'Silence is virtual': youth violence, belonging, death and mourning

‘Silence is Virtual’: Youth Violence, Belonging, Death and Mourning.

William Henry & Sireita Mullings-Lawrence

Introduction

The chapter will consider how young people navigate ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe’ spaces both in the real and the virtual world and how such spaces impact the lived experiences of young people, who are caught up in youth crime and violence. It will therefore contribute to the ongoing discussions on youth gangs, ‘black on black violence’, youth crime and young people’s engagement with social media. As many young people are turning to social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, to identifiably or anonymously express their condolences and in several instances address the issues that are for them the causal factors behind the loss of these young lives. Therefore, consideration will be given to how young people navigate their ‘endz’ (neighbourhoods) and how they utilise online platforms, as life and death spaces to communicate real, imagined and silenced emotions.

The current debates regarding children and young people’s engagement with social media, is centred around the impact, benefit and influences it has as an organiser of their young lives in the virtual world. Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are just some of the platforms that have increasingly become a surrogate space for young people to communicate, especially in cases where real world contact is denied by various constraints.[1] For instance: where a physical/personal appearance at a public event, such as a funeral or gathering, is unwise due to postcode or other rivalries which will place the young person in immediate danger. This has led to the encouraging of educators and parents to monitor young people’s usage of the virtual, for potential threats of cyberbullying, facebook depression, sexting[2] and exposure to inappropriate content. These aspects of an online presence are explored by Boyd, who suggests that we consider: ‘Why do teenagers flock to these sites? What are they expressing on them? How do these sites fit into their lives? What are they learning from their participation? Are these online activities like face-to-face friendships – or are they different or complementary’? In line with Boyd’s questions we are keen to gather insight on some of the ways young people engage with the virtual world.[3] In order to get a clear idea of what young people are exposed

to, what they are expressing, learning and creating in these spaces, there needs to be a focus on how they articulate their views by way of visual and audio media that are presented in multiple formats across various virtual platforms.

Indeed many who are caught up in these acts of violence, whether as perpetrators or victims, fear reprisals if they physically attend the social gatherings, wakes or funerals of those who have lost their lives. This is because appreciating gang rivalry from their perspective is far more complex than many would imagine; the empirical approach presented here will highlight some of this complexity. It will also make known how the demand for respectability, as a means of demonstrable 'success' in the realms of criminality, manifests as the 'road man' mentality and largely determines the 'safe' and 'unsafe' spaces young people navigate. Therefore, an argument for understanding the ways in which young people share their lives in the public and alternative public arenas, as a conscious choice, will be deployed to make explicit the links between social media and youth crime.

Background

The chapter is drawn from empirical work the authors have been involved in with various cohorts of primarily BAME young people, between 12 and 25 years old, for several years in community based settings. The data featured includes the demographics of the young people, in the sense of how they articulate areas of 'danger' and safety', as well as that taken from other sources that offer insight into their young lives. The information gathered from focus groups, participant observations and interviews with youth practitioners, programme leaders and youth participants in these organisations will be featured in this account. These organisations aim to address the complex issues faced by young people, some of which are framed through issues of inclusion and education and target social integration, social mobility, increased confidence and increased life expectancy. However, the effectiveness and impact of the projects is not discussed in detail here, but is drawn upon to give context to the concerns of young people.

The usage of Interviews, focus groups and observations were chosen as being more effective for this piece, as they enabled participants to react and respond to each other through naturally occurring speech, thus yielding a collective and an individual view into their worlds. Doing so gives priority to the views of the young people themselves, who too often

complain at being ‘silenced’ within the wider public arena, which is why many utilise, to the fullest, alternative sites of expression within the virtual world. Unsurprisingly, we noted the manner in which young people interact online occurs in numerous ways,[4] and an observation of a summer photographic workshop as part of the ‘Different Endz’[5] project, highlighted the difficulties faced in any analysis of the virtual threats they experienced or posed to others. The analysis was aided by one particular summer workshop, the main aim of which was to divert a cohort of young people, aged 16–25 who were at risk of gang involvement, due to heightened gang activity within their local community. These young people had online access for 15 minutes during their lunch break, with restrictions placed on the types of websites they could visit. Sites that featured extreme violence and/or pornographic material were blocked as, arguably, they reinforce antisocial and nihilistic behaviours.[6]

