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Crises of the Live
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Thank you for the invitation to offer this keynote address. This talk is entitled “Crises of the Live.”

Today, I will share a few stories which I hope will elucidate how the conventional understanding of what is live and what *feels* live has changed over the past year. These stories (or core case studies) will touch on examples which I confess are not traditionally theatrical—such as, an in-person street protest in Chicago or an online song “battle” featuring R&B singers—but they serve as extreme examples which make it easier to appreciate the evolution in thinking about liveness in performance. Together, these stories will cohere in support of the following assertion: Live performance is a state of mind, an imagined co-presence in time with others. This assertion bears repeating: Live performance is a state of mind, an imagined co-presence in time with others. This is not a radical departure from how we think about the live¹—a well researched area—but the emphasis here, understood through the lens of a global pandemic and indexed by both blackness and activism, is how live performance is partially a *thing* produced by a creator as and also a *feeling imagined* by the spectator (slash) audience member.

Furthermore, I will suggest that live performance, considered in this manner, has the following attributes (again with an emphasis on reception):

1. It has an urgency to be seen. It is comprised of a series of moments deemed unmissable to the extent that anxiety, a profound *fear of missing out* occurs if you dare to step away.
2. It has an essential connection to an historical past premised on theatre as an act of sociality, inspired by a need to be with others.

As theatres begin to reopen across North America (and as many theatre companies have announced their abbreviated summer seasons or revealed plans to resume production in the fall, it has become increasingly common for people to wax nostalgic and share their memories of theatre before the pandemic, specifically the last play they saw before theatres were closed. The retreat into nostalgia whets the appetite for the experience on the horizon.

A. Here is my pre-pandemic story.

In November 2019, I received an e-mail from Lee Mikeska Gardner, Artistic Director of The Nora Theatre Company in Cambridge, MA. Gardner invited me to participate in a “Central Conversation” following a performance of their coproduction (with WAM Theatre) of Dominique Morisseau’s play *Pipeline*. I agreed. We selected Thursday, March 12th 2020, three days after opening night for what would essentially be a talkback. I had no inkling then that *Pipeline* would be the last play I would see in person before a global pandemic shuttered theatres for more than a year. In November 2019, the world-at-large had not yet been alerted to the dangers of Covid-19. However, five months later when I walked into the sold out performance at the Central Square Theater and saw fewer than two dozen people assembled, I knew that the future of live performance was in jeopardy. Three days later, the state required all theatres to close.

Admittedly, I hoped that the “conversation” would be cancelled. It wasn’t. I entered a quiet, mostly empty lobby. There was a palpable nervous energy among ushers and production staff. It wasn’t pre-show jitters, but a fear that the show would be shutdown. Audience members scattered themselves throughout the theatre. I had a row all to myself. Others had entire sections.

Although I have experienced plenty of sparsely attended productions in my life, the *Pipeline* audience distribution was my first experience with what I now recognize as pandemic-related “social distancing.”

Following the governor’s directive to end large public gatherings, *Pipeline* joined the first wave of professional theatres to pivot to online streaming. Audience members were encouraged to “pay-what-you-can” to access a recorded performance while being steered to a series of suggested donation levels from “friend” (\$10) to “angel” (\$200). The urgency of the donation and the potential threat of the pandemic on the arts were relayed by the production team: “Know that your purchase of this pre-recorded video stream event will help sustain Central Square Theater artists and staff while we are dark.” [Video: *Pipeline* trailer]

Returning to the production I attended, there was a felt sense of urgency at the performance which stemmed from the uncertainty of when (not if) the show would be shutdown. Collectively, we were inhabiting and sharing a moment exceeding what was framed by the playwright. Beyond the story world of the play, we were *in time* together as we were realizing that our routines were about to shift (without having any sense of for how long). However, we knew that that show—our show—if it closed prematurely, probably would never return. Collectively, we could sense impending loss and, together, we leaned-in to emotionally support the production. The theatre, which was nearly empty, felt full because we so clearly wanted to imagine an experience (including an audience) that wasn’t there or, more accurately, would have been if not for the threat of a pandemic.

Pipeline proved prescient not only in the ways it revealed how institutions and audiences would operate in the throes of a pandemic, but also in the manner it placed a spotlight on racism within societal systems. Its title refers to the school-to-prison pipeline, “the confluence of education policies in under-resourced public schools and a predominantly punitive juvenile

system that...drastically increases the likelihood that [at-risk] children will end up with a criminal record rather than a high school diploma.”² *Pipeline* centers on Omari, a high school student at a private college preparatory school, and Nya, his mother who teaches at a public school. There’s an undercurrent of racism and elitism which makes it difficult for Omari to fit in. He feels the weight of being assumed to represent all Black people *and* being subjected to the stereotypical ideas of blackness held by others including his teachers. It is his frustration at his life situation which leads to a key offstage action: Omari shoves a teacher, an act which could result in suspension and being charged with a crime. In Nya’s school, the teachers (in their break room) share stories about school fights but also about inadequate staffing as well as poor mental health counseling which impairs the life chances of their students. The systemic problems are so great across schools that Nya, speaking about her son, laments, “It doesn’t matter where I send him to school, nothing’s working! He’s being sucked into this void and I keep trying to hold onto him, but the force is so strong...that I have to...[h]old on firm or I’ll lose my grip.” The void is prison or, perhaps, death at the hands of law enforcement.

