

**Black Art is Protest: Black Artists Responding to
and Shaping the Black Lives Matter Movement of 2020**

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Introduction

Black artists - those in the mainstream and those whose names are not widely known - in theater, music, visual arts, and dance have used their voices to create greater equality, whether they were the first or only Black artists or they were using their art to speak out against an unjust system. From the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s to the Black Lives Matter Movement of 2020, there is a lineage of art that is protest. I cannot write about the Black art that is protest as part of the Black Lives Matter Movement of 2020 without talking about all the factors that influenced and impacted that 2020 movement, including COVID-19, the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the long-standing racial injustices in our country, and the lack of diversity in many institutions and systems.

Racial Injustice in America

“Prejudice is a burden that confuses the past, threatens the future and renders the present inaccessible,”-Maya Angelou.

The first slave ship, The White Lion, landed on American soil in “1619” with “20 enslaved Africans” forcibly removed from their home continent and transported to North America (Waxman, *The First Africans in Virginia Landed in 1619*, Time), as enslaved free laborers, since then, America has faced deep-rooted systematic racial injustice towards the Black community. Four hundred years later, the treatment of Black Americans evolved from lynching and burning to having a target on their backs placed there by American law enforcement. In the beginning months of 2020, three Black souls lost their lives at the hands of white Americans. On February 23, 2020, Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man, was fatally shot and murdered by three white civilian men while going for a run in the neighborhood of Satilla Shores in Brunswick, Georgia. A month later, on March 3, 2020, yet another Black man lost his life.

Walking home from a church performance in Tacoma, Washington, Manuel Ellis was stopped by four law enforcement officers who held him down until he lost consciousness, even though he repeatedly screamed, “I can’t breathe.” He died. Ten days later, on March 13, 2020, in Louisville, Kentucky, a Black woman, Breonna Taylor, was shot and killed in her own home by a stampede of white police officers responding to a so-called drug dealing operation, later to be found false. The consecutive widespread killing of Black Americans seems to be an infectious disease, a pandemic. However, this wasn’t the only pandemic that 2020 faced.

The Dual Pandemics of Racial Injustice and COVID-19

As key as it is to understand the impact Black artists made during the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, it is also crucial to understand the social injustice realities of that time within the educational and workforce systems. The world encountered and adapted to a significant change in 2020 worldwide with the introduction of the COVID-19 pandemic. Society faced a lockdown for safety against the deadly virus. Schools and workplaces across the country closed down and moved online to mitigate the spread of the virus. Once schools shifted to remote learning due to COVID-19, pre-entrance college students scrambled with administration for the college entrance exam, such as the SAT or the ACT. School systems began to face controversy with college entrance exams, many of whom argued that these exams were culturally subjective. Many white students had the upper hand in preparation for the exams compared to Black students because “white parents particularly have the resources of higher income, better education and less discrimination against” (Martinez, *Covid-19 and the Transformation of American Society*, p. 58). The final scores on the entrance exam determined the college a student would attend. White students would “demand and get the attention of the professor in the

classroom and the benefits of the classroom, while the well-off are more likely to attend the second-rate online colleges and get degrees” (Martinez *Covid-19 and the Transformation of American Society*, Pg. 50).

American businesses and companies had to shut down due to health concerns of the virus. However, it was the opposite for frontline jobs: transportation, critical retail workers, nurses, and doctors. Those working the frontline jobs are predominantly Black and Latino, many of whom worked in healthcare. With healthcare being the most significant frontline job during an unprecedented time, the workers had to work in unsanitary spaces, “the disproportionate number of Blacks and Latinos who work in healthcare do so in the poorest of hospitals with more Black and Latino patients” (Martinez, *Covid-19 and the Transformation of American Society*, p.18)

There is a difference in the demographic for those who had to work in addition to the majority of people who needed the care and treatment for the disease. Thus, with COVID-19 spreading throughout the world and affecting people of all ages, economic statuses, and nationalities, the Black community in the United States faced the collision of COVID-19 and ongoing deaths of Black Americans because of racial injustice.

