**Fifteen-Minute Moments: Black Women’s Short Plays as a Political Aesthetic of Crisis**

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**Abstract**

This article examines short plays as a political aesthetic of crisis using examples from *Black Lives, Black Words* (2015-17) at the Bush Theatre, London, which respond to concerns arising from the #BlackLivesMatter movement about Black deaths in police custody. I focus on Black women playwrights’ portrayals of Black mothers’ anxieties about protecting their sons, and of Black mothers and sisters grieving the loss of sons, brothers and fathers in incidents where excessive force is deployed by the police. I consider how *Black Lives, Black Words* connects to the radical aesthetics of the 1960’s Black Arts Movement by promoting the use of theatre for activist purposes. I argue that the politicising potential of the *Black Lives, Black Words* initiative is accentuated by the use of a short play format as a political Black aesthetics for responding to contemporary crises. By analyzing pivotal moments in a sample of the fifteen-minute plays, I demonstrate how the content of the plays combines with their performance styles to maximize the potential for audience empathy despite their short playing times.

**Keywords** Activist Theatre, Political Aesthetics, Black Aesthetics**,** Black Lives Matter, *Black Lives, Black Words,* Bush Theatre, Short Plays

**Black Short Playsas Responses to Contemporary Crises**

Short plays have become increasingly popular as a way of responding to urgent cultural crises. The prominence of short plays may well be attributed to cultural shifts that have seen our attention spans shorten in a world increasingly dominated by social media soundbites on Facebook and Twitter. John H. Muse argues that the contemporary prevalence of short plays can be linked to social media cultures while recognizing a longer trajectory of what he terms “microdramas,” including modernist, neo-futurist drama, Beckett’s plays, and microthons, where microdramas are programmed together in an evening to make a longer performance event. As described by Muse, short plays are “crafted to be considerably shorter than its audience’s likely horizon of temporal expectation” (2). Muse argues that there are limited studies of short plays because “[b]rief plays often struggle to build complex characters, to incorporate more than one or two plotlines, to involve large casts, and to generate the sort of absorption that animates longer forms” (5). Short plays can appear to be impressionistic and simplistic due to their limited timeframe, because it is imperative for the writers to make their points quickly and succinctly in compressed form and denouements arrive quickly. However, Muse maintains that short plays should not be treated as inferior to longer or full-length plays and that the form is deserving of more sustained study.

This paper focuses on short plays as those that are written to be performed with a duration of ten to fifteen minutes, which are exploring or responding to a specific theme and are curated to be performed together within an evening of ‘shorts.’ Such short plays are distinguishable from plays that happen to be shorter in length than a perceived norm (such as contemporary plays that last between thirty and fifty minutes, which are often deemed to be ‘short’ by theatre reviewers), from the tradition of one-act plays (although some of the plays that I discuss are one act), and from one-continuous scene plays, which often have running times of longer than fifteen minutes. Whereas Muse’s focus is on the temporal aspects of the short play form, on what can be achieved dramatically in a short space of time, my analysis focuses on the brief play as a political form, as a model that is used for presenting short, sharp messages, points and provocations. I am more concerned with what can be achieved as a political aesthetic within a short play format and how such plays contribute to transnational social debates about Black lives in Britain and the USA. Within an evening of short plays, it is not so much the form or aesthetic of the individual plays that creates the overall effect of the production; rather it is the combination of showing the plays together that creates the aesthetic and activist intervention by offering audiences a variety of snapshots of perspectives into the issues portrayed. A range of perspectives can be presented on the one issue, which is effective for both its interrogative effect and for promoting the use of theatre as a basis for social activism.

***Black Lives, Black Words* and The Black Arts Movement**

This paper considers the political aesthetics of Black women’s short plays through analysis of some of the pieces written for the British productions of *Black Lives, Black Words,* which have so far had three productions at the Bush Theatre, London in 2015, 16 and 17.[[1]](#footnote-2) *Black Lives, Black Words* is an international project started by Reginald Edmund in Chicago, USA, and productions have since been put on in Canada and in London in collaboration with Simeilia Hodge-Dallaway, who runs Artistic Directors of the Future and Madani Younis (former Artistic Director at the Bush Theatre).[[2]](#footnote-3) Each *Black Lives, Black Words* production consists of an evening where Black playwrights and performance practitioners are invited to contribute a ten to fifteen minute play that reflects on concerns arising from the #BlackLivesMatter movement by providing a response to the question “Do Black lives matter today?” The plays are programmed together into an evening where they are performed as script-in-hand rehearsed readings interspersed with performance poetry and spoken word performances. Each *Black Lives, Black Words* production is unique as the project moves from city to city, each with a different set of invited writers, spoken word artists, poets, and cast members. Bush Theatre contributors have included Mojisola Adebayo, Oladipo Agboluaje, Trish Cooke, Rachel De-Lahay, Courttia Newland, Winsome Pinnock, and Somalia Seaton. Runs are between one-and-three nights long and the performances are presented for free in university settings or at a small cost in theatres to ensure wide accessibility.

