

Gender-Inclusive Activism as Public Pedagogy in Music Heritage Contexts

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Abstract

While heritage is increasingly set at the heart of cultural sustainability discourse, its inherently political nature is too often ignored. Heritage includes both positive and negative dimensions of social life and the public sphere; it can serve as a powerful source of cultural identity, belonging, and social transformation, while also, for instance, sustaining gender-exclusive norms. This article acknowledges that heritage is a contested site, and argues that gender-inclusive activist interventions utilized as public pedagogy in music heritage contexts have the potential to reconfigure patriarchal structures, to expand the established socio-cultural boundaries of who is authorized to perform culture and bear or produce knowledge for/in/of the public. By foregrounding public pedagogy and drawing on feminist theories of cultural and social transformation, this article explores the potential for gender-inclusive heritage activism in Nepal to generate pedagogical sites of political negotiation and wider social transformation. The theoretical exploration illustrates how heritage activism can generate encounters in which authority is transcended, collective agency is exercised, and new cultural meanings are co-created for the notion of publicness. In activist processes, the chain of communicative actions between those marginalized - women in this case - and their allies holds the potential for pedagogical moments in which heritage narratives are reconfigured, political presence is asserted, and social transformation fostered beyond the actual staging of heritage. The article suggests that place-bending in gender-inclusive heritage activism can be a resource through which those with authority can challenge their own authorities to transform public aspects, both discursive and spatial, of heritage.

Keywords

gender, music, heritage, heritage activism, inclusion, intervention, public pedagogy, place, social transformation

Introduction

We used to hang out on the sides of the phalcha [public platforms in Nepal], where only men sat to sing traditional songs. If they needed something, like water, they'd call us to fetch it, but we had to place the water pot at a distance so we wouldn't touch their platform. We were treated like untouchables.

But I love that, today, I can sit on that same phalcha next to those men, along with my women friends, and sing with them. Passersby bow to greet us all.

I am now truly part of this neighborhood.

(A female music heritage practitioner reflecting on her journey, after a gender-inclusive heritage intervention into what was earlier, a male-exclusive music space in Nepal.)

As a female heritage activist and musician, working in a context in which women are marginalized as culture-bearers, I have personally experienced how heritage, while increasingly set at the heart of contemporary cultural sustainability discourse, may still be seen as non-political. Between 2014–2019, while I travelled across Nepal on various music-based commissions, I gained a deep insight into how music-heritage bearers sustain their practices and how these practices are embedded in complex political contexts. Heritage is not socio-politically neutral: it carries both positive and negative dimensions of social life and the public sphere; it can serve as a powerful source of cultural identity and belonging, while at the same time defending and sustaining, for instance, gender-exclusionary norms.

Yet, the dominant narratives on heritage preservation tend to frame the central challenge as sustaining endangered traditions, paying far less attention to the fact that music heritage is a highly contested, stratified, and gendered sphere. As Claesson (2017) observes, dominant narratives can implicitly categorize people and affirm certain identities and cultures, excluding others. In the music discipline, the scholarship on music heritage tends to emphasize the viability of musical ecosystems under economic, technological, and cultural pressures (Bennett et al., 2014; Schippers & Grant, 2016; Schippers & Seeger, 2022); it rarely interrogates how music-making as a social endeavor can unintentionally reinforce exclusionary social divisions and systems. Gender was long ignored even in UNESCO's heritage discourse (Blake, 2014), hence further marginalizing women and other minority groups within the broader social system of heritage (Palanchoke et al., 2026).

Research on music heritage across diverse contexts indicates that women are often positioned as instrumental to heritage survival—sometimes framed as a last resort in preservation efforts—while simultaneously being denied recognition or subjected to gendered devaluation (e.g., Janse, 2021; Bigenho & Stobart, 2022). Further, my observations of *Dapha* and *Ratyauli* music traditions in Nepal—cases presented later in the article—illustrate how women may be excluded from the heritage practice altogether, or women's heritage practices may be subjected to processes of sensationalization or sanitization shaped by neoliberal interests. The *Dapha* music tradition, a historically male-exclusive site that is only gradually opening to women, remains marked by gender-exclusionary norms (Palanchoke, 2021, 2026), while *Ratyauli*, though traditionally a women-only musical practice, continues to be highly sensationalized. In similar heritage contexts marked by gender exclusion, unequal authority, and market-driven appropriation, activist interventions that encourage and create inclusive spaces and narratives can catalyze transitions in which heritage practice supports not only its own continuity but also broader social transformation (Palanchoke et al., 2026). In this sense, as Lähdesmäki (2016, p. 767) argues, heritage is a process and performance through which tangible and intangible elements acquire shared meaning via ongoing interaction within specific social contexts. As such, although heritage functions as a site in which power and authority are produced and maintained, it also holds the potential to generate

new forms of power. Consequently, participation in heritage practices can contribute systemically to social inclusion and the empowerment of women and girls in public life—an objective that aligns with Nepal’s National Gender Equality Policy (2020) and broader national commitments to gender equality. This understanding also draws on the recognition that heritage activism, that seeks to challenge status quo and unprogressive attitudes and values (Lähdesmäki & Turunen, 2025), is embedded in social movements that enact and sustain alternative ways of practicing and valuing heritage (Mozaffari & Jones, 2019). Such movements open pathways for the social production of public space, shaping environments that encourage civic pride and social interaction while fostering community, reinforcing local identity, and addressing processes of social exclusion (Schuermans et al., 2012). This is particularly significant in the Nepali context, where efforts to advance gender equality must navigate tensions with the imperatives of cultural heritage preservation, given that socio-cultural structures have historically been patriarchal and male-dominated (Ghimire et al., 2024).