The Day George Floyd Was Murdered

On May 25, 2020, a significant death of another Black soul happened, changing the course of history. George Floyd, a 46-year-old father, was murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It began when Floyd went to a grocery store and paid with a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. The cashier proceeded to call law enforcement. From there, four officers appeared; one officer was Derek Chauvin, who played a primary role. The officers proceeded to force Floyd out of his car, handcuffed him, and then pinned him to the concrete. While placing

Floyd under arrest, Officer Chauvin put his knee on Floyd's neck for approximately nine minutes while Floyd was gasping for air and screaming, "I can't breathe." As he took his last breath, he let out his last cry, "Mama," A cry that would reach people across the globe and impact the very course of history.

The World Reacted

"The time is now for us all to take action to heal and strengthen our communities and we commit to being the voice for change!"-Albany Dance Center.

Videos of Floyd's death surfaced and were seen online around the world. People watched the nine-minute-long, horrific video of Floyd yelling out, "I can't breathe." The medical examiner later ruled that the cause of death was a homicide. People quickly responded to this horrendous incident. Outrage, heartbreak, pain, and disbelief flooded every country, city, and neighborhood. Putting on their masks to stay safe from COVID, people around the world marched on the streets, protesting this hateful act and the never-ending racial injustice in this world. The people chanted "Black Lives Matter," "I Can't Breathe," and "No Justice, No Peace." This nine-minute video was evidence of ongoing racial injustice and a broken system in law enforcement, and people had enough. People in an estimated 40 countries participated in the protest.

The United Kingdom "had the largest protest in the world last summer outside of the United States" (Silverstein, *The Global Impact of George Floyd*, CBS). The United Kingdom, like the United States, has its fair share of racial injustice and experienced the death of a Black soul in 2020, Belly Mujinga, a transport worker. New Zealand, France, Colombia, Switzerland, Brazil, and South Africa were among the countries that joined in the protest for George Floyd. His death was the spark that pushed people in so many countries to stand and speak up. The United States was the country with the most significant number of protests, a country with rooted

and ingrained systemic racism; a country that has had numerous killings of Black people at the hands of white Americans, mainly law enforcement, many of whom received a verdict of not guilty. The Black Lives Matter protest in 2020 in America was not only about George Floyd, but the other Black Americans who lost their lives: Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Emmett Till, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Medgar Evers, and many more. Most people in the United States held up signs and chanted, "Say their names." They were honoring the lives that were lost to systematic racism and a broken system but were never to be forgotten. These names are why the Black Lives Matter Movement was birthed.

Black Lives Matter in 2020

Throughout the American centuries, the Black community in America has been in bondage either physically or mentally, a continuation of oppression by “white supremacy, power, and domination for what James Baldwin called the ‘monster’ in our mind”, according to author Tru Levertte (Levertte, *With Fist Raised...* p. 300). He continued to write, “Throughout centuries and across continents, Black people have attempted to confront this fear and assert self-determination.” The unlawful actions that many white law enforcement officials perpetrate upon the Black community are what started the Black Lives Matter Movement. In 2012, a young Black soul, Trayvon Martin, was shot and killed; a year later, in 2013, his killer, George Michael Zimmerman, was acquitted. From that, in 2013, “Three female Black organizers—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—created a Black-centered political will and movement building project called Black Lives Matter” (*Howard Library Law*). What started it all was the famous hashtag “#BlackLivesMatter” surfacing throughout social media platforms. From there, “the movement grew nationally in 2014 after the deaths of Michael Brown in Missouri and Eric

Garner in New York” (*Howard Library Law*). Michael Brown and Eric Garner were two Black souls killed at the hands of white law enforcement. The movement spread worldwide after the death of George Floyd, “Most recently, #BlackLivesMatter has spearheaded demonstrations worldwide protesting police brutality and systemic racism that overwhelmingly affects the Black community” (*Howard Library Law*).

The media has dramatically impacted the Black Lives Matter movement, mainly social media. Many activists “sustain a news-gathering technique that relies on community—for equal parts content and catharsis. They hit ‘record’ again and again”(Richardson, *Bearing Witness While Black*, p. 28). News on social media outlets can reach all audience members at their hands. However, there is a conflict with posting Black Lives Matter news on social media because “Snapchat video and Instagram stories are designed to disappear ” (Richardson, *Bearing Witness While Black*, p. 28). When posted news quickly disappears, a problem arises: a number of people have not been informed of any news stories that have to do with Black Lives Matter.

