate and others do not – an outcome of continuing geopolitical inequality rooted in the history of European colonialisms. However, she also talks about other flows, across a partitioned land, with shared histories and songs. Thus, we end on a note of hope.

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Ben: I first met Moushumi on 29 June 2016 at the International Oral History Association conference in Bengaluru, where she was invited to make a presentation-performance as an artist who works with orality. In the backdrop of our meeting was the India of Narendra Modi’s first term, and this was just six days after the UK’s majority vote for Brexit. Both countries had experienced decades of neoliberalism. The majority vote for the UK to leave the EU – a narrow one in Wales and a far heftier one in England outside London – and Modi’s rise, represented, among other things, a consolidation of the power of racial nationalism in both contexts. I was feeling emotionally shattered by the Brexit referendum result. Because of the tenor of the Leave campaign it seemed to me even then to strike a blow for nationalism and for purity, for white supremacy and against everyday multiculture (Rogaly, 2021). This cut me to the core as a multiple heritage son of a secular Jewish father, an immigrant from South Africa to the UK, and a Christian mother and as the partner of a Sikh Punjabi woman, and now a father of multiple heritage children of colour of the generation referred to as ‘millennial’.

To borrow from a recent Bob Dylan song, Moushumi’s performance that night ‘contain[ed] multitudes’.5 She drew on her vast archive of recordings from West Bengal and Bangladeshi and from the Bengali diaspora – songs of immense power that overflowed the enormous venue, sung by artists many of whom had never received any acclaim outside of their localities. The Bengali language was a connection for me because, although presenting on my more recent, UK-based, research at the conference, my PhD research had been conducted in Bengal. I had studied Bengali at SOAS and lived in West Bengal for a number of years. Then when Moushumi herself sang, her voice, the Bengali lyrics and themes of the songs sliced me open. The songs ‘Bari Kothay’ (Where is Home?) and ‘Joshor (Jessore) Road’ in particular were like knives accentuating the split I felt over the Brexit result and what it might mean for the future.

‘Joshor Road’ evokes a line of hungry refugees, some of them near death, moving from East Pakistan to Kolkata, India, during the 1971 War of Liberation in Bangladesh.6 The song contains allusions to Kolkata that triggered memories of periods I spent living there in the late 1980s and 1990s, and of close friends in that city and its surrounding
districts. Moushumi’s set included a recording of the Asian Dub Foundation talking with each other in a rehearsal studio, the unmistakable sound of London’s multiculture – familiar to me from growing up in that city – and the entanglement of that multiculture with both everyday and more violent racisms. Caspar Melville writes about how, in 1970s and 1980s London, ‘self-generated musical cultures [were] produced from the margins, often by those who had few other cultural or economic options, . . . open[ing] up space for counter-narrative and the founding of multi-cultural alternatives’. As a teenager in the 1970s such alternatives felt like home to me.

For example, late 1970s performances by Linton Kwesi Johnson of his poetry set to music were central to my experience of London at the time and an earlier part of my anti-colonial education. ‘Reggae fi Radni’, Linton Kwesi Johnson’s tribute to the West Indian historian and anti-colonial activist Walter Rodney, is discussed by David Austin (2018) in his biography of Johnson. Johnson was inspired both by Rodney and his mentor C. L. R. James – another West Indian historian and a polymath, who was alive, in his 80s and resident in the upstairs flat above the Race Today office in London when Johnson was creating this work. According to Austin, both James and Rodney were, like West Indians as a people, ‘forged out of an encounter between the peoples of Africa, Europe and Asia and the indigenous peoples of the Americas – a worldly, cosmopolitan experience’ (Austin, 2018, p. 144). West Indian cultures were key to the multiculture in London that had been threatened by the National Front in the 1970s. Two-tone bands The Specials and Selector drew on West Indian and other heritages to push back against the racist politics of the Front and point towards a common working-class experience. ‘The two-tone bands . . . fus[ed] pop forms rooted in the Caribbean with a populist politics . . . pointing to the possibility that black and white young people might discover common or parallel meanings in their blighted, post-industrial predicament’ (Gilroy, 1987, p. 226).

Writing over 40 years later, Caspar Melville (2019, pp. 22–23) saw London’s black musical cultures as continuing to hold the seeds of resistance: ‘[I]n the context of revivified ethno-nationalism, the backward-looking desire to put the “great” back into Great Britain and the pervasive inhospitality to difference which seems to be currently defining Britain, placing these musical cultures at the heart of the history of the nation’s capital might work in the opposite direction.’

