

Improvising *Rage*

Tracey Nicholls

I. Resurgence of the gallant South

I keep coming back to “Strange Fruit.” I launch myself in other directions, exploring musical critiques of cultural politics through Janelle Monáe’s “Hell You Talmbout,” through Lauryn Hill’s “Black Rage.” And, seemingly inevitably, I come back to reflecting upon the song voted “one of the darkest songs you’ve ever heard” (reddit.com); one of the “Top 11 Most Depressing Songs of All Time” (spike.com); and “the first great protest song” (theguardian.com)—Billie Holiday’s anti-lynching anthem, “Strange Fruit.” I had initially intended to focus my attention only on Monáe (“Hell You Talmbout”) and Hill (“Black Rage”) in a discussion of protest songs that might be able to act as metaphorical anthems—or, act analogously to anthems—in helping to constitute a cohesive sense of group identity and a shared narrative that might articulate a collaborative project for the Black Lives Matter movement. My thinking about the role music might play in nurturing the idea that Black Lives Matter repeatedly returns to the following questions: What kind of improvisation is possible—and what kind is *needed*—in a social justice movement whose central demand has sometimes been framed as “I can’t breathe”? (And please, yes, do take a moment to fully appreciate the victim-blaming absurdity of a dying man’s plea being characterized as a demand—one too radical for the status quo to satisfy.¹) On

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¹ These are the last words of Eric Garner, who couldn’t breathe as he lay dying on the streets of Staten Island NY because he was being held in an illegal chokehold by a member of the New York Police Department, 17 July 2014. He was posthumously accused by the NYPD of selling loose cigarettes, allegedly depriving the state of New York of pennies in tax revenue. The officer was not indicted.

the heels of that first question of the possibility and necessity of improvisation in social movements generally, there is also the question of whether an anti-racist moral revolution can even *be* improvised in the streets of this particular polarized, fragmented, and variously disengaged and relentlessly violent society.

In the course of thinking about these questions, I am reminded repeatedly of the singular power of “Strange Fruit” within American political thought. The most recent time the song impinged on my thinking was as the crucial part of a particular celebrity’s response to the flood of invitations to perform that were issued by the Donald J. Trump Inauguration Committee as they strove to compile the entertainment line-up for their January 20, 2017 celebration of the 45th president of the United States of America. This response, by an English singer named Rebecca Ferguson, was one of the very few acceptances that appeared to me as rebuke, not endorsement. The tweet through which she publicizes her response to the invitation reads:

If you allow me to sing “Strange Fruit,” a song that has huge historical importance, a song that was blacklisted in the United States for being too controversial. A song that speaks to all the disregarded and down trodden black people in the United States. A song that is a reminder of how love is the only thing that will conquer all the hatred in this world, then I will graciously accept your invitation and see you in Washington.²

This is not pandering to the new top dog, or normalizing neo-fascism. This is holding up a moral mirror, and inviting the grotesque travesty to behold itself as an illegitimate and incompetent pretender. And it can be that *only because* of the cultural sway that “Strange Fruit” has, a power born of its history in the hands of the singer who made it famous and the songwriter who, in at least some accounts, offered it to her as a signature piece.

“Strange Fruit” was written by a Jewish schoolteacher from New York City, Abel Meeropol, whose other claim to fame was that he and his wife had adopted the orphaned sons of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.³ Haunted by a grisly

² See Charlotte Alter’s “Rebecca Ferguson Says She Will Perform at Donald Trump’s Inauguration on One Condition.” *Time*, 02 January 2017.

<http://time.com/4620259/rebecca-ferguson-strange-fruit-donald-trump-inauguration/> (accessed 25 January 2017).