Past deaths of Black Americans had a domino effect, and when the video of George Floyd’s death surfaced, it caused a shocking outburst. 2020 was not only a change in society with the pandemic of COVID-19, but also a change in the pandemic of systemic racial injustice, a system of “bias policing and unfair judicial precedents, rooted in anti-Blackness and racial disparity” (NAACP). This system must be broken; to break and rebuild the system, people can no longer sit in silence. Black artists did what they always do and spoke the truth to those in power.

Black Art

“Black art has always existed. It just hasn’t been looked for in the right places,” Romare Bearden.

The first militant Black movement in the 1960s occurred during the Civil Rights Movement. This movement led to the end of segregation between white and Black Americans and brought both demographics to integrate into American Society. From the Civil Rights Movement, Black Art became an essential part of the movement, and the Black Arts Movement was created by Black artists, including Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Ntozake Shange, Ed Bullins, and many more. Poet, playwright, critic, and political activist Larry Neale, who coined the term, described the Black Art Movement as an “aesthetic and spiritual sister of Black power.” “The Black Arts movement was influenced by the teaching of Elijah Muhammad”(Levertte, *With Fist Raised...* p. 300); the teaching and belief of the “Nation of Islam.” Elijah Muhammad a religious leader, would speak and teach the “Holy Quran” , believing that “the sun is going West”. His teaching “will raise a powerful sun of truth and the spirit of truth from this part of our planet by us whom God has raised up among us.” (Muhammad, *The Future Master Fard*). The reason Black people, during that time, studied and looked to Islam was the belief that Christianity came from colonialism and was used as a weapon to weaken the minds of Black people and to oppress them. Many Black communities at the time wanted to declare independence and mental freedom within America. They turned to their motherland of Africa, where Islam was one of the native religions. They believed in shaking off the mental shackles that Christianity had helped to maintain. It was a way to "raise consciousness and to encourage Black people to define their identities for themselves and escape the double consciousness” (Levertte, *With Fist Raised...* p. 300).

At that time, Black artists needed a space to create and share Black art at a time when many anti-integration believers who were white Americans challenged Black voices. Many believed that the Black Arts Movement was anti-white, but it was Afro-centric or pro-Black.

Black artists wanted to highlight Black artists' work and voices without having to create art in relationship to white voices or Western ideals of what was good and beautiful. Many artists and activists emerged from the Black Arts Movement, including Alice Childress (playwright), Gwendolyn Brooks (poet), Jacob Lawrence (visual artist), Audre Lorde (writer), and Sidney Poitier (actor). Along with being activists, they were artists who used their work to speak out against racial injustice in America.

Black Plays Prior to Covid

Broadway is arguably the theater capital of the World, known worldwide for the best theater shows produced. However, the “Great White Way” continues to have racial equity challenges. In 2019 and the first three months of 2020, before the COVID shutdown, Broadway produced forty-two plays. From the 2019 and early 2020 theater seasons, Broadway had a low percentage of Black audience members coming to Broadway shows. The Broadway theatergoers who identified as Black made up “3.9% in 2018-2019”, (*Broadway League releases 2022-2023 audience*, Broadway News). During 2019 and early 2020, Broadway fell short of producing Black stories on stage. The shows at that time with a theme of Black voices were *American Son*, *Choir Boy*, *Slave Play*, and *A Soldier's Play*. In an interview, Donna Walker-Kuhne, foremost expert in Audience development by the Arts & Business Council, stated, “Prior to the murder of George Floyd, the Broadway district produced a maximum of one-three plays in any given year written by Black playwrights.” *Choir Boy*, *Slave Play*, and *A Soldier's Play* were among the plays on Broadway with a Black voice and a Black playwright. Walker-Kuhne mentioned that the reason behind the number of Black plays produced is that “many times producers would state that there was not a Black audience to support the production or not enough plays to consider.” Broadway

Producers, who are mainly white Americans, would use this excuse as a reason for the number of Black plays that were produced on a stage on Broadway. Walker-Kuhne shared that most Black artists would constantly complain about the lack of representation on Broadway or have recycled productions: *Porgy and Bess* or *Raisin in the Sun*. Black artists need new stories to tell and need to tell the stories of Black voices. Black art can impact and leave an imprint on Black artists to tell the story of being Black in America.