Ed Siegel, reviewing the production for WBUR (public radio), critiqued *Pipeline* for its politics and asserted, “there’s still an obligation [for playwrights] to not let agendas—whether they be community-building or political postulating—get in the way of storytelling.”³ Whereas Siegel framed the play as being too political, Bill Marx, in *Arts Fuse*, argued the opposite. He asserted that Morisseau’s play would have been even more effective if it focused more on systemic problems than family drama between Omari and his parents. He writes, “Remaking ourselves and our institutions in ways that would mitigate Omari’s rage would make for a far more formidable but valuable *lehrstück* [teaching play]—but that would mean stepping out of the comfortable confines of realism and calling out the powerful.”⁴ Personally, the production felt honest—perhaps because there was a sincerity in the enterprise of putting on a show in a

looming pandemic--and therein was its effectiveness. To state it another way, the urgency of engaging the problem of racism required that we venture out and show up.

Looking back after a year of nationwide protest related to police abuse and the experiences of Black folk, *Pipeline* proved timely. Although the Nora/WAM production predates the murder of American George Floyd, it correctly read the mood of everyday citizens tired of witnessing Black death and ready to take to the streets. Although critiqued for this “agenda,” Nora Theatre Company was unapologetic: “*Art is our Activism* and our production of *Pipeline* exemplifies this mission.” I remember leaving the theatre feeling not anxious about a looming pandemic, but rather grateful for the ways theatre can be a catalyst for change. There was something reassuring about this lesson—of the necessity of showing up, the urgency of attending, the power of presence—which reflected our moment and revealed the possibilities of the live.

B. Honk for Justice

Two months after I attended the production of *Pipeline* in greater Boston and only days after the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis, artist-activist Jocelyn Prince attended protests and marches on the South Side of Chicago. Concurrently, people took to the streets across the United States and Canada, in Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa among other cities. In Chicago, Jocelyn witnessed the overwhelming show of force by the Chicago Police Department (CPD). Their intimidating presence seemed out of proportion to the peaceful demonstration which itself was a response to the killing of an unarmed Black man by a police officer. Several Chicago protestors would be beaten by members of the CPD on that day. Others at subsequent protests. Prince remembers,

I began to get frustrated that while people on the South Side of Chicago were being beaten in the streets protesting murder by police, white people on the North Side were going about their daily business, chatting about their kids' summer camp programs or how long the line is at Whole Foods. When Madison reached out to me to ask me if I knew of any protests happening [elsewhere] in the city, I said we should make our own.⁵ Prince and Kamp started their own protest, Honk for Justice Chicago, which would become the longest sustained demonstration related to George Floyd's murder in the city. Prince researched city ordinances concerning street demonstrations. Together, they devised a concept for a visibility protest which could take place on sidewalks and, therefore, would not require permits. Although simple in design, they understood that the impact of these initial events would increase if they could attract people to join and participate in the protest over successive days. They leveraged social media, creating "Facebook events" initially for the first two protests and circulating information via other outlets such as Instagram and Twitter. What began with a less than a dozen volunteers on the first day quickly expanded.

The next day's protest in the Rogers Park neighborhood began with a couple dozen participants. At the start, Prince gathered the small group in a circle on the grass near a fieldhouse. She used the "people's microphone," when a crowd repeats everything that a speaker says for amplification, to point out a comfort station with water, first aid and other supplies. Prince led the group to repeat the words of Assata Shakur, "It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains."⁶ Within a few hours, the crowd swelled to several hundred people who gathered for blocks along Sheridan Road, a major four-lane street, in the city. Protestors held up signs with slogans reading "Honk for Justice" and "White Silence is Violence." Some were passerbys who found themselves compelled to join in. Most were people who learned

about it less than twenty-four hours earlier via Facebook. People of all ages and races attended the protest. Some banged pots and pans. Another person played a trombone.

Police officers in riot gear arrived. They came with empty buses for mass arrests.

Honk for Justice

Despite the presence of the police and their buses, the second Honk for Justice protest in Rogers Park ended peacefully. There were no acts of violence. None of the hundreds of protestors were arrested. Nevertheless, the presence of law enforcement officers dressed in preparation for violence reminded participants why Honk for Justice Chicago was necessary.

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a Black man who was accused of using a fake twenty-dollar bill at a convenience store was murdered by a white police officer in Minneapolis. Handcuffed, with hands behind his back, he was forced facedown on the street with multiple officers kneeling on him, including one who kneeled on his neck. George Floyd pleaded for breath. *I can't breathe*. He repeated these words more than twenty times. A crowd gathered, calling for the officers to stop and to allow the man to breathe. For nearly nine minutes—eight minutes and forty-six seconds—the lead officer continued to kneel on George Floyd's neck until life drained from his body. The murder, recorded on cellular phones and police body cameras, was replayed on the news and shared across social media. Nationally, people took to the streets in protest of this particular death as well as the dozens of recent murders of Black people by the police that had inspired the Black Lives Matter movement.

