

The Black Lives Matter Movement: Learning Through Photography

Grade Level: 9-12

Subjects

Art, English language arts, History, Photography, Sociology

Themes

Activism, Bearing witness, Cultural diversity, Social justice

What Students Will Uncover

Perspectives of mourning and inspiration in the Black Lives Matter movement

Essential Questions

- How might photography from the Black Lives Matter protests reveal different perspectives?
- In what ways does photography from the Black Lives Matter movement evoke the civil rights leaders of the 1960s?
- How is photography a form of activism?

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 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.



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](#)

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 how photography can foster empathy and inquiry
- Analyze the roles and responsibilities photographers have in society
- Analyze the importance of documenting historical events and creating social change through photography
- Identify connections between the Civil Rights era and its leaders 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 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

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

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 awareness and social change.

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.

Lesson

Setting the Stage: Lesson Introduction

Before viewing the photo essay, explore this exercise with students to learn how the medium of photography captures important historical and cultural moments.

1. Share with students that in 2016, *The New York Times* photo editor Darcy Eveleigh, discovered unpublished photographs in *The Times* archives. The untold stories were published in "[Unpublished Black History](#)."
2. Ask students to view the photographs. They reveal previously unseen/unpublished historic moments: a young Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (at a high school basketball game), Thurgood Marshall, Jesse Jackson, and James Baldwin, and young boys marching during the first Afro-American Day parade in 1969.
3. Share with students a quote from journalist and author Rachel Swarns that is a forward to the book *Unseen: Unpublished Black History from The New York Times Photo Archives*.
4. Ask students: How do these photographs document beauty, dignity, and the many accomplishments of black individuals throughout history?

"...black photographers were using their cameras to depict what the white world so often failed to see: the beauty in the communities. Frederick Douglas and [W.E.B.] Du Bois believed that African-Americans could harness the power of the new technology [of photography] to capture the dignity and accomplishments of black people and document events that would otherwise go unrecorded."

—Rachel Swarns

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 in Atlanta, Georgia, following the death of George Floyd in May 2020. (*Note to educators: the Background section provides additional information for reference and context.*)
2. Before viewing the photographs, ask students to share their thoughts about the title of the photo essay "We Will Breathe."

3. Ask students to [read Bright's photographer's statement](#) (3 paragraphs).
4. Ask students to view the photo essay "[We Will Breathe](#)" and read the corresponding photo captions.

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. Have the pairs or small groups 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 the most connected to? Why?
2. As a class, discuss the following questions:
 - The photographer, Sheila Pree Bright, writes that after the acquittal of Zimmerman, "protests erupted around the country, and the hashtag #blacklivesmatter started a new civil rights movement. I felt compelled to be there on the ground and document what was happening in the communities of Atlanta, Baltimore, Ferguson, Baton Rouge, and Washington, D.C." Describe how Bright in her photos captures the memories of George Floyd and Rayshard Brooks, who were killed weeks apart by Atlanta police.
 - 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 convey 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" of the people she captures in her photographs. How are Bright's photos unlike "traditional media"?

3. Ask students to read the following two quotes from Bright. Have students select a photograph from the photo essay that illustrates Bright's point of view. Ask students: In what ways do you think Bright's photographs are a "form of activism"? How does her art bring people and communities together?
 - "As a fine art photographer, I am interested in the [lives] of those individuals and communities that are often unseen in the world. My objective is to capture images that allow us to experience those who are unheard as they contemplate or voice their reaction to ideas and issues that are shaping their world.... My work captures and presents aspects of our culture, and sometimes counterculture, that challenges the typical narratives of Western thought and power structures."
 - "As an artist it is deeply rewarding to hear that in my work people see the beauty, complexity, and humanity of those I've photographed.... I feel art is a form of activism to create awareness and bring shared communities together."

Reflecting and Projecting

Challenge students to consider the photo essay's broader implications and to integrate their knowledge and ideas with various points of view.

1. 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.

Share with students the following quote from Lewis after the death of George Floyd.

"It was very moving, very moving to see hundreds and thousands of people from all over America and around the world take to the streets to speak up, to speak out, to get into what I call good trouble, but to get in the way. And because of the action of young and old, Black, white, Latino, Asian-American and Native American, because people cried and prayed, people will never, ever forget what happened and how it happened, and it is my hope that we are on our way to greater change."

Do you agree with Lewis that "we are on our way to greater change"? Why or why not? What are some examples you have witnessed in your life? How have

individuals spoken out and gotten into “good trouble”? Write a short essay (2-3 paragraphs).

2. Bright writes, “In the 1960s, there wasn’t social media to help us counter such depictions of how movements develop, evolve, and impact the political, economic, and social workings of a place.” Research how the Black Lives Matter movement has evolved. In what ways has social media acted as a catalyst? How has social media influenced your understanding of the Black Lives Matter movement? What role does social media have in holding people accountable for their actions, exposing truths that might have gone unnoticed? Write a short essay (2–3 paragraphs) or create a slideshow with illustrations using evidence from multiple sources.

What’s Happening Now

Provide students with resources to explore current events and information about Sheila Pree Bright’s work.

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 how artists create murals in cities to bring awareness to the lives that have been negatively impacted by racial policing. View “33 Powerful Black Lives Matter Murals.”
4. 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 support voices in the Black community and encourage more youths and adults to speak out about their lived experiences.

1. 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? Share your findings with others.
2. 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
- *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates

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

- **C3.D2.Civ.8.9-12.** Evaluate social and political systems in different contexts, times, and places that promote civic virtues and enact democratic principles.

- **C3.D2.His.2.9-12.** Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.
- **C3.D2.His.3.9-12.** Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.
- **C3.D2.His.7.9-12.** Explain how the perspectives of people in the present shape interpretations of the past.
- **C3.D2.His.8.9-12.** Analyze how current interpretations of the past are limited by the extent to which available historical sources represent perspectives of people at the time.

Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

- **CCSS.ELA-SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1.** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 [or 11-12] topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- **CCSS.ELA-SL.9-10.5 and SL.11-12.5.** Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understandings of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1.** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1.** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

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?

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