Edmund describes *Black Lives, Black Words* as an initiative in which “local Black artists worked with directors of color to speak against the injustices in an unfiltered way and to speak directly to the communities that they are connected to. [This] resulted in raw, urgent and exciting new writing that was socially and politically tied to the #BlackLivesMatter discussions” (Edmund, vii). The idea that these short plays offer raw, urgent and unfiltered responses to social injustices and contemporary crises recalls the concerns of the 1960’s Black Arts Movement in terms of being a politicised Black aesthetic that uses theatre for social and activist purposes. The Black Arts Movement was connected to the principles of the Black Power concept and revolved principally around the social role of Black arts as a consciousness raising practice. Black Art was conceived as a form of radical practice that represented Black experience and drew on Black aesthetics in order to promote a social role for a Black theatre practice that was aimed at Black audiences. The Black Arts Movement rejected ideas of art for art’s sake, promoting the idea of art as having a functional purpose, and one of their defining principles followed W. E. B. Du Bois’s often-cited manifesto that Black theatre should be ‘About us, By us, For us, and Near us’ (134). Such a view presupposes Black practitioners’ control over the production of Black Art, over the stories that are told, the modes of telling, and the spaces in which they are shown. However, such control is rarely afforded to Black playwrights in Britain, who are largely dependent on white theatre managers and programmers for allocating space for their plays to be produced. Under Madani Younis’ leadership from 2012 to 2018, The Bush Theatre in London emerged as an important space for Black British theatre, reflecting his commitment to engaging with race and race politics beyond corporatised ideas about ‘diversity’ by identifying a radical position for Black arts “to provoke culture […and present] the rawest version of who we are” (qtd. in Aitkenhead).

Although the Black Arts Movement originates from an American context, its applicability to the British productions of *Black Lives, Black Words* resonate through the creative politics of its founder Reginald Edmund, who, although based in the USA, has sought to achieve a global reach for the initiative to Black communities in the UK and Canada. *Black Lives, Black Words* follows the global reach of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which was started by three Black women activists (Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi) in 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the fatal shooting of 17-year old Trayvon Martin, and has since developed into a global hashtag and activist movement. In his comments in the publication of the *Black Lives, Black Words* playtexts, Younis suggests that the political debates pertaining to #BlackLivesMatter “opens up a creative space for Black activists and artists to fashion and articulate a response” (Younis, v) and he describes *Black Lives, Black Words* as “a conversation held across continents, where we come together to speak to the vital question of what is the value of Black lives in America, the UK and across the world” (v).

*Black Lives, Black Words* also links to the concerns of the Black Arts Movement by promoting notions of Black aesthetics as a political form. Specifically, the Black Arts Movement came from a place of protest and rage, and of using theatre for revolutionary purposes, that are recalled in the *Black Lives, Black Words* productions as Black writers, directors, spoken word performers, and activists come together to make urgent and responsive work. These are by no means new concerns, but are responses to contemporary crises that can be situated in relation to legacies of the past. Edmund likens contemporary Black playwrights to the “ancient times of the griot, as the politicians, the preachers, and the prophets of their times gathering the people together and guiding them through stories toward a better world” (vii). The logo on the cover of the published *Black Lives, Black Words* playtexts is the raised fist of the iconic Black Power salute, which also locates the initiative within connections to a historical lineage and a legacy of Black defiance, resistance and the activism of the Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore, Edmund’s explanation of *Black Lives, Black Words* as a way of “[g]iving artists of color actual control over their own narratives, and giving the community voice, access, and space to be heard, as well as bridging communities with a shared global dialogue”(qtd. in Victor) chimes with the Black Arts Movement’s quest for theatre in the Black community to be “about us, by us, for us and near us.”