Talking with Moushumi after her performance and later on a visit with my son to her flat in Kolkata, I learned that she herself has a millennial son, who is based in London, and that she was often there. As our friendship grew, I and other friends got involved in organising three of her performances in Brighton and London. Moushumi’s repertoire continued to move me in ways that I could not yet articulate. In particular, the song ‘Bari Kothay’, though not explicitly political, connected to my own search for home in the sense of a vision of a political, economic and social transformation away from the dominant racial nationalist politics and the ongoing violence of neoliberalism.

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Moushumi: ‘Music is a realm that has a great deal to do with social justice’ (Davis, 2017). Let me begin with the song ‘Bari Kothay’, ‘Where is Home?’ It is hard to write about song and sound without the sound, because so much of the meaning of a song is contained in its utterance. At the same time, our silent reading is also a kind of utterance,
we hear the words in our heads as we read and write. It is not the intended sound of the singer, but a sound of the reader-listener’s making.

_Shibuj sankete rasta epaar opaar korar shomoy_
_Path er kon e shedin duto pore thaka shabda pelam_
_Bari kothay?_

When the lights turned green
And I was crossing the road
I found these words
Lying by the wayside:
Where is home?

They shadow me now
And circle my head,
Through poetry and song,
Flowing with the wind:
Where is home?

When the lights turned green
And you were coming from across,
I saw the words etched
On your face, in your eyes:
Where is home?

O city so vast, of traffic and crowds,
The words like waves come crashing on your shores:
Where is home?
In this shower of light, the glimmer of your signs,
The words now glow, now dim and glow:
Where is home?
They speed on your roads with the rush of cars,
Halt at crossings, turn, then run:
Where is home?
In the quiet of your room, in the corner of your sleep,
The words come and rest on the spread of your mat:
Where is home?
This morning after a wakeful night,
O city, they ring in your play of words:
Where is home, where is home?

The words, those words, I hear on and on,
As I blend into crowds of faces white and black.
Where is home? Where is home?

Music has a language of its own, which affects the listener. But the affect also depends on their multiple locations in time and space. It must have been Ben’s familiarity with the sound of my language, the political exigency of the moment (with, as Ben has said, Brexit looming in the air) as well as something about my way of singing, weaving a translation with the song, communicating meaning, the affective quality of the human voice – it must have been all of these factors which led him to feel the way he did when he heard me sing. Would this song have worked in the same way with others, under the same conditions? Would it work the same way with Ben under different conditions? Possibly not.

Yet, the words of the song have a general meaning that both transcends the conditions of this personal reception and crosses borders of nation/country/homeland. If home means refuge, then where to find refuge in this war-torn time? This time makes us all refugees. I remember writing this song as a kind of utterance, breaking my own silence, early during my stay in London in 1999 or 2000. I had arrived in this new country in June 1998. I went to London following my then husband who had a job with the BBC. Our son had just turned eight. To go to London, I had not only left a home but I had also left a job as editor of a niche gender and Dalit studies publisher in Calcutta (Kolkata), a site of intellectual growth for me. I had left a circle of musician friends and my audience too. Here I was in another and a different world where my purpose had radically changed. Hence, I was uprooted on many fronts and would feel engulfed in a silence. Then I wrote my London impressions and my everyday into this song. A political song, in the way our everyday lives are political.

Slowly, as time went by, I began to find my voice in my new reality. I began to sing this song with my newly-formed band Parapar with British musicians Olly Weeks, Ros Acton, Ben Hillyard and Ed Snow, beautifully arranged by Olly, and we recorded it around 2007. The song became the main thread of a film called Bridging My Home. By then I was living back in Kolkata and we recorded our parts in our different locations and put the song together at the mixing table. In 2017, I released my album Songs from 26H: Home Recordings of Mousumi Bhowmik, and put this song in it. In my essay in the accompanying booklet I wrote:

*What* is the ‘home’ that we are talking about, and *where* is it? In these songs, as in my work of all these years, including our work of The Travelling Archive, this is a key question that I have been grappling with. Perhaps because my personal history and our collective history is one of being uprooted or of engaging in acts of uprooting. In ‘Bari Kothay’ the question plays in a loop – where is home? . . . It is not just a question of ‘where’, but also ‘what’ – *bari kake boli*? What do I call home? Perhaps someday I will write a song about it. For now, when questions of nation
and state are being drilled into our heads every moment and we are being told where we belong and where we must belong, and how to belong; also, who belongs and who does not; I feel that my songs are the only way for me to say that I do not know where I belong. And, I have a right not to know. I have a right to say that in these times, when bombs most casually drop from the sky and boatloads of people leave what they knew as home in search of what they think will be home, I cannot know anymore what home is. If home is where I live in the warm familiarity of my stained teacup, then home cannot be where I get killed while I am having tea with someone I love or when I am listening to music or plucking flowers to offer to my god. No god comes to save me then.