³ See “Strange Fruit: The film,” *Independent Lens* (PBS). Julius and Ethel were *the* Rosenbergs, executed by the United States government in 1953 on the charge—almost certainly false in Ethel’s case and dubious in Julius’—that they passed atomic secrets to the Soviet Union. See also “The Trial of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg” at www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/FTrials/rosenb/ROSENB.HTM. The Meeropols’ adoption of the Rosenberg boys gave them a safe identity with which they could continue growing up in their Jewish New York community despite the hysteria of Joseph McCarthy’s America.

photograph of a lynching, Meeropol wrote the lyrics as a poem in about 1935, and later put it to music.⁴ According to David Margolick, author of a 1998 *Vanity Fair* article and a definitive book about “Strange Fruit,” by the late 1930s, the song was “regularly performed in left-wing circles.”⁵ It found its way to Billie Holiday via a meeting between her and Meeropol arranged by Barney Josephson, the owner of the club in which she was performing, in which Meeropol played the song to a seemingly unimpressed Holiday.⁶ Meeropol’s perception notwithstanding, Holiday did adopt the song, recording it in 1939 on a small label called Commodore Records (because Columbia, the label she was under contract to, was too afraid to touch it), and performing it live in Josephson’s club, Café Society, with very theatrical stage directions.⁷

The song thus became a widely-heard telling of protest against social injustice, a schooling of audiences about the realities of African-American lives (and deaths) in parts of the United States that practiced lynching. Jazz critic Leonard Feather once said of “Strange Fruit” that it was “the first significant protest in words and music, the first unmuted cry against racism.”⁸ Given the long history of African-American activism and oratory, I think we can probably all see Feather’s claim about its “first-ness” as hyperbole, but there is no denying the impact this song had on Holiday’s audiences. Margolick’s *Vanity Fair* essay recounts fights breaking out in nightclubs after it was performed and Billie Holiday herself being attacked by distraught and traumatized patrons. Despite the emotional toll that singing “Strange Fruit” had on her, Holiday apparently felt a duty to perform it. “I have to sing it,” Margolick quotes her as saying; “[it] goes a long way in telling how they mistreat Negroes down South.”⁹ And the impact of the song did play a part in efforts at changing social policy: some of the people who endorsed passage of federal anti-lynching laws wanted to send recordings of “Strange Fruit” to Congress, presumably because they felt hearing it would produce an awakening of the legislators’ moral outrage. “Strange Fruit” holds its

⁴ See David Margolick’s essay “Strange Fruit,” archived at *Lady Day.net*, www.ladyday.net/stuf/vfsept98.html (accessed 27 August 2009); and Dorian Lynskey’s “Strange Fruit: the first great protest song,” *The Guardian*, 16 February 2011. www.theguardian.com/music/2011/feb/16/protest-songs-billie-holiday-strange-fruit (accessed 25 January 2017).

⁵ See Margolick, 3.

⁶ See Margolick; and Lynskey.

⁷ See Margolick; and Lynskey. Barney Josephson, owner of the only New York nightclub brave enough to take on the controversial song, decreed that Holiday was to close her sets by singing it in darkness, with only a single light illuminating her face, and in silence, with no drink service. “No matter how thunderous the ovation, she was never to return for a bow,” recounts Margolick in his 1998 *Vanity Fair* article (4).

⁸ See Margolick, 1.

⁹ See Margolick, 5.

power, even with the passage of time, and has been called “one of the 10 songs that actually changed the world.”¹⁰

II. John Coltrane’s desires and Lauryn Hill’s rage

While “Strange Fruit” deserves both the socio-musicological accolades it has received and the moral authority that Rebecca Ferguson successfully mobilized, there are many musical instantiations of “conversation about racial injustice” in American cultural history, and at least one of these is presently emerging as an intergenerational call to the Black Lives Matter movement. Lauryn Hill’s 2012/2014 “Black Rage” is a lyrical revision of the well-known 1959 Broadway show tune “My Favorite Things” that is clearly in conversation with John Coltrane’s improvisations on the tune throughout the 1960s, and is equally clearly in support of the struggle to make black lives matter.

