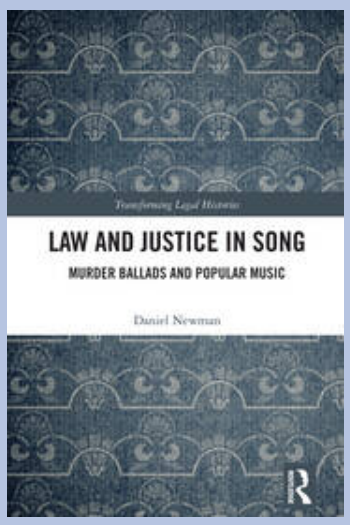
Law and Justice in Song: Murder Ballads and Popular Music by Daniel Newman

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Daniel Newman's *Law and Justice in Song: Murder Ballads and Popular Music* is an interdisciplinary study of the murder ballad as a cultural output through which we can learn how society engages with death, killing, and, through that, with social issues we attach to them such as discrimination, grief, memory, and justice at large. The premise that underpins this project is that death, killing, and murder "are foundational subjects in song as these emotive topics—at once universal and particular—occupy artists from place to place, and across generation to generation" (1). We need to engage with the topics of death, killing, and murder as part of our ongoing endeavour to make sense of our mortality and violence. These themes, Newman suggests, are simultaneously universal and contextual, appearing across places, cultures, and generations (1). He writes:

> As social creatures, humans need to engage in dialogue about such heavy, disorientating subjects, whether it is to share the burden or just make sense of it all. More loftily, we might try to render beauty out of tragedy … All such endeavours can be cathartic and liberating. (1)

Newman defines murder ballads broadly as songs concerned with death and killing (4). Some murder ballads recount historical crimes and therefore possess a documentary quality; others are entirely fictional. What unites them is their capacity to "offer avenues of existential contemplation and questioning of how these matters [death and killing—KLM] relate to a range of wider experiences" (5). In that, the book's objective is rather ambitious as it seeks to use the murder ballad as a lens through which to explore how we understand death and killing in society (263).

One of the book's most compelling methodological contributions to the field is its insistence that songs are better understood as performances rather than merely texts. Newman's approach draws heavily upon close reading of the lyrics, but avoids reducing songs to their lyrics alone. He observes that "the words are part of a fuller whole" (43) and insists that "we must take some interest in the performance" (43). Newman therefore combines a close reading of the lyrics, with attention to the artist's identity, performance style and tone, the musical atmosphere, and the broader context through which songs acquire meaning (43).

At its strongest, the book demonstrates how murder ballads provide what Newman describes as "a resource for getting at how people understand their lives" (283). Rather than focusing solely on legal responses to violence, he seeks to understand the nuance of how "ordinary people" experience and perceive death, killing, and murder, how we negotiate mortality. Newman presents murder ballads as a form of subversive legal history grounded in social and cultural experience: they reveal social understandings of violence that emerge outside of formal legal institutions. The book's intervention is critical, Newman argues, because it does not centre law, but rather recognizes that law operates at the margins of broader social understandings of death and killing. In that, the book holds considerable value as a work of socio-legal scholarship that occupies an intriguing interdisciplinary position between the study of law and popular culture, the study of law and music, and the study of law and literature.

Yet, a productive tension emerges early on and runs throughout the text. Although Newman frequently gestures towards the limitations of centring legal discourse in understanding the human experience, the book frequently turns to the law as a primary lens. Indeed, Newman acknowledges that "death is co-opted into the realm of law" (18) and argues that "the law has, then, a conspicuous role in death and killing. It tends to take over and force a legal lens onto the experience" (18). On occasion, the book appears complicit in this process of co-option, or, at least, it replicates the seeming inescapability of the law. For instance,

when Newman contends that previous scholarship has often left the legal implications of murder ballads implicit, his own effort seems to risk reproducing the very legal centrality he questions earlier on. This is not a flaw because, as Newman writes, there is benefit to combining the historical, cultural, and legal aspects, as the book does; the book is thus a study that oscillates productively between legal analysis and broader cultural interpretation.

Acknowledging the variety of ways to deal with death and killing, the following chapters are organized around thematic lenses for murder ballads. The first couple of such chapters explore morality, revenge, and bigotry. In discussing morality, Newman examines songs that frame murder through notions of right and wrong, where "lessons must be learned" (60), "consequences need to be faced," (60) and "moral lessons [are] being taught" (82). Particularly compelling here is the consideration of revenge narratives, where "murder [is] evoked in the need for revenge" (63), especially those in which women respond violently to abusive men. These examples allow Newman to articulate how certain murder ballads function as forms of "feminist jurisprudence" (75). The following chapter extends his concern with gender by examining misogyny and femicide. Through a gendered reading of the murder ballad, the form emerges as one of the cultural ways through which discriminatory assumptions are reproduced (105).