Media, Polytricks and Misrepresentation

Analysing the usage of contemporary forms of social media by young people, to express their innermost concerns, provides insights into their worlds that speak to the complexity of their relationships with the wider communities in which they live and operate.[7] Further, in the context of their position as members of BAME communities within the UK, their usage of social media to address various issues including youth violence, death and mourning, provides a space for a radical rethink on what is largely regarded as an almost apathetic approach to ‘black on black’ violence. Indeed the seriousness and regularity of violent acts that are attributed to criminal black youth gangs, including various high profile stabbings, attempted murders and murders in a number of locations across the UK, make it necessary for the police service, local authorities and other agencies to establish the best ways forward in this regard. These violent acts often result in very public debates about who is to blame for the actions of these nihilistic black youth, or who is ultimately responsible for dealing with the consequences of their actions. Far too often what is considered ‘newsworthy’ by the mainstream media merely serves to reinforce certain stereotypes through a form of ‘deviancy amplification’ that detracts from the real issues.[8] The point is, as Carrabine suggests:

> the mass media now provide us with round the clock news of crisis, disaster and trauma; rising social mobility brings a greater range of experiences, expectations and troubles; technological innovations have brought with them immense global dangers; and

> since 9/11 ‘new’ forms of terrorism further contribute to the cultural climate of fear.[9]

Such is the manner in which these issues are framed that the black youth presence adds to the febrile atmosphere that feeds the ‘cultural climate of fear’, because at its core is an investment in the pathological notions of black youth as another thing that needs to be ‘fixed’ in ‘Broken Britain’. This means that the blame for their antisocial behaviour is not regarded as a consequence of living within an inherently racist, classist and sexist society. Rather it is squarely laid at the door of the black community in general and the black family unit in particular, who themselves are criminalised in myriad ways; finding themselves under ‘endless pressure’ as noted by Pryce.[10] For example, by not taking into account ‘the materialist socialisation’ of these youth, means that their proneness to ‘being victims of crime and especially violent crime’ is overlooked.[11] This situation worsened for the black community whose disproportionate representation in the Criminal Justice System is well documented, because ‘the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act criminalises children, young people and their parents’.[12] An Act that was introduced by New Labour and further endorsed by ex-prime minister Blair at the Callaghan lecture in Cardiff in 2007, when he confessed that he was ‘lurching into total frankness’ and stated the need for an:

> intense police focus on the minority of young black Britons behind the gun and knife attacks. The laws on knife and gun gangs needed to be toughened and the ringleaders taken out of circulation.[13]

Blair failed to consider the history of racial oppression that structurally placed the black community at a disadvantage, socially, culturally and politically in the wider public arena, where as suggested by Les Back ‘new ethnicities’ are in flux and are therefore fluid and not fixed as Blair implies.[14] The suggestion is that intensifying a ‘police focus’ on the minority within a minority can be counterproductive if the drivers for this behaviour are collapsed into mere criminality, as is often the case in such matters. Indeed the scandal surrounding the Tory MP Oliver Letwin’s comments, in a joint memo to then prime minister Thatcher (regarding the riots that took place in various London boroughs in 1985), enable us to understand the racial climate at that time. More importantly, the fact is that he was, and still is, responsible for creating/influencing public policy, is

telling when considering how his racist values were central to his political views:

> The root of social malaise is not poor housing, or youth 'alienation', or the lack of a middle class… Riots, criminality and social disintegration are caused solely by individual characters and attitudes. So long as bad moral attitudes remain, all efforts to improve the inner cities will founder.[15]

