

## **Remembering the Dead and Say Their Names**

### *The Role of Sound in Two Multimedia Memorials as Media Activism*

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**ABSTRACT** This essay considers the role of sound, as in spoken voice, in two multimedia memorials to individuals killed by violence in the United States. The first is *Remembering the Dead*, a memorial to victims of mass shootings from the 1880s to the present. The second is *Say Their Names*, a memorial to victims of police violence and brutality. The use of sound (the speaking aloud of victims' names) in both these installations is meant to create and extend a space, a temporary autonomous zone that offers—through thoughtful listening to the names of victims spoken aloud—perceptual, phenomenological, and sensory engagements with the act of remembrance to provide witness and memorial for those killed and to promote meaningful social and civic justice to stop the killings. In this regard, both projects were conceived and developed as media activism. **KEYWORDS** Sound, voice, multimedia, media activism, memorial

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This essay considers the role of sound, as in spoken voice, in two multimedia memorials to individuals killed by violence in the United States. The first is *Remembering the Dead*, a memorial to victims of mass shootings from the 1880s to the present. The second is *Say Their Names*, a memorial to victims of police violence and brutality.

The intent of these projects is to literally speak the names of those killed in mass shootings and police actions, to make clear their deaths, to make manifest their memory, and to promote meaningful social and civic justice to stop the killings. In this regard, both projects were conceived and developed as media activism.

#### **REMEMBERING THE DEAD**

This project was conceived and developed as both a physical and virtual memorial to victims of gun violence, specifically mass shooting victims from the 1880s to the present. The virtual memorial is a dedicated website based on a regularly updated database of victims' names, ages, places of death, and dates of death.<sup>1</sup>

Once connected to this website, victims' names and other information are displayed on visitors' computer screens. After its display, the name of each victim is added to a memorial list in the screen's background. Another name is displayed. The process continues, eternally. With each name displayed, the list grows longer. The intent of *Remembering the Dead* is to remind viewers of the human cost of violence, to make immediately and viscerally clear that people continue to die in barrages of bullets.

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A fundamental emphasis is provided by text-to-speech technology that speaks aloud the name of each victim. This role of sound is discussed in more detail below.

The physical iteration of *Remembering the Dead* displays victims' names on a computer screen resting in a bed of 9 mm bullet casings atop a wooden kiosk reminiscent of both a bullet and a tombstone. A computer and small sound system are hidden inside the kiosk.



FIGURE 1. *Remembering the Dead*, kiosk, full view, front. The physical iteration of the *Remembering the Dead* project resembles both a bullet and a tombstone. Viewers can see the names and details of mass shooting victims displayed on the monitor while hearing their names spoken by-text-to-speech technology.



FIGURE 2. *Remembering the Dead*, kiosk, top, close view showing monitor, bullet casings, etc. The names of victims of mass shootings are displayed on a computer monitor resting in a bed of bullet casings atop a kiosk resembling both a bullet and a tombstone.



FIGURE 3. *Remembering the Dead*, screenshot showing display of victim's names and other information. Each victim's name is displayed along with age, date, and place of death while text-to-speech technology speaks aloud his or her name. After its display, the name of each victim is added to the ever-growing memorial list in the background.

The computer connects to the project's dedicated website. The sound system allows visitors to hear the speaking of each victim's name.

Documentation for the *Remembering the Dead* project is available through an archival web page that provides a link to the virtual memorial as well as background and conceptual framework details and an artist statement.<sup>2</sup>

## SAY THEIR NAMES

This project leverages the conceptual framework and computer technology platform of *Remembering the Dead* to provide a memorial to victims of police violence and brutality. The intent is to respond to the demands of international protests following the police murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and “say their names,” the names of those killed by police actions, to make clear their deaths, to make manifest their memory, and to promote meaningful social and civic justice to stop the killings.<sup>3</sup>

As with *Remembering the Dead*, a fundamental emphasis of *Say Their Names* is provided by text-to-speech technology that speaks aloud the name of each victim.

Documentation for the *Say Their Names* project is available through an archival web page that provides a link to the virtual memorial as well as background and conceptual framework details and an artist statement.<sup>4</sup>

## ROLE OF SOUND

Both *Remembering the Dead* and *Say Their Names* display the names and other information regarding victims of mass shootings and police violence. The intent is to make immediately and viscerally clear that people continue to die in barrages of bullets, or from police actions.

But hearing the sound of each victim’s name, spoken using text-to-speech technology concurrently with the display of his or her information, brings a fundamental and primary emphasis.

