

Spaces of Sounds: The Peoples of the African Diaspora and Protest in the United States

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Abstract

Sanford. Baltimore. Chicago. Staten Island. Charlotte. Cleveland. Oakland. Austin. Los Angeles. The Bronx. Despair in the United States is nothing new. It is neither an emotion confined to the neatly-drawn borders of this land nor is it experienced more acutely by any one group of people.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Black Studies, Caribbean Studies, Cultural Studies



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The slaves who were ourselves had known terror intimately, confused sunrise with pain, & accepted indifference as kindness. – Ntozake Shange, [Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo](#)

Sanford. Baltimore. Chicago. Staten Island. Charlotte. Cleveland. Oakland. Austin. Los Angeles. The Bronx.

Despair in the United States is nothing new. It is neither an emotion confined to the neatly-drawn borders of this land nor is it experienced more acutely by any one group of people. The vast discrepancy between the results of the popular vote and the electoral college's selection of Donald Trump as forty-fifth president of the United States amply reveals despair to be an sentiment viscerally experienced by a wide swath of people in this country, irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, class, or sexuality.

Such despair has been ignored, however, by those who have caused and who continue causing the suffering of peoples of both indigenous and, later, African descent. We are taught that men from what we now recognize as Europe arrived in this hemisphere in the late fifteenth century, settling initially on a strip of earth in the Caribbean Sea that would become the first site of massacre and genocide, acts which unleashed, if one lends credence to the narrator of Junot Díaz's [The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao](#), the fukú, the "Curse and the Doom of the New World." The narrating voice himself characterizes the curse not in the actions of death, but in the "screams of the enslaved, [...] the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began [...]" (1). The fukú resonated through the sounds that these human beings made.



Image of the People's History of Telegraph Avenue mural, designed by Osha Neumann, painted in 1976, restored and enlarged in 1999, at the corner of Haste and Telegraph in Berkeley. Image by Flickr user nursenicole329 (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).

Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. – Toni Morrison, [Beloved](#)

The State's unwillingness to hold George Zimmerman responsible for the murder of Trayvon Martin—and its subsequent refusal to hold any police officer accountable for the hundreds of deaths they have caused—has galvanized the United States in the last four years. Hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children alike have taken to the streets, as [#BlackLivesMatter](#), a true and succinct sentence, has roused ghosts of the past who have never left us, who have always been present, accompanying us on this journey.

This post is not a reflection of the music that has served as a soundtrack to these protests, though there are articles that have done so, such as [this one](#), [this one](#), and [this one](#). These pieces do not include the extensive list of articles that address perhaps the most widely-viewed piece of protest music thus far, [Beyoncé's "Formation" video](#), a scarce offering of which can be found [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). Instead, it is an essay inspired by the sounds of the protesters themselves, the noises made by the minds, bodies, and spirits of the men, women and children who have taken to public spaces and sometimes commercial zones in order to confront and object to the protections applied to those who kill men, women, and children, often of African descent.

Listen to Los Angeles in 2013. . .



<https://youtu.be/HPfbi4lekTo>

. . .to Houston in 2014. . .



<https://youtu.be/hRA9YGgaDW4>

...to New York City in 2014. . .



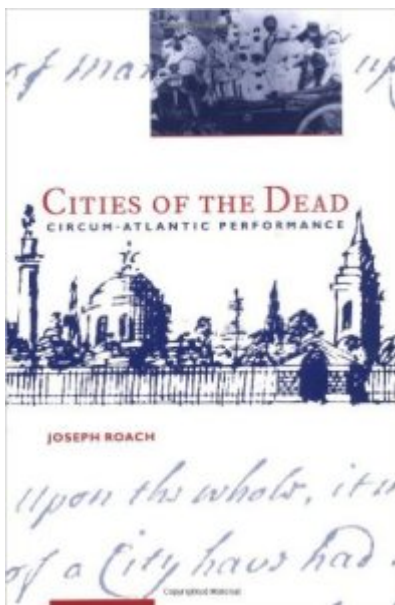
https://youtu.be/ft4n3Pa_F5I

...and to Charleston in 2015. . .



https://youtu.be/g_byFfQgnFk

...



