

# The National Museum of African American History & Culture Wants Your Photos, Videos, and Stories to Help Document the Black Lives Matter Movement and COVID-19

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BY KWIN MOSBY | JULY 28, 2020

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PHOTO: JASON SPEAR, NMAAHC PUBLIC AFFAIRS SPECIALIST

A century-old idea, the [National Museum of African American History & Culture \(NMAAHC\)](#) has become a 350,000-square-foot vessel for the Black community to retell American history through a variety of storytelling methods and diverse perspectives. It was a concerted effort and came to fruition thanks to several important people, including the late U.S. Congressmen John Lewis and Mickey Leland.

The museum is temporarily closed due to COVID-19, but curators are requesting members of the African-American community help with a new initiative to assemble an online collection of personal stories about two major crises: the [coronavirus pandemic](#) and the Black Lives Matter movement. In June, the [NMAAHC launched Voices of Resistance and Hope](#), a community platform for millions of people to upload their images, firsthand accounts, personal stories, essays, poems, photographs, short videos, and observations about how these transformative issues have impacted their lives.



Curators from three SI museums, NMAAHC (African American History and Culture), NMAH (American History), and Anacostia Museum. PHOTO: JASON SPEAR, NMAAHC PUBLIC AFFAIRS SPECIALIST

Launched almost a month after the museum's [Talking About Race](#) web portal, the new platform offers an opportunity for the [NMAAHC](#) to highlight shared COVID and Black Lives Matter movement experiences, and to celebrate the American values of resiliency, optimism, and spirituality. Last week, 400 people started uploading their stories online in various formats, including photographs, poems, and original music.

The past few months have been ripe with candid, real-life stories about racial inequality as well as countries overwhelmed with a health crisis that has claimed more than 600,000 lives worldwide. COVID-19 has and will continue to reshape the way we navigate our daily lives. The museum encourages African-American and global communities to share their unique stories online, whether it's a firsthand account as a frontline healthcare worker or an uplifting tale of resilience.



In addition to how COVID-19 has affected the Black community, Aaron Bryant, museum curator of visual culture, social justice, and contemporary history for NMAAHC, is echoing the call to action for Black Lives Matter movement stories. And he's eager to hear from voices beyond the U.S. border, too, in an effort to understand why the George Floyd and Black Lives Matter protests resonate with people thousands of miles across the globe. "The protests that are happening all over the world...I'd be interested in not just collecting objects, but more importantly, collecting oral histories and stories from people," Bryant told *Travel + Leisure*. "I think those stories will show our common humanity...bring us together no matter where we are in the world or what race, culture, religion, or sexual orientation we may be."

Working for the NMAAHC for seven years, the Baltimore-based curator draws comparisons between the current Black Lives Matter protests and the Poor People's Campaign, a multicultural coalition that began in 1968 to end poverty. The famous Civil Rights protest is a focal point of his work on a NMAAHC exhibition, [City of Hope: Resurrection City & the 1968 Poor People's Campaign](#), which commemorated the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s final human rights campaign. The exhibition is scheduled to hit the road in 2022.

The 1960s Civil Rights protests — the March on Washington, 'I Am a Man' strike, and the Poor People's Campaign — are similar to the Black Lives Matter movement because all were carried out to change racial inequities and resolve human rights issues. One visual difference that Bryant recognizes between the protests is that the 1968 Poor People's Campaign had more consistency from one protest sign to another, including specifications on what colors, fonts, and sizes should be used. By design, the Poor People's Campaign was about mobilizing communities and using guidelines to communicate: "We have the same voice, we speak the same language, and we have the same needs." The Southern Christian Leadership Conference led the charge to make sure everyone was on the same page, and also suggested slogans to use on the signs.

In comparison, Bryant visited Lafayette Square, the epicenter for the Black Lives Matter movement in Washington, D.C., where he and other NMAAHC curators noticed that a majority of the signs were handmade with various messages and calls to action. "Whether on the fence at Lafayette Square park or on the construction boards around the Chamber of Commerce building, it's almost like you could see their individual voices. These were all voices that had manifested in a visual way," said Bryant. "There was a lot more uniformity and consistency in the 1960s. That's what stood out to me."



PHOTO: JASON SPEAR, NMAAHC PUBLIC AFFAIRS SPECIALIST

The NMAAHC is working with the Anacostia Community Museum and the National Museum of American History — both based in the D.C. area — to create a collection of assets to capture the Black Lives Matter protests in Lafayette Square. Bryant and the museum expanded their efforts to document the George Floyd and Black Lives Matter protests in other U.S. cities and show the surge in artists creating colorful and thought-provoking murals on the plywood covering the windows of office buildings, restaurants, and other local businesses. Bryant believes it's also important to display the anti-racism protests that were sparked in international cities, including London, Rio de Janeiro, Berlin, Rome, Edinburgh, Hong Kong, Brussels, Paris, Madrid, and Sydney. He said he's interested in understanding the international connections to the George Floyd protests, including Aboriginal protestors in Australia. Their stories need to be told, too.



PHOTO: JASON SPEAR, NMAAHC PUBLIC AFFAIRS SPECIALIST; AARON BRYANT, NMAAHC CURATOR

The NMAAHC doesn't have a date set to reveal a new public exhibition dedicated to these life-altering events, but the [Voices of Resistance and Hope](#) online platform will be a resource for museum curators to start collecting timeless assets, such as original music that addresses social injustices, poems that capture the thoughts of marginalized communities, photos that reveal the most poignant moments of a peaceful movement, and the personal prose that showcases the fear of the unknown about a global pandemic. It's hoped that these countless stories from African-American and global communities will create a colorful mosaic of perspectives. These are historic, real-life experiences and stories that Bryant and the NMAAHC need your help to tell.