



Unheard Voices: Black Lives Matter and Activism

Grade Level: 6-8

Subjects

Art, English language arts, History

Themes

Activism, Bearing witness, Cultural diversity, Social justice

What Students Will Uncover

Connections between art, activism, and the Black Lives Matter movement

Essential Questions

- Why does a photographer's perspective matter?
- How is art a form of activism?
- How does photography document perspectives of grief and trauma?
- In what ways does photography from the Black Lives Matter movement evoke the civil rights era and its leaders of the 1960s?
- Why do people respond to tragedy through art: music, photography, painting, etc.?

Lesson Overview

Students explore the photo essay, "[We Will Breathe](#)" by Sheila Pree Bright, taken in Atlanta, Georgia, after the death of George Floyd in May 2020. These photographs capture perspectives of mourning and



COMPANION PHOTO ESSAY

[We Will Breathe](#)

by Sheila Pree Bright

Materials

- Online access to the photo essay "[We Will Breathe](#)" by Sheila Pree Bright
- [Note-taking sheet](#)

SDGs



Standards & Frameworks

- [SEL Competencies](#)
- [C3 Framework](#)
- [CCSS ELA Standards](#)

inspiration in the Black Lives Matter movement and evoke the civil rights era and its leaders. Students will engage in learning activities to consider the significance of Bright's photographs at a societal, cultural, and personal level.

Key Issue

Photographic documentation of the Black Lives Matter movement provides a humanistic perspective by portraying the lived experiences of people working towards racial and social justice.

Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Understand the power of photography to foster empathy and inquiry
- Analyze the role a photograph has in documenting historical events and creating social change
- Identify connections between the leaders of the Civil Rights era and the Black Lives Matter movement

Background

Putting the Photo Essay in Context

This section is intended for the educator and provides information about the photo essay, the photographer Sheila Pree Bright, and the connections between the Black Lives Matter movement and leaders from the civil rights era.

The Black Lives Matter organization, founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, was founded with the “goal to build the kind of society where black people can live with dignity and respect.” Black Lives Matter emerged as a space to highlight and protest the systemic racism and police brutality encountered by Black communities and individuals following the 2012 murder of 17-year-old Treyvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of his murderer, George Zimmerman, a year later.^[1]

The #BlackLivesMatter social media hashtag helped to bring awareness and accountability to the problem of police violence as community members used their phones to document the encounters they witnessed with police. Protests in

¹ A.L., “[Black Lives Matter is not a terrorist organization.](#)” *The Economist*, August 9, 2018.

the summer of 2014 following the deaths of Eric Garner, who suffocated in a police chokehold while gasping “I can’t breathe,” and Michael Brown, an unarmed 18 year old shot by a police officer, invoked the Black Lives Matter slogan with hundreds of thousands demonstrating in the streets.^[2] Protests continued as the violence against people of color at the hands of law enforcement gained more national attention and scrutiny. In the summer of 2020, between fifteen and twenty-six million people in the United States participated in demonstrations after the death of George Floyd.^[3] Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin kneeled on Floyd’s neck for more than nine minutes despite his pleas that he could not breathe. A teenage bystander, Darnella Frazier, recorded the fatal encounter with her cell phone, which allowed the world to bear witness to the cruel and unjust circumstances of his death.^[4]

In response to Floyd’s death, marches and rallies broke out in cities around the world calling for change, including police reform and attention to the injustices people of color face. The Black Lives Matter movement has been widely cited for helping to organize and document many of these protests and efforts.

Photographer Sheila Pree Bright, in her photo essay “We Will Breathe,” bears witness to the time of grief and reclamation that arose with the death of George Floyd, and only deepened with the loss of Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta, Georgia. Her photos highlight intimate moments of mourning and inspiration in the Black Lives Matter movement, which evoke the civil rights era and its leaders. She writes, “The images I photograph create contemporary stories about social, political, and historical contexts not often seen in the visual communications of traditional media and fine art platforms.”