Coltrane, like Holiday, has had an undeniable influence on many in the world of music who concern themselves with discourses of civil rights, equality, and both black and white nationalism in American political history. It is important, in noting this, to appreciate that, as ideologies, black nationalism and white nationalism have very different motivating roots. Despite sharing objectionable sub-groups who promote separatism, supremacy, and racial violence—all of which I think should be repudiated regardless of which community it issues forth from—black nationalism developed as a response to the refusal of government to provide resources equally to black and white communities, in the form of a commitment within African-American communities to economic and cultural self-sufficiency. Frank Kofsky, a historian of the post-WWII jazz era, attributes a form of incipient black nationalism (he labels it “proto-nationalism”) to Coltrane and a number of his contemporaries, jazz musicians sympathetic to the “do for self”/Black Panthers’ position on racial struggles: a commitment to grassroots provision of policing, school breakfast and lunch programs and after-school programs for children, economic support of black-owned businesses, etc.¹¹ And, of course, much of the criticism both hip-hop culture and the Black Lives Matter movement have received is on the grounds of nationalist rhetoric. This commitment to provide within the community the resources that are denied to it by the state is, however, a very different motivation from the racial purity views and anti-miscegenation rhetoric of white nationalism in the United States.

I have written elsewhere on the question of the significance of Coltrane’s successive improvisations on “My Favorite Things,” speculating on both his commitment to the tune itself and his intentions with respect to particular per-

¹⁰ This is Margolick’s characterization of how the song was evaluated in a ranking produced by *Q Magazine*, a British music magazine, in November 2003.

¹¹ Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*. New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970.

formances.¹² To some extent, Coltrane's adoption of "My Favorite Things" as a vehicle for improvisation throughout his later career (the 1960s, after he had left Miles Davis' band and begun to front his own quartet, and later, quintet) was part of a trend in the (East Coast) jazzworld of the late 1950s. Jazz biographer Lewis Porter discusses Coltrane's attraction to the Rodgers and Hammerstein tune in the context of remarking upon a reliance by Davis on an aesthetics of contrast and arguing that working with Davis had similarly influenced Coltrane. Improvising on these popular tunes sets up a contrast, says Porter, "between the world of light and pretty and theatrical, and the guts and intensity of the blues and the black American experience."¹³ While this shared aesthetic's potential for social commentary through juxtaposition may well have informed the choice of standards on which Davis and Coltrane hung their improvisatory explorations in the late 1950s and the decade that followed, I speculate that there is unappreciated significance in the very version of "My Favorite Things" that sounds most conventional (hence, the least like an aesthetic juxtaposition), Coltrane's 1960 Atlantic recording.¹⁴ Listening to Coltrane's almost 14-minute long Atlantic recording is much less musically challenging than, say, his wildly improvisational 34-minute *Olatunji Concert* version in which "quotations" of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "My Favorite Things" are barely discernible. One might even be tempted to think that this apparently conventional rendition is ... conservative. If, however, one tries to sing along to Coltrane's Atlantic version, especially if drawing from memory the Julie Andrews film performance that made the song famous, it quickly becomes obvious that the seemingly faithful rendition is—deliberately and subversively, I would argue—repudiating the expected link between the melody and the lyrics.

In my view, Coltrane intends the disruption: it *sounds like*, but *is not*, the enumeration of apolitical, quietist pleasures like "whiskers on kittens" and "warm woolen mittens."¹⁵ As an artist, Coltrane was somewhat notoriously not given to overt political pronouncements, but in conversation with interviewers he knew and trusted, who thoughtfully questioned his aesthetic and political intentionality, he would concede that his music commented on social issues.¹⁶ On my reading of this Atlantic improvisation, Coltrane affirms that there are "favorite things" (values) but rejects the catalogue that the Broadway tune offers: the

¹² Tracey Nicholls, *An Ethics of Improvisation: Aesthetic Possibilities for a Political Future*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012.

¹³ Lewis Porter, *John Coltrane: His Life and Music*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998 (104).

¹⁴ Nicholls, *An Ethics of Improvisation* (87).

¹⁵ Nicholls, *An Ethics of Improvisation* (87).