The first Honk for Justice Chicago protest in West Town occurred eight days after the murder of George Floyd. It was a death that resonated both because of its alignment with other death by police scenarios and its unavoidable spectacle. Prince remembers,

I will never be the same after watching that video. It was like watching a televised lynching. I cried for days. I had nightmares. I dreamt that my brother or other black men I loved were under that officer's knee. I was most horrified by what I saw in the following days, white people going about their business as if nothing had happened. I found that sort of desensitization to violence against black bodies disturbing.

What was needed was an intervention to help folks, especially those who lived on Chicago's North Side, to understand that had George Floyd's skin complexion been different—had he been white—he likely would still be alive. To raise awareness, Honk for Justice Chicago needed to be a durational event, perhaps a marathon protest, that occurred not just on one day in one part of the city but rather everyday throughout Chicago. It would run for sixty consecutive days, between June 2, 2020 and August 1, 2020.

In the style of a field organizer on a political campaign, Jocelyn Prince hosted volunteer trainings. Each began with her telling her story—who she was; why and how she got here. Prince was born and raised on the South Side of Chicago. Her father was a lawyer active in local politics, who ran unsuccessful in the three judicial races and, later, was appointed a judge by state official. Prince knocked on her first doors when she was twelve years old, getting petition signatures to get her father's name on the ballot. She would become a staff organizer on the 2008 Obama for America and 2016 Hillary for America presidential campaigns. In the year preceding Honk for Justice Chicago, Prince worked in Iowa for the Kamala Harris for the People presidential campaign. With a parallel career in theater, she organized and facilitated town halls designed "to foster a dialogue among activists, academics, artists, policy makers, and interested community members to identify potential next steps and an action plan for change" as Connectivity Director at Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in Washington, D.C. Partnering

with Prince was Madison Kamp, a recent college graduate and an advocate for diversity and inclusion who met Prince through a Bradley University debate team alumni group.

Joining Prince and Kamp were a core group of volunteers, the “yellow jackets.” The yellow jackets were engaged theatre artists who, like the cofounders, felt compelled to act and speak out. They were Thom Cox, Sunny Serres, David O’Donnell, Dana Buccheri and Stacy Bergland. Cox, a professional theatre actor and a founding member of the Tony Award-winning regional theatre Lookingglass Theatre Company, recalls feeling “angry” at the murder of George Floyd and possessing a desire to “take action in the face of power that knew it wasn’t accountable.”⁷ Sunny Serres, a local college professor, remembers deliberately avoiding the video of George Floyd’s murder for a week and, upon watching it, “believed it to be the first lynching that I’ve ever seen.”⁸ The “yellow jackets” became a cast and crew of sorts. They set up a staging area for other volunteers and participants, which included bottled water, snacks, poster board and markers, signs and other supplies.

To spotlight the intervention: Honk for Justice Chicago was a theatre-inspired performance of activism. With theatres closed, the streets served as the stage for public demonstration for change. With social distancing in place and gatherings, in general, discouraged, activist theatre became the site where participants as well as passerby could forge connection. They could be in time and in place together not just once but for two months, a potentially enduring familiarity made possible by a pandemic, societal unrest, and a longing for interpersonal connection. The streets offered access to a feeling of *communitas* no longer available through a physical theatre.

Daily, “pop up” protests continued with the location announced on Facebook the night before. The logistics of this proved cumbersome which led Prince and Kamp alongside the “yellow jackets” to choose seven locations on the North Side of the city, one for each day of the

week: Uptown, West Town, Logan Square, Lincoln Square, Lincoln Park, Rogers Park and West Ridge. This cycle was repeated every week for nearly two months. To further promote Honk for Justice Chicago, a website was created (www.honkforjusticechicago.com) which included a schedule of events, photos and published pieces about the protest. The site offered a succinct overview.

Every day, we protest at a different intersection on the North Side of Chicago from 4 - 6 pm, occupying the sidewalks, waving signs, chanting, making noise, and getting drivers to honk their car horns in support. This event is family friendly. Kids are more than welcome!

Bring signs and anything that makes noise (pots and pans, whistles, musical instruments). We have a limited stock of premade signs, as well as poster board and markers. We have water, snacks, masks, and basic first aid supplies on hand. Helium black balloons are also a great thing to bring for children (and even adults!). Sign suggestions include - "Black Lives Matter," "Silence is Violence," "Black is Beautiful," and "Justice for George Floyd."

When you arrive at the intersection, please look for volunteers in yellow jackets. You can show up at Honk for Justice anytime between 4 and 6 pm, but we encourage you to attend our 10 minute training, which begins promptly at 4 pm.

We protest RAIN OR SHINE. We encourage all participants to wear a mask and practice social distancing.

Although we are not directly affiliated with the Black Lives Matter organization, we ask that you support the great work that they do to organize us all around racial justice.

Donate at blacklivesmatter.com.