Moreover, according to Ashton in her study of black male prisoners and how they located their sense of belonging as UK citizens, one youth asked her 'if being a gang leader counted as a formal identity'.[16] This is important to understand because the role the public and alternative public arenas play in moulding and shaping the identities of many of these black youth are the recipients of various forms of inequality that are known but seldom publicly addressed in any meaningful way. Moreover, when such issues are raised, especially in the context of mainstream schooling and how it obscures a positive black historical presence, 'we are accused of political indoctrination and teaching black kids how to hate whites'.[17] Consequently it is the black community as a homogenous mass that is held to account for incidents that, according to Blair, are deemed a consequence of their inability to control their young people. However, Carby suggests that this type of behaviour represents 'the cycle of pathology'; a consequence of black British youth being forcibly socialised into a culture of social practices that do not reflect their lived reality, as 'identifiable others' in the land of their birth.[18] Hence:

> Though the memo in which Mr Letwin made these claims is now some three decades old, there is a clear public interest in exposing the attitudes and values that once guided a still-serving member of the British Cabinet.[19]

It is the 'exposure of these attitudes' that is important here for two main reasons. Firstly, because Letwin speaks of 'black areas' which in truth makes little sense in the context of a UK demographic: secondly, lost in the Letwin debate was Thatcher's written comments stating how 'disturbing' the contents of the memo were, and how there is a need for a heightened police presence in these communities. However, the fact that in the news items Thatcher's 'acceptance' of the language and sentiments of the memo was not interrogated, speaks to how ingrained this worldview of the black community was, and still is, as those who will never belong to Britain. More importantly, this is not new news to the recipients of white

racism within the cultural milieu that is the black community, because any sense of belonging is always undermined by some type of sobering experience that is passed on anecdotally from generation to generation. That is why according to one respondent:

> You asked me what does it mean to belong? Well it fucking well ain't dealing with this all the time. I know what they (white people) say about us and some of it's true 'cos I know people who do things. But, you know, most of us don't get involved but I can understand why some do because if their parents went through the same shit as they are now, at school in the streets from everywhere. You're gonna say fuck it I belong with my own and for nuff youts that's the gang.[20]

The fact that these young people are primarily integrated into, and educated about, British culture via the state schooling system's National Curriculum, as well as other agencies of socialisation, must be considered when discussing their supposed 'educational underachievement' and gang affiliation. This lack of consideration results in the emphasis being placed on the black family as a pathological unit rather than the structural inequalities and deficient parenting styles that impact on the life chances of the white working classes in a similar fashion. There is also a denial of the experiences of racism as a psychological factor.[21]in any meaningful way, with regard to the omission of positive forms of self-identification in these young lives, where being black does 'not sit easily with being British'.[22] For instance, debates about a positive black historical presence are too often undermined and discredited in a very public way, as evidenced in the following news item:

GCSE students are to be taught that some of our nation's earliest inhabitants were Africans who arrived here long before the English. The Mail on Sunday has discovered that the extraordinary rewriting of our island's history – the politically correct work of a Marxist academic – will be offered to thousands of history students throughout England from September. Its creators claim the course addresses the 'white male-dominated' view of history – but it has outraged some of Britain's most eminent thinkers. Booker and Nobel prize-winning novelist V.S. Naipaul said: 'Once again political correctness is distorting our history and the education of our children.' And historian Sir Roy Strong, author of The Story Of Britain, said: 'This stands history on its head, projecting back on to the past something that isn't true.'[23]

The point is what is arguably lost in this type of media driven 'historical correctness', is the role it plays in further undermining the self-esteem, self-value and self-worth of the very young people who need these positive influences. Moreover, educators and practitioners who work with gang affiliated young people, or those who are impacted by gang culture or youth violence, recognise immediately that these public debates also undermine their credibility in the eyes of these young people. Consequently, this paradoxical argument sits parallel with the current misrepresentation of some black youth, where the hooded top is not read as an innocent youth style or necessity for warmth but has become a symbol of disorder coded with negative perceptions. Unsurprisingly, Prime Minister Cameron once stated 'we the people in suits often see hoodies as aggressive, the uniform of a rebel army of young gangsters'.[24] Similarly, Osgerby makes reference to a series of newspaper articles in both *The Sun* and the *Daily Mirror* where headline stories made attempts to demonise black youths as folk devils, stating 'there are slippages between media stereotypes of youth-as-fun and youth-as-trouble'.[25] Similarly, The Runnymede Trust's report *(Re)thinking gangs* speaks to the problems inherent in the construction of the gang through the image of Black youth and suggests:

