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OPINION

We need action to accompany art

The 35-foot tall letters were formed in stark marigold paint against the dark gray speckled pavement. Though bold in color, the action itself is not bold.

By **Brandi Summers** Updated June 11, 2020, 3:08 a.m.



People walk down 16th street after volunteers painted "Black Lives Matter" on the street near the White House. TASOS KATOPODIS/GETTY

Amid global protests against police brutality, white supremacy, and the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, [Tony McDade](#), and other Black Americans, Washington, D.C., Mayor Muriel Bowser painted the length of two blocks along 16th

Street NW, steps from the Trump White House, with three words: BLACK LIVES MATTER.

It is visually stunning: The 35-foot tall letters were formed in stark marigold paint against the dark-gray speckled pavement, framed by stone buildings and surrounded by vibrant green trees. Though bold in color, the action itself is not bold. The mayor also renamed part of the street “Black Lives Matter Plaza.” Bowser later explained on [MSNBC’s Morning Joe](#) to host Jonathan Capehart that she was directly responding to President Trump, with whom she had exchanged a barrage of taunts via Twitter. “The Black Lives Matter mural is a representation of an expression of our saying no, but also identifying and claiming a part of our city that had been taken over by federal forces,” Bowser said.



Mayor Muriel Bowser

@MayorBowser

It has been a long time coming, but I know. I know—change will come.



51.7K 7:29 PM - Jun 5, 2020 · Washington, DC

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Still and moving images of the mural gained immediate traction, with many people applauding Bowser's move as a perfect way to troll Trump. The popularity of the mural has attracted so much attention and support that cities including [Raleigh](#), N.C., [Oakland](#), Calif., and [Sacramento](#) have unveiled similar public protest art scrawled across their streets.

Easily read as a valiant effort to impart change, gestures like Bowser's mural — and that of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi kneeling, with Black and other white [congressional Democrats, while wearing kente cloth stoles draped over their shoulders](#) — superficially stylize Blackness rather than respond to Black demands for justice. These gestures rely on what I call Black aesthetic emplacement, which captures how Blackness has largely gone from evoking a set of political commitments, rooted in the preservation of Black life, to aesthetic representations in the form of words, objects, and images. Black aesthetic emplacement is evidenced in the way representations of Blackness (and Black people) are used by politicians, developers, and corporations to achieve their social, political, and economic interests. For Bowser, the painted street was used to make a coherent argument for D.C. statehood. For the Democrats on Capitol Hill, they were trying to signal that they understand the struggle in streets across the country.



On Monday, Democratic lawmakers took a knee to observe a moment of silence on Capitol Hill for George Floyd and other victims of police brutality. BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Black aesthetic emplacement obscures the displacement and exclusion that is caused by excessive policing, predatory lending, evictions, and increased tax burdens, issues that protestors in Washington, and other cities around the world are fighting against. The mural can't hide the Bowser administration's political commitments that have contributed to the continuing displacement of Black residents from Washington while at the same time reinforcing the unequal conditions longtime Black residents continue to face. Bowser's proposed increase to the police budget by \$45 million, and plans to build a [\\$500 million new jail](#), are oppositional to the demands of the Black Lives Matter Global Network, geared toward greater investment in communities, not policing.

Bowser claimed that the production and placement of the mural was "to make it a place for healing, strategizing, protest, and redress," but this street art project offers a purely symbolic, aesthetic gesture that is completely disconnected from the goals of the Black

Lives Matter movement. The mural depoliticizes and decontextualizes important histories of Black resistance and activism.

In the grand tradition of other powerbrokers evading accountability for harming Black lives, Bowser is co-opting the language of the struggle against Trump rather than articulating plans to eradicate the structural imbalances that plague her city. She is joined by city and state leaders in places like New York City, Chicago, and Oakland who make impassioned speeches about the importance of Black life while at the same time enforcing curfews and allowing law enforcement officers to harm protestors exercising their First Amendment rights.

Black aesthetic emplacement can be found all over the country. You see it in the branding of cities, where developers and marketers superficially draw on Black urban history as they landmark quarters that are, or used to be, inhabited by Black and brown residents, like Roxbury in Boston, Bayview Hunters Point in San Francisco, Pilsen in Chicago, and Washington's Shaw neighborhood.

Black aesthetic emplacement, in this moment, enables public figures to rebrand themselves as supportive of and aligned with the interests of Black people. It's quite seductive and very dangerous.

As the world mourns the violent demise of Black men and women at the hands of law enforcement, what the protests are teaching us is that empty acts of virtue aren't enough unless they are coupled with policies and practices that can lead to lasting, systemic change. We don't know yet how the coronavirus pandemic and economic downturn will affect the population in the long term, but what we do know is that Black people will be on the losing end and will always need action to accompany art.

Brandi T. Summers is an assistant professor of Geography and Global Metropolitan Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and the author of ["Black in Place: The Spatial Aesthetics of Race in a Post-Chocolate City."](#)

[Spatial restrictions of race in a not-so-diverse city.](#)

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