Face coverings were requested not for the purpose of anonymity but rather in accordance with city and state guidelines requiring masking in an effort to curtail the COVID-19 public health crisis that was occurring concurrent with Honk for Justice Chicago. The “yellow jackets” wore neon yellow vests with thin orange stripes similar to those worn by crossing guards or construction workers. The vests served multiple functions. They helped volunteers and first-time protestors to identify key organizers for that particular protest. They further marked Honk for Justice Chicago as a formally organized event rather than an accidental gathering. In addition, they helped to provide visual consistency from event to event. As the days passed, the “yellow jackets” replaced Jocelyn Prince as the person, with megaphone in hand, training volunteers. Kamp remembers those moments of “leading the team” to be the most challenging even for a person like herself who “like[s] speaking in front of people.”⁹ She remembers, thinking about service to and for community each time she addressed volunteers, “This is not about you Madison. It’s about the movement and the support of the black community.”

Honk for Justice Chicago worked with two volunteer publicists, Seth Zurer and Rachael Perrotta, who coordinated press releases, handled outreach, and provided media training to Prince, Kamp and the “yellow jackets.” Protests were covered by the gamut of local, regional and national press. WTTW, Chicago’s PBS news station, featured Honk for Justice as part of a neighborhood profile series on Lincoln Square. Nick Blumberg reports, “And as with many Chicago neighborhoods, demonstrations for racial justice have been making noise — in this case, literally. The demonstration “Honk for Justice” has been coming to Lincoln Square every Thursday.”¹⁰ In the televised segment, Prince appears saying, “We want to keep the volume up so that people here on the North Side understand what Black people are going through not just here in Chicago but around the country.” In a video essay on Chicago protests created and

published by the *Washington Post*, Honk for Justice Chicago appears prominently with Prince interviewed.¹¹

As enthusiasm for the daily protests began to wane, Prince, who eventually became the sole lead organizer after other obligations limited Kamp's involvement in late July, found herself having to do more and more organizing work to get people to attend. She reflected on her own efforts and, by extension, the labor of black women which often drives social justice movements. Prince considered the inability of Black women to rest which, in turn, inspired a performance which would last for the remainder of the Honk for Justice Chicago protest series. She thought what would it feel like if instead of standing and wearing a bright yellow jacket, she wore a pretty summer dress, brought a beach chair and just sat down.

The theatricality of the daily protests increased. In addition to the summer dress and beach chair, Prince added a variety of new costume and set pieces including a large straw beach hat, a beach towel, a white tub for soaking her feet, magazines, a parasol and a hand fan. Throughout the protest, she refused to speak with passersbys. If someone approached her, a "yellow jacket" would intervene and let the person know that Jocelyn is resting and cannot be disturbed. This improvisational schtick became a ritual that symbolized how black women consistently are asked for unpaid labor and the ways white allies might interrupt that dynamic. In its coverage of Honk for Justice Chicago, the *Chicago Reader*, a regional free newspaper, spotlighted this "performance art twist": "When Prince is there, she sits in a lawn chair reading. White volunteers serve as mediators between her and anyone who wants to interact with her, telling them, as Prince says, "No, she's resting. She needs to rest. You can talk to me."¹² In the *Washington Post* coverage, Prince offers, "Black women have been doing a lot of organizing work for progressive politics for centuries. It's time for white people to do that work. It is far past time for black people to rest."¹³ With her performance art, Prince drew inspiration from damali ayo

and Tricia Patrick Hersey. damali ayo created her interactive street performance, *Living Flag: Panhandling for Reparations*, to raise awareness about the issue of reparations for the descendants of Black Americans enslaved by white people in the United States. During the performance, damali occupied public spaces like street corners, library steps and parks. She collected money from white passersbys and immediately paid those funds to Black pedestrians. Tricia Patrick Hersey founded The Nap Ministry in 2016 to provide spaces for rest with immersive workshops and performance art. Hersey's performance art positions rest as a form of liberation. The Nap Ministry creates striking images, some of which provide commentary on the history of black women and labor.

If *Pipeline* was challenged as a teaching play, Honk for Justice Chicago should be considered a teaching performance. It centered the live event as an opportunity to education and position allies as proactive agent in support of a movement for social change. It leveraged physical proximity—a standing yellow jacket next to a sitting Prince—to model how a community could support one another and share the burden of leadership. Also, this iteration of the live was both durational and immediate. Yes, there were sixty opportunities to participate. However, embodied within each was the urgency of the moment to stand up for Black people targeted by structural racism.

Rain or Shine

Honk for Justice Chicago aligns with the history of social activism and protest within Chicago. Its emergence, beginning with an exchange between Madison Kamp and Jocelyn Price, has its roots in the sympathy strikes of the past in which Chicagoans felt compelled to stand up and step out in support of an outrage occurring elsewhere. Owing to Prince's training in theatre and

performance studies, its borrowing of Boalian techniques is identifiable. The audience member becomes an agent for change.

Although successful, there were numerous challenges encountered by Prince and Kamp and their team of “yellow jackets.” Among the more significant were the efforts required to sustain Honk for Justice Chicago over sixty days. Every day, volunteers were needed to occupy sidewalks and publicly call for justice. These individuals had to be recruited. New participants required training. Whereas recruitment on sunny and warm weekends was not difficult, rainy weekdays proved more complicated. Participation could range from hundreds of people to just two people depending on the day. Cox remembers, “To continue showing up knowing that there may be very few people coming. Rainstorm. Or days and times where there are only two, three people showing up. It takes an extra heft.” Part of the required “extra heft” was the realization that, at times, an entire movement can rest on the shoulders of one or two people. It is literally a pair of people standing up (and almost seeming to stand against a city) for justice. Serres recalls her most challenging times as “Those moments when I was by myself and it was just [Jocelyn] and me. I was really in a vulnerable spot. I noticed that I would get yelled at and picked on when it was just me, but it was also some of the most rewarding too.” In part, the reward was the self-acknowledgment of the importance of individual activism the idea that a person can make an event.