*Black Lives, Black Words* plays range in scope from pieces about the purposes of Black theatre and the experiences of Black performance practitioners to those that are more concretely focused on concerns about the crisis in policing and Black deaths during or soon after being in police custody that emerge directly from the #BlackLivesMatter movement. A number ofplays highlight Black characters’ feelings of mistrust and anger towards the police. The plots and aesthetic choices of those plays by Black women that respond directly to issues of police brutality against Black bodies and to deaths in custody cases are of particular interest when considering that the majority of deaths in custody cases involve men. Black women playwrights respond with portrayals of Black mothers and sisters who are questioning how to protect male family members or grieving the losses of sons, brothers and fathers in incidents where excessive force is deployed by the police. Black women characters become representative of the voices of the family members that are left behind to seek justice and the short play format becomes a powerful way to capture the intensity of their grief in a compressed form.

Many of the short plays in *Black Lives, Black Words* can be summed up by a key or pivotal moment, an image, or a revelation that is central to the drama and leaves the lasting impression of the narrative. In recognition of this tendency, which necessitates that approaches to analysing short plays might also be different from analysis of full-length dramas, the following analyses centre on the key images or pivotal moments in each of the short plays examined. I suggest that the activist potential of these plays is accentuated by the use of the short play format as an aesthetics for dealing with contemporary crisis.

**#BlackLivesMatter: Protecting Black Sons, Brothers and Fathers**

Police officers in the UK and USA are contracted to act as enforcers of law and order whose job is to “protect and serve.” Yet, too often, this duty is not equitably applied to Black people who are disproportionately targeted for stop-and-search and subject to heavy-handed policing. Although incidents are largely reported as occurring in the USA, the UK has its own problems with relations between Black communities and the police. Recent predictions suggest that “Black people in England and Wales are 40 times more likely than white people to be stopped and searched” (Townsend). Concerns about Black men’s safety when dealing with the police are captured in a number of Black women’s plays in *Black Lives, Black Words*, which tackle the issue from the perspectives of mothers, siblings, and children who carry fears about what might happen to their sons, brothers and fathers, and from family members who have experienced the worst and are grieving and memorializing lost loved ones or pursuing action to learn the truth about the circumstances in which they died.

Yolanda Mercy’s *His Life Matters* depicts the issue from the unique angle of a pregnant woman and her female partner waiting in a doctor’s surgery (presumably for a pregnancy termination consultation) and contemplating whether they should keep their first baby because he will potentially be “disabled” by “the two things he can’t change” (207) being Black and male, which could leave him vulnerable to racist attacks and to police brutality. Fears about becoming the mothers of a Black son, whose dignity can be compromised by racist mistreatment, and potentially being yet another grieving Black mother is accentuated by the short play format and the pressure of their decision. The partner of the pregnant mother would rather terminate their baby in the womb than see him suffer in life through disadvantage and potentially becoming another loss to police brutality or to racial violence. Therefore, what should ostensibly be a happy moment shared between a couple is marred by the anxieties arising from the race and gender of their unborn child and by the perceived social disabilities that he might face as a Black male. Indeed, the play alludes to the idea that the decision may well have been different if the baby was not due to be a boy:

But I can’t afford to see him suffer…like so many men, so many black mothers have suffered before. I refuse to have my name stamped on a headline with tears rolling down my face, with my weave fucked up cause I ain’t slept in days. Days and weeks and years, resting on my heavy shoulders stitching pain under my eyes reflecting to the world the story of my dead son. […] I refuse to be a statistic on a list of broken lives, broken boys, broken mothers.

(207)

The significance of the mothers’ decision about whether to keep or terminate their pregnancy is further driven home by the fact that they are a lesbian couple who will presumably have made an active decision to conceive their baby through the necessary fertility planning and inseminations. Indeed, this element is heightened further in the YouTube recording of the performed script, where it is the egg of one mother that has been implanted into the other and it is the mother whose egg is being used that is doubtful about whether to continue with the pregnancy whereas the mother who is carrying the baby wants to keep and protect their child. Information about egg donor inseminations on GOV.UK explains that the person who gives birth to a baby will be determined to be the legal mother of a child, which has implications for same sex, transgender, and surrogate pregnancies. These implications are brought home in the closing moment of the play when the mother whose egg is being used hesitantly leaves the final decision in the hands of the mother who is carrying the child: “So what I’m trying to say is…is…if you want to keep him. That’s fine. *(Beat.)* But I don’t know if I can” (207). The ambiguity of the layers of the play also taps into debates about pro-choice, and about pregnancy termination when a baby is known to have disabilities. Indeed, at the start of the play it seems as though the play is one about the ethics of such a choice. Yet the revelation that the ‘disability’ that they are speaking about is that of being a Black male shifts the ethical debate about terminating a child.