¹⁶ Frank Kofsky, "John Coltrane: An Interview," in *The John Coltrane Companion: Five Decades of Commentary*, edited by Carl Woideck. New York: Schirmer, 1998 (135). [Originally published in *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*.]

raindrops, whiskers, and mittens, and the strudel, schnitzel, and blue satin sashes. Heard this way, Coltrane's taking up of "My Favorite Things" is a "taking on," a subtle and uncompromising critique of mainstream white America's self-representation in the decade following the murder of Emmett Till, and during the long struggles for justice and equality that marked the Civil Rights Movement. Jazz historian Frank Kofsky has argued persuasively that the musical circles Coltrane moved in during this period were politically "proto-nationalist" — many of the musicians were aware of and, to varying extents, willing to comment verbally and musically on the debates of the day, such as the strategic advantages of Malcolm X's black nationalist rhetoric over Martin Luther King's integrationist approach to racial equality.¹⁷

Overwritten by Lauryn Hill as "Black Rage," "My Favorite Things" has gone beyond the call-out I contend Coltrane was giving to (white) American complacency. Where Coltrane kept the jaunty little tune almost intact, disrupting only the too shallow inventory of "good things" which Rodgers and Hammerstein tell us will distract us from our fear of "bad things," Hill weaves together the same recognizable melody with lyrics that are a scathing parody of the original, and serve the purpose of enjoining us to courage, not distraction, in the face of confrontation and fear. Hill sings that this black rage is "founded on denying of self" in a system that treats black Americans like "two-thirds a person" and tells us that, in the context of police dogs, police beatings, police shootings, when she "remember[s] all these kinds of things ... [she doesn't] fear so bad." Showing the rage and pain of American racism in rhetorically graphic "alternative lyrics" sets up as jarring a contrast to the melody as does Coltrane's subtle disruption. And it is very clearly a continuation of Coltrane's subversion, as David Drake notes in a review that voted "Black Rage" 2014's "best new track."¹⁸ Even as Hill speaks back through the generations to Coltrane in the song she has been performing different variations of since 2012, she has also

¹⁷ Eric Porter's intellectual history of the jazzworld of Coltrane's day, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), particularly notes Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln, and Archie Shepp, but Kofsky suggests a strong political commitment on Coltrane's part when he recounts his first meeting with Coltrane in the context of his role as a student organizer of a 1961 benefit concert for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), one of the radical-progressive voices for racial equality during the 1960s (see chapter 12 of *Black Nationalism*, Kofsky's 1966 interview with Coltrane; also republished in Carl Woideck's edited volume). Coltrane's willingness to perform at a benefit for SNCC was a clear political statement of support for radical revisioning of black America's future realities.

¹⁸ See David Drake, "Black Rage (Sketch)." *Pitchfork.com*, 24 August 2014. <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/tracks/17064-lauryn-hill-black-rage-sketch/> (accessed 28 January 2017).

recorded versions whose accompanying videos and contextualizing comments position the song as an articulation of Black Lives Matter demands.¹⁹

The “anthem”-esque quality I see in “Black Rage” is something it shares with “Strange Fruit”—an uncompromising moral indictment of racist hatred and brutality, from the standpoint of solidarity with those who suffer. In this shared call to solidarity, both songs have an aspirational power; they call us to do better and be better—to care about lynching, to not be afraid of brutal state power—in the same ways anthems call us: to stand on guard, to meet in bonds of love, to proudly hail the nation’s flag. The capacity “Black Rage” has to act as a potential locus for the building of group identity and/or shared narrative for the Black Lives Matter movement depends additionally upon our seeing it as an act of formal revision within a cultural vernacular that teaches call-and-response as a standard communicative practice.²⁰