> The correlation of gang cultures and criminal activities with young Black boys serves to collectively implicate and criminalise all Black boys and the Black community.[26]

Unsurprisingly then, according to one gang-affiliated young person:

> Can you guarantee me a job if I do my school work? No you can't and I can make more in a week than I'd make working. All that black history stuff you go on about is long and probably aint true anyway.[27] It won't help me hold and my bres hold our corner and protect the Ps.[28]

Jason speaks to the very conscious choices certain young people make when faced with 'that black history stuff', which for them has no bearing or relevance to their future social trajectories. For this reason, in the next section an insight will be provided into how these young people use a notion of belonging that is wrapped up in how they gain, or garner, respectability in their local communities.

Reputation, Belonging and Youth Violence

For young people who turn to alternative modes of money making, a public or private space is not only a place they 'inhabit but a place they may be called upon to defend', as their 'turf' association is arguably their foremost means of identifying self and other.[29] Crucial to understanding the idea of 'turf' association, such youth make 'an effort to organise hierarchies as a way of gaining some control' over the aspects of their lives they are seen to 'own' and 'control'.[30] Gaining control is one aspect of territorialising their space; it requires the manipulation and organisation of persons, implemented through a hierarchy in which power is disseminated in a top-down fashion. The hierarchy generally consists of family members, friends and peers, and the power is distributed by 'elders'/ 'shotters', who give instructions and organise the 'business' side that will generate the Ps. They instruct/ command the 'youngers'/ 'tinies'/ 'soldiers', followed by 'wanabees', 'associates', and fantasy members who choose to align themselves with the group because they are looking for kudos and not gang membership. Pitts accurately sums up the current situation arguing that 'in certain parts of our towns and cities, and among certain social groups, life has become far more dangerous for children and young people'.[31] Efrem noted that gangs are 'stuck in their post codes by the world wide web' and a 'false sense of security' is created as they now also use videos to mark territory.[32] However, the common belief is that the nihilistic behaviour of inner city youth generally perceived as 'minority' groups and 'gang' affiliated, impacts on the movement and public perceptions of all youth who live within the urban landscape, because:

> Gang turf is more than a collection of streets, alleys, stores, and street corners; it is sacred ground that is the site of struggles for identity, power, and status. It is a hallowed space that gives the gang its meaning. It is where members learn group norms and publicly display their group membership and loyalty, and it acts as a tangible reminder and repository of the gang's history and values.[33]

The young people featured here are aware of the 'gangs' that operate in their area and where some may not know the actual gang members personally, they are knowledgeable of the names and colours that are associated with specific areas. In some cases 'these names reflect the actual postcode that young people have assigned themselves to', as in the case of E9 Balance (East London E9).[34] Where the post code is not embedded in the name, alternative labels are created that become sub sets derived from

the areas of origin, such as the south-east London based ‘Gypset crew’ of Gipsy Hill and ‘Bluisham boyz’ in Lewisham. Interestingly, in some instances the colours associated with the local ‘gangs’ are taken from the colour of the dustbins in their area, so for instance in Lewisham the rubbish bins are generally coloured blue; hence blue-borough equals ‘bluisham’.[35] In some instances acronyms such as PDC for Poverty Driven Children or Peel Dem Crew become associated with an area in much the same way as the postcode, as one participant expressed for instance, ‘when you hear PDC everyone knows they repp Briky [represent Brixton]’.[36]