Bright’s book, *1960 Now: Photographs of Civil Rights Activists and Black Lives Matter Protests*, includes black-and-white portraits of social justice activists from around the country. She writes, “As major movements have emerged in the past two years, I’ve also documented the tensions, conflicts, and responses between communities and police departments that have resulted from police shootings in Atlanta, Ferguson, Baltimore, and Washington D.C. I’ve observed young social activists taking a stand against continued injustice that closely resembles that which their parents and grandparents endured during the era of Jim Crow. By documenting this emerging social movement, I have been able to invite other communities into the ongoing conversation.” Bright’s work is part of a growing movement to address a longstanding history of racial inequities through art, which she sees as a form of activism to raise

² Aldon Morris, “[From Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter](#).” *Scientific American*, February 3, 2021.

³ Larry Buchanan, Quoc Trung Bui and Jugal K. Patel, “[Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History](#).” *The New York Times*, July 3, 2020.

⁴ Rachel Treisman, “[Darnella Frazier, Teen Who Filmed Floyd’s Murder, Praised For Making Verdict Possible](#).” NPR, April 21, 2021.

awareness and social change.

Lesson

Setting the Stage: Lesson Introduction

Before viewing the photo essay, explore this exercise with students to learn how different sources can provide ways to understand important historical and cultural moments.

1. In 1963, after the church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered a eulogy for the four girls killed in the tragic event. In it he encouraged his audience to “substitute courage for caution.” What do these words mean to you? How do they resemble the tragedies occurring today?
2. It is widely believed that jazz musician John Coltrane wrote a song titled “Alabama,” but Coltrane never publicly confirmed this. Some say the song is patterned after the rhythms in the eulogy spoken by King in Birmingham, Alabama. Have students listen to this song and share whether they think it is a response to the eulogy. Ask students: Do you see this song as a form of activism or simply a response to tragedy? Have them explain their reasoning.
3. The eulogy and the song are primary sources from 1963. How does each source give us a different understanding of that time?

Engaging with the Story

Introduce students to the photo essay and provide specific tasks of observation.

1. Tell students that they will view a photo essay titled “We Will Breathe” by photographer Sheila Pree Bright. This collection of 10 photographs captures perspectives of mourning and inspiration in the Black Lives Matter movement following the death of George Floyd in May 2020 in Atlanta, Georgia. Tell students that the photographs evoke the civil rights era and its leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (*Note to educators: the Background section provides additional information for reference and context.*)
2. Ask students to [read Bright’s photographer’s statement](#) (3 paragraphs).

Delving Deeper: Discussion Questions

Encourage students to examine the themes and issues raised in the photo essay.

1. Organize students in pairs or small groups. Ask students to use the [note-taking sheet](#) to answer the following prompts. Ask the pairs or small groups to share their

findings with the class.

- Identify the location and event in each photograph.
 - Describe the people in the photographs. What are they doing?
 - Describe the significance and meaning of the signs held by the protestors.
 - Which photograph did you feel most connected to? Why?
2. Use a concentric circle activity to engage students in a dialogue. Have students organize themselves into an inner circle and an outer circle. Students will respond to one question with a partner from the opposite circle, rotating after each question is answered. (*Learn more about [how to use concentric circles in your classroom](#).*)
- Two photographs reference Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. What does King symbolize in these photographs?
 - Locate the two photographs that include the American flag. What do you think the flag represents in these photographs? (*Some answers could include identity, justice, or freedom.*)
 - “Rarely are the voices of mothers and women highlighted in American social protest imagery. There is a powerful presence of women in the Black Lives Matter movement,” writes Deborah Willis, Ph.D., professor at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. In what ways do these photographs capture the “powerful presence” of women?
 - In an interview with the International Center of Photography, Bright said, “I want to show you the humanity of these black bodies; I don’t want to show you what traditional media is showing you.” Describe how Bright shows “the humanity” in her photographs. How do Bright’s photos differ from those in “traditional media”?
 - “In the 1960s, there was no social media to help us counter such depictions of how movements develop, evolve, and impact the political, economic, and social workings of a place,” writes Bright. How does social media influence your understanding of social issues and movements?
 - What is the significance of the photo essay’s title “We Will Breathe”?

Reflecting and Projecting

Challenge students to consider the essay’s broader implications and to integrate their knowledge and ideas from various points of view.

1. Photographs provide a fundamental role in documenting our world. View the photographs in “[See the Civil Rights Movement in Photographs](#)” from *Time*

Magazine.