Sharmila Chauhan’s *Prodigal* uses a dual perspective in which a mother and a sister remember their son/twin brother who was fatally shot by the police and a white man gives an account of his police officer son who was the one that pulled the fateful trigger. Both parents reflect on their sons as babies and remember defining moments from their childhoods and into growing up to become the men that they became. Chauhan’s dual perspective aesthetic creates space for the grieving Black family’s feelings to be heard in response to the police officer’s official view. By placing the police officer’s father to address the audience in monologue while the women speak to each other, the play suggests that a certain unity is required in activism against police brutality. When the women arrive for their meeting with the father and ask him for details of what happened he remains adamant that his son “was just doing his duty”, “my boy was a good lad”, “my son had no choice” (my transcription). The white father’s encouragement for his son to be daring and take risks is starkly contrasted with the Black women’s memories of training the Black son how to behave in ways that could prevent police stereotyping: “speak properly, don’t stand out from the crowd”; “walk with dignity [with your] head held high” (my transcription). Yet they could not protect him from the police officer’s assumptions that “he looked suspicious, the hoodie, that walk”; “he wouldn’t stop when they asked him to” and he appeared defiant with his “hands in his pockets […] playing that music so loud” (my transcription). This devastating account of the son/brother’s last moments brings home the fact that it is the police officer’s account of the events that often becomes the accepted and publicly available version: “the murdered have only the eyes of their killers to bid them goodbye” (my transcription). The police officer’s observations highlight the dangers that Black men face in the face of racial stereotyping and racial profiling. His assumptions about the son’s behaviour resonate with concerns raised in “The Talk,” a 2015 *New York Times* video “explaining how black parents have to prepare their sons for police encounters – out of fear, mainly, that such interactions can go horribly wrong, ending with their son dead” (Lopez). Black parents explain how they train their children about what they should and should not do when they are stopped by police officers (note *when* they are stopped, not *if* they are stopped): follow instructions, stay calm, keep hands visible on the steering wheel, record the badge number of the officer(s), film the arrest, comply, ask for permission or state what you are going to do before you do it, don’t fight back, don’t give any rebuttals. They also suggest that white parents do not have to have this talk; as one contributor explains, “Caucasian people teach their children that if things go wrong they should go to the police.”

Trish Cooke’s *Left Hangin’* picks up on these concerns through the eyes of the mother of a deceased child who is seeking to understand how her vulnerable son who has diagnoses of autism and ADHD ended up dying in police custody. The dramatic form places the Mum Celia as the main narrator explaining how her son Kane’s story unfolded, with the other characters performing vignettes of the incidents as they are being described. The play moves rapidly, showing how the pressures stacked up on Kane due to domestic abuse, racism, mental health, and disabilities, and ultimately how the police stereotyped him and failed in a duty to protect him. This grieving black mother refuses to accept the police version that Kane’s death was suicide: “What I don’t get is how a six foot man can hang himself in a six foot two door frame” (154). Her concerns about how the police deal with black men with mental health conditions relates to the cases where the police are called to help but then something happens and the vulnerable ends up dead.[[3]](#footnote-4) Questions are raised about whether she will ever find out what actually happened, and about whether there will be a true report. For example, the Independent Police Complaints Authority have repeatedly been criticized for lacking objectivity and for usually ruling on the side of the police. The aesthetic of Cooke’s play is framed through connections to real-life concerns through the projection of official newspaper headlines and statistics about the high numbers of deaths in police custody and ending with a BBC News Bulletin headline from 23 July 2015, in which an independent review was announced:

Theresa May to launch independent review of deaths in police custody […]. It will assess whether police officers properly understand mental health issues, the availability of appropriate healthcare the use of restraint techniques and suicides in the first 48 hours of detention.

