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# Say His Name, Say Their Names: BLM and the Poetry of Tamir Rice

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## Abstract

In this paper, I turn to the poetic community that has addressed Tamir Rice and his murder. I examine poems that were written specifically after, for, or about Tamir Rice, published in the U.S. during a time when the racial justice movement Black Lives Matter was strongly pulsing in the socio-political and cultural consciousness. Ocean Vuong's 'Toy Boat' (2016), Tsitsi Ella Jaji's 'To Bless the Memory of Tamir Rice' (2017), and Reginald Dwayne Betts' 'When I Think of Tamir Rice While Driving' (2016) produce layered processes of commemoration. As social and political activists, Vuong, Jaji, and Betts use their poetic sounds to work against the abstraction of Tamir Rice as nameless, faceless, raceless, and ageless that was generated (among other things) by the label of 'the boy' which dominated initial reports. These sounds, I argue, parallel the ensuing protest chants during the street marches for George Floyd and Breonna Taylor ('say his name', 'say her name'). Writing from different ethnoracial locations-as a Vietnamese American, a Zimbabwean, and an African American poet, respectively-and representing a sample of this poetic community, these poets collectively undo the commonplace rhetoric of a post-racial world and the myth of the isolated incident.

At the same time, my readings of these poems will demonstrate that Tamir Rice's death is poetically processed both in the idiosyncratic specificity of its circumstances and in relation to the long history of racial violence in the U.S. As such, the critical question at the center of my examination relates to the friction between responses to individual incidents and cumulative social action, viewing poetry and the poetic community as a site of negotiation between the two interconnected modes. The tension between writing about one incident and writing about the whole picture-or in this case, saying his name and saying their names-shifts into a more political or humanitarian one than a poetic or formal one. What happens when elegizing or paying tribute to an individual becomes inevitably tied to an uncomfortably big picture, especially in the context of the nation-state? How does the movement between the individual and the collective manifest formally in the poem and, in turn, what do those formal maneuvers reveal about the politics and the political consequences of the response?

**Christos Kalli** (he/him) is a PhD candidate at the University of Pennsylvania. His critical writing has been published in the Los Angeles Review of Books, Harvard Review, Hopkins Review, World Literature Today, and Poetry Northwest. His poems have appeared in Prairie Schooner, Muzzle, Ninth Letter, Adroit Journal, National Poetry Review, American Journal of Poetry, Faultline, and minnesota review. From 2017 to 2019, he has served on the editorial board of Adroit Journal and from 2020 to 2021 he was an Associate Poetry Editor for

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