Say Their Names:
Drama of the Black Lives Matter Era

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When Trayvon Martin was killed by George Zimmerman in February 2012, followed almost immediately by a string of incidents of police brutality and other forms of violence against African Americans that continues to this day (George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery), the Black Lives Matter movement helped to generate new levels of protest and awareness that also manifested in the arts. It's now clear that Black Lives Matter (hereafter, BLM) drama is a significant new subgenre within African American drama, and therefore deserves further consideration as a type of "crossroad" with earlier works as we head into its second decade. BLM drama travels back to the plays of the Black Arts movement of the early 1960s by Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and others. It also owes a great deal to the works from the past two or three decades by Suzan-Lori Parks, who resurrects/revises historical and literary figures such as Abraham Lincoln (*The America Play*, *Topdog/Underdog*, and several of the mini-plays in *365 Plays for 365 Days*) and Hester Prynne (*The Red Letter Plays*) by re-imagining them within the context of global Black history. Other recent playwrights, notably Jackie Sibblies Drury in *Fairview* and Jeremy O. Harris in *Slave Play*, have asked white audience members to confront their own racialized assumptions by turning a mirror on the nature of performance, complicity, and spectatorship.

Although I will begin with brief comments about some of the precursors mentioned above, most of the discussion that follows will focus on three representative works that—in both their style and their messaging—can clearly be identified as BLM plays. The first, by an established artist, Anna Deavere Smith, is her *Notes from the Field*; the second and third are by newer playwrights: James Ijames' *Kill Move Paradise* and Antoinette Nwandu's *Pass Over*. All three have had national audiences, not only through their original and regional productions, but also through film and streaming versions (an increasingly important way to reach audiences in the COVID era), and a revised version of *Pass Over* was one of the first plays to hit a newly-reopened Broadway in August of 2021. As Naveen Kumar remarked in a *New York Times* article on 8 Aug. 2021, "the play arrives on the heels of a re-energized movement to confront police brutality and systemic racism." I will argue that while Jones/Baraka and Parks in their earlier works set the groundwork for using theater to address important questions of history and racial injustice, BLM playwrights draw upon these legacies and move further into more directly urgent dramatic themes of recording/telling/naming, oppression and police brutality, and spectatorial complicity or activism. These themes reflect the increasing awareness that the BLM movement has brought to the ways that systemic racism perpetuates a culture of violence against Black people.

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In the era of the Black Arts movement of the 1960s, LeRoi Jones (who changed his name to Amiri Baraka during this time) was one of the most significant voices as a poet, playwright, critic, and activist. Much has been said elsewhere about his emergence from being a Beat Generation writer (along with Jack Kerouac, Diane di Prima, and others) into a new and vital role as an outspoken advocate for Black nationalism. The play of his that had the strongest impact upon later activist movements was undoubtedly *Dutchman*, which was first staged in March of 1964, won an Obie (Off-Broadway) award that year, and has had many subsequent revivals, including even a Zoom version by Seeing Place Theatre in 2020.[1] *Dutchman* concerns an encounter on a New York City subway train between Clay, a young "assimilated" Black man, and Lula, a white woman who beguiles him seductively but ends up murdering him once he has expressed his true anger about the behavior of her and others like her who practice cultural appropriation and other racist acts. At the end of the play, Lula is seen writing in a notebook and beginning the process all over again with another unsuspecting young Black man, while the older Black man who is the train conductor treats her deferentially, thus revealing his apparent complicity in the cycle. The play is important to keep in mind when considering later BLM drama for two reasons. First, Clay's pivotal monologue in which he accuses Lula and other whites of misunderstanding and stealing elements of Black culture such as music ("Belly rub is not Queens…")[2] continues to hold true even though the musical forms themselves have changed over time, from bebop to hip hop. Second, Clay's murder at Lula's hands is still a shocking and very real act of violence which occurs while the other subway passengers ("black and white," according to the opening list of characters) reveal their complicity: they do nothing while the murder is happening, then cooperate when Lula commands them to help throw his body off the train. As a whole, Baraka's play underscores both the elements of what later came to be known as systemic racism, and the perpetuation of both symbolic and real violence on the part of the oppressors, in ways that remain relevant even more than a half century later.