III. Saying names with Janelle Monáe

Equally interesting from the standpoint of producing improvisatory art and from the standpoint of popularizing narratives of the Black Lives Matter movement is Janelle Monáe’s “Hell You Talmbout.” This song is deliberately structured to appear *through* improvisation: the chorus urges “say his name” and “say her name,” but/and consciously leaves spaces in its invocation of the history of racist hatred and violence that links Emmett Till to Michael Brown and Freddie Gray and Sandra Bland and Aiyana Jones, and, and, and ... There is space for new names, for old, forgotten names, and for local or regional variations in whose names need to be spoken into the concrete context of any particular performance. This gives the song enormous global potential in its making of justice claims and its enacting of solidarity; the entirely contingent verses can be used to protest Aboriginal deaths in the Australian prison system, for instance, or to protest police inattention to missing First Nations women in Western Canada, but the song’s call to say names demands an audience response. In these respects

¹⁹ The 2014 award Drake refers to was for an updated version of the 2012 song that Hill re-recorded in her living room; there is also a version of “Black Rage” widely available online that Hill has parenthetically titled the #BlackLivesMatter Edition.

²⁰ Here I am drawing on the literary theory developed by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his landmark book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). Gates argues that there is a pervasive practice of formal revision within black vernacular speech (and African American writing and music), and that we can see in this “Signifying” a distinct approach to critique and a redefinition of the concept of originality: one displays artistic prowess by being able to manipulate elements of pre-existing artworks in order to fashion new meanings. This is what I see both Coltrane and Hill doing with Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “My Favorite Things.”

at least—conscious nurturing of contingency and formal revision, and robust demands for popular engagement—“Hell You Talmhout” is a model for what an “anthem” consistent with improvisation theory might be.

Improvisation theory judges performances contextually and values them according to how well they enact “participatory and civic virtues of engagement, dialogue, respect, ... community-building, ... the ability to negotiate differences, and willingness to accept the challenges of risk and contingency” within the social space available to them.²¹ I think this is a theoretical language that can move us beyond the generalities and abstractions of conventional political discourses about racial polarization, societal violence, and multicultural tensions, in order to offer some concrete observations of (or to) the Black Lives Matter movement. In particular, I want to note the value improvisation theory places on the “codeswitching,” or cultural fluency, that results from community-building which emphasizes learning and knowing each other’s stories. Valorizing an ability to hear shared meanings when they are spoken in the different voices, or unfamiliar rhythms, gives rise in improvisation theory to an ability to recognize interpretational expertise that is demonstrated in the mapping out of real-time translations among cultures or perspectives. And the improvisatory nature of Monáe’s song does require interpretational facility, in adapting the names we need to say in a given performance to the community in which it takes place; it does require us to learn the realities of Eric Garner’s life and death, Aiyana Jones’ life and death, Emmett Till’s life and death—their realities, which are not realities for many of the people in this society who do not get coded as “people of color.”

I think too that a great deal of the perspectival divide separating Black Lives Matter activists from the apparently disengaged American public is because the Black Lives Matter narrative is not seen/heard/understood by the “all lives matter” crowd as expressing anything like the justice-claim that is meant. This is to say I think “all lives” disengagement denotes a failure to codeswitch, and perhaps even a failure to recognize a code-difference in these attempts to speak the lives and deaths of black people who have been deemed to not matter. The “all lives” insistence seems to derive its power from the foundationless view many Americans have of their society as a level playing field. Rather than face challenges to that comforting belief, some people will (perhaps inevitably) retreat into platitudes about all lives, and dismiss “Black Lives Matter” as special pleading. The story that Janelle Monáe and Lauryn Hill are helping to popularize, on the other hand, is one in which all of these deaths of men and women of color form links in a narrative chain that stretches back into a past which has

²¹ Ajay Heble and Ellen Waterman, “Sounds of Hope, Sounds of Change: Improvisation, Pedagogy, Social Justice,” *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, Vol 3, No 2 (2008). www.criticalimprov.com/article/viewFile/409/619 (accessed 31 January 2017).

very evidently not been left behind. The deaths are not isolated incidents, the officers responsible for the shootings and beatings are not random bad apples, and the United States of America is very definitely not “post-racial.” There is a system-wide institutional racism uniting all of these names and brutally-ended lives, and the precondition of any effective social change and reconciliation is the recognition (a) that these deaths are happening utterly unjustifiably and (b) that they are connected by a pervasive climate of disregard (or, at best, inadequate regard) for black lives.