Through analyses of songs addressing racism, the lynching of Black Americans and fatal police brutality against them, as well as the Black Lives Matter movement, the chapter "Means of Resisting Inequality" demonstrates how murder ballads can function as tools of mobilising protest and fighting racial inequality. This chapter shows how songs concerned with death and killing can facilitate collective resistance and demand social justice. In doing so, this chapter exemplifies the political potential of the murder ballad and highlights the broader importance of analysing popular music as an object of socio-legal critique.

Equally powerful is "Tribute and Memorial," where Newman explores the role of music in shaping collective memory and how murder ballads are used "to commemorate those who have been impacted by killing, most obviously the victims whether those be the person murdered or those wrongly accused" (155). One of the better-known songs in this category is Elton John's "Candle in the Wind," a tribute to the death of Princess Diana. Popular music, he notes, can play a meaningful role, being "a way to express and channel emotion at a personal and public level" (134). Collective memory through music, therefore, "allows for shared grieving,

and cultural forms can be integral to the process of developing and enabling a shared experience" (134). Newman's discussion of "Streets of Sorrow/Birmingham Six" is especially evocative, where he demonstrates how music can rally communities through shared experiences of injustice and suffering (148).

"Gallows Humour" provides an interesting angle in the context of legal scholarship. The chapter examines murder ballads that are "bleakly funny" and intended to elicit laughter (181). Here Newman argues that humour has been "often overlooked" in studies of law and literature because scholars tend to focus on the seriousness of the law. The murder ballads analysed in this chapter are perceived as "black comedies". Depicting distressing situations "in benign conditions such as entertainment," he argues, can provide audiences with mechanisms for coping with anxiety and tension (203). Yet, he notes, black comedies should be taken seriously. In doing so, the chapter occasionally reproduces the tendency it critiques. At moments, the analysis appears to take humour too seriously, interpreting it through "serious" legal frameworks rather than centring the (very serious!) art of humour.

The final substantive chapter, "Faith," investigates how murder ballads engage religious understandings of death. The notion of salvation, Newman argues, can provide reassurance in the face of mortality, helping us cope with existential uncertainty (257). His examination of Christian narratives of sacrifice and redemption in murder ballads leads him to suggest that without the story of Jesus and associated "Christian ideas" of redemption, "murder ballads would have no source" (237).

Where there has been much "law and" scholarship on literature, music, theatre, and film, this book takes on a historical analysis of the murder ballad as a way through which "we can understand how death and killing in song have a function in dealing with the world around us" (14). Newman urges us readers to "respect and value" these songs as sources of knowledge, and he models this approach. Newman's analysis is consistently thoughtful, wide-ranging, and rigorous, attending diligently to material that is emotionally and politically weighty. The songs are treated as meaningful cultural artefacts capable of revealing how we understand violence, suffering, responsibility, and loss. The book indeed demonstrates that songs about death and killing are meaningful social texts that reveal how communities confront some of the most difficult aspects of human existence.

Newman concludes the introductory chapter by observing that "mortality is a tough matter for people to tackle; dying is a messy business,

and homicide is always emotive" (32). The central question animating the book seems to be how artists make sense of these difficult realities. At times, however, Newman's interpretive desire to produce coherence appears to impose order on experiences that are fundamentally resistant to explanation (just like law itself does). Death, killing, and murder are senseless even if the law seeks to make sense of them, and some of the strongest moments in the book are those that permit pain, grief, and ambiguity to remain unresolved rather than shaped into analytical conclusions.

Ultimately, *Law and Justice in Song* is a rich and thoughtful contribution to the field. The book will be of considerable interest to scholars of law and popular culture, law and music, socio-legal studies, cultural studies, law and literature, and the legal humanities more broadly.

About the author

Dr Kfir Lapid-Mashall *is a queer artist-scholar based in Glasgow. A professionally trained dancer turned attorney turned performance artist, his research messes with the broad, complex, conflictual experience of (in)justice. Spanning across performance art, live art, dance, and theatre, Kfir's work has featured globally in festivals, underground clubs and cabarets, performance venues, universities, and galleries, evoking societal issues like the global refugee crisis, worker's rights, the freedom of artistic expression, the policing of queer bodies and public sex, and the UK immigration policy. He holds a PhD from the University of Glasgow. For further information see his website.*

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