Review: Singing the Nation

Traci Parker

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Published on: Jul 31, 2023
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21428/3e88f64f578a2a61
License: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0)
Project
Singing the Nation

Project Director
Sonya Donaldson, Colby College

Project URL
https://singingthenation.com/

Project Reviewer
Traci Parker, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Project Overview
Sonya Donaldson

Singing the Nation is a digital humanities project that aims to incite discussion about “Lift Every Voice and Sing” and its resonance in contemporary Black life. Also known as the “Black National Anthem” and “The Negro National Anthem,” the song was written by James Weldon Johnson as a poem to commemorate Abraham Lincoln’s birthday in 1899; it was later set to music by Johnson’s brother, J. Rosamond Johnson. It was first performed in 1900 by 500 school children to honor Booker T. Washington’s visit to The Stanton School in Jacksonville, Florida, where Johnson was the principal.

Singing the Nation features a video collection of performances and mashups that comprise an “ephemeral archive”: works created often with a single intention—an observation of a holiday or a meaningful date (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Birthday, Juneteenth), to mark a significant event (e.g., Barack Obama’s election), or to demonstrate shared cultural practices (e.g., step shows, HBCU events, Black church services). The 75 videos in this collection are organized into categories: “Celebrity,” “Choir,” “Documentary,” “Group,” “Mashup,” “News,” “Solo,” and “Youth.” Some of the videos span two or more categories, revealing the ways in which the videos elude a simple classification. This elusiveness forces us to rethink ideas of (im)materiality and the (ir)relevance ascribed to these kinds of digital objects. The videos, collectively, attend to the sonic and the visual, to emotions and memories — and might reveal something to us about Black history, Black culture, and Black life. With this collection, I argue for the salience of these forms of creative expressions by Black people, and for the work they do as potential sites of memory and materiality.

Singing the Nation uses the minimal computing model, as defined by Alex Gil and Jentery Sayers. In “The User, the Learner and the Machines We Make,” Gil notes that centering on the question of need—what is necessary and enough to do the work—clarifies how we view and embark on “doing” digital humanities. The clarity means that we decenter our own material desires to consider, instead, the viewer/user experience.
Sayers’s “Minimal Definitions (tl:dr version),” provides a blueprint for this process, particularly with his emphasis on increasing “entry, access, and self-representation to build systems/projects premised on social justice and difference,” and “to decrease the environmental effects and energy consumption.” The focus on “maximum ephemerality” as a means of engendering experimentation and “collective participation” is equally appealing, as it aligns with how I conceive of this collection: a project that is open to collaboration and that honors the work of everyday creators.

This project emerged in 2011 from my non-academic curiosity about the song’s relevance in Black public life, as for me, it seemed to have fallen out of favor. I initially set up Google Alerts and created a playlist of the performances I had found. Alex Gil, then Digital Scholarship Librarian at Columbia University, has been an invaluable interlocutor and guide through GitHub, and provided lessons in using Visual Studio Code among other resources. The project’s development has also been aided in part by a Virginia Humanities Fellowship and a Visiting Scholar post at the University of Virginia’s Scholar’s Lab (2019-2020).

The website represents the first stage of Singing the Nation. A second stage of the project will examine video metadata and analyze comments sections, which reveal another set of discourses appended to the videos. These discourses center around art, blackness, history, and national belonging and amplify the videos’ resonance. A third phase of the project will invite public participation in the form of critical and creative engagement with the collection and with the ideas around ephemera, history, and memory. The project welcomes collaborators and those who would engage with the collection for their own research.

---

**Project Review**

**Traci Parker**

Singing the Nation is a digital humanities project that celebrates “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (1900), popularly known as the “Negro National Anthem” and the “Black National Anthem.” Harlem Renaissance creatives James Weldon Johnson, author of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), and his brother J. Rosamond Johnson composed the hymn’s lyrics and music respectively.

Singing for the Nation is being developed in three phases. The first — and current — phase features 75 performances and user-created mashups of the hymn in a collection that, Sonya Donaldson calls, an “ephemeral archive.” The second phase will examine the videos’ metadata and comment sections. The last stage will invite public participation.

The project argues “for the salience of ephemera” (materials created and designed for short-term use and enjoyment), and insists that, “by engaging with ephemera, we can consider the ways that these videos, individually and collectively, might help us reconstruct and better understand Black history, Black culture, and Black life.”
As a digital archival collection that uses the minimal computing model, it centers the viewer/user experience by featuring a “sampling” of videos from famous and little-known performers. Complementing this is “Singing the Nation: On Memory, Ephemerality, and the Minimal Computing Model.” In this essay, Donaldson details the project’s origins and evolution and deliberates on individual and communal memory as theory, method, and praxis for Black digital humanities work. Here, and throughout, she makes strong connections with extant scholarship on ephemera and the minimal computing model. However, the project also would benefit from a deeper engagement with the hymn’s rich history and historical scholarship on Black protest, culture, and memory. I encourage Donaldson to provide a more detailed exploration of the hymn’s long history.

Singing the Nation’s reliance on YouTube ensures that the project is user-friendly. But it also raises several questions regarding user/viewer engagement, method, and arrangement. First, YouTube is a global corporation that commodifies and restricts Black people and Black culture, and yet it is simultaneously a liberatory force for Black people. How then should we read the sources through these lenses? Second, will the sampling of videos grow? Will current and future performances of the song (such as Sheryl Lee Ralph’s performance of the song at the 2023 Super Bowl LVII) be added from YouTube and other online platforms? Are there other performances of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” that are housed in physical archives that have not been included (because of permissions, have not been digitized, etc.)? A list of these performances and their location might be useful.

Finally, the videos are organized into eight categories: “Celebrity,” “Choir,” “Documentary,” “Group,” “Mashup,” “News,” “Solo,” and “Youth.” Users may search by category; however, the videos’ categories are not clearly marked. I recommended tagging the videos (as well as arranging the videos in chronological order on the “Browse” page).

Singing the Nation is a promising endeavor that spotlights the history and significance of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” for generations of Black Americans. I look forward to seeing how the project develops and will generate new and thoughtful discussions and encounters with the century-plus-old hymn.

Footnotes