All of the hope that we—whatever “we” might be—can come together to enact social justice is fragile in these days of the Trump presidency, and can so easily seem futile in the context of yet another death, yet another name to say in yet another performance of Monáe’s song. Part of the mythology of the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s is that it succeeded, finally, because it engaged the moral sensibilities of the white, middle-class, TV news-watching majority. As Rawlsian civil disobedience theory might tell the story, African-Americans “won” their full claim to civil rights because they successfully enacted an appeal to the majority sense of justice.²² But, in a Facebook world of self-selected news feeds and fragmented information universes, where and how do we find the shared experiences that might generate anything like a majority sense of justice?

Perhaps, I tell myself, this perception of futility is born of a cognitively lazy or sloppy desire on my part for a single solution that can be all things to all people, a “magic bullet”—or, more to the point, a magic *anti*-bullet—that can coalesce the group identity required for any successful Black Lives Matter movement *and* also awaken the hearts and minds of the seemingly disengaged majority to the deadly disjunction of their political ideals and the social reality in which people of color are struggling to stay alive. Perhaps. As Kai Wright observes in a compelling analysis for *The Nation* of the false dichotomization of violence against people of color and violence against law enforcement officers, “[t]he world is more complicated than our political discourse accommodates.”²³ Perhaps there should be different tactics for producing a cohesive movement identity and a general sense of outrage. They are two distinct goals, after all. Perhaps the great benefit improvisation theory can provide to the Black Lives Matter movement is greater clarity on the fit between goals and tactics?

²² See John Rawls’ definition of civil disobedience, section 55 of his *Theory of Justice* (revised edition, Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).

²³ See Kai Wright, “Black Lives Still Matter.” *The Nation*, www.thenation.com/article/black-lives-still-matter/ (accessed 9 August 2016).

IV. Making up what saves us

If we start again with the question of what an anthem does, we can perhaps shed more light on the question of how well either “Black Rage” or “Hell You Talmbout” could function for and within the Black Lives Matter movement in anthem-like ways. Anthems, like flags, are symbols representing an idea of the nation-state to which they belong. In their most voluntarist and least repressive permutations, both symbolic representations invoke a sense of social commitment and belonging, and enact an abstractly shareable community for the nation’s citizens. To be in a foreign country and spot unexpectedly one’s “own” flag can be a comforting reminder of home. Similarly, an anthem’s power to shape our hearts and minds, its aspirational vision of who I am as a citizen, lies in its ability to construct a “united us” that we all perform together.

The anthem belongs simultaneously to each of us (individually) and to all of us (collectively), as a common goal or future, and importantly, I think, we belong to it ... or, at least, are theoretically accountable (to each other, our fellow citizens) for living up to the value commitments we are singing. This is the power I see in “Hell You Talmbout”: its ability—much like the “people’s mic” tactic of voice amplification used in Occupy protests—to construct power and accountability horizontally.²⁴ In this case, through naming, as with the lyrical revision in Hill’s “Rage,” we see the power of music to curate social memory and to shape narratives of popular demands for justice. Improvised content in each “Hell You Talmbout” performance turns the saying of names into a kind of vernacular politics of recognition, reinforcing the shared commitment that all lives—*including* black ones—matter. When an anthem’s vision of its people fits that people’s vision of their best selves, singing it can be the kind of eerily profound experience one might have in singing a favourite song that resonates per-