Artist Protesting in 2020

"The Black artist is dangerous. Black art controls the Negro's reality, negates negative influences, and creates positive images" - Sonia Sanchez.

With the uproar of protests against the murder of George Floyd in 2020, many forms of Black protest art emerged. Instead of rioting or boycotting, artists used their craft to speak out against racial injustice. In response to the death of Floyd, Washington, D.C.'s mayor, Muriel Bowser, an African-American woman, was the first to name a street in D.C., Black Lives Matter Plaza in Washington. Mayor Bowser and the D.C. Department of Public Transportation hired portrait artist Aniekan Udofia to paint the first Black Lives Matter mural on the Black Lives Matter Plaza street. Eight hours later, the mural finished. The mural consisted of bold lettering and yellow spelling "Black Lives Matter." Visual art had a more prominent effect worldwide in 2020 compared to other art forms like dance, theater, poetry, or music. Many visual artists painted murals to respond to the aftermath of the summer protest. Since Floyd's killing, an estimated "2,000 pieces of street art around the world have been created", (Lang, *What the Artists Behind George Floyd Murals...*, Time). Painting murals is a form of expressive and commutative art, being able to tell a story; murals can also honor and celebrate someone or something. Wordly artists painted murals of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Berlin, Germany,

Bethlehem, Palestine, Nairobi, Kenya, and Binnish, Syria. These murals consist of the face of George Floyd, his final words, "I Can't Breathe, and vibrant colors. A few of these countries are in a war, such as Syria and Palestine, and yet still took action to honor a Black man who was killed unjustly halfway across the world. "The way he was killed is the same thousands and thousands of people who were killed in the same way in Syria." (Lang, *What the Artists Behind George Floyd Murals...*, Time). Not only in America but also in many different parts of the world people continue to chant "No Justice, No Peace."

Public Enemy released a remix of their famous Grammy-nominated song "Fight the Power" in the summer of 2020, responding to George Floyd and the other countless murders. Public Enemy reimagined the song title by Isley Brothers, "Fight the Power," creating a slogan reaching out to listeners, who many were protestors, amping them up to fight against racial discrimination in America. Doing so by adding phrases in their lyrics "All the bullshit going down" (Lustgarten, *Ten Details That Shaped Do the Right Thing*, Brooklyn Museum). The song was first released in 1990 as a song played in Spike Lee's film *Do The Right Thing* soundtrack. The song was a response to the killing of Michael Griffith in 1986, known as the Howard Beach incident. During a mob fight, the mob proceeded to force "Michael Griffith, to run onto the Belt Parkway, where he was hit by a car and killed"(Lustgarten, *Ten Details That Shaped Do the Right Thing*, Brooklyn Museum). This was a song that spoke out against the exhausting perpetual brutal attacks and killings of Black Americans at the hands of police, "cowards are huntin' Black men, that's what I'm seeing." The lyric translates that Black members of the community walk with a target on their backs.

In Harlem, New York, protesters created a way to pay tribute to George Floyd, "Dance for George" and amongst those protesters were professional dancers. Harlem protestors

performed dances such as the electric slide and the cupid shuffle. Both dances are frequently used within the Black community at special events. The idea for the tribute dance performance was to honor George Floyd's death, "after the dancing came a silent, nine-minute kneel" (*Dance for George*, Oregon Educational Association). The Black community can find healing in coming together to pay tribute to a Black soul lost. The healing they get from being surrounded by their peers is not alone with the feeling of being Black in America, those feelings being fear, anger, or loss. Various emotions needed healing throughout the United States, emotions felt from losing another Black life.

Poet and activist Amanda Gorman wrote a poetry book, *Call Us What We Carry*, responding to the 2020 protest: "The point of protest isn't winning; it's holding fast to the victory of freedom even when fast victory is not promised." Gorman's idea of protesting is not to feel victorious; the focus is on speaking out and having unheard voices heard. Her poetry focuses on the 2020 Black Lives Matter Movement. She writes a specific poem congregating the meaning of protesting for BLM and its impact, called "Fury and Faith." Gorman wrote, "Together, we envision a land that is liberated, not flawless. Again & again, over & over, we will stride up every mountainside, magnanimous & modest. We will be protected & served by a force that is honored & honest. This is more than a protest. It's a promise."