In his pivotal *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (1996), Joseph Roach characterized New Orleans and London as urban centers marked by two simultaneous, consistent acts: appropriation by white people and white power structures of the cultures of the peoples they have violently marginalized, and then, at the same time, a clear distancing from those very cultures and peoples. Although now in its twentieth year of publication, Roach's theorization of the circum-Atlantic world remains vastly underutilized in scholarly circles—particularly in sound studies, where it should have special resonance— and has become increasingly critical to our understanding of this historical moment, as it “insists on the centrality of the diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas, North and South, in the creation of the culture of modernity” (4). With this configuration, Roach accomplishes two feats simultaneously: first, he decentralizes the United States as the focal point of studies about the so-called New World, instead, placing on equal footing all of the histories and cultures of the Americas. For this scholar of the literatures of the Americas, particularly those written by men and

women of African descent, Roach's is a critical gesture that facilitates comparative work across national boundaries.

Second, and most importantly, Roach emphasizes the role of murder, rape and the destruction of whole cultures indigenous to the American and African continents in the foundation of the nations of this hemisphere. [Ta-Nehisi Coates](#) is perhaps the most recent writer to remind us that the most potent legacy of such modernity, racism, "is a visceral experience, that is dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth" (*Between the World and Me*, 10). That which we know as "modernity," itself a deeply flawed construct that remains in need of serious revision, was born of broken backs, mutilated limbs, hushed middle-of-the-night tears of indigenous and African peoples. Moans and sighs, whispers and wails, cries and screams, they are the musical score of this hemisphere's American experiment.

The slaves who were ourselves aided Indigo's mission, connecting soul & song, experience & unremembered rhythms –Ntozake Shange



Harriet Tubman Memorial Monument, Harlem, Image by Flickr User John Mannion (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).

In the face of a populace accustomed to ignoring the wailing of mothers who have buried their children, who have disregarded their dignity and the weight and shape and taste of their loss, men, women, and children have mobilized. They have made manifest that which communities of peoples of African descent have spoken of and have documented since the founding of this nation. As Roach has utilized the term *performance*, the literal rituals of mourning by communities of African heritage not only commemorate those who have recently passed but they also invoke the spirits of those who have long borne witness to such violence. Throughout his study, Roach distinguishes between a European heritage that begins to segregate the living from the

dead during the Enlightenment (50), and more traditional cultures, particularly African ones, where spirits mingle with their human counterparts. While written texts may not, and often do not, adequately commemorate the loss of lives deemed marginal to the larger society, performance itself – chants, wails, songs – serve not only to memorialize but also as gestures of restoration.

Protesters and activists are no longer satisfied with the well-established decree that we should wait for a distant moment for a more perfect realization of the United States's many promises. No, instead, they have identified this as the historical moment in which those oaths are to be fulfilled. They have walked, marched, and stomped through streets, on sidewalks, parks, churches, filling malls and transportation hubs with their bodies as testimony. They have repossessed and redefined spaces once thought of as simply neutral, *transparent space* as Katherine McKittrick refers to it in *Demonic Grounds*, revealing the fault-lines of difference based on class, race, gender, and sexuality in this society (xv). They have done so manipulating sound, both recycling chants used through the decades to protest injustice and, at times, simply occupying space, without a word uttered.

The silence waged in the 2014 protest in Grand Central Terminal after the non-indictment of Daniel Pantaleo in the murder of Eric Garner does not represent erasure, but rather a purposeful demonstration of the willful humanity of those unwilling to forget.

<https://youtu.be/fvUcNWnxrAs>

They quiet themselves. They replace the sounds of unfettered pain and grief with its absence, until all that you hear is the mechanized announcement of train schedules. The contrast is stark: the moment highlights what Claudia Rankine has identified as the condition of black life in *Citizen*, that of mourning (145), against a backdrop of technological advancement, that which has been built on the backs of and through the physical, emotional, and intellectual labor of black life. Here, the members of this community enact what has been called a “die-in”: simulating the physical positioning of bodies in caskets, they force onlookers to confront an uncomfortable truth about the history of this country and of the nations of this hemisphere.