In this article, I examine the role of music heritage activism in the Nepali context, where, historically, women have been denied access to mentorship relationships, ritual contexts, and public spaces in which music is taught and performed, or where women’s music has been misappropriated by neoliberal cultural market. The exclusion is exemplified in the case of Dapha music illustrated in the opening vignette, a case that I have worked on as an activist researcher and music educator. In the vignette, one of the research participants reflects on her experience of exclusion prior to the activist intervention and shares her joy at gaining access to music learning and performance, which in turn fostered a renewed sense of belonging. She is among the few in her ethnic group who now have access to this musical heritage. Besides, heritage-making in Nepal has frequently been linked to global and national neoliberal policy orientations by numerous scholars (e.g., Sengupta, 2023; Sah, 2021; Sharma & Phyak, 2017; Yates & Mackenzie, 2018), which exploit the dynamic relationship between tourism, economy, and heritage, often subverting local practices. I observe similar dynamics in music-heritage contexts, where narratives of cultural promotion can be mobilized for profit by a wide range of actors, particularly when such narratives intersect with discourses on women.

In this article I argue that gender-inclusive activism in music heritage contexts has a great potential to reconfigure wider patriarchal structures in society by expanding the established socio-cultural boundaries of who is authorized to perform culture and bear or produce knowledge for/in/of the public, thus contributing to social transformation. I further argue that public pedagogy (Biesta 2012; Charman & Dixon, 2023, 2021) can offer a critical theoretical and methodological framework for understanding the public and pedagogical nature of such transformative activism. By foregrounding public pedagogy as a lens and drawing on feminist theories of cultural and social transformation (e.g. Fraser, 2014, 2005; Stephens 2013), while reflecting on my own experiences as a female heritage activist and performing musician, this article explores the possibility for gender-inclusive heritage activism to generate pedagogical sites wherein political negotiation can occur and new knowledge and understanding needed for social transformation can be co-created. Based on my earlier research, I suggest that *place-bending* (Palanchoke, 2021), as part of gender-inclusive heritage activism, can be a resource that is enabled when those in authority perform *parrhesia* – *truthtelling* (Foucault, 1983) – to challenge their own authorities to allow the transformation of knowledge and agency. In this line, I approach heritage not simply as a pinnacle of cultural identity, or as a monolith to be celebrated and sustained, but as a pedagogical site capable of instilling agency in/for/with those marginalized by reconfiguring existing authorities. By taking examples of my collaborative research with women heritage

practitioners and stakeholders from Nepal, the study illustrates how heritage activism can generate encounters where authority is transcended, collective agency exercised, and new cultural meanings co-created.

This post-qualitative theoretical enquiry approaches theory as emerging from practice, drawing on my engagements as an activist-researcher — including field encounters from my participatory action research between 2020-2023 with Dapha practitioners, and interviews and workshop-based interactions in 2025 with Ratyauli practitioners and stakeholders, to develop its conceptual claims. It is grounded in practice-based and empirically situated research conducted through my long-term engagement as a music heritage activist, educator, music performer, and researcher in Nepal. The analysis draws on a combination of field encounters, participant narratives, and workshop-based interactions developed through my community-based arts initiative, Folk Lok ¹ (2020-2023), and research interactions in the amplifyHer² research project (2024-2026). While the material from 2020–2023 is presented primarily through reflective accounts, the 2024–2026 phase includes audio documentation from semi-structured interviews and multi-arts-based workshops with music practitioners that functioned both as sites of intervention and as spaces of knowledge production. Rather than treating these materials as discrete data points, however, I approach them as relational and situated encounters that inform the conceptual development of gender-inclusive heritage activism as public pedagogy in music heritage contexts. Ethical considerations have been central to this work, with participants engaged through ongoing relationships of trust, informed consent, and collaborative reflection, and with care taken to represent their voices responsibly within the broader analytical framework.

Uncovering the political in music heritage

Don't include songs that mention alcohol bottles, please!

(A female music heritage practitioner, after recording a song that mentioned alcohol during an interview, asks to not use the song—because women from *good households* should not be singing about alcohol.)

In her critique of *authorized heritage discourse*, Laurajane Smith (2006) argues that heritage narratives frequently reinforce patriarchal and heteronormative frameworks by privileging male-centered histories. Within these frameworks, gender becomes a token theme—addressed merely through the acknowledgment of women's absence or through projects run on the liberal feminist ideals of individual emancipation (Bigenho & Stobart, 2022, p. 1123). As Whittington (2021, p. 247) summarizes, gender inequality in heritage is both a cause and an effect of broader societal inequalities. Bigenho and Stobart (2022) illustrate this through their study of the failed attempt to

¹ Folk Lok was a community-based arts initiative that I initiated at the Satori Center for the Arts with funding from the U.S. Embassy's Book Bus program between 2020 and 2023. The program developed organically as a collaborative effort following my initial engagements with Dapha practitioners in Kirtipur. Although it began with a short-term aim of producing a collaborative public performance for a music festival, it gradually transformed into a sustained partnership focused on ensuring the long-term viability of the practice within its community context. In this process, gender inclusivity emerged not only as an outcome but as a desired adaptation.