Like the Black Lives Matter Protest in 2020, many other Black movements and protests, including the Montgomery bus boycott during the Civil Rights or Rodney King's brutal beating at the hands of white law enforcement, causing the LA riots, have been supported by white allies. The alliances of white Americans did not take a movement or a protest away from the Black voices of the protest and movements. Instead, they shared and supported the fight and fury against systemic racial injustice. Rodney King's brutal beating was the first widespread recorded

evidence of police brutality, "African Americans and select allies have used the technologies to bear witness while Black." (Richardson, *Bearing Witness While Black*, p. 118). When an ally for the Black community can capture injustice in their hands using technology with a video camera, they contribute to change. *12 Angry Men... and Women: The Weight of the Wait* was a theater piece adapted by Jewish American playwright and author Arthur Yorinks. The piece was a response to not only the death of George Floyd but the murder of so many other Black souls due to racial discrimination and an unjust system. Arthur Yorinks believed "as an ally or an interloper-me being a white man in America, but given my background, and knowing firsthand what antisemitism looks like and feels like, I at least can have a sense of what injustice is (though certainly not from the perspective of being Black in America). Still, in whatever way my skills could aid in the crucial protest - the crucial moral imperative to stand up to and declare what side I'm on in this struggle- that's important to me as a person, as a human being, living in and among the ongoing injustice of America ". Yorinks believed that his assistance in shaping the piece for Black voices to tell Black stories was his way of contributing to the summer 2020 protest. Black female novelist Toni Morrison inspired the title by saying, "What struck me most about the people who were burning down shops and stealing was how long they waited - the restraint, not the spontaneity, the restraint. No one talks about that." In September 2020, The Billie Holiday Theatre produced *12 Angry Men... and Women* in response to George Floyd and Breonna Taylor's deaths. Black women in America have had their fair share of police brutality and racial discrimination in America; however, Breonna Taylor's death did not receive the same public outcry as the death of George Floyd, a Black man. In the original narrative of "12 Angry Men", the lives of Black women were not included. The director of the piece, Dr. Indira Etwaroo, conceptualized the adaptation of the book and added the voice of a Black woman whose life was

lost. Etwaroo justified her action of contributing Black female voices by saying, "they needed to be." From there, the story of Breonna Taylor was then added to the other stories with dominant Black male voices. Black actress Lisa Arrindell played Breonna Taylor's mother, and actor Wendell Pierce played the part of her boyfriend

Theater as Protest

12 Angry Men... and Women, adapted by Arthur Yorinks and directed by Dr. Indira Etwaroo, had a Black cast consisting of two actresses, two actors, and a male violinist. Amongst those theater artists was Black actress Arrindell. These Black artists read and spoke the stories of Black voices who have encountered racial profiling from law enforcement. One of the Black stories written in the piece was Breonna Taylor's death story. The play *12 Angry Men...and Women: The Weight of the Wait* goes deeper in her story. An excerpt from the piece: "Breonna was an emergency room technician, her job was to help save lives, but hers was lost . . . over 20 gunshots, by the police, into her home in the middle of the night; eight bullets that ultimately killed her. It took 20 minutes after she was shot for emergency medical assistance to respond." Having her story, a story read by Arrindell, a black woman is vital because, during the existence of Black Lives Matter, there have been more Black male deaths that have received news coverage compared to Black females. To have a Black female artist read the voice of another Black female who lost her life is vital because they both shared the experience of being a Black woman in America. An example of this experience is living with racial stereotypes such as, the "angry Black women", a term coined and "penetrated many parts of American culture, including the workplace" (*The Angry Black Women...*,Harvard Business).

Perhaps even more haunting than Breonna's story is another monologue from that theatrical work: "I set out with my two sons. We walked all night and got as far as New York City, where we were violently arrested and secured. We were taken aback and treated in a bad manner. I had not counsel. I did not know what the law was. I remained fifteen days, locked up, until my arms swelled and my appetite gone . . . did not know the law, nor what I should say, so I thought it better to let the law have its course . . ." Living as a Black person in America, you become a criminal, never understanding the crime or the law. Ultimately a Black person would be racially profiled by specific members of society, primarily by white officers, those that know the law. *12 Angry Men and Women* is one of the many examples of theater as protest—telling stories that no one else dares to tell at a time that needs it. A story that speaks volume to Black rooted racial prejudice in America, and a story that contains truth to power can have a negative reaction, putting fear in those that want to tell the story. However in a time such as the summer of 2020, one can no longer have fear to speak truth to power, one must contribute.