Unlocking these codes and processes for naming and claiming turf sheds light on the manner in which some young people imagine and narrate themselves as something other than just mindless, nihilistic, gang-affiliated youth. For instance, within these names that in some cases resemble mission statements, there are clear objectives behind them that make known to those who are privy to these codes, exactly what is at stake in peaceful or conflict situations. Spergel notes that ‘the symbolic names are more important and enduring for gang function and tradition… inscribed… along with gang names on the walls… as a threat to other gangs’ (Spergel 1995).[37] Consequently, they will understand that PDC is in one sense Poverty Driven Children, but PDC can also stand for the Peel Dem Crew. Similarly, Don’t Say Nothing (DSN) of Croydon, Shine My Nine (SMN) of Thornton Heath, Spare No One (SN1) of Peckham and South Man Syndicate (SMS) of Stockwell and Brixton, speak to the realisation that the mapping of turf, in this fashion, goes hand in hand with perceived areas of safety and danger. As such these young people now yield an alternative form of empowerment that presents itself in the claiming of place and the resymbolising of locality, which involves the redrawing of their local map and the construction of ‘informal’ boundaries that are not to be crossed or disrespected. The warnings are no longer limited to the medium of graffiti on a wall or public object, but are evidenced in virtual spaces, as ‘strategies of spatial organisation are deeply bound up with the social production of identities’.[38] In other words whilst this ideas of control, representing, respecting and the acquisition of power are being played out, there is the simultaneous production of identities that often reduces young people to violent perpetrators of ‘gang crime on road’.[39] Moreover, where their aim is to protect those in their communities, they run the risk of ‘victimising others who are not involved’ but simply live in the area.[40]

For many black youth an active participation in so called ‘gang culture’, offers an alternative form of social empowerment through a culture of respectability and belonging that is ultimately self-destructive. Consequently they are often oblivious to the problems associated with this lifestyle, especially when it comes to mapping out a future that is not associated with some form of petty or serious criminality. This is because ‘the police or prison doesn’t bother us. Our generation just want more things. We’re addicted to the hustle’.[41] This attitude speaks to the importance of understanding these formal and informal sites of learning, where the immediate acquisition of ‘more things’ outweighs the long term benefits of the traditional route to these ends via formal education; that which for them is regarded as ‘long’.[42]Unsurprisingly then, the manner in which gang affiliation and other forms of criminal activity serve as an organising principle in what is in effect a culture of abstention, needs to be fully understood. For instance, knowing what you can earn per day (a wage) depending on what your hustle is, to what age-graded sentence you can expect if you get caught with say drugs or a weapon, is crucial. The point is many see the ‘streets’ as an alternative learning environment and if they are gang-affiliated they will be ‘educated’ in all things to do with survival on the streets, which includes dealing with living in a racist society. In many ways this speaks to Back’s notion of the ‘metropolitan paradox’ where ‘momentary escapes from racism are contiguous with ever more complex forms of racial power and domination’, which can be read through the way they posture on the same streets.[43] Moreover, what is important for us to appreciate is that any state reaction to youth crime that does not take into account how these young people view respect through the acquisition of ‘more things’, becomes problematic, for, as Krinsky states:

> Human behaviors acquire their meanings within specific social contexts. Disapproving social reactions to deviant behaviors dictate their significance even for those who engage in them. Therefore, to understand deviance as fully as possible, researchers must explain not only the motives behind particular uncondoned activities, but also, and just as importantly, the fundamental causes of society’s responses.[44]

The notion of ‘uncondoned activities’ becomes central to this argument because the social imbalances that are recognised by many young people as a by-product of living in a racist society, partially explain why many withdraw from various aspects of community life and adopt a ‘soldier mentality’ whilst operating within ‘alternative cognitive

Landscapes'.[45] For them, exercising distance from the wider community is therefore a very conscious choice, which makes explicit the links between educational underachievement as a consequence of a seeming failure at school, and respectability as a consequence of success in the realms of criminality 'on road'. We therefore need to understand the pull factor of the forces at play that make crime into an appealing career and a pathway, for certain black youth who embrace an anti-school culture, in which a hyper-masculinity that actively encourages embracing the 'road-man mentality' is promoted; literally and virtually.[46] As such a discussion on expressive spaces where they can achieve a sense of belonging is crucial to understanding the school/on road dichotomy because, as was suggested above, they operate within 'alternative cognitive landscapes', where 'on road' success is often coupled with the prevalence of instances of black youth violence. However, as will be explored in the next section, this notion of 'on road' success or even failure, is now being played out in the expressive space that is the virtual, where acts of violence too often translate into the physical world. Unsurprisingly then, within these virtual spaces we witness lamentations as well as reflections of 'life on road' and what it means to be alive, 'I woke up this morning with tears in my eyes, knowing LiL Z is nowhere to be seen. I have to give thanks for what God has done to save me.'[47]