² amplifyHer, Transition Pathways Towards Gender Inclusion in the Changing Musical Landscapes of Nepal, is a research project funded by the Research Council of Finland (project no. 358072). This article has been produced as part of a sub-study of the project, which also constitutes my doctoral research. The sub-study received an ethical review statement from the Uniarts Helsinki Ethical Review Committee (statement no. 10/2024), issued in December 2024.

designate women's singing as a heritage object in Bolivia, revealing the contradictory gender politics that intersect with class and colonial power hierarchies at both national and international levels. The initiative, which required the gendered labeling of the practice as "women's singing"—a distinction not applied to male-centered heritages—ultimately failed to achieve legal recognition as heritage. Additionally, as they note, "the promotion of 'women's singing' operated within the already-mentioned gendered development discourses that shape agendas of NGOs, international funding sources, and Bolivia's neoliberal state, hardly undoes patriarchy" (p. 1124). Similarly, Janse (2021) documents shifts in gender roles within Japan's float festivals, where women have gained access to some previously male-exclusive roles, including musicianship. Yet, as she observes, limitations persist, particularly regarding drumming and leadership positions, which have remained male domains. Janse argues that the organizational structures of the float festivals mirror broader societal hierarchies: while change signals greater inclusion, existing power relations largely remain intact. These studies point to how heritage-making can reproduce structural inequities even when framed as inclusive or emancipatory.

The situation is no different for various musical heritages in Nepal. Nepal ratified the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2010. The period of the 2010s coincided with significant political shifts in the country—the rise of ethnic identity movements, the fall of the monarchy, and the declaration of a federal republic. Though researchers have found an increased recognition of discrimination based on gender among the general public (Malla, 2011; Yadav, 2016), both national and local heritage discourses frame music as being especially representative of indigenous or ethnic identity in relation to state marginalization. The discourses also consider music in the context of the rapid changes and loss attributed to cosmopolitanism and capitalism (Moisala, 2019; Stirr, 2012).

The complexity of intersection between heritage and gender became evident to me recently during a conference presentation on women's music heritage, when a participant asked: "*Is it (the women's music) not simply a tradition—how can we call it heritage?*" Though the comment was brief, it revealed a resistance: a hesitation to acknowledge women's musical practices as culturally valuable. This reluctance is not merely cultural but also political, because decisions about what counts as "heritage" are bound up with power and authority. The reduction of heritage to "simply a music tradition" reflects underlying social stratifications and obscures the multiple agents engaged in ongoing negotiations within intersecting hierarchies of gender, class, and caste. As Mozaffari and Jones (2019), I critically understand heritage as something "strongly implicated in political power relations" (p. 8). Heritage encompasses *dynamic actions* through which various actors continuously configure and reconfigure history, identity, culture, and power (p. 8). Women's music practices that I have been engaging with in Nepal must be understood as heritage – both in how they intersect with the social organization of common practices and in how they are increasingly entering contested policy and academic discursive sites, where they are actively mobilized and manipulated by local stakeholders and policy actors as markers of broader sociopolitical processes.

Sound, action, and authority in the public sphere

Music heritage as a pedagogical site for parrhesia

..in the actualisation of the public pedagogical encounter, authority flows between learner, knowledge and place. The educative agent has authority. The knowledge has authority. The educative agent speaks or acts, and in the space new knowledge appears and they speak/act on the authority of themselves and thus enact parrhesia. This is also a manifestation of the re-

authorisation of the self...When pedagogy encounters public what comes into being is the educative agent and the presence of authority. (Charman & Dixon, 2023, p. 34)

Charman and Dixon (2023), referring to Foucault, note that discursive determinants, including knowledge-producing institutions such as universities, function as power, binding publics to specific knowledge systems that regulate authority. Charman and Dixon explain that Foucault's *parrhesia*, or "truth-telling," disrupts such institutional codes and opens a field of possibility in which authority and knowledge may shift. The practice of *parrhesia* is dialogic, and is directed toward those "above": it involves agents who, being aware of their privileged position, speak their mind as an exercise of freedom and duty, even at the risk of dismissal by the majority or by established power (Foucault, 1983, pp. 4–6). According to Charman and Dixon, such agents are educative agents, speaking and acting on their own authority, bringing new knowledge into the public sphere. Through the lens of public pedagogy, authority and knowledge are seen not as static but contested, circulating through encounters of disruption enacted by *parrhesia*.

The *speech* and *action* of *parrhesia*, the transformation of knowledge and authority, and their contribution to *publicness* constitute public pedagogy (Charman & Dixon, 2023). Speech and action open up possibilities for the transformation of knowledge and authority, thereby generating a pedagogical encounter. Such encounters become *public pedagogy* when the question of publicness—who appears, who speaks, and who is addressed—is actively negotiated. *Pedagogy in the interest of publicness* thus concerns a public encounter when actors and events can generate new forms of political existence in which action is possible and freedom can appear (Biesta, 2012). To account for the multiple registers of voice and varied expressions of agency, rather than privileging speech alone—as emphasized by Charman and Dixon—I conceptualize *sound*, replacing 'speech', as a broad field of embodied vocal expression through which negotiation occurs in music heritage practices, ranging from singing to everyday conversation, laughter, silence, and embodied vocal gestures, and also the music produced by bodies.

In the context of women's music heritage in Nepal, authority over heritage performance is shaped by multiple discursive determinants. In some cases, traditional music institutions and cultural gatekeepers regulate who may perform and in what ways; in others, this authority is exercised by experts, government bodies, social media platforms, and public event organizers, all of whom influence how and by whom heritage is defined, represented, and circulated in the public sphere. In most cases, this authority is held and exercised by men. Gender-inclusive heritage activism must therefore be able to challenge such existing determinants.