Throughout her career, as many critics and scholars have discussed, Suzan-Lori Parks has addressed issues of racial inequity in a playfully postmodern way. Her 1995 play *Venus*, for example, tells the story of the real-life Saartje Baartman, a Black South African woman who was brought to England in the 1850s and exhibited in circus sideshows for her allegedly large posterior before she was vivisected postmortem by a French doctor. Parks combines the historical referents to Baartman's mistreatment with a contemporary sense of the exploitation of the female "black bottom." As mentioned earlier, in many of her plays, Parks uses the historical icon of Abraham Lincoln but rewrites him in a way that foregrounds the excavation of repressed Black histories. In an early play that now seems more relevant than ever, *Death of the Last Black*

[1] Maya Phillips, "In Two Renditions, *Dutchman* Speaks to the Moment," *New York Times*, August 11, 2021, C3.
[2] LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Dutchman* and *The Slave: Two Plays* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1971), 34.

Man in the Whole Entire World, the central character of the Black Man is killed in various ways over and over again throughout the narrative as he begs to cross over into the next world. *Topdog/Underdog*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2001, again focuses on Black men but in this case the closing violence is performed by one brother upon another as a distraught Booth, feeling deprived of his literal and figurative inheritance, shoots his brother Lincoln after their three-card monte game ends differently than he expected. Parks continues to look at the questions of legacies and inheritances in her epic Civil War play, *Father Comes Home from the Wars parts 1, 2, and 3*. During the first hundred days that Donald Trump was in office, Parks wrote a daily mini-play (*100 Plays for the First Hundred Days*). In these, she returns several times to the question of how ignorance of history and the practice of tokenism undermine efforts at achieving racial justice in America. This is evident, for example, in the mini-play for Day 13, February 1: "Happy Black History Month," which begins as follows:

> The 45th: Happy Black History Month. I've scheduled a whole month of events starting with a Listening Breakfast where I'm surrounded by my Negroes and they smile at me while I say things like: "Frederick Douglass is a great guy. He says and does great things."
> Y: He's using the present tense to talk about Frederick Douglass.
> X: Are we still having Black History Month?
> Y: Not for long. Enjoy it while we can.[3]

Parks is using an event that actually happened—Trump's uninformed reference to Douglass—to highlight the issue of how lip service is paid to the idea of celebrating Black history without actual knowledge of Black history itself. This mini-play, like many of the others in *Hundred Days*, underscores the danger of having those in power be not just ignorant, but actively oppressive, as became even more clear in the years leading up to George Floyd's death at the hands of police in the summer of 2020.

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Anna Deavere Smith's *Notes from the Field* is part of her ongoing series of what she calls "multivoiced solo dramas,"[4] the most well-known of which are *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. Smith has developed a technique of interviewing multiple real-life people connected to an historical moment, and then embodying all of them herself on stage, regardless of age, body type, race, gender, etc., using the speakers' own words complete with verbal tics and hesitations, presented in documentary style. She herself is a light-skinned Black woman, and previous scholars have written about the complicated ways that her work negotiates questions

[3] Suzan-Lori Parks, *100 Plays for the First Hundred Days* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2018), 19.
[4] Anna Deavere Smith, *Notes from the Field* (New York: Anchor, 2019), xv.

about identity politics.[5] For *Notes from the Field*, which Smith created as a response to the death of Freddie Gray at the hands of the police in Baltimore, she interviewed about 250 people who spoke to her on the topic of what she calls the "school-to-prison pipeline."[6]

In both the live performance and the filmed versions of the play, Smith juxtaposes her enactments of the speakers with real-life video and slides to remind us that everything we are seeing is real, a technique she used in her earlier works but includes more often here. For example, in the middle of Judge Abby Abinanti's monologue, we get cell phone video footage of a fourteen-year-old girl in Texas being thrown to the ground by police officers.[7] Earlier, we see news footage of the death of Freddie Gray, followed by a monologue by Kevin Moore, who was a bystander to the incident and caught it on video. His comments about "the knee in the neck"[8] and the need to record what happened became all the more powerful in 2020. Moore (or rather, Smith playing Moore) says:

> Man, I just feel like we need to *record* it, you know'm saying? We need to get this word out that that thing is—is happening. This is the only weapon that we *have* that's actually…the camera's the only thing we have that can actually protect us, that's *not* illegal, you know what I'm saying?[9]

Moore's words ring especially true when we consider how significant video footage has been to the recording and testimony about violence that was perpetrated against George Floyd and others. We also hear from Allen Bullock, an eighteen-year-old Black male protestor, about how the police harass him just for crossing the street: "I had a police ask me why'm I walkin' in the street, why am I crossing the street, like."[10] As Nwandu's *Pass Over* also makes clear, even everyday behaviors cause Black subjects to be challenged by white authoritative surveillance.