Territorialism, Silence, Death and Mourning in the Virtual

Determining 'failure' or 'success', in the virtual cannot be distanced from the social media sites where these matters are debated, discussed and made visible through young people's online presence.as found in game spaces such as Gangster War, Mafia Wars, Gang War, and Gang Nations. These game spaces feature all forms of extremely graphic violence that is conducted during the acquisition of weapons, drugs, money, mansions and girls/ women. In fact social media has essentially created a new mode of gang activity where public performance and viewership have become just as important as guarding a physical territory. In fact we see an extended or alternative form of territorialism taking place through online convergence, as the Internet as a 'convergence space' is one where gang conflicts amongst young people are intensified and new ones created.[48] Here virtual social worlds are made publicly visible, which often overlap with the real world where many young people do not recognise the embedded histories that are being played out in their day-to-day lives. As a result,

contemporary youth who are struggling to find their place in the landscape of Britain often find themselves marginalised, confined to boundaries that ironically result in a shrunken territory. The shrinkage, which is also virtual, happens because of the fear or discomfort that young people experience when travelling 'freely' across London. The result is a form of self-imposed sanction that ends up confining them to the communities in which they live, thereby contributing to forms of 'self-exclusion'.[49] This partially explains why they aim to develop their own sense of security and identity, one where they define their own precepts of inclusion and exclusion, as a form of 'neighbourhood nationalism'.[50] More importantly:

> the long-term implications of being socialised into a culture rooted in networked publics are unknown… teens live in a society whose public life is changing rapidly.[51]

The rapid change that Boyd speaks of is evidenced in the public social media (SoMe) profiles of these young people, through which they express aspects of their young lives.[52] However, what is paramount is that through such profiles, we learn that in addition to the emergence of virtual reputation-building, many are uncomfortable with not being able to freely navigate their neighbouring streets. As a result a form of alternative territorialism, in both real and virtual spaces, has become one of the underlying navigational issues for urban youth. This is because what occurs in the real world is transferred to the virtual and vice versa, which is the current case between groups from Brixton and Peckham. Consequently, this alternate territorialism is a claiming of 'overlapping territories' that in the first instance is borne from the rifts caused by various groups/ gangs representing or 'reppin' an area. This needs consideration because the online acts of violence, far too often exacerbate the existing tensions within and between groups of young people from different communities. For instance, in the case of youths from Peckham and Brixton clashing, the original reasons for the ongoing feuds have become blurred and then remade in ways that make sense in the current moment. Moreover, Brixton and Peckham are not the only boroughs that have 'beef' with each other; Peckham is said to have a history of disputes with 'New Cross, the Old Kent Road and Stockwell'.[53]What is of interest is that these conflicts appear to have no specific point of departure, as such what it means to 'rep' (represent) an area and the mechanisms employed to defend their 'endz' (the areas in which youth live), becomes their key focus. However, as stated above, for many of these young people the history behind these forms of territorialism remains unknown, which means the patterns of behaviour are based on cultural retentions, transferred from generation to generation and taken for granted by each generation of young

people. This is evidenced in YCTV2's documentary 'Know Your Endz' which has been written and produced by young people for an audience of their peers. It highlights these postcode rivalries and emphasises the contentions between SW2 and SE15, as well as E8 with NW1. When asked to explain these rivalries, it was suggested:

> It's about the street you're from the street your reppin, the street you have grown up in… if someone comes into your endz and disrespects your street then you're not going to take it… I am not going to let no one disrespect my endz… if you disrespect my endz then obviously I am going to come down on you hard… if anyone can walk through your area then you have no control of what's happening.[54]

