A Rhythm of Popular Unity

Crowd Mobilizing Rhythms [CMR]

The effect... which by virtue of the logic of repetition is also both clarification and unification. The movement of the whole piece is towards a new unity—an image of popular unity—made up of related but diverse, developing elements (not to be confused with uniformity), coordinated and achieved by a blend of irresistible logic and spontaneous expression.

(Christian Wolff, notes for Frederic Rzewski's record *The People United Will Never Be Defeated* [TPUWNBD], 1978)

Wolff wrote the above about Rzewski's TPUWNBD, 36 piano variations on the famous Chilean revolutionary song from the 1970s *El Pueblo Unido Jamas Sera Vencido,* composed by Sergio Ortega to lyrics by the group Quilapayún. I find it more generally applicable as a way of describing CMRs, or protest calls. Wolff's description is apt as to the sense of the repetitive nature of CMRs, their unifying effect, and their diversity of subject, language, and rhythmic variations. CMRs are one of the most striking social behaviors of peoples' spontaneous expressions of resistance and solidarity.

Throughout the world, and in different social and cultural situations, rhythms and beats are used to engage, organize, and mobilize people. The rhythms of protest and revolutionary chants and songs, various sporting events, children games and rhymes, share many features.

In what follows I will identify those most common rhythms, give examples, categorize them into three distinct groups, and offer a hypothesis about their origin and commonality in different places around the world. I will focus on protest chants, which were the main idea behind my piece *Sumud*. Protest and revolutionary songs, or other forms of lyrics set into a melody, might share with protest chants the purpose and result of CMRs, but were left out of this current research. The prevalence of similar rhythms around the world, in many languages and cultures, led me to wonder whether there is some kind of "universal protest rhythm," or perhaps, more broadly, a universal crowd mobilizing rhythm.

How did those rhythms originate? Is there something musically, physiologically, or biologically inherent in these rhythms that makes them common in different places? Or did those rhythms wander via human contact from continent to continent, and later through media and technological developments? Since recording technology was not available until ca. 1877, it is hard to pinpoint an origin or even trace their evolution.[4] Nor can one assume what the chants sounded like before recorded evidence, although there may be clues in written sources.

My hypothesis is that originally CMRs were derived from spoken language, which suggests and dictates their rhythmic patterns, along with some of the most basic human biological systems (heart beats, breathing) and common social behaviors (repetition, gathering in groups, marching, protesting). Today, partially due to technological developments and globalization, a reverse process has taken place. We

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[4] Edison's mechanical phonograph cylinder was invented in 1877.

are now so familiar with CMRs that they influence and to some extent constrain the texts we set to them.[5] While I believe they have some inherent elements that made them evolve organically in different places, it is my assumption that there used to be more variety among the popular chants, which became restrained and more unified under the wings of globalization.[6]

Three Prime Forms of CMRs

Most chants — throughout history, globally, and not insignificantly, from my own personal experience — can be represented by three prime forms. Most other chants are variations of these forms.

CMRs are meant to be repeated, catchy, and easily memorized. They share basic and natural characteristics of rhythmic organization: short phrases (one or two measures); duple meter; repetition; and simple subdivision. There are other, secondary factors that shape the rhythmic patterns, which I will describe later. Here I focus on protest calls, some collected from various protests in which I participated, in the US and in Israel/Palestine. Others are taken from video and audio recordings of protests around the world, mostly found on YouTube.

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[5] One example for that would chants in which a word is repeated in order to fit those familiar rhythms, such as "Allende, Allende, El Pueblo Te Defiende!" or "Free, Free Palestine!"