Let me give an example. In late 2020, as much of the world entered hibernation under COVID-19 lockdowns, a traditional Dapha music group in Kirtipur, in Nepal's Kathmandu Valley, arrived at a historic decision: for the first time in its more than 300-year history, the group would invite women to apply for its next apprenticeship (Palanchoke et al., 2026; Singh & Palanchoke, 2023). Dapha groups are characteristic of indigenous Newa society— not simply performing music, but embedding music, performance, and ritual within a complex socio-political fabric that sustains communal kinship, continuity, and collective belonging. Each Newa town could have a dozen or more of such groups. Within Newa epistemology, the patron deity of music is widely understood to be inaccessible to women— even looking at the shrine is believed to bring misfortune to women, their families, and the wider community. These beliefs, together with notions of menstrual impurity, women's structurally weaker positions within households, and a broader pan–South Asian association of female public performance with prostitution (Widdess, 2013), have historically excluded women from hereditary music apprenticeships and positioned them largely as spectators or devotees rather than practitioners in public musical and ritual spaces.

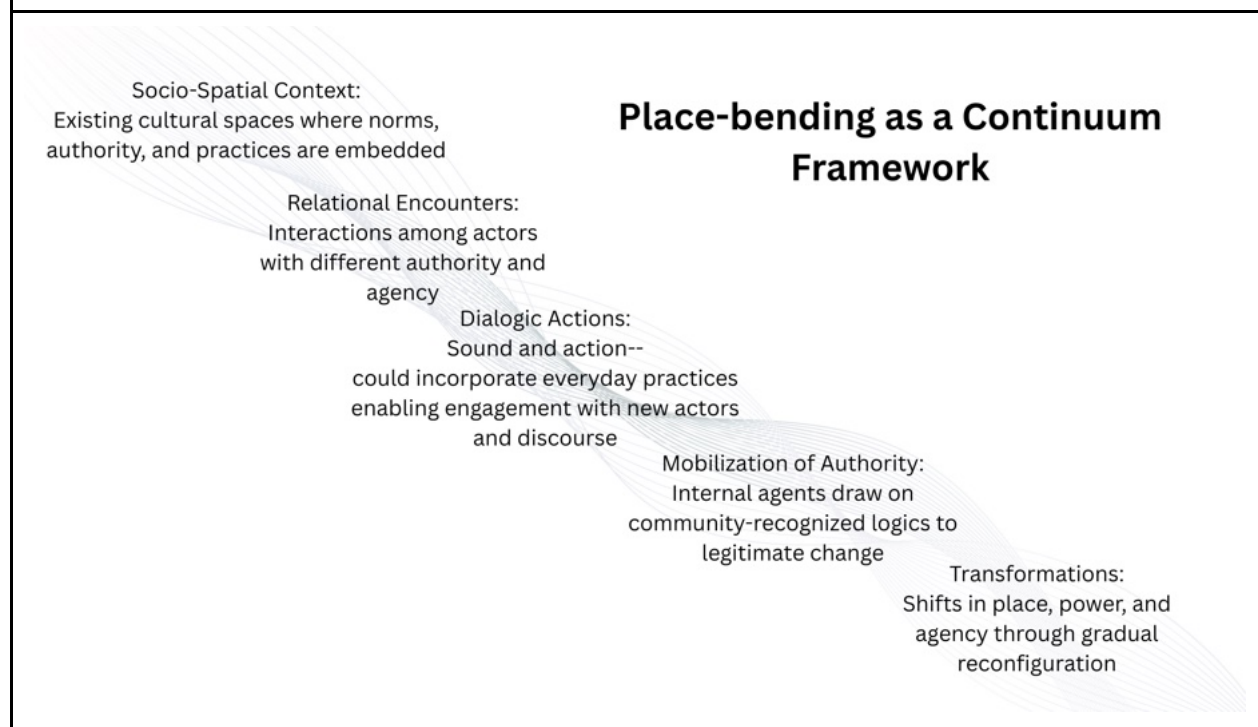
I first encountered the Kirtipur group as a female researcher documenting a heritage practice perceived to be at risk of disappearance through my community-based arts initiative Folk Lok. Alongside my female colleagues—who accompanied me for audio-visual documentation—we became the first women to enter the rehearsal and performance spaces of the group from Kirtipur. Our very presence became an act of parrhesia, beginning to demonstrate that women could equally be heritage enthusiasts—and even heritage makers. Through our presence, we expressed a different truth about what women can be and do within a heritage practice. I myself, despite being a married woman typically expected to assume caregiving roles within the household, was fully engaged in public and community life, at times even disregarding those assumed domestic expectations. One of the elder masters often spoke of his initial surprise at what he perceived as my boldness—a woman entering an all-male musical space during our earliest encounters. Together, my female colleagues and I enacted our own truths: that as women and girls, we can rightfully claim space within public life. Through our sound and actions—everyday conversations, questions, inquiries, laughter, singing, and acts of allyship such as documenting their music and practices—we came to embody the role of educative agents. Our participation subtly reconfigured the boundaries of a space that had long been exclusionary. Over time, the custodians of this tradition began to take up parrhesia themselves, signaling a readiness from within the community to move toward transformation.

Music heritage activism through place-bending

...place bending [is a] bending [of] the restrictive construct... (Palanchoke, 2021)

Before our entry into the Kirtipur Dapha tradition, women had had no access to these sites of rehearsal or performance. The circulation of female voices and bodies within these spaces initiated what I have called a process of place-bending (Palanchoke, 2021). Place-bending refers to a process through which authority is not directly confronted or overtly challenged, but instead is gradually renegotiated through relational encounters, everyday interactions, and forms of internal reasoning that resonate with values already recognized by the wider community. Through this process, authority is reconfigured in ways that make change socially legitimate and culturally intelligible, such that it can be collectively owned. Place-bending can thus be understood as a continuum framework, as illustrated in figure 1, composed of interrelated dimensions of change, operating within socio-spatial contexts where internal agents—whose authority transforms through relational encounters and dialogic actions—mobilize their existing authority and community-recognized logics to legitimate and open pathways for the transformation of place, power, and agency. In the case of the Kirtipur Dapha tradition, the encounters with female researchers, prompted male heritage practitioners to reflect on their exclusionary structures and, over time, to invite women as equal participants into sites of music learning and performance. In doing so, they transferred institutional authority to women through existing ritual practices, including those grounded in relations with the group's supernatural patron deity, opening space for women to cultivate their own agency. Today, women from this very same group not only perform within their neighborhood, as illustrated in the opening vignette, but also travel to nearby towns and cities, enacting public pedagogy beyond their neighborhood to inspire wider social transformation.