Between 2017 and the time of writing, much water has flown down the Brahmaputra. Or, shall we say that much water has flown down the Tsangpo? The Luit perhaps? Dihang, Siang – what name shall we call this river which comes from the Manasarovar Lake up in the Himalayas and flows through Tibet, China, the northeast of India and Bangladesh? Shall we call her the Jamuna? Not just rivers, lands too flow from and into one another. I grew up in the northeast of India, in a hilltown called Shillong, and I see myself as being part of this flow of lands and rivers. We give names to places and rivers in our own languages, and make them our own. There is a sense of belonging, of intimacy, attached to this act of naming. Moreover, names are handed down to us, they flow from generation to generation, they are our inheritance. At the same time, we draw boundaries and put walls around lands and divide our waters. We divide ourselves in the name of faith and language, ethnicity and colour, we stop one another at borders and check-posts. We commit unspeakable crimes in the name of guarding our borders. That makes us not only part of the flow of lands and rivers, but complicit in acts of killing too.

Between 1979 and 1985, an anti-‘foreigner’ agitation took place in the state of Assam in the northeast of India with a running border with Bangladesh, over the question of citizenship and who could rightfully live in the state. As a consequence of this agitation, on 18 February 1983, a mass killing of Bengali Muslim peasants took place in and around a place called Nellie in Naogaon district of Assam. In a 2015 film by Subasri Krishnan on the Nellie massacre, What the Fields Remember, an elderly Bengali Muslim man, Sirajuddin Ahmed, who lost most of his family members on the night of the killing, sits on the shore and watches the waters of the Kopili river flowing towards the Brahmaputra. He remembers how this river used to be the playfield of his childhood. That was a time of innocence. Then came the time when one had to prove that they belonged to the land and the river belonged to them. Sirajuddin speaks softly, and he is deceptively calm. But he is talking about the killing of his loved ones. They would see corpses floating in the waters of this same river. Sirajuddin’s daughters would take part in the agitation against the ‘bidehi’ or ‘bohiragato’, the foreigner, because they thought they rightfully belonged to this land, while the infiltrator was some other. They would march on the streets with the agitators holding placards in their hands. Then when the killers came to their home and attacked and left, one of his young daughters on the verge of death, asked her father, ‘Baba, are we then the bidehi, the foreigner, the infiltrator?’

That time was the beginning of what has slowly become a politics of total hate and intolerance across India. To the question of borders and belonging is attached the question of papers. And this question of papers, of requiring the right papers to have the right to belong to a place, is becoming a key question in this time of intense border-making
and exclusionary politics not only in India, but all over the world. The question has come to dominate the politics of India ever since the far right Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), assumed power in 2014. When Ben and I met for the first time in 2016, the BJP were in the third year of their first term. In 2019, with the party in their second term, the government passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), which, linked with the National Population Register (NPR) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC), threatens to disenfranchise millions of people, rendering them stateless and without rights. The one-point agenda of this party is to convert the country, which has historically been home to people of many religions (with Islam being the second largest faith), languages and ethnicities, and to make it into a Hindu and Hindi-speaking nation. Such politics affects everybody, in greater or lesser degree, damaging both the perpetrator and the victim of violence. People may or may not have the right papers to prove who they are and where they belong. Even if they do, the papers might not come to much use in this climate of hate. The possibility of living side by side, with some understanding and some differences, such as we do within families, is ruined. It is this destruction of the family of the human that we are witnessing in our time.

The river Brahmaputra flows through the Darrang district of Assam. Here, in Sipajhar town on 23 September 2021, 28-year-old Maynal Haque (spelt Hoque in his Aadhar card which was proof of his citizenship) was killed during an eviction drive of the state government, along with 12-year-old Shaikh Farid. Not only was Maynal Haque killed, there was a photographer recording the incident on behalf of the state government, Bijoy Bania, who stomped on Maynal’s lifeless body which lay on the ground after the police had fired shots at him, as if to kill was not enough, there were still some scores to settle.