History sometimes records activism as a series of dynamic snapshots: a person holding a sign or standing up to (and directly) facing the police. However, protests have a soundtrack. Honk for Justice Chicago was no exception. There were the voices of people repeating—essentially chanting—the words of Assata Shakur in that first gathering. There were the amplified words of Prince, Kamp, or the “yellow jackets” on the megaphones for the daily trainings. There were the improvisatory statements of participants, the banging of pots and pans,

and, yes, even the sound of a trombone. Seres fondly remembers, the large number of “bus drivers, post office workers, Fed Ex drivers, Amazon [delivery] drivers who would honk and wave and yell.” She adds, “I remember just being on the North Side and having people hanging out of their cars with excitement that there was a protest happening in their neighborhood.” Serres also notes the positive impact of supportive passerbys on low attendance days: “You’re alone? We respect you.”

There were also detractors. With the protest occurring in summer 2020, in the months leading up to a presidential contest between incumbent Donald Trump, who increasingly supported violent white nationalism and seemed unwilling to empathize with Black and Brown communities targeted by police violence, and former Vice President Joseph Biden, Honk for Justice Chicago attracted the ire of people who viewed the protest as activism against Trump. Serres notes, “The amount of rage people had is surprising. How can you feel rage about someone standing up for themselves? That level of rage was mind blowing.” Cox remembers people approaching him in an intimidating manner and launching into “aggressive debate.” Referring to the sense of being “physically threatened,” he reflected, “That has always been the case with any protest against racial oppression. That is the nature of the conversation and it already has been. I had to return myself to feeling that [I] had to be willing to be unsafe. I was putting myself at risk in a way that I wasn’t accustomed to.” Participation in these daily protests, especially the rainy weekday gatherings, prompted self-examination—a “return to self”—that helped the volunteer to see themselves as part of a larger community and, equally importantly, to understand how their activism can make a difference and effect change.

The visibility and extended duration of the protest not only raised awareness to the justifiable outrage at George Floyd’s murder but also captured the attention of a city on the power of live activist performance. The impact of Honk for Justice Chicago extended beyond the

individual responses of participants. It also affected passerbys who found themselves in the midst of a protest as it rotated daily among seven distinct neighborhoods. They became participant-observers in a manner reminiscent of theatre in-the-round or runway spectators. As performance scholar Jordan Schildcrout writes,

Even if an audience member is focused on the performers, they inevitably see their fellow audience members on the other side of the stage—and are reciprocally seen. This mutual visibility could produce a variety of effects—curiosity, anxiety, desire—but it necessarily makes one more aware of one’s own visibility in relation to others sharing this same space.¹⁴

Some people felt antagonized. Serres notes that when she participated in a Honk for Justice Chicago protests “someone would yell Trump 2020 everytime.” Thom Cox remembers a man who was “being territorial” at the last protest in West Ridge. The man declared, “Why are you doing this in a residential neighborhood? You’re in my neighborhood. This is why people come to hate Black Lives Matter.” The man walked away only to return with a megaphone. Cox remembers, “He pointed it at my ear and turned on the siren. ‘How did you like it? That’s what it sounds like.’ Then he walked away. What if that had been a gun? He lifted it and pointed it at my head in the way you would a gun.”¹⁵ This experience evidences theatre scholar Harry Elam’s assertion, “In these turbulent times social activists [become] protagonists in their own real-life drama.”¹⁶ Other passerbys found inspiration and hope. An especially poignant moment for Serres was when “a bus driver got off the bus to thank me.”

“American society is rife with loud, moral protest,” writes James Jasper.¹⁷ Honk for Justice Chicago represents the spirit of activism within the Windy City. For weeks and across seven distinct neighborhoods, Chicagoans gathered to protest injustice afar (specifically George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis) and also closer to home. Consisting of sixty individual events,

Honk for Justice Chicago evidences the depth of activist spirit in Chicago. It also served as a reminder that activism can incite resistance to change. There were honks for justice. There were passerbys who sought to silence the protest. In making the challenges to justice and process visible, Prince and Kamp's campaign spotlighted not only the labor but also the real obstacles to creating lasting change. The effort to bring about change needs to be ongoing and must be of an extended duration. As Sheila Radford Hill has observed, "Deep within the soul of grassroots organizing are a thirst for freedom that cannot be quenched, a hunger for justice that cannot be satiated, a will to succeed that cannot be denied, and a desire to build a legacy of change that will pass on to new generations."¹⁸

The links between theatre and activism were strengthened in 2020. Embodied. Live. An event. The performance-dimension of the protest provided a substitute for what previously occurred onstage. It was as if *Pipeline* moved to the streets, in a way reminiscent of Amiri Baraka literally moving the production of his play *Dutchman* to the streets of Harlem (in New York City) not long after its premiere in the East Village. Honk for Justice Chicago emphasized this new approach to liveness—framed from the perspective of the audience. It began with a pronounced desire to render Blackness seen. There was an urgency to be recognized—to have the experience of racism acknowledge—to be heard. Honk, both the durational performances and the individual sounds of cars passing by, existed as an intervention on the landscape. It also figured the creator-Prince ultimately as the spectator silently watching her own creation. Of course, Honk for Justice also served as a reminder that performance is an expression of community care and connection.