[6] Examples of content unhappily wedded to and dictated by these rhythms:
"A baby's not a baby til it comes out…
That's what birthdays are all about!" or
"Fuck the Courts and legislature:
I am not an incubator!" or
"Porn, strip clubs, and the church!
This woman-hating culture is the worst of the worst!"
StopPatriarchy.org Chants, http://www.stoppatriarchy.org/protest-chants.html

(1)

    a. *Short form*: one measure of four beats, starting on the downbeat. The simplest possible form:
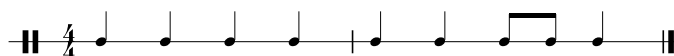

Example: "Make Love, Not War!" or "Hands Up, Don't Shoot!" or "Draft Beer, Not Boys!"[7]

Common variation:

Example: "Hell No, We Won't Go!" or "Free Free Palestine!" or American Sign Language rhythm (ASL): "BOAT BOAT BOAT-BOAT-BOAT" and "Virginia School for the Deaf's Fight Song."[8]

    b. *Long form:* two measures of four beats each, starting on the downbeat. The simplest possible form:

Example: "One, Two, Three, Four, Hell No We Won't Go!"

Common variation:

Example: "One, Two, Three, Four, Occupation No More!"

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[7] Sources are occasionally given for historical context, but it is often impossible to accurately determine a source for something that might have originated somewhat organically. Sources are not given for current and well-known examples.

[8] Bauman, Dirksen. Nelson, Jennifer. Rose, Heide. (editors). *Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American Sign Language Literature.* Berkeley: University of California Press 2006.
The "sign rhythm" examples are from the accompanied DVD.
 "BOAT BOAT BOAT-BOAT-BOAT" signed by George Kannapell (from a film by Charles Krauel) and "Virginia School for the Deaf's Fight Song" signed by Freda Norman
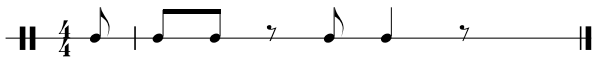
(2)

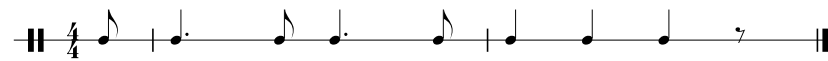a. *Short form*: one measure of four beats, starting with a pickup. The simplest possible form:

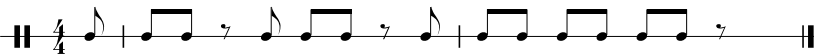Example: "We're Here! We're Queer!"

Common variation:

Example: "No Justice, No Peace!"

b. *Long form:* Two measures of four beats each, starting with a pickup. The simplest possible form:

Example: "We're Here, We're Queer, Get Used To It!"

Common variation:

Example: "El Pueblo, Unido, Jamás Será Vencido!" or the English version "The People United Will Never Be Defeated!" or the feminine, less common version: "La Gente, Unida, Jamás Será Vencida!"
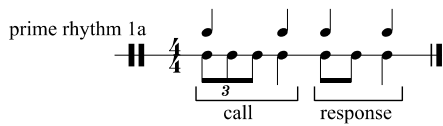

(3)

A form of call and response, one or two measures that could be categorized under either the first or second prime rhythms shown above.
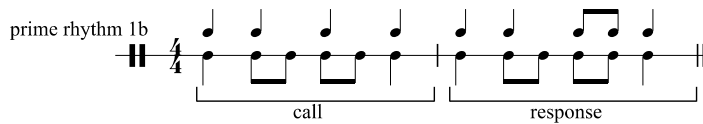
a. Call and Response: Prime Rhythm one

Short form:

prime rhythm 1a
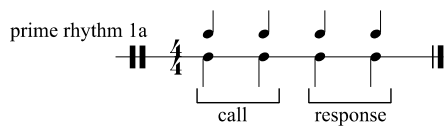
call   response

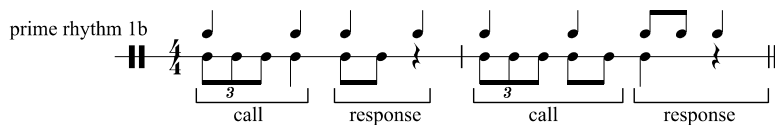Example: "Whose Streets? Our Streets!"

prime rhythm 1a

Example: "What Kind Of Pie? Occupy!"