The Darrang incident was too disturbing to remain silent. Hence, I worked with visual artist Labani Jangi and together we made a short video entitled Nimat Kiyo? (Why This Silence?), based on the song ‘Bistirno Parore’ in Ahomiya, written by singer-songwriter, composer and musicologist of Assam, Bhupen Hazarika. The song is an adaptation of Paul Robeson’s ‘Ol’ Man River’. Ben and I had been discussing Robeson’s work (see below) and I had been telling him about the Bengali song ‘Birstirno Dupare’ which I used to sing, which in turn was a translation of the Ahomiya adaptation of ‘Ol’ Man River’. In our work Nimat Kiyo?, the old river Luit or Brahmaputra flows in silence, unmoved by the killing of Maynal Haque by the police, unrepentant of the sickness in the heart of Bijoy Bania. ‘Tumiye jodi Brahmar putra/ Hei pitritta tene naam matro. If you are the child of Brahma, the Creator, then what sort of a parent is Brahma to silently endorse such wrongdoing?’ ‘Are we the bidehi then?’ Rumi, Sirajuddin Ahmed’s daughter, had asked. Again, the river quietly flows. Kopili, Luit – they are all the same.

Singing Hazarika’s Assamese song about the burha or old Luit, mixing it with the Bengali translation in which Luit becomes the Ganga, sliding into the endless, uncaring flow of the Mississippi and returning to the Luit, in Nimat Kiyo?, I am singing about the universality of human suffering on the one hand and the indifference of our states on the other. Labani paints Maynal Haque lying on the map of India with his stick held in his hands, pointing skyward, in a gesture of resistance.
Ben: State violence long experienced by India’s Muslim minority further intensified after the election of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister in 2014, accompanied by attempts at legitimation through political statements, silences and government policies (Chacko & Talukdar, 2020). The involvement of police in pogroms against Muslims in Delhi in February 2020 was not out of step with this. In an earlier Facebook post Moushumi had asked, ‘What we are thinking about is, are we going to be thrown out now? Are we going to be sent to detention camps? Are we going to be packed into trains and sent to the equivalent of Auschwitz and Treblinka?’

The metaphor offered by the known history of Nazi genocide in the context of contemporary India and other countries animated Moushumi and my conversation. Music as a tool in the struggle against fascist politics and against the depredations of capitalism seemed even more important in an era when people had been voting in large numbers – e.g. for Modi in India and for Trump in the US – for policies that produced and reproduced differentiation between some humans as humans and others as less than that.

Music and song played important parts in the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the US and many other countries, triggered by the brutal police murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and reflected in over 400 years of struggle. As W. E. B. Du Bois emphasised in his 1903 classic The Souls of Black Folk, music of black liberation evolved through the experience of slavery and the memory of that experience. Du Bois shows how, ‘[s]cored in a minor key . . . slave spirituals function as central allegories for an exploration of racialized being and knowledge’ (James, 2021, p. 4). What Du Bois refers to as ‘sorrow songs’ are precursors to the work of Du Bois’ mentee and co-founder of the newspaper Freedom, Paul Robeson, who was directly connected to slavery through his father’s life story (Redmond, 2020; Rudahl et al., 2020).

In recent decades, the violence of European colonialism and the slavery and indentured labour that had such a central role within it have tended to be discussed separately from the Nazi Holocaust with its mass killings of Jews, Roma people and others. In contemporary Europe and the US, amid continuing widespread racism of all kinds, histories of racist oppression and mass extinction have at times even come to be presented in a competitive way – our-suffering-was-greater-than-yours. Anti-semitism, the Holocaust and European colonialism, including both transatlantic slavery and the mass killings of indigenous peoples by settler colonial states, have specific histories that are at the same time interconnected. Political education could inform the building of coalitions and solidarities, perhaps the kind of ‘horizontal alliances through the margins’ that Michele Lancione (2020) has suggested in a different context. However, instead of this, some states have actively produced a hierarchy of official anti-racisms, for example through school curricula, with a few adopting specific laws and policies to tackle one form of racism – anti-semitism – while other racisms are legislated against in the aggregate, if at all. At the same time these states have not tended to demonstrate a central concern with anti-semitism defined as hatred of Jews but have used more controversial definitions of anti-semitism that propagate the idea that opposition to Zionism, an ideology currently used to justify a form of settler colonialism, is anti-semitic (Behar, 2022). This contemporary trend towards a hierarchy of anti-racisms militates against
coalition-building between differently racialised people. But as I will go on to explore further below, resources for such coalition-building can be drawn from the 1930s and 1940s when leading anti-colonial leaders and intellectuals drew attention to the interconnections between different forms of racism and the struggles against them, seeking unity in the struggle.

From the 1930s, for example, Paul Robeson increasingly addressed his musical performances to the liberation of working-class people across the world, while continuing to use his art to fight anti-black racism in the US, and European colonialism in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In 1950, facing internal exile in the USA following the confiscation of his passport by the federal authorities, Robeson performed at Blaine on the US–Canadian border with amplification projecting the sound across the border into Canada. Shana Redmond details how in his musical activism Robeson paid close attention to ways in which different audiences could be galvanised to wider solidarity. For example, Robeson adapted one line of ‘The Ballad of Joe Hill’ at this concert from ‘“Says Joe what they forgot to kill went on to organize” to “Says Joe what they can never kill went on to organize” . . . made more potent the lyric’ for those present at Blaine (Redmond, 2014, pp. 131–132).