The contribution

"It doesn't matter how strong your opinions are. If you don't use your power for positive change, you are indeed part of the problem" - Coretta Scott King.

Black Artists contributed to the Black Lives Matter Movement in 2020 through creating art and a safe space for speaking, healing, and uniting. These three actions bring the community of Black Americans and white allies closer and to grapple with the idea that no more Black lives need to be lost. Black art also has the purpose to "renew Black pride, it would reassert Blackness as positive and valuable, and would fuel the fire of Black Power"(Leverette, *With Fist Raised...*, p. 125). Black artists and art bring a whole new meaning to what Black pride is. The hidden secret of Black art is it can be a weapon for change, like marching or rioting. Black art can be

peaceful, but loud. According to activist and artist Amiri Baraka, “the Black aesthetic acknowledges Black art as a political weapon, abasing the prevailing standards that attempted to universalize white European forms as the ideal”(Leverette, *With Fist Raised...*, p. 125). Black art it can also be transformative.

Black Art as a Solution for Change

“We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek”.-Barack Obama.

For change to happen, people must create, fight, and believe in its possibilities. Black artists who used their art during the protest used their power to speak out rather than to be silent. Art has the “power to transform ideas generated by Black people into action, especially revolution action.” (Leverette, *With Fist Raised...*, p. 126). When people think of different art forms, such as dance, music, poetry, visual arts, or theater, it is viewed as only entertainment; however, art speaks and can touch someone intimately. Art can reach a person's soul, bringing a story to life. Many Black people can connect physically and emotionally to any art form created by a Black artist who's lived the Black experience in America. The Black experience in America is an unjust police encounter or mistreatment; those "treated unfairly by the police, unfairly sent to jail or stayed in jail because they didn't have enough bond money." Racial discrimination exists in the workforce, where "one in four Black workers reported experiences of discrimination at their jobs in the past 12 months". Not feeling safe because of the color on one's skin is another product of racial discrimination, as "Black Americans are much less likely than white Americans to feel safe walking alone at night in the city or area where they live -- and Black women feel even less safe." (*The Black Experience*, Gallop)

Black art can also reach and teach people from different social spaces open to learning and understanding, trying to understand and grapple with the trauma of living life as Black in America. Amanda Gorman's book *Call Us What We Carry* reaches to all ethnicities who are open to reading her book. A portion of her poetry book consists of poems that can teach and resonate with others about the existence of being Black. Gorman wrote in her "Fury and Faith" poem, "Black Lives Matter, no matter what. Black lives are worth living, worth defending, worth every struggle. We owe it to the fallen to fight. But we owe it to ourselves to never stay kneeling when they call us to stand." Her poem speaks words to power and truth, teaching us all her belief in why Black Lives Matter and why it is a reason to take a stance, a stance that can change the future.

4 Years Later

"History has shown us that courage can be contagious, and hope can take on a life of its own -Michele Obama.

Four years have passed since the Black Lives Matter summer protest in 2020, and society hasn't forgotten George Floyd's death. His murder, which the entire world witnessed, shaped a global outcry and brought people from all walks of life together to fight against racial injustice. The three officers who were a part of the murder, Derek Chauvin, Thomas Lane, and J. Alexander Kueng, were fired from the Minneapolis Police Department, arrested, and charged with second-degree murder. Chauvin was found guilty to "21 years in a federal prison" (Karnowski, *Chauvin Murder Conviction...*, AP), and the two other officers face three years in prison. Since the convictions, numerous states in America have issued 140 police oversight and reform laws. Four states, Colorado, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Connecticut will now be implementing limiting officer immunity. Depending on the crime committed, officers will have

less immunity and safety behind the badge. States like Colorado, New York, Virginia, and Kentucky focus on mandating or funding body cams for each Police Department for recorded evidence and insight into a police interaction in the case of another George Floyd incident. States like Oregon, Nevada, California, and Minnesota are restricting neck restraints, the reason behind George Floyd's death. The new "laws, and new rules adopted by police departments across the country, are not enough to satisfy demands by Black Lives Matter organizations and other activists who are pushing for wholesale reforms, cultural shifts and cutbacks at law enforcement agencies." (*As New Police Reform Laws Sweep Across the U.S...*, New York Times). States created small changes in Police Departments, but those part of the summer 2020 protest and the belief in BLM still demand that society shift their cultural thinking.