(157)

Max Kolaru’s *Father’s Day* depictsa brother and sister visiting the grave of their father to prepare for a memorial event one year on from when he was killed by racists in London. Sister’s vivid recall of the events of the night that her father died detail how the police treated her brother stereotypically when he went into the station for help with his father’s blood on his hands; the police stereotyped the crime as “Black on Black Crime,” said that the son was being aggressive and handcuffed him; they became distracted by the clearly agitated son while their father was left bleeding to death outside on the street. A racist murder, the lack of witnesses and Sister’s description of the police’s response carry echoes of the Stephen Lawrence case, where police officers interpreted his friend Duwayne Brooks as being agitated and invested their energies in trying to calm him down as Stephen lay bleeding to death on the street. In the play, A CCTV camera that was not recording due to maintenance and the CCTV images of the crime mysteriously disappearing also link to the police failure to deal adequately with evidence in the Stephen Lawrence case. Brother doubts that they will get justice and angrily makes this link explicit in a hard hitting and direct way by alluding to “the controversy over the use of police spies to gather information about the Lawrence family while they were trying to persuade the police to properly investigate their son’s racist murder” (Evans).

There ain’t no justice – Sis. […] There’s Just Us. […] The same race a white people you’re trying to fight against, is privately listening to every word you say. Look at what they did to the Lawrences. A Good upright God Fearing Family that they were trying a find dirt on, all the while pretending they was doing everything to further the course of justice. But really an truly, doing everything they could to mek sure the racists that did murder Stephen Lawrence got away scot free.

(191)

The use of the family as plot devices in these plays evokes connections to the founding of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Frank Leon Roberts describes the activism of the three founders as arising from the fact that “[t]hey were always worried about their brothers”: “Patrisse Cullors was 13 when she watched Los Angeles police handcuff and haul away her older brother without knowing why it was happening […;] Opal Tometi […] was alarmed when her youngest brother started preschool and began to raise questions about his hair and skin color—questions she knew were triggered by societal messages about race. And Alicia; and Garza worried about her brother’s safety every day”, and even more after the Zimmerman verdict: ““My brother is six feet tall and has a huge Afro,” Garza says, “and I thought, that could have been my family”” (Roberts). The plays highlight the particular angst of being the mothers and family of Black men, which is underlined through an aesthetic in which those who are left behind are positioned to speak out for those who have lost their lives as well as connections to real life instances that reveals the potency of the issues portrayed.

**Excessive Force and Black Deaths in Custody**

Two of the plays that portray actual incidents of police brutality against Black bodies also make deliberate and apparent aesthetic choices that enhance their effect. Winsome Pinnock’s *The Principles of Cartography* uses a visceral framework of a choral round in which witnessing an act of police brutality against a Black man being searched by police on the street in present-day Peckham is linked to the past and traumatic memories of the mistreatment of the bodies of slaves being inspected on the auction block:

They pluck at his shirt, his trousers, turn him around, pluck at his pockets, squeeze his cheeks to look inside his mouth. I recall how they jabbed and prodded us, counted our teeth to determine how healthy we were, before putting us on the block.

(139)

The police officer’s treatment of the Black man is described in terms that evoke memories of slave auction blocks, creating a sense that contemporary police brutalities against Black bodies stem from a longer history that can be traced back to legacies of slavery in which violence enacted upon Black bodies was lawfully sanctioned by slave codes. Descriptions of the police officer’s use of a Taser as “Wires whip around his legs” evokes “three hundred years of enduring one indignity after another” (140) and the elderly witness imagines a response in which her “chest swells with an ancient anger” (141) and she reclaims power by snatching the Taser away and holding it against the officer’s head, figuratively “taking [his] whip out of [his] hand and letting [him] have a taste of it” (141). Her actions seek to empower Black women to respond to centuries of the dehumanization of Black bodies. While the mistreatment of Black bodies may stem from slavery, the continuance of acts of violence is apparent in the disproportionate numbers of Black lives lost on the streets of the UK and the USA. At the same time, present day witnesses – a Black mother and her young son – implies that the act of witnessing is a painful reminder of what he might be confronted with one day.

A sense of empowerment for Black women when facing the police is created through the performance style of Mojisola Adebayo’s *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland,* a requiem for Sandra Bland (d. 13 July 2015), a 28-year old African-American woman who was found dead in a police cell three days after being arrested by Texas State Trooper Brian Encinia in what should have been a routine traffic stop on 10 July 2015. The cause of death is reported as “asphyxiation (ruled suicide)” but questions have been raised about the circumstances leading up to Bland’s death.[[4]](#footnote-5) When Black people die at the hands of the police they have no voice, no recall to say what really happened. It is the officer’s version of events that takes precedence and it is left to friends, family and community activists to take up the call in the fight for justice in their names. Interviews with Bland’s sisters in the HBO documentary *#Say Her Name: The Life and Death of Sandra Bland* (2018) raise pertinent questions: “How do you go from this very strong woman to dead in jail by alleged suicide” (my transcription). It is noted in the documentary that, contrary to reports that Bland was depressed, that in fact she was happy in her life, having recently secured employment at her alma mater Texas University, which she was due to start just a few days after she was arrested.