Late in life Du Bois visited the site of the devastated Warsaw ghetto and questioned his earlier prioritisation of ‘the color line’. In 1952, in ‘The Negro and the Warsaw ghetto’, he wrote how the experience had totally changed the way he thought about race and racism.

‘The problem of slavery, emancipation and caste’, wrote Du Bois,

. . . was no longer in my mind a separate and unique thing as I had so long conceived it. It was no longer even solely a matter of color and physical and racial characteristics, which was a particularly hard thing for me to learn, since for a lifetime the color line had been a real and efficient cause of misery. No, the race problem . . . reached all sorts of people and caused endless evil to all men . . . [T]he ghetto of Warsaw helped me to emerge out of a certain social provincialism into a broader conception of what the fight against race segregation, religious discrimination, and the oppression by wealth had to become. (Du Bois, 1952, p. 15)

Robeson, meanwhile, in spite of viewing the USSR as a bulwark against the racism of the USA, had powerfully – if indirectly – criticised the 1940s Soviet state for anti-semitic atrocities, including the murder of some of his close friends. He chose a performance at Tchaikovsky Hall in Moscow in 1949, which was broadcast live across the USSR, to sing, in Yiddish, the song ‘Zog nit keyn mol az du geyst dem letstn veg’ (Never say that you are walking the final road). Robeson also translated the lyrics into Russian so that they would be understood by the audience. They had been written in 1943 by Hirsch Glick, a resident of the Nazi ghetto in Vilnius, inspired by news of the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto earlier in the same year. The lyrics were set to the music of a pre-existing Soviet song. This is a song of defiant resistance – its refrain ‘Mir zaynen do’ translates as ‘We are here’. ‘Zog nit keyn mol’ was adopted by Jewish partisan groups as a marching song and became well known after the Second World War. But the resonance of the Tchaikovsky Hall performance goes even wider than Jewish defiance against the Holocaust or anti-semitic state terror carried out by the USSR. Because the performance
was by Robeson, it can at the same time be seen as uniting emancipatory struggles against US racism, the fascism of Nazi Germany and ongoing European colonialism.25

Robeson’s use of Yiddish was significant because Yiddish had been spoken by an estimated 75 to 80% of Jews in the world just prior to the Second World War, and the Holocaust was the main cause of the dramatic reduction in the number of Yiddish speakers during the twentieth century (Kahn, 2012, p. ix; see also Katz, 2004, pp. 301, 306–308). In the late nineteenth century Yiddish was the primary language spoken by over 95% of Jews living in the Russian empire’s Pale of Settlement, where Jews were subject to laws that restricted where they could live, what jobs they could do and the education they had access to (Brossat & Klingberg, 1983/2017, pp. 31–32). This was a time and place of violent racist oppression in the form of anti-Jewish pogroms, and intensely raw capitalist exploitation of workers, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Yiddish incorporates elements of German, Hebrew, Aramaic and Slavic languages. It is a language without a state (Katz, 2004, p. 276), an unbordered language. Radical Yiddish songs have been part of a more general revival of Yiddish culture and Klezmer music since the 1980s. Singer Isabel Frey, whose 2020 album _Millenial Bundist_ drew direct inspiration from an organisation that Jewish workers formed in Tsarist Russia in 1897, Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter Bund (more commonly known as The Bund), clarified that ‘[t]he Yiddish that I symbolize, the radical, socialist, non-religious, Jewish leftism, is only one of many facets of Yiddish culture’.26

Speaking in an oral history interview in 2011, another leading twenty-first-century Yiddish revival musician and former union and community organiser, Daniel Kahn, explained: ‘Musicians have always been on the borders of cultures . . . Yiddish, structurally, as a language, it was always about that. The many Yiddish speakers lived in an isolated world, because it was a multinational language, a transnational language, it was so open. It drank in so much of the world around it. It was cosmopolitan and travelling and dangerous. It was dangerous for anybody who wants to hang their hat on a national identity.’27

