

“Sing About Me”: Social Media Memorial and Inventory Form

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There is a catalog of names that haunt Black political imaginaries and protest cultures; icons and leaders, family and strangers, whose names are weighted as evidence in the long histories of and movements toward liberation. Each is spoken of individually at the moment of the crime and meant to display a double burden of proof: the spectacularity of their particular demise as well as the quotidian nature of Black death. Violence is the original connection tying them together—Sean, Sandra, Ezell, and Quintonio—but in the last few years they have a new relation, new communion, and a new life in sound.

Music is oftentimes where and how people live. It's a dynamic experience of performance and reception that requires vigor, from the breath and muscle twitch of the singers and/or musicians to the hearing and processing of those melodies by the receiver. Music, then, is the perfect technology through which blackness is animated, even that of those presumed dead and gone. Songs of tribute for the deceased, including Nina Simone's "Why? (The King of Love is Dead)" and, more recently, "Trayvon" by Pittsburgh emcee Jasiri X, are sonic memorials intended as life support for the memories and visions of loved ones as well as hopes of and for communities who face ongoing structural and physical brutalities. Some of the latest incarnations of this musical strategy are directly influenced by contemporary protest technologies. Musicians have picked up on and expanded upon the labors of social media, which have turned the changing same of state violence into rallying cries delivered in 140 characters or less, hashtags, and memes. Music as a method of communication, organization, and vision is meeting the call again from insurgent communities for new narratives and representations of the many people gone.

Social media is animated by the local crowd sourcing of its participants, growing attention and information at a pace that outstrips network competition. It is now common for the mainstream media news to gain their information from Facebook or Twitter, making for a situation in which violent events reveal "native informants" who become experts, too often, of their own demise. The 2016 video that attended the case of Black Minnesota man Philando Castile, in which his partner captured his murder by police in the passenger seat of the car she was driving, is the terrifying evidence of a spectacular loss in real time. News networks were late to the

footage that became a part of the too-long memory of unprovoked police violence now encased in the matrices of the internet. The hashtags that document this person (#PhilandoCastile) and so many others are stored in a digital evidence locker to which the public might return as the victim's stories unfold. As Bonilla and Rosa explain, these hashtags are part of a "social imagination" that "serves as an indexing system in both the clerical sense and the semiotic sense. In the clerical sense, it allows the ordering and quick retrieval of information about a specific topic" (2015, 5). From this information new conversations and communities are made possible.

The types of publics created by Twitter emerge from the hashtag's capacity to serve not just as an indexing system but also as a filter that allows social media users to reduce the noise of Twitter by cutting into one small slice. However, this filtering process also has a distorting effect. Social media create a distorted view of events, such that we only get the perspective of the people who are already in our social network. (Bonilla & Rosa 2015, 6)

While the constitution of new publics of similarly positioned peoples can certainly "distort" perspective, this insularity also reflects the optimal use of the technology. If I am made to condense the announcement my anger, sadness, disgust, and frustration into 140 characters or less, it helps to do so with and to people who will understand and share in a common shorthand. Though a tweet of #SandraBland may be radically different when delivered by me (a Black woman) versus a Black man, we can nonetheless create identification with one another without the need for further language or context.¹ Imperfect, yes, but "the dialogicality and temporality of Twitter create a unique feeling of direct participation. Twitter allows users who are territorially displaced to feel like they are united across both space and time" and this is especially true for African American Twitter users whose numbers are almost 50% higher than those of white Americans (Bonilla and Rosa 2015, 7, 6).² With the rise of "Black Twitter," which journalism scholar Meredith Clark defines as "a temporally linked group of connectors that share culture, language and interest in specific issues and talking about specific topics with a black frame of reference," activists and other politically motivated people can tap into an ongoing and multiplatform narrative of redress, affirmation, and vindication (Ramsey 2015).

In the transition from personal phone to globally-accessible social media, these events are amplified, drawing attention, gasps, outrage, studies, and curricula through the hashtags that organize them in public consciousness. Through the multisensory liveness of video, with its dramatic scenes and sounds, we might begin to hear another metamorphosis from the event to the video to the hashtag and back into an alternative sonic ex-

perience. The epistemo-archival impulse that energizes Black Twitter—the urgent need to reveal, to document, to record—has continued offline in an effort to collate and reanimate the women and men condensed in social media by technological necessity. Unbound by word count, contemporary Black musicians translate IP addresses into time signatures in order to organize the “noise” of the Twittersverse into a unique repertoire of continued debate and rebellion.