Adebayo was taken with Sandra Bland’s story, as many of us were, a Black woman who was a social media activist in the #BlackLivesMatter Movement becoming one of the names in the long list of Black deaths in police custody. However, Adebayo explains that she wanted to restage the scene in a way that would go beyond simply retelling the story:

The interrogation also struck me as a horribly gripping and dramatic ‘scene’ that escalates with devastating dramaturgical effect. […] However, I did not want to just re-stage the real-life scene. Anyone can go on ‘youtube’ to see it. I have no taste for verbatim plays that only translate reality rather than transport the audience imaginatively. I want theatre to do something that a webpage, a news clip or a mainstream documentary cannot do.

(Adebayo, 2019, 167)

Adebayo wanted the retelling of the incident to do more than simply show what happened and she crafted the interrogation to have an activist potential. To create the piece Adebayo transcribed the full dashcam evidence of Encinia’s encounter with Sandra Bland and crafts it to be performed by a core group of Black women and a community chorus of one hundred culturally diverse women playing Bland, one white man playing Encinia, and one white woman playing the second officer that arrives at the scene after he calls for backup. Through the collective voice of Black women, Adebayo’s version seeks to empower Bland in the moment of arrest.

On stage, the third production of *Black Lives, Black Words* is performed in a promenade style, whereby “[i]n the spirit of protest, most of the audience will stand and move with the performance” (Bush Theatre). The promenade performance style was used to good effect in Adebayo’s transcribed play, effectively bringing together Black women in a collective response to police brutality. The actresses playing the core Bland speaking roles are set on podiums around the auditorium with Encinia on another speaking through a microphone.[[5]](#footnote-6) The Community Chorus Black women are positioned in amongst the audience, which becomes most effective as they all fall to the floor in unison to enact the moment when Encinia restrains Bland on the grass verge next to the road.

The short play format is particularly effective for showing just how quickly the situation escalated from the initial stop and explanation of why he stopped her to Encinia’s threats of violence and attempts to physically remove Bland from the car. The entire play is about fifteen minutes long and so much happens very quickly in a heated exchange in which Encinia quickly moves from a routine “Hello Ma’am”, to repeatedly shouting at Bland to “GET OUT OF THE CAR!” (177) and threatening to forcibly yank her out before drawing his stun gun on her. The use of multiple core actresses to play Bland and a community chorus amplifies the Black women’s voices to respond loudly and collectively (sometimes two, more, or all of the Bland and community chorus voices in unison) to the police officer’s demands as the situation escalates. An extended extract of a moment from the rehearsal version of the script demonstrates how Adebayo shapes the play for the seven core Blands to work together collectively to voice her words as a challenge to the officer’s comportment.

ENCINIA: Step / out of the car!

ALL: You do not have the right to do that…

ENCINIA: I do have the right now step out/ or I will remove you.

ALL: I refuse to say –

BLAND ONE: I refuse to talk to you other than to identify myself/ I am getting removed for a failure to signal?

ENCINIA: Step out or I will remove you. Step out or I will remove you. I’m giving you a lawful order. Get out of the car now, or I’m gonna remove you.

BLAND TWO: And I’m calling my lawyer.

ENCINIA: I’m going to yank you out of here. *(Reaches inside the car.)*

BLAND THREE: Ok, you’re going to yank me out of my car?

ENCINIA: Get out.

BLAND FOUR: Okay, alright.

ENCINIA: *(Calling in backup.)* 25-47.

ALL: Let’s do this.

ENCINIA: Yeah, we’re going to. *(Grabs for BLAND*).

BLAND FIVE: Don’t touch me!

ENCINIA: Get out of the car!

BLAND FIVE, SIX & SEVEN: Don’t touch me.

ALL: Don’t touch me!

BLAND SEVEN: I’m not under arrest – you don’t have the right to / take me out of the car.

ENCINIA: You are under arrest!

BLAND ONE: I’m under arrest?

BLAND TWO: / For what?

BLAND THREE: For what?