In the same interview Kahn elaborated on how he felt about Yiddish music. After noting that it can be ‘folkloric, sentimental, nostalgic’, he emphasised that it need not be. For Kahn, ‘[i]f you can take it out of that context, reactivate it, play rock n roll with it, it’s radical. That’s still rock n roll. That’s the blues. That’s punk.’ He recalled hearing Yiddishist Michael Alpert sing live. ‘He has teeth. Sings it with teeth. Dark, challenging, funny, weird, sexy, radical. So defiant, fuck you, complicated and critical about the Lodz ghetto programme. Brechtian . . . ’28 Some performers of Yiddish song, like Frey, Kahn and Geoff Berner,29 have drawn on the radical politics of other, earlier periods of struggle, developing their own versions and adapting them to contemporary circumstances. Based in Europe and North America, these Yiddish song revival artists all made connections with, for example, Black Lives Matter, and the wider abolitionist movement.30

Isabel Frey has deliberately made such connections a regular part of her performances, ‘So even those songs that do not have any political significance, I am imbuing with interpretation and meaning through my lead-ins to the songs.’31 She describes the songs on _Millenial Bundist_ as ‘workers’ songs, written for people frustrated with the situation they’re in or determined to fight for a better life, so through the medium of music also new forms of solidarity become possible’.32
I was unaware both of the potential political power of Yiddish music and of its revival when, in September 2018, after Moushumi and I had been in conversation for over two years, I was introduced to a secular Yiddish choir in Brighton via a Muslim friend, Dr Muzammal Hussain. At the very first rehearsal I attended, I was immediately struck by the warmth and curiosity of fellow choir members. For once I didn’t feel like an outsider because of my Jewishness. Instead I felt I might not be Jewish enough. The director of the choir soon reassured me. When speaking to her on the stairs I mentioned that my late father had been Jewish but not my mother. She said her Jewish heritage came from her father too. As I learned later, being Jewish was not a prerequisite for being in the choir. I haven’t looked back since. At the first rehearsal we sang in very upbeat terms about both brotherhood and sisterhood in the song ‘Ale Brider’. I imagined this not as diasporic Jewish nationalism but as universal emancipatory humanism. The song is based on a late nineteenth-century poem, ‘Akhdes’, by London-based socialist Morris Winchevsky, which as historian Vivi Lachs (2018, p. 98) has explained was actually a satirical take on the absurdity of the idea of unity between assimilated and better off Jews on the one hand and newly arrived Yiddish-speaking working-class Jews on the other.

I knew nothing of this history in spite of my Jewish paternal grandmother’s family having lived in East London at the turn of the twentieth century and I was excited by the sound of the choir singing ‘Ale Brider’. The joy and humour of the song (referring to loving each other like a groom with a bride vi a khose mit a kale), the way it seemed to lift the whole choir while singing it, the Yiddish names Rokhl and Esther, which brought to mind one of my sisters and my niece. And alongside this there was a sing-a-long feeling to its ‘oy, oy, oy’ sections and an explanation at the top of the song sheet that spoke of socialism. Though it is not a street choir, something of my early experience of the choir resonated with the claim of The Street Choirs Writing Collective that ‘a sense of solidarity [and joy] can be transmitted via the songs themselves as well as through singing them with others’ (Campaign Choirs Writing Collective, 2019, p. 138).

I joined the Yiddish choir during Jeremy Corbyn’s socialist leadership of the UK Labour Party. I supported the party leadership’s internationalist and anti-colonial politics and policies. Yet these were being portrayed by elements of the media as problematic for Jews due to a prevalence of anti-semitism on Labour’s left and a reluctance on the part of the Labour Party to deal with it speedily or effectively. Left-wing anti-semitism has a long and sometimes bloody history (see, for example, McGeever, 2019; Virdee, 2014). Yet the weaponisation of anti-semitism as specifically threatening in its left-wing manifestations seemed to stand in the way of building alliances to fight against the continuing prevalence of anti-semitism across British society and against all racisms, without any suggestion of a hierarchy amongst them. Further, the attacks on the Labour leadership seemed designed to bring down the Labour left and thereby the potential for what could, at its best, be a strong coalitional, internationalist, anti-colonial and anti-racist socialist politics that was so badly needed in the face of resurgent racial nationalism, and, in the UK context at least, following 40 years of neoliberalism.

In common with many other leftist people of Jewish descent I was fascinated and inspired by the connection of a Yiddish radical tradition with a universal internationalist politics of emancipation, standing up against both capitalist exploitation and fascism and all racisms.
This connection was not made explicitly or in the same way by the choir where a range of political perspectives were present and the focus was on the singing. But for me many Yiddish songs, recorded and performed and changed across time, offered a palpable, visceral connection to a politics of liberation. Singing such songs could produce collective joy in a way that resonates with Robin G. Kelley’s (2019) writing on ‘Blues Internationale’ and especially his citation of Aurora Levins Morales: ‘[t]he audacity of joy as our anchor in the midst of catastrophe . . . There’s a joy that arises from being with what’s true even when that truth includes the terrible.’