Smith shows how speaking and language and audience become important in social justice movements like Black Lives Matter, particularly when we hear the riveting speech by Jamal Harrison Bryant, who delivered the eulogy at Freddie Gray's funeral and used the image of the box/coffin to urge the audience members to "get up."[11] The play delivers an indictment of the way that schools, in the way that they discipline "problem" students, reinforce institutional bigotry; we see this powerfully in the sequence in which a high school student, Niya Kenny, tries to intervene when her classmate, Shakara, is treated abusively by a police deputy in the

[5] See, for example, Eddie Paterson, *The Contemporary American Monologue: Performance and Politics* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen, 2015), and Janelle Reinelt, "Performing Race: Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror*," *Modern Drama* 39, no. 4 (Dec. 1996): 609-17.
[6] Smith, *Notes from the Field*, xvi.
[7] Ibid., 50.
[8] Ibid., 12.
[9] Ibid., 13.
[10] Ibid., 19.
[11] Ibid., 27.

classroom and Kenny herself also ends up being the subject of policing. The second act of the play moves to larger questions of historical trauma and the potential for activism. Bryan Stevenson (again, as performed by Smith) speaks about the "ideology of white supremacy"[12] passed down from mistreatment of indigenous people and from slavery, and about how the system within which he works (trying to alleviate suffering) is "broken."[13]

At the same time, Smith wants to deliver the possibility of, as interviewee Sherrilyn Fill of the NAACP puts it, "a space where change can happen."[14] She does this in part by making the penultimate (and highly memorable) monologue come from Bree Newsome, for whom we also see the actual footage of her climbing the flagpole at the statehouse in South Carolina and removing the Confederate flag, despite being surrounded by police who could have shot her down. Newsome explicitly references the Black Lives Matter group of which she was a part that joined with other activists to plan the action, and talks about how the decision was made to have her, a Black woman, "be the one to scale the pole."[15] She explains that "in the wake of the Trayvon Martin case,"[16] she is part of a new movement; as the member of a younger generation than Civil Rights activists like the late Congressman John Lewis (who has the closing monologue), she "thought about" Martin Luther King, Jr., and about Malcolm X—but "then I really had to learn to focus on learning how to climb the pole."[17] Here, "climbing the pole" is both a literal physical act and a metaphor for a young Black activist taking the next steps toward social justice. It's all the more powerful because Smith conveys the urgency of Newsome's voice to a larger audience.

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James Ijames' *Kill Move Paradise* was developed at the Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago and premiered in New York City at the National Black Theatre in June 2017. Ijames' play puts the characters in a surrealistic setting but overlays it with contemporary political relevance: three young Black men appear in succession, joined later by a Black male teenager, in what we learn pretty quickly is the afterlife. There is a dot matrix printer spitting out an endless list of names of the newly dead, and the space keeps getting jolted with violent earthquakes. Ijames makes it clear that this setting "is not realism and should not be performed as such."[18] Daz, the second character who enters this space, has a wonderful monologue in which he describes the remains of Black pop culture that lie just offstage where we can't see it, including

[12] Ibid., 125.
[13] Ibid., 127.
[14] Ibid., 121.
[15] Ibid., 134.
[16] Ibid., 135.
[17] Ibid., 136.
[18] James Ijames, *Kill Move Paradise* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2019), 9.

"old recorded reruns" of 1990s Black sitcoms as well as such personages as Tupac, Biggie, and Bessie Smith.[19]

One of the significant tropes of the play is the characters' awareness of us, the audience. When Isa, the first character, arrives in the space, he stares at the audience for so long that we are supposed to feel uncomfortable; when Grif gets there, Isa explains that the audience is "America,"[20] and Daz, the third character, both "recognizes" and "hates" the audience.[21] We, the spectators, are implicated because we are silent witnesses who have (presumably) paid to see this performance, yet are unable to act; in his *New York Times* review, Ben Brantley calls us "passive voyeurs for whom violent death has become a sort of theater." Throughout the play, in a direct reference to Eric Garner, who was killed by New York City police in 2014, the characters keep saying that they can't breathe (words that became a further rallying cry after the death of George Floyd). Isa asks, "What you do for a brotha that ain't breathing to make him start breathing again,"[22] and we see Daz gasping for air; when Tiny arrives, he, too, says, "I can't breathe."[23]