- What do you notice in these photographs? Describe any similarities or differences between these images, taken between 1961 and 1968, and images of the Black Lives Matter movement today.
 - Choose a photo from this collection. What story does it tell? Who is present? Who is absent? What do you think the photographer was trying to capture? Does this photo foster empathy or promote inquiry? If so, how?
2. Former Congressman John Lewis, author, activist, and recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, was one of the leading forces behind the protests of the Civil Rights Movement. Lewis, seen in several iconic images from the Civil Rights Movement, was arrested more than forty times during the nonviolent movement for equal justice. In a speech he gave in Selma, Alabama, during the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday, he said, "Don't give up. Don't give up on the things that have great meaning to you. Don't get lost in a sea of despair. Stand up for what you believe in. Because ... we are one people, one family, the human family." What do you think about this statement? Describe a time when you witnessed an individual who did not give up on something that was meaningful to their life. The individual could be a friend, teacher, family member, or someone in the news.

What's Happening Now

Provide students with follow-up activities and resources to explore current events and updates to the story.

1. On April 20, 2021, former Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin, was found guilty on all charges related to George Floyd's death.
2. Learn how the "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History."
3. Learn more about Sheila Pree Bright's photography by visiting her website.



Take Action

with the UN Sustainable Development Goals

How will you address issues of inequality?

The Black Lives Matter Movement continues to lift up voices in the Black community and encourage more youths and adults to speak out about their lived experiences.

1. How can you use art to be an activist? Where can you share your art in a way that will make a difference and have your voice heard? Use this guide to help promote student activism.
2. Ask students to view images from Black Lives Matter protests from countries around the world using online galleries, such as "Images From a Worldwide Protest Movement" from *The Atlantic* or "Powerful Photos of Black Lives Matter Protests Around the World" from *Condé Nast Traveler*. Describe what you notice. How are people addressing issues of inequality? Have students share their findings with others.
3. Sign up for Black Lives Matter, a member-led global network created by three Black organizers—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometti—in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer George Zimmerman. This organization helps to fight misinformation by reporting suspicious sites, stories, ads, social accounts, and posts about Black Lives Matter.

SDG 10: Reduce Inequality Within and Across Countries

Companion Texts

These texts are recommended by teachers who are currently using *We Will Breathe in their classrooms*.

- *The Hate You Give* by Angie Thomas
- *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone
- *Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker Rhodes
- *Birmingham, 1963* by Carole Boston Weatherford

Resources

- Bright, Sheila and Alicia Garza. *#1960Now: Photographs of Civil Rights Activists and Black Lives Matter Protests*. (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2018).
- Light, Melanie and Ken Light. *Picturing Resistance: Moments and Movements of Social Change from the 1950s to Today*. (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2020).
- [Black Lives Matter](#).
- [Google Arts and Culture: Photos From the Civil Rights Movement](#).
- Boissoneault, Lorraine, "[These Never-Before-Seen Photos From The New York Times Offer a New Glimpse Into African-American History](#)." *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 17, 2017.
- Swarns, Rachel L., Darcy Eveleigh, and Damien Cave, "[Unpublished Black History](#)." *The New York Times*, n.d.
- "[In Conversation: Sheila Pree Bright](#)." International Center of Photography (ICP).

Connections to National Curriculum Standards and Frameworks

SEL Competencies (CASEL)

- **Self-awareness.** The ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior.
- **Social awareness.** The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior.
- **Relationship skills.** The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework

- **D2.Civ.14.6-8.** Compare historical and contemporary means of changing societies,

and promoting the common good.

- **D2.His.3.6-8.** Use questions generated about individuals and groups to analyze why they, and the developments they shaped, are seen as historically significant.
- **D2.His.6.6-8.** Analyze how people’s perspectives influenced what information is available in the historical sources they created.

Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.2.** Analyze the purpose of information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and evaluate the motives (e.g., social, commercial, political) behind its presentation.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1.** Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2.** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

Note-taking Sheet

Use this note-taking sheet to write down your observations, insights, and evidence from the photo essay.

Photo	Observations and Insights
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	
8	
9	
10	

We Want to Hear From You

We'd love to hear how you integrate (or plan to integrate) this lesson into your classroom. What were your favorite takeaways and student responses?

info@globalonenessproject.org

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Stories and lessons for growing minds.

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