Moushumi: It struck me while working with the young political artist Labani Jangi on our piece ‘Nimat Kiyo?’ (Why This Silence?) that a song like ‘Ol’ Man River’ so easily becomes our own, but our own songs remain essentially local. From the time of our anti-CAA-NRC-NPR movement in 2019 to the farmers’ protest in 2020–2021, I heard so many adaptations of the song ‘Bella Ciao’, in so many subcontinental languages. To my mind, therefore, more than the song, what we share more equally between our (in) different and unequal parts of the world is our vicissitudes – wars and walls, hate and hunger – as well as the human spirit of resistance. But, when it comes to songs of resistance, the reality is that some songs travel to other places and some don’t. In her aforementioned talk in Barcelona in 2017, Angela Davis (2017) was remembering how, during the time of their ‘political formation’, they used to sing the revolutionary songs of the Spanish Civil War. I suppose that for Davis and her generation, those songs were familiar, accessible and singable, culturally not too distant from them, even if in another language, hence a kind of ‘local’. Just as we used to sing songs of the Telugu poet Cherabanda Raju translated into Bengali or songs of the 1940s and 1950s Indian People’s Theatre Association in Hindi, Urdu and Bangla, during our own years of political formation. Interestingly, we would also sing Joan Baez and Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan, as if they too were our own. It is possible to see this as our advantage too, as the post-colonial subject, where we are more culturally accommodating, and can take more from the outside.

There are other musical and sonic exchanges and migrations which take place within a wider ‘local’, within a geography beyond geopolitical boundaries of our nation-states. Between Pakistan, Bangladesh, Kashmir and India for example, owing to our shared histories and shared melodies and an understanding and empathy for each other’s languages, there is a sharing of poetry and song that comes to us quite naturally. In 1979, the Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911–1984) wrote his poem ‘Hum Dekhenge’ (We Shall See), which became a major song of protest during the time of the rule of Zia U1 Huq in Pakistan when there was a ban on the poetry of Faiz. Singer Iqbal Bano defied the ban and sang this song at a public meeting in 1986. Then in 2019–2020, there was a kind of reawakening of the song in India, and it spread to every corner of the nationwide anti-CAA-NRC-NPR movement; everyone was singing it, also translating it into other Indian languages.

Raaj karegi khalq-e-khuda
Jo mein bhi hun aur tum bhi ho
(All of God’s creation will prevail
That is me and you too.)

It is during the movement against the discriminatory citizenship laws that the national anthem of India, a song written by Rabindranath Tagore,\textsuperscript{38} acquired new and complex meanings. On one count, protestors began to sing this song to claim a sense of belonging to the land; it became as potent as the national flag. This was not a matter of nationalism, but a case of a disenfranchised people claiming a place within a land. The flag and the song are mine too – that seemed to be the sentiment behind singing this song. The same song was used by the state to repress its people, when people protesting against CAA-NRC-NPR, beaten and crushed, were forced by the law enforcers to sing the national anthem. The protestors were portrayed as being anti-national and the song was a weapon by which to make people bow to the power of the state.\textsuperscript{39}

There is more meaning to draw from that particular song, however. Tagore’s original song was longer than the verses sung as the national anthem. The Chennai-based singer and activist T. M. Krishna first picked some of the unsung verses of the national anthem to sing as a song of protest during the anti-CAA-NRC-NPR movement (Bhowmik, 2020). Then others followed. I have also sung those verses with friends on marches. The verses make a song of its own, going beyond the nation. It becomes a song of solidarity in struggles against repressive states. The land we seek as home, home as the place which gives us shelter, is like the mother’s lap, where a child feels safe.

Ghor timiro ghono nibiro nishithe
Pirhito murchhito deshe
Jagroto chhilo tobo abicholo mongolo
Noto nayane animeshe.

In the darkest night
Your ever-watchful eyes
Heal the sick and dying.\textsuperscript{40}

We seem to have come full circle in our struggles and in our efforts to build solidarities. The question of where and what home is, is overriding. What then is home? Home is where we feel safe, where we feel protected. Home is the place which shows light in the darkest of nights. Which heals the sick and dying. Where is that home? Certainly, in our dreams and in the songs we can share with one another.

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2. See Tyler (2020, pp. 18–20) on the close entanglements between authoritarian state regimes and neoliberal capitalism.

3. This echoes and builds on Paton’s (2021) call for a strong ‘fully intersectional’ ‘coalitional politics’ in response to ‘state authoritarianism and crises’.