The most powerful moment is when the first three characters (right before Tiny arrives) recite a lengthy list of real-life names of Black men and women who have died due to racial harassment. Ijames says in the stage directions right before this sequence that the list "should be a speaking of names as an attempt to keep those bodies alive,"[24] and he encourages the director to add new names in production—certainly, at this juncture, that list would now include George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and others. The impact of then seeing Tiny, who is younger and smaller than the others, arrive is devastating, and we learn that he had been playing with a toy gun in the park when the police shot him because they thought it was real. (Ijames has said that the play itself was inspired by the 2014 shooting of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice by Cleveland police. [Brantley]). Tiny has a difficult time understanding where he is and why, and it is only after a number of role-play games with the other three characters (including acting out a Bill Cosby show style sitcom) that he speaks directly to the audience about what it felt like to die. He asks us, "Was it something I did?...What is everyone so afraid of" but a response, as Ijames indicates in the stage directions, "probably won't come."[25]

The closing sequence is a multivoiced chant by the four characters as they transform into "god-like vessels of possibility,"[26] then seem to elevate in the white light. It seems at first that a transcendent ending is about to be possible—but at the very last moment, "quite abruptly, we

[19] Ibid., 19.
[20] Ibid., 14.
[21] Ibid., 18.
[22] Ibid., 16.
[23] Ibid., 42.
[24] Ibid., 28.
[25] Ibid., 52.
[26] Ibid., 53.

slam to black."[27] Brantley puts it well when he says that the play "has no sense of ending or of resolution" and that it "takes place in a nightmare of history, in which events are repeated, fugue-like, into eternity."[28]

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Antoinette Nwandu's play *Pass Over* premiered at the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago in 2017, had a Lincoln Center Theatre production in New York City in 2017, and was made into a film by Spike Lee produced by Amazon Prime in 2018. Thus—as with Smith's play on HBO—it became available to a larger audience than it might have reached with only theatrical performances, especially as its themes resonate all the more urgently in the wake of the killing of George Floyd and others. In August 2021, a revised version opened on Broadway when theatres first began to come alive again as New York City attempted to emerge from the Covid pandemic.

When *New York Times* interviewer Naveen Kumar asked the two lead actors reprising their roles from the Lincoln Center production what it was like to do so in August 2021, post-George Floyd, Jon Michael Hill, who played Moses, responded, "I remember Philando Castile was killed the year before we premiered in Chicago. Eric Garner before him; there are so many people that we've had to watch get taken."[29] Namir Smallwood, who played Kitch, responded even more personally:

> I basically became an adult in Minneapolis, and I was stopped by the cops three times, just walking. I had guns almost drawn on me once. When George Floyd happened it was like, that literally could've been me.[30]

The play is loosely inspired by Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, as two Black men, Moses (the equivalent of Beckett's Vladimir) and Kitch (the equivalent of Beckett's Estragon) play verbal games while they await the chance to "pass over" (as Vladimir and Estragon await Godot as a savior figure) into some kind of better place. And just as Pozzo interrupts Beckett's two refugees, demonstrating his abuse of power by the way he treats his servant Lucky, Nwandu's characters face Mister and Ossifer (a police officer), who are both played by the same white actor, but the result is more alarming than it was in *Waiting for Godot*. What complicates *Pass Over* further is its three-layered time frame: the play is set simultaneously in the present, on an urban street; in the 13th century BCE, i.e., Biblical times (hence the character Moses' name and the references to the Book of Exodus); and on a plantation in 1855 (i.e., in the era of American slavery). Nwandu points out in her introduction to the play that her inspiration came in

[27] Ibid., 56.

[28] Ben Brantley, "Bewildered Rage Over Lives Cut Short," *New York Times*, June 12, 2017, C2.

[29] Naveen Kumar, "Leading the Way for Broadway." *New York Times*, August 8, 2021, AR 5.