C. Verzuz

This past spring semester, I taught a class at Boston University centered on African American theatre. Along the way, I invited in a variety of playwrights (via Zoom) to join us in discussion. Among them was Tarell McCraney, author of the play *Choir Boy* but probably still best known for the film *Moonlight*, based on one of his early plays. We talked about the challenges of live theatre in the pandemic and the explosion of streamed productions as well as the rise of Zoom theatre, essentially as a form of online readers' theatre. Our conversation turned to whether these online activities were adequate substitutes for the live event. McCraney shared his opinion that most Zoom theatre lacked a sense of urgency and couldn't quite command your attention. Quite simply, he stated (and I'm paraphrasing), if you feel as though you can walk away from the screen, perhaps to go to the bathroom or to the kitchen for a snack then it is missing that essential feature of liveness that separates theatre from film and television. McCraney suggested Verzuz, the online singing "battle" between rhythm & blues divas as an example of what a live event should be. With a hat tip to the esteemed playwright, I want to spotlight Verzuz, not Zoom theatre (with one notable exception that I will introduce later) as an example of the urgency of the live as well as its analogue the anxiety of the missed occurrence.

Verzuz, spelled with two "z"s rather than "s"s, is essentially an online, social media forum available via Instagram Live in which two musical artists take turn singing (or playing) their hits, often at the request of viewers who can submit their comments (viewable to all) via chat bubbles. Judy Rosen, writing for the *New York Times*, notes, "The title evokes a heavyweight bout, and the episodes unfold like a boxing match: Each round presents a track from each artist, with viewers encouraged to pick the victor on a song-by-song basis."¹⁹ Fans (slash), viewers (slash), audience members express their thoughts via chat bubbles—a single word or more of praise. It is probably the world's friendliest "battle" as the artists repeatedly express respect for one another

and, consistently, viewers share their appreciation for the virtuosity on display. [Video: Verzuz, Patti Labelle and Gladys Knight]

Verzuz is also a virtual Black community which revels in the experience of blackness for its own sake. Judy Rosen writes,

Nearly every artist to appear on Verzuz is Black, and the show makes no concessions to any other audience; non-Black viewers enter its virtual spaces as eavesdroppers on an in-group conversation. The point of these battles is not to choose winners, but to luxuriate in the glories of the Black pop canon, and the community forged by that body of music. The critic Craig Jenkins, writing about a matchup between Gladys Knight and Patti

LaBelle, [rendered a pithy verdict](#) that could be applied to the whole Verzuz enterprise:

“Blackness won.”

It is the virtual assembly, the gathering of hundreds of thousands of people, the majority of whom self-identify as Black, that contributes to Verzuz innovation in liveness. A battle is an event. It is church of a sort that happens at a specific time and place. It demands that you show up or, otherwise miss out, despite the fact that it may be recorded. The urgency of the live is your awareness of the presence of others—not just the featured performers but also other audience members with their chat bubble assertions of presence. Part of the power—the liveness—of the event comes from knowing that you and others, despite geographical distance, are sharing in the same moment, the same experience. Its liveness created a sense of proximity of being together despite the social distancing restrictions of a pandemic. This awareness of others is aided by the presence of familiar, recognizable celebrities, as audience members, whose posted thoughts added to the experience and thrill: *Michelle Obama and I are watching Gladys Knight and Patti Labelle*. Yes, it may be possible to watch the battle later (as a recording) but the glimmer of the live has faded because you are no longer watching it in time with others.

I want to separate Verzuz out from “event cinema” which has been extensively studied in connection with liveness. It is not akin to the film version of *Hamilton* or the opera and theatre live series (such as the National Theatre Live or the Metropolitan Opera Live). In those cases, the assumption is that the mediated viewers are vicariously (via the recording or live stream) gathered at a specific venue at a particular time. For example, we are transported to a theatre on a specific date (or set of dates) in New York City or London.²⁰ [Video: audio of opera intermission] In the case of Verzuz, the audience is the virtual audience. As a spectator, you join people who are geographically dispersed but imaginatively envision themselves being together—and, as a result, the result is a “live”, temporally co-present community structured not around the identity of the producer but rather with a desire simply to be together. And this is where the charge of the live emerges: to attend is to be a part of this imagined community comprised of disparately placed real people.

There are other explicitly live moments in Verzuz. Judy Rosen adds,

the show retains...a sense that unscripted weirdness may erupt at any moment. A battle between the dance-hall titans [Beenie Man and Bounty Killer](#), livestreamed from Jamaica, was interrupted by the local police. (“There are 500,000 people watching us right now from all over the world,” Beenie Man told them. “Do you want to be that guy?”) The R&B star [Ashanti was forced to stall when her adversary, Keyshia Cole, ran an hour late](#). The Wu-Tang Clan rappers [Ghostface Killah and Raekwon](#) finished off their battle singing and dancing to old disco hits.