4. The lyrics for ‘A Song for David’ by Joan Baez are available at www.joanbaez.com/discography/

5. The lyrics for ‘I Contain Multitudes’ are available at www.bobdylan.com/songs/i-contain-multitudes/. Dylan is borrowing here from Walt Whitman’s poem ‘Song of Myself’, 51. Thanks to Natalia Cecire, who informed Ben of this while they were in conversation on the University of Sussex picket line in the 2022 University and College Union strike.

6. A translation of Joshor Road by Rimi B. Chatterjee is included in Jalil and Sengupta (2022, pp. 244–245).

7. This is referred to by Les Back (1996) as the ‘metropolitan paradox’.


9. A documentary by Debanjan Banerjee, made as a student project at the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute of Kolkata. Available at https://vimeo.com/58526834

10. Songs from 26H. Home Recordings of Moushumi Bhowmik with Oliver Weeks, Satyaki Banerjee and Sukanta Majumdar. Audio CD available from Travelling Archive Records, 26H East Road, Jadavpur, Kolkata 700032, India.

11. The Travelling Archive is available at www.thetravellingarchive.org/

12. What the Fields Remember is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=599LmFwHJwU

13. 20,000 kilometres of border walls had been built or were under construction according to Michael Agier (2016). As Nira Yuval-Davis et al. (2019, pp. 1 and 3) show, ‘borders and bordering have moved from the margins into the centre of political and social life’. Moreover, bordering is a process that is multiscalar, contributing both materially and virtually to a variety of local, regional and global political projects of governance and belonging.

14. Reetika Khera contrasts the original purpose of Aadhar cards as a unique identity number for all Indian residents with their use in practice as ‘a necessity to access welfare benefits and other services’ (in Amrute et al., 2020, p. 76).

15. The film is available at https://youtu.be/RGU8gl90V5A

16. For a detailed discussion of Robeson’s song, see Chapter 3 of Redmond (2014) ‘Songs of free men: The sound migrations of “Ol’ Man River”’.

17. Moushumi made a similar allusion in another Facebook post on 21 October 2019: ‘whether we will see our own trains to Treblinka is hard to tell’. Available at www.facebook.com/moushumi.bhowmik.33/posts/1410101862480358

18. For the period preceding this resurgence, see Orejuela and Shonekan (2018).


20. A case for the importance and potential of this kind of coalition-building is made in McGeever (2022).
21. ‘By speaking and singing [Ol’ man river’] in universal cadences, Robeson conjoined the issues of race, labor and internationalism in the vibrant political culture of the Black Popular Front in the 1940s and 1950s and used performance to defy the geographical and political borders of U. S. imperialism and influence’ (Redmond, 2014, p. 100).


23. An audio recording of Robeson singing ‘Zog nit keynmol’ at Tchaikovsky Hall is available at https://soundcloud.com/yiddishkaytet/zog-not-keynmol

24. Glick himself did not survive the war. See https://holocaustmusic.org/places/ghettos/vilna/glikhirsh/

25. Alana Lentin (2020) has written extensively on the importance of decolonising anti-semitism. See also Robert Cohen (2021).


29. Geoff Berner is a radical Jewish performer of Yiddish and other songs based in Vancouver. See http://geoffberner.com/

30. See, for example, Berner performing ‘Daloy polizei’ (Fuck the police) here https://youtu.be/ep7bX02Wbvg; Kahn singing ‘In Kampf’ (In struggle) in solidarity with students at the University of Chicago protesting the police shooting of Charles Thomas in 2018 here https://youtu.be/v0WYOWyrsUM; and Isabel Frey’s live Facebook performance on 9 June 2020 following the resurgence of Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of the police murder of George Floyd at www.facebook.com/isabelfreymusic/videos/3644775598882429


33. The Brighton and Hove Yiddish Choir is directed by Polina Shepherd. See Rogaly et al. (2022).

34. See the opening page of Englert (2016).

35. This is borne out in interviews I conducted with choir members as part of a research project on ‘Hopeful Solidarities’. See Rogaly et al. (2022).

36. For a detailed analysis of the Indian farmers’ protest movement, see Singh et al. (2021).

37. For a Kashmiri version, see, for example www.inversejournal.com/2020/04/29/kashmiri-bella-ciao-an-exclusive-interview-with-zanaan-wanaan/
38. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jana_Gana_Mana
39. An online video shows three young Muslim men injured and lying on the floor – their crime, they were at the site of the protest. The police stood above the men and, poking them with their batons, forced the men to sing the national anthem; see https://thewire.in/communalism/three-policemen-who-forced-injured-men-to-sing-national-anthem-during-delhi-violence-identified
40. Listen to Moushumi’s version at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8sxM3gasEU

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