A year after Floyd's death, racial justice organizations across the nation received donations of millions of dollars from "many of the large tech companies", (Livingstone, *These Major Brands*, CNET) . The Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation received 90 million dollars in donations; "a majority of the funds were saved, the report said, with \$8.4 million spent on operational expenses and \$21.7 million distributed to local aid organizations and chapters" (Eligon, *Black Lives Matter Has Grown...*, New York Times). Providing aid for Black organizations can keep them running, allowing them to assist and support the Black community and to continue the fight against racial injustice in America.

In Seneca Village, Central Park, many New York cultural institutions collaborated to create and produce a memorial exhibition of all the Black Americans who were killed due to racial injustice in this nation. Today, Seneca Village is known to be a small part of Central Park. Still, before Central Park, "Seneca Village was the site of Seneca Village, a community of predominantly African-Americans, many of whom owned property." Later, "the city acquired the

land through eminent domain, the law that allows the government to take private land for public use with compensation paid to the landowner." (*Before Central Park: The Story of Seneca Village*, Central Park Conservancy). Two years after Floyd's murder, the memorial exhibition was displayed in Seneca Village, with the title "Say Their Name Memorial". The idea for the memorial was first birthed in Portland, Oregon, and has traveled across twenty-five locations across the nation. The design of the memorial is an image of fifty virtual pedestals exhibiting over 200 photos of Black Americans who have died from the enemy of racism spanning back 200 years. These faces have connected and touched the soil of the Black ancestors that once lived there. Among the Black faces are Emmet Till, Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. Faces that shaped society and shaped stories told.

Black Theater-4 Years Later.

"Watch us walk, watch us move, watch us overcome, listen to our voices, the sway. The resilience. The innovation. The raw, unfiltered and untouched soul we have cannot be touched." -Solange Knowles

Broadway entered a demographic change after George Floyd and the closing of theaters due to COVID-19. Broadway News said, "The 2022-2023 season demonstrated diversity on stage." Amongst the diversity in plays are Black voices and stories. Several Black themed plays were produced: *Death of a Salesman*, *Piano Lesson*, *Topdog Underdog*, *Ohio State Murders*, *Ain't No Mo'*, *Trouble in Mind*, *Lackawanna Blues*, and *Thoughts of Colored Man*. Seven out of eight of these plays consist of a Black playwright and narrative. An increase of Black stories on stage led to a rise in Black audiences. "Theatergoers who identify as Black made up 5.3% of the audience" (*Broadway League releases 2022-2023 audience demographics...*", Broadway News). It is a small growth, but it is growth compared to the year 2019 and the first three months of 2020 in terms of the Black plays produced. In 2019 and early months of 2020, three Black shows

were produced on Broadway determining the audience number, which was a low percentage. Post George Floyd, the number of Black stories produced has increased the number of Black audiences coming to the shows. Broadway was also encouraged to demonstrate an alliance with the Black community. According to Donna Walker-Kuhne, "In the midst of the pandemic, an online publication of 'We See You White American Theater,' and its principles for developing an anti-racist theater system was released." This online publication was composed primarily of theater artists, production, and crew members of color. Walker-Kuhne explained how the document consisted of a discussion on a range of topics that needed to be addressed with solutions. One of the solutions included a need for diversifying and creating opportunities for people of color in the Broadway industry trade unions for the importance of future generational artists of color who seek to work on stage and off.

The majority of these Black plays produced in the aftermath of George Floyd discuss the topic of being Black in America. Tony Award-winning revival, *Topdog/Underdog* by Suzan Lori Parks, focuses on two African American brothers who dwell with their identity of being Black men living in poverty. Tony Award-winning director Kenny Leon directed the revival. As a Black director, in a world where there aren't many, Leon is recognized for directing revival plays. When I spoke with Kenny Leon, he shared, "when approaching revivals, I look at how the audience in the seats will be affected and the specific reaction they will have to the story". When directing *Topdog/Underdog*, Leon kept in mind all the generational Black men and women, who lost their lives to racial injustice, "these stories aren't new when it comes to George Floyd; thousands have dealt with the mistreatment in America." Keeping the thought process of honoring and never forgetting the names of those who died, impacted the way he directed, *Topdog/Underdog*.