This grounding in sound, according to Marshall McLuhan, evolves from sound providing the first frame of reference through which humankind attempted to create and communicate a worldview. McLuhan says the aural sense envisions no space between subject and object, “experiences . . . timelessness,” understands truth through direct contact and interconnection with others, and organizes thought as “both-and” rather than this or that.<sup>5</sup> In this way, McLuhan posits sound as a primary sensory input capable of creating deep, rich mental images and emotional responses.

In addition to the five most familiar human senses—hearing, sight, taste, touch, and smell—we might also consider our ability to sense balance/gravity, body awareness, pain, and temperature. Of these nine senses, hearing is the first to become functional.

Walter Murch, Academy Award-winning film editor and sound designer, describes this process quite poetically:

Hearing is the first of our senses to be switched on, four-and-a-half months after we are conceived. And for the rest of our time in the womb—another four-and-a-half months—we are pickled in a rich brine of sound that permeates and nourishes our developing consciousness: the intimate and varied pulses of our mother’s heart and breath; her song and voice; the low rumbling and sudden flights of her intestinal trumpeting; the sudden, mysterious, alluring or frightening fragments of the outside world—all of these swirl ceaselessly around the womb-bound child, with no competition from dormant Sight, Smell, Taste or Touch. . . . So although our mature consciousness may be betrothed to sight, it was suckled by sound, and if we are looking

for the source of sound's ability—in all its forms—to move us more deeply than the other senses and occasionally give us a mysterious feeling of connectedness to the universe, this primal intimacy is a good place to start.<sup>6</sup>

Different from hearing—perceiving sound and the information it carries—listening is the active processing of auditory stimuli. Listening is a carefully considered and purposefully conducted activity, involving conscious effort and attention.

Tim Crook describes that “elliptical listening” occurs when the acoustic space is designed to maximize appreciation of the sound quality. The listener is static in this controlled environment; the outside world is ignored. She is fully engaged at the highest level with the imaginative spectacle being presented for listening. The result can be quite powerful, according to Crook, who says sound effectively elicits life from little details “seen” in the listener’s mind’s eye.<sup>7</sup> “It is auditory in the physical dimension but equally powerful as a visual force in the psychological dimension.”<sup>8</sup>

In other words, sound promotes visualization of something that is only heard. Once we link a sound to an image, the sound is that thing signified by the image. Listening (carefully and purposefully) to such sounds might, according to Alan Hall, offer “a [sound] portal through which a deeper, often inarticulate, consciousness can be glimpsed. . . . The intention is to find deeper and wider resonances within—and with-out—the listener.”<sup>9</sup>

Connecting to these ideas, Michael Bull and Les Back suggest that by considering sound through listening we open new ways of thinking about and appreciating the social experience, memory, time, and place—the auditory culture—of sound.<sup>10</sup> They advocate “attuning our ears to listen again to the multiple layers of meaning potentially embedded in the same sound.” Deep listening, they say, also involves “practices of dialogue and procedures for investigation, transposition and interpretation.”<sup>11</sup>

What if the sounds we hear are the spoken names of the dead? Jacques Derrida provides a philosophical framework when he says:

I am always overwhelmed when I hear the voice of someone who is dead, as I am not when I see an image or a photograph of the dead person. . . . I can also be touched, presently, by the recorded speech of someone who is dead. I can, here and now, be affected by a voice from beyond the grave. . . . A miracle of technology.<sup>12</sup>

“[Recording],” Derrida explains,

is reproduction as *re-production* [emphasis in original], of life itself, and the production is archived as the source, not as an image. . . . Life itself can be archived and spectralized in its self-affection, because one knows that when someone speaks he affects himself, whereas when someone presents himself to be seen he does not necessarily see himself. In the voice, self-affection itself is (supposedly) recorded and communicated. And this supposition forms the essential thread of our listening.<sup>13</sup>

Said another way, through recordings, past events and people are no longer spectral voices. They come to life, to presence, to the present. There is perhaps no more fundamental vocal self-affection than for one to speak his or her name. We can be affected by vocal

recordings of those dead or radically absent. In their absence, we can speak the names of the dead, creating connection and remembrance. Such recordings can touch us in the present, as a voice from beyond the grave.<sup>14</sup>

Both *Remembering the Dead* and *Say Their Names* rise to these challenges by promoting listening and reflection. The use of sound (the speaking aloud of victims' names) in both these installations is meant to create and extend a space, a temporary autonomous zone that offers—through thoughtful listening to the names of victims spoken aloud—perceptual, phenomenological, and sensory engagements with the act of remembrance to provide witness and memorial for those killed and to promote meaningful social and civic justice to stop the killings.

Through engagement with these multimedia memorials we assert the humanity of these victims. And, I hope, we will assert activism to stop future violence so that their lives will not have been taken in vain. ■

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#### NOTES

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