Although its unscripted nature certainly leads to its in-the-moment spontaneity, I believe that Verzuz sense of liveness stems not from the unscripted events of the performers but in the (unscripted responses of the live audience. It is here that Verzuz offers a lesson for live theatre

emerging out of a pandemic. The presence of other spectators changes the event—even an event with a trajectory that is, by design, uncertain.

Also, Verzuz serves as a memory trigger. It invites memories of past live events. It resurrects the passed and reanimates the paused. Mikki Kendall, writing for NBC News offers,

If you are too offline to know what “Verzuz” is, or too young to understand why everybody has been raving about Patti LaBelle and Gladys Knight on social media this weekend, let me help you out (sort of). You missed one of the greatest, possibly defining, cultural events of the pandemic era.

For Kendall, it was a cultural event, a performance that served as a memory trigger. She writes,

Music weaves itself into our lives: it cements certain moments into our memories, evoking the smells, the feelings and even the flavors that were integral to the first time we heard a given song. I can’t tell you what was on top of the Billboard charts when I was 5 or 7 (or even 11) because even though Patti LaBelle’s and Gladys Knight’s works were technically songs for Gen X’s parents (or very cool grandparents), they also were the first music that many of us heard as kids.

She adds,

I still associate it with chores — that music playing on a Saturday morning meant it was time to get up and clean — but also with feeling loved, with dancing with the broom, with singing into a ladle, and sitting in the kitchen hearing the stories I wasn’t old enough to hear. When my grandmother passed away, I listened to Patti LaBelle, Dionne Warwick and Gladys Knight (along with Aretha Franklin and others) on a playlist whenever I wanted to remember that feeling of being a child in her kitchen; nothing else brought those memories back so fast. There’s something about the memories their music evokes

for people, especially my age, that can be both a shared experience and yet utterly unique.

With theatre studies, we refer to these moments or realizations as “ghosting,” often framed as how the live event is haunted by the past performances which we may or may not have witnessed. This is certainly a feature of Verzuz’s liveness. However, there is more. It stages actual live performances—Gladys Knight and Patti Labelle—alongside memories of their past performances (which is aided by the singers’ storytelling) but also as being connected to sets of individual memories, the soundtrack of individual lives. Verzuz calls forward to the present the past lives of people, the memories of being in the world with others across the years and circulates those memories of liveness alongside the experience of being with others for an event. There is a blurring or a slippage, as performance scholar Rebecca Schneider might say, that adds to the sensation of the live.

The dead live again. Memories of childhood imaginatively turn back the clock and replay again the live experience which gets overlaid on the present day live performance event. Patti Labelle sings live and alongside the viewer (slash) listener’s childhood memory of her voice on the radio. It is not a memory of a past set of performances but rather a variety of personally significant, unknowable performances that center at the shared site of embodied black experience. It is communal but also individual. Repeatable but not always the same. Anchored in the past but recurring in the present.

It is this idea of liveness entangled with blackness (and black performance) that excites me within our pandemic present. The crises of the live can best be described by the anxieties concerning shuttered theatres, masked (and metaphorically) silenced people, the loss of connection, touching, feeling through social distancing (and social isolation) core to any idea of community. Looking back on the past year, I propose that it is these performances related to

blackness that make explicit alternate strategies and alternative possibilities of the “live” in the face of these crises. We have seen how Black artists and their audiences have succeeded in a overcoming many (but obviously not all) of the challenges posed by the pandemic. I want to argue that they have restored and, perhaps, rehabilitated our sense of the live even in moments in which conventional theatre was not and could not happen. This was achieved through an entreaty to audiences to embrace an alternate look (and feel) for the live premised on the urgency of Black visibility (streaming *Pipeline*, street activism in Chicago, online song battles in Verzuz); the creation of events provoking a felt sense of immediacy (the need to respond to the murder of George Floyd, the sensation watching a performance in-time with others), and the prompt to situate oneself either physically or imaginatively in a community inspired by the performance itself.

I realize that my interest in the performance and experience of race, especially Blackness, may not be widely shared among today’s audience. With that in mind, I want to close by offering other, quite brief examples which I believe points to this moment in which the possibilities and interpretations of the “live” have been expanded (and, of course, tested) by the global pandemic. First, I have asserted that live performance is a state of mind, an imagined co-presence in time with others. I hope this is not controversial, especially since it is something that we are currently doing at this very moment. It is the assumption that stands at the center of video conferenced play readings (Zoom Theatre) but, most successfully, in audio or podcast theatre. I am partial to Ike Holter’s *I Hate it Here* (2021) which is an audio play that tackles the issue of systemic racism. Composed like an album, consisting of a series of audio tracks, the playwright leaves it up to his audience to decide (as one would with a conventional music album or even a book) how to engage it. In the language of music, do you play all or shuffle—and how does the experience change based on the individual audience member’s remix.