Fig 1. Place-bending as a continuum framework



The case of Kirtipur Dapha demonstrates how heritage, which plays a role in configuring social life, is not neutral, and can also (re)produce places that are themselves non-neutral. As the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1991) argued, places, as the situated sites of the public, are actively produced through social action in the present, much like the public itself. Indeed, as Solomon (2005, 2000) notes, in place-oriented ethnomusicology, musical performance is often understood as central to place-making: to the creation, negotiation, and performance of place. The concept of place-bending foregrounds a critical stance toward the existing place, in this way reaching beyond simply place-making and relying solely on musical performance as the primary means of transformation. Within the place-bending continuum framework, musical performance may therefore become secondary, since in many heritage contexts not everyone is equally eligible to enter, let alone perform without having first been given the tools for such new public action. Nevertheless, sound and action lie at the heart of place-bending.

Music heritage activism as mobilizing gender-inclusive public pedagogy

How wonderful it would be if our daughters and daughters-in-law could also sing Dapha songs.

(A male Dapha practitioner, commenting after hearing me imitate their song.)

Over time, the initial sense of enthrallment prompted the members of the Dapha group I worked with to reorganize their practices in ways that actively encourage women's participation in musical rituals and performances. These transitions include ritually opening the rehearsal site through prayers and musical invocations, organizing public events in which commitments were voiced to support women's music learning, and inviting women practitioners from other towns to play music and verbalize their experience publicly, in this way encouraging women from within their own communities. The internal agents with authority—such as ritual leaders, cultural custodians, or gatekeepers—therefore enact parrhesia by deploying sound as a mode of articulation and

negotiation, naming and acknowledging the injustices embedded in the system, and taking action to transform the boundaries of the existing place so that new forms of authority and knowledge can emerge. It could be assumed that women were invited primarily to fill a perceived gap in heritage preservation and promotion. However, it is important to note that participating women were encouraged to bring their own interests into the music group. They were not required to engage with a single, predefined genre; rather, most chose to begin their musical journeys with flute playing, while some also took up singing Dapha songs. While the group's earlier male members may have prioritized Dapha repertoire, women were able to pursue their own musical preferences within the collective. This transformation resonates with Fraser's (2005) tripartite framework of redistribution, recognition, and representation, highlighting that inclusive change involves not only equitable access to cultural resources, but also the validation of marginalized identities and their meaningful participation in shaping cultural practices.

In this kind of pedagogical process, authority is not simply reproduced but is redistributed, and knowledge about the place is re-scripted. Place-bending thus provides a framework for understanding how heritage spaces can shift from exclusion to inclusion without severing ties with traditional values, through negotiated acts initiated by those situated within the tradition. Hence, from the lens of public pedagogy, and through the recognition of exclusion, place-bending places responsibility for publicness and wider social transformation on those who already hold authority in one form or the other, rather than making an abstract and ephemeral musical performance solely accountable for such change. Place-bending calls on those with privilege to act for inclusivity, even when this entails personal risk such as boycott or exclusion from long-established exclusionary hierarchical norms and social structures, and when it requires sharing or transmitting one's authority to others. These negotiated acts can be equally encouraged or catalyzed by external agents such as researchers and activists. Hence, within the framework of place-bending, heritage is conceptualized as a dynamic field that responds to social movements.

Music heritage as a social movement: A mission impossible?

Maulik' (authenticity) means the experience from raising sons to getting them married. It's exactly about the son and daughter-in-law—what is done when the groom's parade leaves [for the wedding ritual], what is done when they return home with the bride, and how the home is decorated—all of that is shown and taught through it.

(A woman heritage practitioner explaining her heritage in the light of an annual competition that she has been partaking in along with her group.)

In the case of Dapha music, through the Folk Lok program I worked deliberately towards strengthening gender justice within and through music-heritage practices, collaborating closely with multiple music-heritage stakeholders. My current work as a researcher in the project amplifyHer has allowed me to continue the gender-inclusive heritage activist work with women of another music heritage, in this case a tradition that has been a women-only tradition. The authenticity of the women-centered heritage practice of *Ratyauli* in Nepal is articulated in contemporary discourse in a way that reveals a growing disconnect from women's lived experiences as political beings in their own right. Public forms of *Ratyauli*, like the annual competition referred to in earlier vignette, recognizes women only through their existing roles in relation to men, or to the established institutions that uphold patriarchal values. Women practitioners of *Ratyauli* are continually pressured to monitor and "filter" (as many research participants described) their lyrics, presenting only what is deemed civilized, appropriate, and culturally relevant within a patriarchal value system. Consequently, women increasingly sing less about their own embodied experiences

and more about fulfilling normative expectations—ticking the boxes of what patriarchal society seeks to uphold, namely heterosexual marriage and the reproduction of sons.