All of us walk on land soaked in the blood of those who have made our lives easier and more convenient. The men and women at Grand Central make manifest what Roach terms *surrogation*: in the chasm left by death, they offer a replacement, one that both evokes those who have died and disturbs the complacency of survivors themselves (2). The performance serves to confront those who dare say that the violence of genocide and enslavement of past generations should remain in the past; no, these men and women and the spirits they invoke respond. Time is not linear, as we have been taught. For past, present, and future are temporal constructs used to service oppression and domination; this will no longer do.



From Kara Walker's 2014 exhibit, "A Subtlety," at the Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Here, in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. – Toni Morrison

We bear witness to the reclamation of grief, of lives cut short at the hand of a government charged with protecting those human beings who inhabit its borders, at least theoretically. While, as Roach surmises, "memory [may be] a process that depends crucially on forgetting" (2), we hold space to those dedicated to not forget, to instead excavate the silences, breathe life into those histories, remembering that the stories we have heard, the pages we have read, were once human beings. We create "counter-memories" as challenge and testimony, as a sacred pledge to those who are no longer present physically in this realm (Roach 26). We recall the cultures and practices of those who lived before the written form was a tool of exclusion, when remembrance was a practice of community.

American culture, in the hemispheric sense, incorporates all such rituals, across generations; as Roach notes, it is performance that "works on behalf of living memory, by bringing the parties together as often as necessary" (138). No longer consigned to the past, the spirits of those killed by the state are revived, their existences in the human plain celebrated. They are not defined by how they died but instead by how they lived. While literacy of the written form can separate, sound and gesture more effectively bypass the fictions of difference based on race, ethnicity,

gender, class, and sexuality. *Cities of the Dead* amplifies how “performance can articulate what otherwise may not be properly communicated” (161).



Image of the People's History of Telegraph Avenue mural, designed by Osha Neumann, painted in 1976, restored and enlarged in 1999, at the corner of Haste and Telegraph in Berkeley. Image by Flickr user nursenicole329 (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).

It's so magic folks feel their own ancestors coming up out of the earth to be in the realms of their descendants – Ntozake Shange

We say their names. We say their names: Eleanor Bumpers. Anthony Báez. Sean Bell. Aiyana Stanley-Jones. Tyisha Miller. Oscar Grant. Rekia Boyd. Trayvon Martin. Tanisha Anderson. Renisha McBride. Eric Garner. Yvette Smith. Tamir Rice. Sandra Bland. Freddie Gray. Korryn Gaines. Akia Gurley. Alton Sterling. Philando Castile. Micah Jester. Deborah Danner. Walter Scott. Michelle Lee Shirley.

The list, tragically, grows, and still [we say their names](#). We do so as an act of remembrance. As an offering. As peoples of African descent around the world do in times of ceremony, in the name of ritual. We remember those who have come before us, who have birthed this current historical moment of awakening here in the United States. [We say their names](#).



<https://youtu.be/fxFqcdrKV0E>

And, as the sounds of their names said aloud echoes, we pray. Ashé.

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Vanessa K. Valdés is associate professor of Spanish and Portuguese at The City College of New York; she is the editor of [Let Spirit Speak! Cultural Journeys through the African Diaspora](#) (2012) and [The Future Is Now: A New Look at African Diaspora Studies](#) (2012) and the book review editor of [sx salon](#). She is the author of [Oshun's Daughters: The Search for Womanhood in the Americas](#) (2014). The title of this essay is inspired by Josh Kun's [Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America](#), where he writes that his book is “focusing on the spaces of music, the spaces of songs, and the spaces of sounds” (25).

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Featured Image “Freedom Marchers” by Flickr User [Keoni Cabral](#), Photoshop processed digital image from the Martin Luther King Center in Atlanta, Georgia ([CC BY 2.0](#)).



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