Second, I have contended that the “live” carries within it a sense of immediacy which can prompt a fear of missing out. In the course of the pandemic, there have been innumerable streamed productions which (because of contractual restrictions) could not be recorded. Comparable to a theatrical run, there were of limited duration. Although I have focused on the agency of the audience member to frame (to define) this sensation of “live,” I acknowledge that there are performances in which the agency, stage presence, charisma, or “it” (depending on your preferred phrase) of the individual actor can radically overwhelm the work itself and create that dynamic of immediacy and (perhaps—to mangle the English language—that sense of unmissability) as actor Shia LeBeouf did in the live reading of the screenplay of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* whose projected/performed/invented story world seems to exceed the confines of the Zoom box offered and transforms costars as amused audience members. Thanks to LaBeouf, *Fast Times* (as a reading) becomes an intensely live event, in part, because it seems so uncertain about what will come next. It is a improvisation upon a script, in a manner not unlike Verzuz and, of course, what we would normally expect to see within the theatre. Third (and finally), I have called attention to the ways that embedded within liveness is an invocation to community achieved through an appeal to memory and a looking back. The live revives. It gives breath, life back to George Floyd so that he can live again. It overlays the past and the present in Verzuz. As we head into the summer festival season, I am intrigued by the ways that that select theatre—and here I want to point to the Shaw Festival and Stratford Festivals in Ontario which were only an hour or two away from my childhood home—have embraced outdoor, tent performances as a way to respond to the pandemic. In this return to the outdoors, there is a reclamation of a theatre past premised on the idea that liveness is not about frames (whether they be the doors *into* a theatre or the box of a grid) but it is the felt experience of being with others. Ultimately, this is

what the live is. Certainly, it can be imagined (as I have suggested) but I think that we would all prefer to be together in time and in person. Thank you.

- 1- This framing of liveness should be familiar; see Peter Brook's often quoted description in *The Empty Stage* or even more popularly Edwin Wilson's definition in *The Theatre Experience* (13th edition). New York: McGraw Hill 2015: "Live theatre: The performance of a dramatic event by a group of actors in the presence of their counterparts, the audience members" (p. 7).
- 2- Catherine Y. Kim, Daniel J. Losen, and Damon T. Hewitt, *The School-to-Prison Pipeline: Structuring Legal Reform* (New York: NYU Press, 2010): 4.
- 3- Ed Siegel, "'Pipeline' Tries To Find Space For The Anger Of Young Black Men At Central Square Theater," *WBUR The Artery*, 11 March 2020.
<https://www.wbur.org/artery/2020/03/11/pipeline-nora-central-square-theater-review>
- 4- Bill Marx, "Pipeline: A Didactic Excursion," *ArtsFuse*, 11 March 2020.
<https://artsfuse.org/197568/theater-review-pipeline-a-didactic-excursion/>
- 5- Jocelyn Prince HJC Interview (February 6, 2021), unpublished.
- 6- Assata Shakur, "To My People" (letter, July 4, 1973); www.assatashakur.org/mypeople.htm
- 7- Thom Cox HJC Interview (February 6, 2021), unpublished.
- 8- Sunny Serres HJC Interview (February 6, 2021), unpublished.
- 9- Madison Kamp HJC Interview (February 6, 2021), unpublished.
- 10- Nick Blumberg, 'Chicago Tonight' in Your Neighborhood: Lincoln Square," July 9, 2020.
<https://news.wttw.com/2020/07/09/chicago-tonight-your-neighborhood-lincoln-square>
- 11- "With more protests, more gun violence and more coronavirus cases, Chicago is a city on edge," *Washington Post*, July 26, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/national/with-more-protests-more-gun-violence-and-more-coronavirus-cases-chicago-is-a-city-on-edge/2020/07/26/615e904f-29ab-4c98-818f-0e46c265b0de_video.html
- 12- Kerry Reid, "A manifesto, a performance art protest, and the return of (some) live theater," *Chicago Reader*, July 16, 2020.
- 13- Quoted in "With more protests."
- 14- Jordan Schildcrout, "Envisioning Queer Liberation in Doric Wilson's Street Theater," *Modern Drama*, 61.1 (2018): 95.
- 15- Cox.
- 16- Harry J. Elam, Jr., *Taking it to the Streets* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997): 25.
- 17- James Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998): 2.
- 18- Shiela Radford Hill, "Foreword," in *The Dignity of Resistance*, eds. Roberta M. Feldman and Susan Stall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014): xiv.
- 19- Jody Rosen, "Verzuz Is One of the Least Toxic Places Online. Here's Why.," 22 April 2021. *New York Times*
- 20- See Margaret Jane Kidnie, "The Stratford Festival of Canada: Mental Tricks and Archival Documents in the Age of NT Live." some point an illusion of simultaneity in the context of delay becomes impossible to sustain. Cochrane and Bonner note, for example, that NTLive's on screen mentions of liveness prompt 'wry laughter' among cinema audiences in Australia, where the first viewing of the recording can be weeks after the originating performance. To the extent, though, that delayed screenings work, it seems that the performance recording sometimes has enough

temporal proximity to the event to ‘enliven’ the experience of watching filmed live theatre. In situations of delay, in other words, some spectators seem able to distinguish between a performance that is ‘nearly now’ as opposed to ‘already gone.’ This is perhaps the context in which the cinematic community—the spectators in the same cinema with whom one watches a theatrical performance—becomes a defining factor in the experience.