A number of these communiqués between the artists and their publics have taken the form of an accompanied roll call, listing the names of those murdered as a way to both acknowledge the unrecognized while also, through the sheer numbers of them, demonstrating the pervasiveness of the damage by populating the siege of Black communities. Like the books that held tight the names of the enslaved, these sonic ledgers chronicle bodies but add to them the details of circumstance, history, and family that the slaver’s manifest simplified or denied altogether. Both sets of evidence are located along the historical trajectory that Katherine McKittrick has named the “mathematics of unlivingness” in which the “breathless numbers” of the Black disappeared are used to document the fact that they ever lived at all” (2014, 18, 17). While those named encountered violence differently, they nonetheless are drawn together by their shared dispossession through racism, which abolitionist scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (2007, 28).

Oakland born jazz trumpeter and composer Ambrose Akinmusire’s “Roll Call for Those Absent” (2014) models and announces this form but the attendance that he marks as absent is left amorphous, prodding the listener into a deeper engagement as those missing are identified one by one. The song begins by literally turning up the volume on the composition, bringing into higher pitch and frequency our engagements with Kimani Gray of New York, Oscar Grant of Oakland, and the now iconic Florida teenager Trayvon Martin. Martin’s name is the song’s leitmotif, being said by the child narrator more than a dozen times in just over three and a half minutes of haunting free form organ and drum. “Roll Call for Those Absent” is one of the first to reflect this contemporary form as a method of critique and serves here as a guidepost for the readings of two popular examples. The names represented in these songs belonged to women and men killed by police, vigilantes, and unknown neighbors yet those distinctions are productively collapsed in these inventories, allowing the listener to hear the structural relation of antiblackness shared between them. These lists—names falling from the speaker’s mouth one after another—are, like the consolidated tweets before them, their own manifestoes, document-

Current Musicology

ing the incredible dispossession that some live while others only witness. Music activates these lists in real time, making them leap off of the page, and organizing them as an analog opportunity for collective performance and remembrance.

These pieces appear through a variety of genres and traditions. In the case of “Hell You Talmbout,” which has been labeled an anthem for this moment’s activists, its power lies in part in its easy adaptability for a cappella use in mobilizations. In fact, this is precisely what happened at a Georgia fundraiser for Hillary Clinton in October 2015. A group of young Black people representing #AUCShutItDown performed the song as a part of the demonstration, which interrupted her speech on policing reform at Clark Atlanta University. The song is a perfect representation of that location, that demographic, and that political conjuncture. Performed by the Atlanta-based Wondaland Collective and lead by its founder—resident cyborg and pop/R&B star Janelle Monáe—“Hell You Talmbout” places listeners firmly in the U.S. South. Its opening of rapid snare is the sound of southern drum lines popularized by Historically Black Colleges and Universities and their call and response style, in which one voice takes the lead only to then disappear into the soundscape of the masses, is a model for the organizing that has historically grounded Black social movements. The drum introduces the voice that repeats the bodies of the fallen:

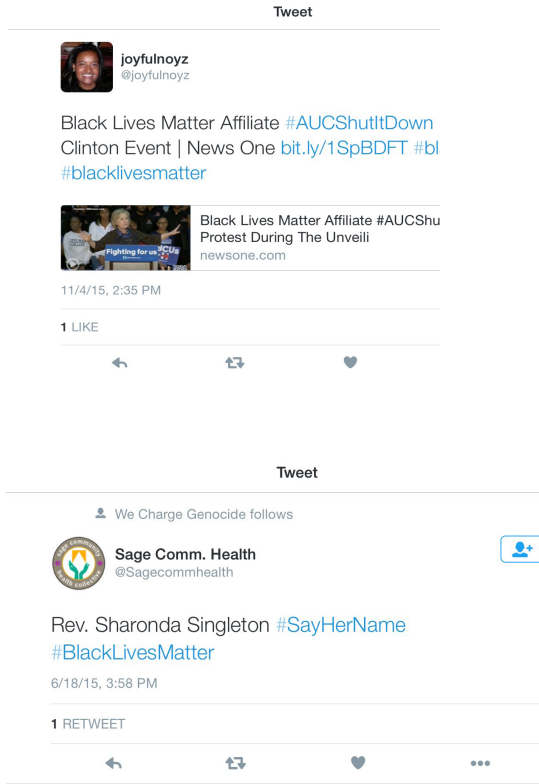
Freddie Gray, say his name

Freddie Gray, say his name

Freddie Gray, say his name

Freddie Gray, won’t you say his name

The final line (“won’t you say his name”) is structured as a question but performed as a declaration, allowing for no ambiguity of message or intent. Singers go on to speak the names of Sharonda Singleton and Emmett Till as a part of this litany, again condensing time/space by drawing a straight line between the 2015 Charleston church murders and the lynching of a teenager (Till) in 1955. The repetition is insistent—the vocalists sometimes yell and scream, voices trembling as if about to break for tears or breath—and the musical composition, which is held together only by voice and drum, adds the structure and coherence that media platforms often lack. In distinction to these technologies, no one is anonymous in this song’s efforts—your name is spoken aloud or you are a part of an identifiable “we” (chorus) who sings, “Hell you talmbout?” This question, as Monáe described at a performance of the song in Philadelphia, was intended to change the conversation and she did so through amplifying the already loud tenor of the #SayHerName campaign.³



Figures 1 & 2

Crossover jazz titan, pianist, and arranger/composer Robert Glasper also expanded the energies and reach of Twitter and social media by exploring again the inventory form through improvisational music. His album *Covered* (2015), which (re)arranges pieces by Musiq Soulchild, Jhene Aiko, and others, ends with “I’m Dying of Thirst,” a cover of Kendrick Lamar’s song of the same name from his 2012 release, *good kid/m.A.A.d City*. In its original form, the twelve-minute “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst” is a hybrid mash-up of two different productions held together by the language of a community elder who tells Lamar and his crew, “You young men are dying of thirst.” Like Monáe’s composition, Glasper’s cover begins with the drum, suggesting the steady, consistent meter of the violence implicitly addressed in the voices that follow: “I am Eric Garner. Trayvon Martin. Michael Brown. John Crawford. Rekia Boyd. Aiyana Jones. Oscar Grant, III . . .” Taking advantage of the #IAM language popularized in the demonstrations after the 2011 execution of Georgia death row inmate Troy Davis, this roll call signals the intimate entanglements of blackness in which a

violation to one is a violation to all. The recitation is not high intensity like “Hell You Talmbout”; the Glasper Trio guides the calm pace of its delivery by children, making the impact of these losses perhaps starker, more devastating. Eventually the voices overlap, developing an unintelligible cacophony of names with the echo “I am” overlaying them. From this accumulation, we hear the voice of a single child who offers an alternative narrative of this frightening present, saying “I feel proud to be brown everyday. . . . I enjoy being brown.” This is the sound of possibility as the drum disappears and the piano fades toward its final chord.

Music called for recognition and justice, and forecasted new possibilities, well before the explosion of social media influenced it, but this merger has produced unique opportunities for reinforcement and amplification by musicians whose creations and impact exist as much in the digital realm as in the analog traditions of industry review and consumption. Inventories and roll calls are now a strategy in amassing discursive authority in media and, through music, they make meaning of and extend the lives that may only appear as blips on the radar of unrelenting U.S. and global casualty. This is why musical creation of and for the dead remains a request from those imperiled. The repeated refrain of Lamar’s “Sing About Me” compels listeners to lean into the genealogies that make us vulnerable to singing and being sung for: “When the lights shut off and it’s my turn to settle down, my main concern: promise that you will sing about me. Promise that you will sing about me.” This promise remains upheld; the repeating bodies that Akinmusire, Monáe, and Glasper name and compose are now documented and cataloged, both online and off, as Black music establishes itself again as archive, technology, and political demand.

Notes

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1. In July 2015 Sandra Bland was found dead from asphyxiation in her jail cell after being arrested in Texas during a routine traffic stop. The conditions and causes of her death are disputed.
2. The percentage of African American Twitter users (22 percent) is significantly higher than that of white Americans, who number 16 percent (Bonilla and Rosa 2015, 6).
3. NastyBD Concerts, “Janelle Monae & Wondaland—Hell You Talmbout (Eephus Tour Philadelphia 8-12-15),” YouTube, uploaded August 13, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SttWb9mDp3Q>.

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