BLAND FOUR: For what?

[…]

ENCINIA: […] Get out of the car! Get out of the car – now!

BLAND FIVE: Why am I being apprehended? You’re trying to give me a ticket / for failure…

ENCINIA: I said get out of the car!

ALL: Why am I being apprehended?

BLAND SIX: / You just opened my car

BLAND CORE: You just opened my car door…

ENCINIA: I’m giving you a lawful order. I’m going to drag you out of here.

BLAND SEVEN: So you’re gon’, you’re threatening to drag me out of my own car?

ENCINIA: GET OUT OF THE CAR!

BLAND ONE: And then you’re gonna/ stun me?

ENCINIA: *(Slow this line right down, non-naturalistically, like slow-motion.)* **I will light you up!** *(As normal.)* Get out!

BLAND TWO, THREE & FOUR: Wow.

ENCINIA: Now! *(Pointing stun gun at BLAND.)*

BLAND FIVE, SIX & SEVEN: Wow.

ALL: Wow. *(Bland exits car.)*

(Adebayo, 2019, 175-7)

By creating a transcript performance, Adebayo’s version of *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland* manipulates verbatim aesthetics to enact a form of justice that empowers Bland through the multiple voices of the Black women who share the speaking of her words; their voices pop up from around the auditorium demanding to know “Why am I being apprehended?” (Adebayo, 176) and challenging Encinia’s aggressive assertion of authority: “You’re doing all of this/for a failure to signal?” (177). Bland’s resistance is evident as she refuses to comply with Encinia’s barked demands and instead challenges his authority in powerful ways. Bland appears both defiant and at the same time vulnerable in the exchange, repeating phrases back to Encinia and in several lines distressed and crying as she speaks, such as when he restrains her on the ground with his knee in her back: “You’re about to break my fucking wrist!” (181).

Adebayo’s transcript of the arrest of Sandra Bland is a powerful use of verbatim technique, modelled to maximise the emotional and testimonial power of the short piece. Adebayo instructs performers to keep the pace of the performance up to unify Bland’s voice as one person spoken through multiple performers, and also to pay attention to Bland’s use of repetition. The effect of the multiple voices creates a magnified effect of unified Black women’s voices to match the boom of the shouting white male police officer’s voice who spoke through a microphone in the Bush Theatre production. Capturing the defiance of Black women answering back to the officer’s confrontational and aggressive questioning style empowers us to respond as a resistance to the long history of institutional racism that manifests in police stereotyping of Black people:

BLAND SEVEN: *(Crying.)* This make you feel real good don’t it.

ALL: It make you feel real good don’t it?

BLAND SEVEN: A female for a traffic ticket, / for a traffic ticket.

BLAND ONE: Don’t it make you feel good Officer Encinia?

BLAND TWO: I know it make you feel real good.

BLAND THREE: You’re a real man now.

BLAND FOUR: You just slammed me, knocked my head into the ground.

BLAND FIVE:I got epilepsy, you motherfucker!

(182-3)

Muse questions the capacity to feel genuine empathy for characters in a short play form. He concludes that “genuine empathy – as opposed to automatic or sympathetic reactions – requires time to develop in audiences, and that the temporal demands of empathy pose a particular challenge for short performances that appeal to the emotions” (167). Muse suggests, however, that the capacity for empathy “often depends on how familiar we are with the story before it begins” (170). Adebayo’s transcription of the arrest of Sandra Bland engenders the capacity for genuine empathy consistent with the media coverage that this story has generated and the empowering way in which the events are performed by a community collective of Black women. The play is conceived to be performed script in hand in memory of Bland and to continue to keep her name alive in the quest for justice.

As a theatrical response to the #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName movements *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland* is a short play with a large emotional impact, the power of which was made even clearer for me during a collective reading of the script at the end of the CDE conference in Graz in June 2019. As Simeilia Hodge-Dallaway states: ‘The play is a provocation […] It’s a piece of activism, a show of strength in numbers. All those black women on stage will make us think about our mothers, our daughters, our sisters and ourselves. And all the women subjected to abuse that we never hear about’ (qtd. in Sullivan). The collectivity engendered in *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland* echoes the collective endeavor of the *Black Lives, Black Words* initiative and its links to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which itself has been compared with the Civil Rights Movement in their protest against racial injustice.[[6]](#footnote-7)