The above reads like a scene from the 1979 American gang movie 'The Warriors'[55] but tellingly speaks to the way in which gangs operate in the real world, or non-virtual space, as discussed extensively elsewhere.[56] Consequently, the way that gangs interact in the virtual has become an increasing area of interest, because the tensions that have emerged as a result of gang rivalry today are transferred and intensified online. For instance, the murders of more than 100 young people through gun and knife crime during 2015, has led some of the young participants in the 'Different Endz' project, to respond to the deaths of friends and family members in the virtual through real concerns over their physical safety. Crucially, whilst working with this cohort, their YouTube and FaceBook profiles curated with images, videos and comments in the form of lamentations, allow access to what these young people are experiencing and expressing. These lamentations shed fresh light on how multiple social media platforms fit into the lives of young people in very interesting ways, as what they gain through such participation is a voice that would normally have been violently silenced. The reason for this is again wrapped up in this notion of 'reppin the endz', because mourning for, or showing sympathy to, the wrong person(s) can have extremely dire consequences that transcend gang rivalries, as innocent family members or friends, are often caught up in the maelstrom.

These concerns were evidenced during the project, whilst searching through the numerous YouTube links that pay tribute to the lives of lost or 'fallen soldiers', from which the young people discovered that they were far from alone in grieving over the deaths of lost ones. Moreover, the participants revealed that many young people living in London, between the ages of 15 to 25, either know or are associated with someone who has

died via gun or knife violence. Consequently, YouTube and Facebook are two spaces where notes written to friends and peers who have passed away, have been found to be useful in making sense of their willing or unwilling involvement as innocents, mere associates or gang members. Here, the Internet facilitates young people's use of social media to mourn and engage their peers, through expressions and lamentations that differ from traditional modes of tributes to the dead. In some senses these novel cultural practices amongst young people, form a community of active participants in the emergence of 'digital grave makers' that cater for those who visit sites and spaces for mourning online. Virtual cemeteries and virtual mourning have arisen as a result of our 'electronic culture' and have become a significant part of death and dying rituals amongst young people.[57] There is an increasing field of research that focuses on how death and grief are dealt with on various online platforms and social media, which speaks to 'how the Internet and social media may be changing our ways of grieving and mourning' and our concepts of death and bereavement.[58]

Haley, a young person from the project, brought forward an explanation of the term 'Different Endz' or different ends, to explain how it speaks to 'changes' in the process of grieving and mourning that highlights the importance of the virtual mourning space. She commented on the sanctity and preciousness of life as featured in many of the online tributes (see below), whilst acknowledging the abrupt ending of the lives of the young people she referred to as 'the fallen soldiers'; young people who were personally known to her who have been killed on the street. The significance of discussing the death of 'fallen soldiers', was to encourage the young people to openly discuss their views on gun and knife violence, and reflect on their own lives and life chances in their local communities. Haley's reference and tribute to the 'fallen soldiers' spoke to the way in which memorial tributes of 'fallen soldiers', were not only visited online, but they also offered insight into the sentiments behind the sudden loss of a young life, where somewhat disturbingly:

> Killing each other may not be the way forward as there is no guarantee that your name will make the headlines… so it's really about the number of hits an online profile gets.[59]

The above partially explains the growth of these online networks where mourning is central, as evidenced in the tributes made to 15 year old Zac Olumegbon, affectionately known as Lil Zac from Tulse Hill, south-east London. Zac was said to be a member of the TN1[60] (Trust no one) gang and

was stabbed to death by rivals from the GAS (Grind and Stack/ Guns and Shanks) gang outside the Park Campus School he attended in West Norwood, south-east London. Young people identified two R.I.P. video tributes to LiL Zac, produced by Maximum Recordings: one clip filmed on an estate in Tulse Hill, has a total of 73,350 hits with 626 likes and 13 dislikes, whilst the other clip has a total of 114,842 hits, 695 likes and 19 dislikes. Yet whilst the performers in the video clip make clear that 'TN1 is not a gang but they are family', what emerges from these productions are the manner in which young people choose to express their feelings of hurt, loss and confusion as a result of the level of violence that occurs amongst themselves and their peers. However, these hits represent and symbolise the vast increase in the ways young people are able to reach large audiences at a rapid speed, in the relative safety of their homes. Although, despite the 'false sense of security' they gain from marking territory in the virtual, a perhaps unforeseen result of their online presence is an uncanny sense of value for life, as displayed in many of the R.I.P. videos they observed.[61] Tellingly, the R.I.P. videos attributed to another 'fallen soldier', Jozey–Joel Morgan, share exactly the same sentiments. Jozey, a 17-year-old at the time of his death, grew up in Southwark, south-east London and moved to Lambeth during his mid-teens. He was affiliated with the GAS gang and later died, not through gun or knife crime, but in a car crash. Yet at his funeral, 'gunmen from an unknown rival gang' were reported to have opened fire, killing 21-year-old Ronnie Azezur Khan, a funeral attendee and friend of Jozy.[62]