²⁴ Marina Sitrin’s history of horizontality as arising out of 2001 protests in Argentina and shaping the character of the 2011 Occupy Movements across Europe and the United States (“Horizontalism and the Occupy Movements,” Spring 2012) deftly weaves the concept of horizontal power into a longer-lived debate about the respective merits of representative democracy and direct democracy through juxtaposition of guiding metaphors. Occupy, as a political movement, and horizontality, as a concept, have been criticized as inadequate articulations of a path to a better future, but, Sitrin notes, both movement and concept aim not at articulating a path, but at creating a space in which all voices are encouraged to make themselves heard. The “people’s mic” dependence on every voice is only the most literal instantiation of what underpins both theory and practice in this populist co-accountability model of organization that systematically rejects attempts to impose leadership norms on their group politics. “Hell You Talmbout” expresses horizontalism in both the deliberate contingency of content (to be determined in the performative space) and the integral subversion of the performer-audience dichotomy that is built into the song structure of a call-and-response improvisation of community.

sonally: speaking your truth—and feeling it *as* your truth—through someone else’s words. And when anthems are sung as they are meant to be, in public groups and gatherings, they create conditions in which we can all be vulnerable to each other together: singing together necessitates sharing breath, which makes singing together in public a curiously intimate act.²⁵

Here, in this unexpected intimacy and vulnerability, I think we see yet another way in which both of the songs I am discussing here are anthem-like, and simultaneously, a way they are the antithesis of the trappings of official identity. When we understand ourselves as vulnerable and the others to whom we are exposing ourselves as also vulnerable, we have the conditions of empathy from which we can produce solidarity, this commitment to others that I spoke of above as “abstractly shareable community.” But the most obvious and significant disanalogy between national anthems and these two “Black Lives Matter” anthem-candidates is the presence in the former and absence in the latter of any sense of official imprimatur; we are accountable to each other but without authority (beyond that which might be derived from our shared commitments). If we are to make any sense of the concept of an improvised anthem, however, this strikes me as an irresolvable point of divergence; to be improvisatory is to reject (or subvert) definitive or official versions. Reaching this disjunction, it appears to me as a point at which we might mark the difference between the ideas being symbolically represented in song: the difference between a nation-state and a social movement.

Turning now to thinking about what a movement does, I believe we can also see them as aspirationally concerned with building bonds of solidarity, even more consciously and assiduously than the anthems they might use to build those bonds. For those of us telling Black Lives Matter narratives, and for those of us who are hearing it told, this solidarity carries unbreachable obligations. Obligations to listen to justice claims, and obligations to contribute constructively to the shared political lives of our communities. We’re not allowed to ignore people because they’re different, or difficult to understand. We’re not allowed to stand for the idea that all lives matter unless we are willing to stand with the people whose lives are not being served and protected.

We might convey those obligations in anthems, but we enact them through popular movements. And in order to build a movement—even one as non-centralized as Black Lives Matter—there must be an identifiable group identity, a sense of what the leaders and/or principal actors and spokespeople stand for. But this group identity does important work beyond giving the population as a whole an idea of what the movement is about; it reinforces the commitment of

²⁵ Tracey Nicholls, “Episode #52: Tracey Nicholls Improvising Rage.” *Sound It Out* radio interview with host Rachel Elliott, November 2016.

<https://soundcloud.com/improvisationinstitute/episode-52-tracey-nicholls-improvising-rage>.

those already contributing their efforts. Group identity is necessary in part because the courage and imagination required to build a movement, to refashion social institutions, is built in knowing your people, knowing they have your back. Malcolm Gladwell made this point quite persuasively several years ago in a *New Yorker* article about the inadequacy of social media alone to nurture incipient social revolutions like the Arab Spring of 2011.²⁶ Hypothesizing communities formed through Twitter and Facebook as inadequate and ineffective compared to social change networks like the Civil Rights Movement, Gladwell argued that it was personal relationships—longstanding and deeply rooted bonds of trust and friendship—that kept civil rights workers energized and engaged, and predicted bleakly that no such strong communities can be formed in the diffuse social networks of this new technology.²⁷

Regardless of one's views on the possibilities and limitations of social media,²⁸ or technology generally, Gladwell's point about social bonds is well-made: they drive activism more effectively than value commitments because, in fact, they cement activism.²⁹ This crucial importance of solidarity and shared identity among the group of people working for any particular social change is due, I think, to the non-linear reality of social progress. We think of progress as linear and incremental—you put in 8 units of effort to your cause, you see 8 units of

²⁶ Malcolm Gladwell, "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted." *The New Yorker*, 4 October 2010.

www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell (accessed 20 September 2011).