Long form:

prime rhythm 1b

Example: "Whose University? Our University!"

prime rhythm 1b

Example: "What Do We Want? Justice! When Do We Want It? Now!"

b.   Call and Response: Prime Rhythm two

prime rhythm 2b
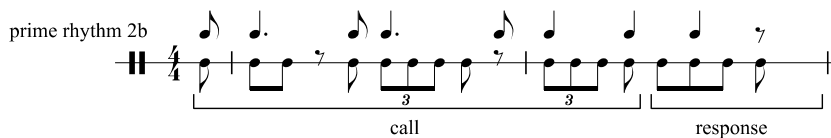
Example: "When Unions Are Under Attack, What Do We Do? Stand Up, Fight Back!"

Variations and chants in other languages

1.a. Variations of the short form, which incorporates rests and all possible simple

subdivisions of the beats. Simple subdivision: does not include triplets or dotted

rhythms. Subdivision of the fourth beat is excluded, since it is not commonly divided

except for in a case of call and response (for reasons I'll describe later):

4th beat silenced: "No More War!" or "I can't Breath!"

3rd beat divided: "Le-hem, A-vo-da!" "!לחם, עבודה"
(trans: "Bread, Work!" from Hebrew) and ASL rhythms mentioned in 1a.

2nd beat divided: "Bi-bi Ha-bay-ta!" "!ביבי הביתה"
(trans: "Bibi[9] go home!" from Hebrew)

2nd beat divided, 4th beat silenced: "Dai La-ki-bush!" "!די לכיבוש"
(trans: "Stop the Occupation!" from Hebrew)
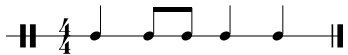
2nd+3rd beats divided: "Ma-vet La-smo-la-nim!" "!מוות לשמאלנים" (trans: "Death to the Leftists!" from Hebrew), or "Ku-lanu Pan-te-rim!" "!כולנו פנתרים"
(trans: "We Are All Panthers!" from Hebrew)[10]

1st+2nd beats divided: "A-ra-vim Ha-bay-ta!" "!ערבים הביתה"
(trans:"Arabs Go Home!" from Hebrew)

1st+3rd beats divided: "Me-di-nat Mish-ta-ra!" "!מדינת משטרה"
(trans: "Police State!" from Hebrew)

1st+2nd+3rd beats divided: "A-na-shim Lif-ney Shta-him!" "!אנשים לפני שטחים"
(trans: "People Precede Territories!" from Hebrew)

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[9] Benjamin Netanyahu.

[10] Israeli Black Panthers movement chant from 1971
YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oc17wBfFreE

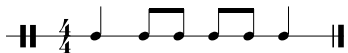4th beat silenced: "No More War!" or "I can't Breath!"

3rd beat divided: "Le-hem, A-vo-da!" "!לחם, עבודה"
(trans: "Bread, Work!" from Hebrew) and ASL rhythms mentioned in 1a.

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(trans: "Bibi[9] go home!" from Hebrew)

2nd beat divided, 4th beat silenced: "Dai La-ki-bush!" "!די לכיבוש"
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(trans: "Police State!" from Hebrew)

1st+2nd+3rd beats divided: "A-na-shim Lif-ney Shta-him!" "!אנשים לפני שטחים"
(trans: "People Precede Territories!" from Hebrew)

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[9] Benjamin Netanyahu.

[10] Israeli Black Panthers movement chant from 1971
YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oc17wBfFreE

1.b. Variations of the long form, which are mostly a combination of 1a rhythmic patterns, in any order:
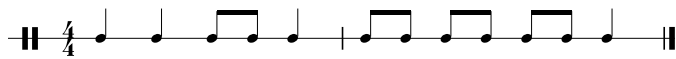
"Hu Ha Mi Ze Ba Rosh Ha-mem-sha-la Ha-ba!" "!הו הא מי זה בא ראש הממשלה הבא"
 (trans: "Who's Coming? The Next Prime-Minister!" from Hebrew)
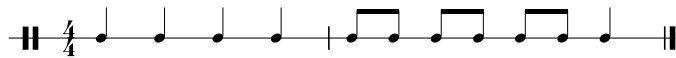
"One, Two, Three, Four, We Don't Want Your Fucking War!"