*Black Lives, Black Words* is an important theatre initiative in which entertainment intersects with a call for action that corresponds with the concerns of the Black Arts Movement. Edmund believes that art can be produced as activism and for healing; he states “I want audiences to walk out of the theater believing the time to act, believe, stand up and take part in the discussion of the issues plaguing the black community is now. […] But most importantly I want this to be a catalyst toward healing” (qtd. in Webb). The aesthetic contribution of the *Black Lives, Black Words* productionsis in the experience of the evening as a whole – the effect of watching the various short plays one after the other, and of the promenade performance style that I saw at the Bush Theatre’s third production. A rehearsed reading format places the focus upon the words, rather than on stage action, with the important part of these plays being the issues that they portray and the overall narrative rather than a particular aesthetic of performance. The short play format resulted in compressed and impressionistic performances, a raw a provocative style that got straight to the heart of pertinent concerns that are linked to real life concerns within the #BlackLivesMatter debates. As an audience member, the experience felt somewhat as though being presented with rapidly changing emotions in visceral performances that described painful and sometimes violent matters of police brutality and the characters’ responses to mistreatment; as one piece ended another started, and the emotions that they take you through start over again and build up. This sense was further underlined by the promenade style of the performance event that I attended, in which the plays were performed from various places around the auditorium.

Keeping the presentation style simple in the rehearsed reading format means that there was limited stage action, with no set, and everyday clothing as costumes which placed the main focus of attention on the material being spoken and adds to the rawness that prioritises the subject matter and story as the most important parts of the political aesthetic. Accumulatively, the evening amounts to a form of theatrical protest, through pieces that expressed the unsanctioned view of their creators. In this sense, the radical content in the subject matter of the plays combines with the dramatic and performed devices to create and underscore raw and direct performances. The consciousness raising potential of *Black Lives, Black Words* is maximizedby the creation of an emotionally charged evening that promotes an activist purpose for Black theatre in Britain. The powerful content of the plays expresses anger and revolutionary ideas, simultaneously provocative and poignant in exploring ideas about race, injustice and rightful rage that provokes a sense of determination for justice. Emotional impact and a call to action is a key purpose, which is aided by the short play format and the rough edges around each performance piece. Their deliberately unpolished style lends them a political force as activist pieces with short sharp messages that raise consciousness and agitate towards action and change. *Black Lives*, *Black Words* exemplifies the short play form as an effective political aesthetic of crisis.

**Biography**

Lynette Goddard is Professor of Black Theatre and Performance at Royal Holloway, University of London, where they research contemporary Black British playwriting with a focus on the politics of race, gender, and sexuality. Their book publications include *Staging Black Feminisms: Identity, Politics, Performance*(Palgrave, 2007)*, Contemporary Black British Playwrights: Margins to Mainstream*(Palgrave, 2015), and *Errol John’s* *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*(Routledge, 2017)*.*They are currently researching Black British theatre directors’ processes and productions and a project on how race is portrayed in contemporary plays through such themes as race, immigration and asylum, race and the police, race and sport, race and religion, and race and the rise of right-wing politicians.

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1. While the Bush Theatre was undergoing major refurbishment, the 2016 production of *Black Lives, Black Words* was shown in collaboration with Theatre Royal Stratford East. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Artistic Directors of the Future is an initiative founded and managed by Hodge-Dallaway to create new BAME artistic directors through training and opportunities. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See, for example, the cases of Roger Sylvester who died on 19 January 1999, eight days after being detained outside his home in Tottenham under the Mental Health Act, and Sean Rigg, who died at the entrance of Brixton Police station on 21 August 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. A facsimile of the autopsy report, newspaper coverage and analysis of the circumstances surrounding the death of Sandra Bland are readily found through internet searches. See, for example, George C. Klein’s analysis in ‘On the Death of Sandra Bland: A Case of Anger and Indifference’ (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Core Blands were played by Indra Ové, Juliet Okotie, Akiya Henry, Sheila Atim, Sarah Niles, Sapphire Joy and Judith Jacob; Encinia was played by John Last and the second female officer by Ruth Minkley. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. See for example, Dewey M. Clayton’s comparative study, which recognises that both Black Lives Matter and the Civil Rights Movement ‘evolved out of the need to continue the Black liberation struggle for freedom’ (Clayton, 449). Clayton writes: ‘Building on strategies used by the civil rights movement in the 1960s, Black Lives Matter engages in nonviolent direct action to bring attention to police killings and abuse of African Americans’ (449). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)