²⁷ In the wake of the Cairo protests, Gladwell was dismissed as just plain wrong; the revolution can so be tweeted, said his critics. But, just as a reminder that reality is more complex than rhetoric allows it to be, a 2011 *Frontline* documentary, "Revolution in Cairo," illuminated some background to the Tahrir Square protests that supports Gladwell's thesis. The April 6 Youth Movement responsible for the initial planning and tweeting of the protests had trained themselves in nonviolent protest tactics, had learned lessons from the Serbian student movement that resisted the Milosevic dictatorship, and had developed social networks both online *and* in person. Their revolution worked because they had both technology and solidarity.

²⁸ One of the readers of this paper during its review stage helpfully suggested that another part of the limitation on social media's capacity to foster the kind of grassroots community a horizontalist political culture would need is its algorithmic governance. Insofar as sorting mechanisms become ways of silencing voices that cannot easily be accommodated, I think this observation astutely draws our attention to the crucial need for transparency in horizontalist or grassroots practices of collaborative decision-making: we need to *see* the sorting and organizational processes happening so we know they are not being gamed behind the scenes.

²⁹ This point is also made by Seth Godin in a 2009 TED Talk on alternative leadership models, "The tribes we lead." Godin observes that what most people want from their community relations and social activism is to be missed. We want people to notice that we didn't show up for the meeting.

progress—but the actual experience of working for social change is quite different. Typically, one works, and works, and works, and sees no progress, only resistance. Then, one day, a moment happens, and after that moment, everything has changed. Again, typically, one never knows when that moment is coming. Even in the moment, it is not obvious that this will turn out to be *the* moment. So, while the struggle continues, all that its people have to sustain them are their faith in the future, their camaraderie, and the inspiration that artworks like protest anthems can evoke.

In an earlier essay I characterized the power of improvisatory redescription as a capacity to open up, either within or against an unjust status quo, new space-to-move in which we might rebuild more justly.³⁰ The overlapping central values of both improvisation theory and peace studies—commitments to negotiated decision-making and to building shared common ground in conditions of social breakdown—offer us the resources to develop a politics of improvisation that can advance racial justice. Thinking in terms of creating new spaces, with new possibilities for social repair and reconciliation, I would say about all of these songs—“Strange Fruit,” “Black Rage,” and “Hell You Talmbout”—that, like traditional anthems, they focus audience attention on shared higher ideals, giving them all some (perhaps unquantifiable) capacity to inspire and inform, and some real political value as a “space” in which solidarity around racial justice might be nurtured. The problem of fragmentation of political community is a real one, but balanced alongside of that concern is an opportunity—for “Hell You Talmbout” and “Black Rage”; for their audiences; for Black Lives Matter activists—to participate in an “open access” creation of institutional memory: whose names get remembered, and said. This kind of popular collaborative labour, that political theorist Fuyuki Kurasawa talks about as “cosmopolitanism from below,”³¹ is exactly the kind of negotiated process that is informed by improvisation theory, and offers us a rich demonstration of how we might improvise pathways to peace and social justice through improvisatory norms of inclusivity, responsive listening, and trust-building.

³⁰ Tracey Nicholls, “Improvisation, peace, and justice.” Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP) website, 2010. www.improvcommunity.ca.

³¹ Fuyuki Kurasawa, *The Work of Global Justice: Human Rights as Practices*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Kurasawa’s fascinating analysis of human rights work as social labour that we do with, and for, each other presents “cosmopolitanism from below” (157-192) as a parallel way of conceiving the horizontality concept I discussed earlier in connection with the global Occupy movements of 2011: it is a call to solidarity across borders, understood as the networking and community-building of people at the level of their everyday social relations in order to motivate more inclusively democratic forms of political organization.

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