"Lo Tuh-lu Le-ha-mit Hit-nag-dut A-ma-mit!" "!לא תוכלו להמית התנגדות עממית"
(trans: "You cannot defeat popular resistance!" from Hebrew)

2. Variations of the second rhythm long form, which are mostly a combination of 2a rhythmic patterns, and usually includes 1a patterns in the second measure:
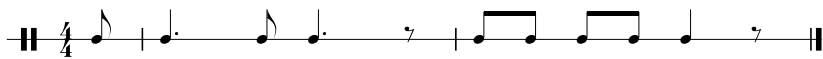

 "Bil Rouh, Bil Dam, Naf-deek Ya Fa-las-tine!"
"بروح بالدم نفديك يا فلسطين"
(trans: "In Blood, in Spirit We Shall Redeem You Palestine!" from Arabic)

"Bil Rouh, Bil Dam, Naf-deek Ya Sa-ddam!"

"Ha-am Do-resh Tse-dek Hev-ra-ti!" "!העם דורש צדק חברתי"
(trans: "The People Demand Social Justice!" from Hebrew)

"Resistance Is Justified When People Are Occupied!"

"Allende, Allende, El Pueblo Te Defiende!" (trans: "Allende, Allende, The People Will Defend You!" from Spanish).[11]

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[11] Chile, early 1970s protest. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WoTbjWdAT5I

Rhythmic Analysis

Musical Elements	Social Reasoning
Repetition	encourages mass engagement; enhances ecstatic elements; serves as a means of natural amplification (along with mass participation); clarificating and strengthening the message; unifies elements.
Duple meter	binary; simplest possible meter (two is simpler than three); symmetry;
Maximum of two measures	easy to memorize
Simplicity of rhythmic subdivisions	easy to memorize; simplifies the message; derives from syllabic division.
No rest on the first beat (and usually not on the second and third downbeats as well)	generates momentum; perpetuates flow.
The fourth beat is usually not subdivided, and often has a rest on the down or up beat[12]	physiological—leaves room to breath (breaths usually occur at the end of repeated phrase).

Rhythmic variations of basic chant forms can be considered a case of rhythmic

recursion, or a rhythm tree.[13] The basic rhythms are similar, but variations may

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[12] Except for in a case of call and response, such as:
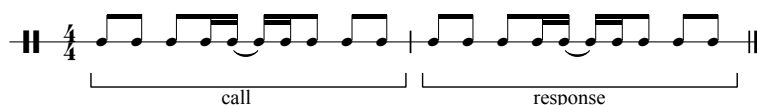
"Show me what democracy looks like! This is what democracy looks like!"

combine of any of the short forms. Possibilities for subdivision within metrical

limitation are endless. More complex chants may include triplets or dotted rhythms.

Example:

"Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?"

A Possible Etymology of Protest Rhythms

Chants: The Ecstatic Dimension of Protest Chants

The English word *chant* suggests a connection to spiritual rituals and religious

ceremonies, such those of aboriginal cultures, Islamic Dhikr, Jewish prayers, Hindu

mantras, Buddhist and Gregorian chants, and many more. The use of the word chant

to describe collective protest calls suggests their connection to the examples above, as

well as the similarly ecstatic dimension in their usage. Many elements of religious

rituals are present in today's communal protest chanting: the gathering of many

people for a shared cause; the rhythmic-speaking of a phrase; the repetitive nature of

the calls; the antiphonal structure; and the use of all of those elements to unite and

organize a group of people.

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[13] In analogy with the linguistic definition of recursion, rhythms can be almost infinitely subdivided to produce more and more complex structures, while maintaining the semantics and syntax of a sentence.

Language

Prosody plays a crucial role in the construction of protest chants. A chant's rhythmic

organization is derived from a phrase's syllabic division. The message must be

delivered in a concise, strong, clear, and unambiguous phrase, but one that is also

simple enough to remember and repeat.

Not all chants rhyme, especially short ones. But rhyme is generally of great

importance in shaping the chants, in fact often equally important to rhythm and

syllabic division. Rhythm tends to provide larger structure, while the text dictates the

inner rhythmic organization. Rhyme often dictates the text.

Language often defines a nation or group of people, both socially and

culturally. It reveals the uniqueness, differences, and individuality of places and

societies, especially in the age of accelerated globalization. Despite language

differences, there is an almost universal rhythmic similarity in protest chants. This led

me to the belief that aside from language, there are other, more universal parameters

that shape the structure of the chants.