From the above it is clear that the dangers of attending a funeral of anyone caught up in youth violence are real and explains why social media facilitates grieving and mourning 'publicly', as a viable alternative for these young people. In this way the manner in which they conceptualise death and bereavement, as heavily associated with say for instance gang culture, sheds light on an increase in social media use, where virtual cemeteries have become a symbol of alternative youth expression. Thus with the advent of technology and the enabling of young people to create elaborate online profiles, expressing their feelings and opinions about the harsh realities and consequences of youth crime and violence, through various forms of media, continues to grow. Tributes are therefore made and shared publicly along with the views, feelings, hopes and aspirations from friends of the deceased, which allows us to witness these youthful constructions of self, through these R.I.P. tributes that become both a means of self-promotion as well as a space of autonomous mourning.

Conclusion

The chapter has made an argument for understanding how it is that young people share their lives in public and alternative public arenas, as a conscious choice, making explicit the links between social media, gang culture and youth crime. By doing so and actively listening to voices that may be silent, or have been silenced for one reason or other, provides an opportunity to make sense of the situations and difficulties they often find themselves in. It also allows us to witness the shift in how young people respond to their rapidly changing environments, the physical and the virtual, countering the notion that they are generally apathetic to their social situations. Far too often they find themselves legislated for, and done to, but generally they are ignored, not listened to and therefore remain largely unheard in the wider public arena. As such, where young people share their own musings on current affairs, or events that directly impact their lives in some way, shape or form, it is important for us to listen to and understand them in the confines of their expressive spaces.

When these virtual social worlds are made publicly visible, we notice an overlap with the real world, where many young people do not recognise the embedded histories that are being played out in their day-to-day lives. As a result, contemporary youth who are struggling to find their place in the landscape of Britain, often find themselves marginalised and confined to boundaries not of their own making; those that have been passed down generationally which ironically result in them contesting a shrunken territory; their turf. The novel aspect of the shrinkage is it now extends to the virtual, due to the fear or discomfort that young people experience when travelling ‘freely’ across London, which results in a form of self-imposed sanction that ends up confining them to the communities in which they live, thereby contributing to forms of ‘self-exclusion’.[63]

The above partially explains why they aim to develop their own sense of security and identity, one where they define their own precepts of inclusion and exclusion, as a form of ‘neighbourhood nationalism’.[64]Consequently, for many young people loyalty is tied to their territory, resulting in an uncanny ‘postcode pride’, which has a different set of morals based on pride and respect. On one hand the area or postcode is honoured by those who live there, on the other the postcode is used as a means to build a ‘reputation’, where respect is often earned through intimidation, extreme violence and fear. For this reason, consideration has been given to how young people navigate their neighbourhoods and how exactly it is that they are utilising these platforms as life and death spaces to communicate their

positions and emotions. However, virtual reputation building has become a strategy for many young people to navigate their cities with confidence, marking out safe and unsafe spaces both in the real and the virtual worlds.

Moreover, the above enables us to view and experience a new mode of connectivity created by young people, where public performance and increasing viewership, demonstrable by the number of viewings a post has, have become just as important as making known the territorialisation of a physical space. Similarly, through this work we have seen that young people utilise the social media sites to express their emotions, especially when it comes to mourning the ‘fallen soldiers’, creating a common space amongst them for discussions of loss and condolence. It is therefore clear that, through the idea of turf war, repping the ends and gaining respect, young people organise their own structures, systems and hierarchies as a way of gaining some level of control over their lives. As a result we learn that such spaces have somewhat replaced, and in other instances enhanced, traditional face-to-face friendships or rivalries, as the ‘virtual’ acts as an autonomous space where young voices can be ‘heard’.

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