Ratyauli, in its customary form, is a wedding-related musical tradition in Nepal. Unlike Dapha music, it is performed solely by women and exclusively for women. The event combines singing with lyrical improvisation, dancing, drumming, joking, and short theatrical skits, often employing sexual innuendo and social satire. The songs address wedding rituals, expectations placed on newly married daughters-in-law—who typically relocate to their in-laws' households—and the emotional anxieties of mothers anticipating a son's marriage. A distinctive feature of Ratyauli is the embodied and vocal expression of women's sexual desires and frustrations, articulated through both song and performance. The gathering follows a playful yet structured format, and typically includes a masked comic figure who amplifies the humor and sexual symbolism. Within local belief systems, the absence of Ratyauli is considered inauspicious for the marriage. Specific to Hindu Indo-Aryan Khas communities—particularly Brahmin and Chhetri groups—who occupy high-caste positions within Nepal's social hierarchy and are often associated with the historical imposition of patriarchal norms across the country, Ratyauli has functioned as a liminal space. It offers women a space within an otherwise patriarchal social system. On the one hand, it offers women—those expected to embody ideals of civility and restraint—an arena for uninhibited expression; on the other hand, it has acquired a negative moral reputation. Despite its ritual importance, Ratyauli is frequently criticized for encouraging impropriety among women and for allegedly undermining their roles as wives and mothers.

The tension between women's inheritance of Ratyauli and their fear of participating in it is reflected in the recollections of one of the women I interviewed, who invoked generational memory to describe the practice as both condemned and experienced as a space of inherited joy and creative freedom:

We used to go, yes we went—even though we'd get beaten by fathers and grandfathers... Even though we struggled, we never gave up singing... We learned it from our mothers and grandmothers—our grandmother would make a horse out of a banana stalk and have wild fun.

(A Ratyauli practitioner speaking on behalf of herself and her sister.)

The intergenerational transmission of Ratyauli includes not only musical knowledge, but also agency. The interviewee, in the quote above, highlights how grandmothers model playful and imaginative forms of expression, transforming everyday objects, like banana stalks, into props for embodied performance. In doing so, Ratyauli emerges as a space in which women claim their bodies and agency through sound (music, singing and laughter) and action (theatrical enactments that mimic male personas and musical participation despite the risk of punishment) in otherwise restrictive gender regimes.

The same practitioner has further articulated the subversive potential of using everyday objects to act like men in the practice:

Women want to be 'lutho,' [masked comic figures disguised as men]; they want to be like men in this male-dominated society. In Ratyauli, they can let their hearts and words loose... riding [imaginary] horses. In real life, we weren't allowed to ride horses.

(A Ratyauli practitioner.)

This reflection underscores how Ratyauli enables women to symbolically transgress gendered boundaries through sound and action. By temporarily inhabiting masculine-coded freedoms—travel, speech, desire, and pleasure—Ratyauli practitioners release suppressed emotions and

articulate opposition in socially sanctioned yet subtly resistant ways. In this sense, Ratyauli functions simultaneously as an emotional outlet, a cultural safety valve, and a performative challenge to patriarchal constraints. Given that “social movements are sustained, intentional efforts to foster or retard broad legal and social changes, primarily outside the normal institutional channels endorsed by authorities” (Mozaffari & Jones, 2019, p. 33), Ratyauli certainly holds the potential to function as such a movement. Yet the very dynamics that bring Ratyauli into wider public visibility—especially within neoliberal cultural markets, popularization, and heritagization—also expose it to patriarchal and capitalistic structures that make such sustained, transformative mobilization difficult to realize. Sharma and Phyak (2017) observe that neoliberal economic policies and cultural movements in Nepal have emerged in parallel. As a result, narratives of cultural preservation and promotion are increasingly mobilized for private profit-making purposes. A similar dynamic is evident in the context of Ratyauli—commercial institutions and private YouTube channels attract audiences to their on-site events and online platforms, while capitalizing on the genre’s sexualized associations, yet in the name of preservation and promotion of culture.

The complex social configuration of Ratyauli, including the proliferation of social media videos and annual competitions staged across West Nepal, point to an increasingly sensationalized, yet simultaneously sanitized, form of Ratyauli.

...nowadays, sharing it on social media and telling sisters this and that, I personally don't like that. You can't say songs on sexual themes are vulgar—I don't agree with that. I also don't like how today's Ratyauli is put on social media saying so-and-so is like this, that one is like that [questioning women's character]. [Being able to sing such themes] is entirely our own right, and it's necessary too—after all, what is marriage for? What really is life? What is love?

(A Ratyauli practitioner.)

The central tensions facing Ratyauli in the age of neoliberal cultural marketing, namely popularization and heritagization, therefore underscore the risk of wider visibility in contemporary media. While offering new recognition, this public visibility, being in the public sphere, can also strip women’s heritage of its nuance, safety, and women’s control over its meaning—particularly when circulation escapes women’s consent and authority.

Music heritage as a social movement: Turning the social expectations

Considering heritage in terms of social movements “employs a nuanced understanding of heritage and its contestation that takes into account the role of negotiation, as well as a variety of means and methods of persuasion, which may not always result in overt conflict” (Mozaffari & Jones, 2019, p. 34). In response to the tensions facing Ratyauli, in November 2025 I conducted a three-day residential workshop in Nepal that brought together women Ratyauli practitioners, academics, media personnel, and competition organizers to collectively reflect on how heritage might be reoriented toward women and social inclusivity. These actors rarely enter into dialogue with one another, a separation that has sustained divergent and often conflicting understandings of Ratyauli: practitioners frequently fear misrepresentation; academics tend to frame the practice narrowly through wedding ritual and implicit alignment with patriarchal social values; media personnel often approach Ratyauli as provocative content for audience circulation; and competition organizers view it primarily as a tool for attracting crowds within commercial festival economies.