In 2023, Kenny Leon directed an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with a Black Hamlet. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was initially written for a white cast, and a white lead. However, Leon took a different direction with the revival using a Black Hamlet. The inspiration Leon had when reimagining *Hamlet* is that the character's story translates to a Black man. His inspiration was to have a Black Hamlet react to how the world around him treats him. Actor, activist, and playwright Ossie Davis wrote the play, *Purlie Victorious* in 1970. Six years after the Civil Rights Act was created and appealed, banning discrimination against race, color, sex, and religion. The play is set during the Jim Crow Laws era when laws inhibited racial integration. These two plays might seem worlds apart, but to Kenny Leon, there was one shared question in his mind: "Where is freedom?"

In 2025, Kenny Leon will be directing *Othello*, starring Oscar-winning actor Denzel Washington. According to Leon, "Othello is a Black man trying to live in a white world with the loss of Black men." The story relates to the term, "Double Consciousness", created by sociologist and activist, W.E.B Du Bois. According to Du Bois idea of "Double Consciousness" is a "concept in social philosophy referring, originally to a source of inward 'twoness' putatively experienced by African-Americans because of their radicalized oppression and devaluation in a white-dominated society" (*Double Consciousness*, Caldwell University). Leon shared that the importance of bringing Black art to life on stage is because he has lived in this world experiencing and witnessing racial injustice, he said that, "it affects my life; it affects my world."

Today, Broadway has produced a significant number of Black plays. "There are now a number of plays and musicals by Black writers circling Broadway for future productions. Current shows include *The Wiz*, *MJ the Musical*, *Hell's Kitchen*, *Home*, and *Wonderful World*", stated Walker-Kuhne. She continued, "there are six additional shows in the process of

development for next season". Broadway in 2024 represents a positive advancement in Black stories' focusing on engagement, participation, and creation.

In addition to Broadway, theaters across the nation are producing plays with a topic of being Black in America. Cincinnati Playhouse is a theater in Cincinnati, Ohio, and Ebony Repertory Theater in Los Angeles are currently producing the play *Stew*, a finalist for the 2021 Pulitzer Prize for drama, written by Black playwright, Zora Howard. The inspiration for the play comes from the death of Tamir Rice, another Black soul killed at the hands of a white police officer. In an interview with Tony-Award nominated actress Michele Shay, who is now starring in *Stew*, shared with me that “the playwright is attempting to throw light on what happens to the people that experience that particular kind of loss, and that particular kind of grief which is basically pain that will never go away, and that the moment of loss, will forever be remembered in their bodies, particularly in the body of the mother, who carried the person that was lost.” It is a story that contributes to the emotions many Black Americans feel across the nation when losing or witnessing someone Black in America killed because of systemic racism. As an actress in this production, Shay believes it’s her mission to help tell the story of living while Black in America, with the hopes that those who come to see the piece can have something to take away from it. “People come to drink from a well of not only entertainment but wisdom that awakens them to what it means to be human in a particular way. That’s our job”. Shay is determined to continue her mission as a Black artist.

Conclusion

Historically, when a Black man or a Black woman was murdered by a specific white American or a racially unjust system, people would protest the death. Time passes, and they become quiet and somewhat forgetful until the next Black life is taken. I see it as *cultural amnesia*, forgetting why we must continue the protest. To protest is to stand up for what one believes in, stand against an unjust or corrupt system, and create change. Black artists used their craft to fight the longstanding battle of systemic racism in America. Black artists spoke to those in power by speaking truth to power during one of the most crucial moments in modern history: the dual pandemics in 2020 of COVID-19 and George Floyd. The power of Black art during and after the movement impacted society and Black artists. Black artists created in different forms, such as dance, music, poetry, visual arts, and theater, to tell a story of being Black in America, and it is a never-ending one. It is a story that will live on the streets or on a stage... but *will live on*. There is both pain and pride in the story of being Black in America. I hope to close the chapter on the pain, turn the page, and write chapters full of the beauty, complexity, power, and pride of being Black in America.

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