[30] Ibid.

part from the image of the Ohio River as the passage from slavery to freedom. She also, writing the piece in the Trump era, wanted to address the question of "state-sanctioned violence."[31]

Nwandu is careful to indicate in her directions to the actors that although the two main characters frequently use the n-word when speaking to one another, it should not be used in rehearsal in any other circumstances. This is enacted in the play itself when the Mister character asks them why they use the word so much but he is not allowed to. Moses tells him, "iss not chors" (it's not yours), to which Mister responds, "EVERYTHING'S MINE!"[32] The exchange encapsulates the power dynamic in the play, wherein Moses and Kitch keep imagining the things they will have and do when they finally are able to "pass over" (they share their top ten wishes), but they are stymied first by Mister's cultural appropriations (he shares his picnic food with them and talks about his mother's hired woman who made the collard greens; he sings a spiritual and wants them to compliment his singing) and eventually by the entrance of the Ossifer character at the end of Act One. Not only does Ossifer (who is wearing mirrored aviator sunglasses) call them "boy," but we see that they have been harassed by the police in the past when the stage directions indicate that they "assume the position" for being searched.[33] He does not release them at the end of this first encounter until Moses recites the phrases he wants from them about being a "stupid lazy violent thug" who is "going nowhere."[34]

In a sequence that echoes the list of names in *Kill Move Paradise*, the second act of the play references real-world police violence as the two characters recount the names of Black people they know who have been killed.[35] Jesse Green, in his review of the revised 2021 Broadway production, says that in performance, "it takes a very long time to name them while also distinguishing their particulars…They expect at any moment to be next." When Ossifer enters for the second time and begins to harass Moses and Kitch again, there is a sequence of possible transcendence as the "space changes" and "the plagues against Ossifer begin," thus referencing the Exodus story.[36] Strikingly, though, the original version of the play does not end with this vision of "passing over"; rather, the Mister character re-enters, ends up shooting Moses, and he is the one who makes the closing address to the audience. Mister's curtain speech embodies covert racism as he claims to feel "sad" and "helpless" about the violence that has been happening against Black people, then refers to "those few…who manage to make good or decent," followed by "*a big performative sigh*" before his "*demeanor brightens*" and he ends by simply saying, "anyway…"[37] Whereas Smith's play ends with notes of affirmation with Bree Newsome's and John Lewis' monologues, Nwandu's version as originally written wants the

[31] Antoinette Nwandu, *Pass Over* (New York: Grove, 2019), vi.
[32] Ibid., 51.
[33] Ibid., 60.
[34] Ibid., 61.
[35] Ibid., 81-83.
[36] Ibid., 95.
[37] Ibid., 104.

spectators to feel the jarring disconnection between the hoped-for future for her two main characters, and the distorted understanding of her insidiously racist white authority figures.

When *Pass Over* opened on Broadway in August 2021 as one of the very first plays to be performed there since the 2020 Covid shutdown, two main ideas were immediately relevant. The first was that this is a play that references the plagues of Biblical times, yet no one could have imagined that an actual plague (the pandemic) would have occurred in the present day. The second was that Nwandu wanted to change the conclusion to a more hopeful one because she felt that Black audiences had already experienced enough trauma as the result of the killings of George Floyd and others. As Naveen Kumar puts it, "Nwandu has proposed a revision of her bleak ending, one that spares Black audiences, in particular, from the trauma of witnessing another tragedy."[38] In his *New York Times* review of the Broadway revision, Green says, "Not only has she [Nwandu] decided to push the play past tragedy into something else, but she has also, in its last ten minutes, let its innate surrealism fully flower in a daring and self-consciously theatrical way."[39] Jon Michael Hill (Moses) adds in Kumar's interview,

> We are still hearing about a plague of Black men dying in this play. I think the reality of that remains true. The new ending is supposed to be Afrofuturistic, an imagined world that none of us know. It's an incredible gesture, because it's trying to capture our potential, our best selves and what could be.[40]

Smith, Ijames, and Nwandu leave us with glimmers of hope for change, but also with a profound awareness that—as the Black Lives Matter movement wants us to understand—such change won't happen without radical transformations of awareness and a redressing of racial inequities. The theater is a place, but only one place, to keep this conversation going.

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[38] Kumar, "Leading the Way for Broadway," AR 5.
[39] Jesse Green, "Broadway for Real, In Horror and Hope." *New York Times*, August 23, 2021, 1.
[40] Kumar, "Leading the Way for Broadway," AR 5.

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