Conceived as an act of place-bending, the workshop intervened in this fragmented discursive landscape of Ratyauli by temporarily reconfiguring who could speak, listen, and exercise authority

within the heritage space. By assembling these actors in a shared physical and dialogic setting, the workshop created conditions for public pedagogical encounters in which participants were invited to articulate, contest, and reflect upon their own assumptions. Through structured dialogue, collective listening, and moments of parrhesia—where participants named exclusions, voiced discomfort, and challenged dominant narratives—the workshop sought not to dismantle Ratyauli as a cultural form, but to *bend* its boundaries. Its participants—occupying different positions of authority and drawn from diverse caste and class backgrounds—engaged with one another through four interconnected workshop activities: theatrical embodied exploration, collective singing and song creation, the learning of new musical skills, and a collaborative envisioning of women-oriented and inclusive futures. While embodied practices, such as theatre, singing, and music-making, first disrupted individual mental and bodily boundaries, these experiences in turn also enabled the bending of the discursive space itself, creating conditions for participants to question, renegotiate, and rearticulate inherited meanings and power relations within the heritage practice. In doing so, the workshop redistributed the authority and re-scripted inherited meanings, opening possibilities for change beyond the workshop itself into the lived spatial contexts where Ratyauli continues to be practiced and negotiated.

Sound and action as political practice for social transformation

I believe the entire workshop was extremely fruitful and impactful, because we were continuously learning, sharing, and engaging in deep discussions. Ratyauli is not only for entertainment, nor merely a spectacle. It serves as an accessible platform for women and everyone to discuss topics related to sexual and reproductive health, relationships from marriage onward, and even the toxic relational dynamics involving mothers-in-law, fathers-in-law, and brothers-in-law—a space where women can open their hearts and speak freely.

And today we realized the importance of making Ratyauli inclusive and effective. For example, many festivals hold Ratyauli competitions. Organizers should make these more systematic, ensure women are given leadership roles, and also include women in management and decision-making levels. Likewise, instead of giving only short-term cash prizes, organizers should provide long-term benefits to participants and winners. Furthermore, regarding social media, if videos are posted without the consent of performers, those should be taken down; and any Ratyauli-related content should be posted only through the official channels [in case of public stage performances].

Another important point is understanding how Ratyauli can help build an inclusive society. Including men in Ratyauli can enhance sharing of the emotional burden that [patriarchal] society always places on women. This topic, alongside many others, was discussed. Above all, what matters is implementation. Participants have expressed their commitment to implementing these insights.

(Feedback from a collaborating media representative illustrating the workshop's impact.)

All in all, the workshop with Ratyauli practitioners and local stakeholders, foregrounded Ratyauli as a social practice through which women articulate lived experiences of sexuality, marriage, kinship, and gendered power relations. Hence, the workshop acted as a gender-inclusive heritage intervention, which encouraged various stakeholders to enact parrhesia and reframe Ratyauli as a political site for sound and action – a communicative medium capable of the public circulation of otherwise marginalized knowledge and lived experiences of women. As articulated by the collaborating media representative, participants collectively reframed Ratyauli as a platform for dialogue rather than spectacle. This reframing emerged not through singing alone but through discussion, reflection, and collective deliberation on leadership, consent, representation, and

inclusion. Calls for women's leadership in performances and organizational structures, ethical practices around digital circulation, and the redistribution of benefits beyond short-term rewards, while educating the participating competition organizers, demonstrate how heritage activism mobilizes action alongside sound. When sound operates in relation to action, it generates pedagogical encounters that allow participants to reveal lived experience, challenge normative meanings, and reconfigure authority within heritage spaces. These actions — organizing, deciding, moderating, consenting, refusing — constitute pedagogical labor through which participants learn, unlearn, and renegotiate social norms.

Importantly, the workshop also challenged gendered assumptions about emotional labor by opening space to consider men's participation in Ratyauli as a means of redistributing caregiving responsibilities that patriarchal structures disproportionately assign to women. Moreover, discussions surrounding inclusivity explored possibilities for expanding social acceptance of marriages involving caste, class, and sexual and gender minorities. Together these discussions raised awareness for shared accountability and collective agency. Such moments exemplify what Charman and Dixon (2023) describe as public pedagogical encounters, in which authority circulates between speakers, listeners, knowledge, and place.

From a place-bending continuum perspective, participants did not seek to dismantle Ratyauli or fix it as an unchanging monolith. Instead, internal actors—cultural practitioners, organizers, and allies with varying degrees of authority—engaged in acts of parrhesia by naming exclusions, questioning established practices (at times even their own understanding and worldview), and committing to alternative ways of organizing heritage. Through these acts, the participants re-scripted the heritage, reconfiguring and bending its boundaries to allow new conversations and forms of authority to emerge. Sound, in this context, became one element within a broader pedagogical process, including dialogue, ethical negotiation, and institutional critique, and at times incorporated in improvisational singing, hysterical or satirical laughter, sobbing and silence. Thus, gender-inclusive heritage activism started operating as a pedagogical process in which learning occurs through participation, contestation, and collective reflection, opening a valve for social transformation. Authority in such communications and exchange is neither fixed nor withdrawn; it is redistributed through relational encounters that make visible the gendered structures embedded within heritage practices and open pathways for social transformation.