Biological Aspects

Two main biological and physiological aspects might account for some of the

universals chant rhythm: heartbeat and breath. The rhythm of a *heartbeat* is often

described as "lub-dub." This is rhythmically connected to the second rhythmic prime

form, which starts with a pick up and contains dotted rhythmic values. The

circulatory system produces two main sounds associated with heart valves closing

and changing the blood flow, called LUB (S1, first heart sound) and DUB (S2,

second heart sound). The former is caused by the closing of the atrioventricular (AV)

valves, the latter by the closing of the semilunar (SL) valves. The sudden block of the

valves causes a reverse in the blood flow, and produces the sounds.
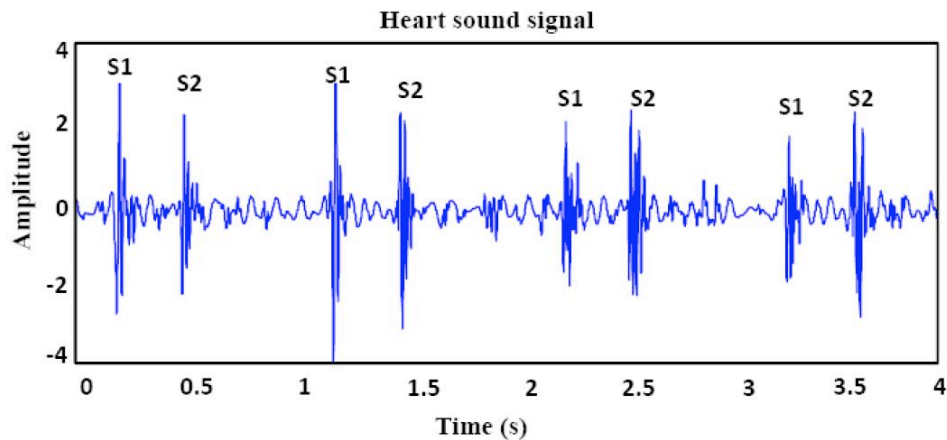

Figure 1. Normal heartbeat signal.[14]

During the continuous repetition of a spoken phrase, the rhythmic organization must

include space for *breathing*. This might explain the common rest on the final beat, as

well as the rarity of subdivision of that beat, for the necessity of leaving space for

breathing. For example, chants whose syllabic division suggests a triple meter, such

as "No More War!" are generally in duple meter with an additional rest on the final

beat.

Social Aspects

As noted above, in order for chants to be effective in a social, mostly spontaneous,

context, they need to be short, rhythmically simple, and easily recited and memorized

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[14] Biometrics Security Laboratory at the University of Toronto.
www.comm.utoronto.ca/~biometrics/medical/heart-sound-fundamentals.html

by a group. Continuous repetition is a means of symbolic amplification of the message, and is thus a rhetorical device. Repetition is also a practical way to naturally amplify the message, since it facilitates a mass of people chanting together, which is required in order to be effective and heard from a distance.

Protests are social gatherings and often include marching. A rhythmically synchronized walking pace might suggest a reason for the great similarity in tempi among chants. The idea of marching could also be an explanation for the nearly universal duple meter.

I Am a Human Microphone

Mic check / MIC CHECK!
With every few words / WITH EVERY FEW WORDS!
Repeated and amplified out loud / REPEATED AND AMPLIFIED OUT LOUD!
By what has been dubbed / BY WHAT HAS BEEN DUBBED!
The human microphone / THE HUMAN MICROPHONE!!![15]

Human microphone (also known as *human megaphone*, or *mic check*, or *people's microphone*) is another way of amplifying messages at large gatherings. It might have originated in the 1970s anti-nuclear movement, as a means of avoiding the necessity of a legal permit usually required for using electronic amplification devices at public assemblies. Once a speaker gets the crowd's attention, they split their speech into

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[15] *The Nation* blog. www.thenation.com/blog/163767/we-are-all-human-microphones-now#

short phrases to be echoed by the assembled others. With a large crowd, multiple waves of repetition might be necessary.[16]

The human microphone has a number of important results. The participants internalize the message itself through repetition, and also amplify it so it is audible for bystanders, who are often a specifically targeted group.