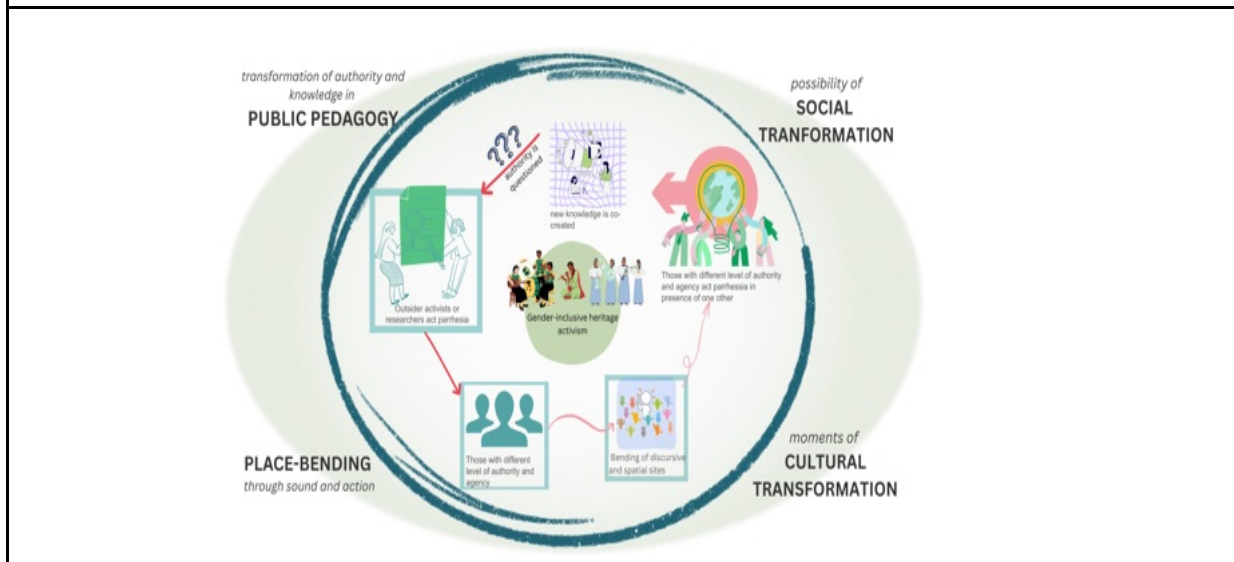
Conclusion: Towards transformative heritage

In this article, I have explored gender-inclusive heritage activism and continuum framework of place-bending in the context of two different music traditions of Nepal and in relation to Charman and Dixon's (2021, 2023) concept of public pedagogy. I have suggested that public pedagogy can offer a useful theoretical and methodological lens for identifying and revealing how heritage activism can function as a pedagogical intervention—one that brings into view the ways heritage practices themselves may reproduce gender-exclusionary norms and social structures, and by rendering these dynamics visible, demonstrating how gender-inclusive heritage activism can open space for acknowledgement, recognition, and critical reflection within heritage discourse. Gender-inclusive heritage activism can be understood as a pedagogical process in which encounters among individuals with varying levels of authority and agency create openings for questioning and transforming exclusionary norms. In these encounters, the individuals enacting parrhesia become educative agents when they project their sound and action to enable the co-creation of new forms of knowledge and facilitate shifts in both discursive and spatial conditions. These shifts function

as moments of cultural transformation in which established relations of power are unsettled and reconfigured, which in turn might open pathways for social transformation.

Fig 1.

Interplay between various elements of public pedagogy and gender-inclusive heritage activism.



Note. The figure conceptualizes gender-inclusive heritage activism as a pedagogical encounter in which actors with varied levels of authority and agency engage in place-bending through sound and action, enacting parrhesia to generate openings for the interrogation and transformation of exclusionary norms, and thereby contributing to broader cultural and social change.

Heritage activism, when approached as a pedagogical process, may encourage actors who occupy relatively privileged positions within heritage systems to act as educative agents—to perform sound and action with a degree of parrhesia—while at times, even remaining embedded within existing cultural value system. Such processes may emerge organically from within the cultural context, but they can also be catalyzed by external actors, such as researchers, as illustrated in the music heritage settings discussed here. While Charman and Dixon (2021) argue that educative agency may be unintentional, I contend that the deliberate and intentional enactment of parrhesia by educative agents is of greater significance. In deliberate activist interventions, heritage emerges not only as a site of transmission or representation, but also as a site of learning and social negotiation, where authority circulates, knowledge is contested, and new cultural subjectivities may begin to take shape. Heritage activism, then, can be understood less as a symbolic or ceremonial gesture and more as a pedagogical encounter in which publics are engaged, norms are questioned, and possibilities for what Fraser (2005) identifies as redistribution, recognition, and representation are explored.

By interconnecting critical heritage discourse and feminist praxis, it is possible to engage with debates that move beyond additive approaches to inclusion and in which women's absence in heritage practices becomes a psychologized matter of lack of motivation. Representation here is not limited to securing visibility or voice for women within existing political or cultural systems,

but extends to questioning how the boundaries of those systems are constituted in the first place. Within heritage contexts, feminist and pedagogical praxis helps illuminate how exclusion is sustained through institutional and cultural mechanisms that regulate who can speak, perform, and represent culture in public. At the same time, rather than seeking inclusion within pre-existing structures of authority alone, such praxis points toward the possibility of gradually transforming those structures through negotiated and relational processes.

By centering sound and action together, the approach offered here complements performance-focused perspectives in ethnomusicology and heritage studies, while drawing attention to negotiation and ethical practice as integral to the reshaping of heritage spaces. Place-bending continuum framework proposes a way of understanding how change might emerge from within heritage systems, through a chain of communicative actions between those who have been marginalized and those who hold varying forms of authority. These interactions hold the potential for pedagogical moments in which heritage narratives are scrutinized, reconfigured, and rearticulated beyond the immediate staging of heritage itself. Heritage activism, approached as public pedagogy, can form pedagogical encounters through which cultural meanings, political presence, and individual and collective agency become negotiated. At times, such encounters point toward moments of transformation; at others, they gesture towards more tentative ways in which heritage practices may become increasingly responsive to questions of gender, power, and social justice over time. In this sense, heritage can function not only as a resource for continuity, but also as a site of cautious, situated change and wider social transformation.

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