The human microphone doesn't share the same rhythmic limitations used to deliver a message in the form of protest chants, but the two methods share certain features. In both, the message is echoed, antiphonally structured, and naturally amplified. The rhetorical features of protest chants — simplicity, repetition, and emotional appeal — are also present in the human microphone, mainly through repetition by the crowd. An individual speaker's rhetorical prowess is also communicated, and transformed in interesting ways, by unison repetition. However, unlike protest chants, the human microphone can convey elaborate, more complex messages.[17] And also unlike protest chants, control of the message is empowered to the voice of one person.

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[16] YouTube. www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoJBZxOh4bY

[17] Examples for human microphone used in 2011 Occupy Wall Street by Slavoj Zizek and Cornel West.
YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eu9BWlcRwPQ
YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJbS5N-hzqs&list=PLLbMk27LYcnnnIxwrDbnNzX2kWLJnm40G&index=4

Silent Protest

Silent protests are an extreme sonic contrast to chants, but are no less powerful. An early example is the silent parade of July 28, 1917 in New York City, organized by W.E.B. Du Bois and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), protesting anti-black violence. The only sounds heard were those of muffled marching drums, while the voices of the tens of thousands participants were silent.[18] It is a powerful statement about deprivation of voice.

The loud, noisy ones do call attention to themselves, but a silent protest evokes feelings of mourning and loss, a deprivation of rights, people who have lost their voice or withheld their voice. This creates a real effect on the bystander and on the people doing the marching.[19]

Another oppressed group that frequently uses silent protest as a tool is the Mexican Zapatistas Movement. At the end of a mass silent protest in Chiapas in December 2012, spokesman Subcomandante Marcos said: "Did you hear? It is the sound of your world collapsing. It is our world coming back."[20]

Can silence resonate?

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[18] *NY Times* blog. http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/15/a-history-of-making-messages-heard-silently/?_r=0

[19] *Ibid.* William Kornblum, sociology professor at the City University of New York. Quoted in the above article.

[20] *The Guardian.* http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/dec/31/zapatistas-mexico-politics-protest
YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5K_z_ceSlwE

Unifying a Complexity:

The Dialectic of Protest Chants

Protest chants can be an expression of solidarity and freedom, yet they can be (and have been) used for controlling and oppressing people.

Chants can be tools for delivering the essence of a message in the simplest, clearest way, yet they also simplify and negate the subtleties of complex ideas—regardless of the political message.

Chants utilize the lowest common denominators of human expression by popularizing a message. They are pluralist: they can be a voice for "the common people," engaging a maximum amount of participants towards a specific end.

Chants can be a spontaneous expression of concision and sincerity, yet they can also be manipulatively rhetorical. Chants are rhetorical by virtue of repetition alone, but not only.

Chants can be the voice for people in the streets, for popular struggles, for diversity, for individuality. But they can also be a way to unify diverse voices into one voice, echoing a simple message uniformly, quashing individuality and flattening diversity.

Chants can use language as a tool for authentic nationalistic expression, but they can also transcend language differences and unite struggles around the world via rhythm.

They can be many voices and a single voice at the same time.

Is it unity or uniformity?

Coda

Physical resonance and echo are acoustic phenomena. They always occur as an impulse response, but are not always perceived.

Social resonance and echo can be literal or metaphorical, or both, such as in protest chants.

Political resonance and echo are only metaphorical.

…The European élite undertook to manufacture a native élite. They picked out promising adolescents; they branded them, as with a red-hot iron, with the principles of western culture, they stuffed their mouths full of high-sounding phrases, grand glutinous words that stuck to the teeth. After a short stay in the mother country they were sent home, whitewashed. These walking lies had nothing left to say to their brothers; they only echoed. From Paris, from London, from Amsterdam we would utter the words 'Parthenon! Brotherhood!' and somewhere in Africa or Asia lips would open ... thenon! ... therhood!' It was the golden age.[21]

Jean-Paul Sartre, Preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth, 1961*

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[21] Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 1963, 7.