

**Testimony of Melody Capote, Executive Director
Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute
before the
City Council Committee on
Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup
Relations October 20, 2020**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the City Council. My name is Melody Capote, Executive Director of the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute.

The very first thing that I want you to know is that **Black Lives Matter** and that, Ladies and Gentlemen, **I Still Can't Breathe**.

I appeared before you in June and told you **I can't breathe** and to my great embarrassment, nothing was done.

Well, I still can't breathe because, after George Floyd's murder, more of my relatives have been dealt the ultimate punishment for simply *Living While Black*. I ask you this: If Breonna Taylor were your daughter, would you be able to breathe?

I still can't breathe because I still have to have "*the talk*" with my Black son warning of death by law enforcement, each time he walks out our front door.

I still can't breathe when the City Council and the administration speak about the special role of arts and culture in healing a community whose culture has been stolen from them only to find that the stolen culture is on display somewhere on 5th Avenue. This is the very definition of systemic, inequitable funding that favors European culture contractors as opposed to authentic representatives of the African Diaspora who are forced to fight for nickels and dimes while the folding money is passed out downtown.

I still can't breathe when the Cultural Institutions Group (CIG) grantees get the lion's share of arts & culture funding and then call me on the side for tips on how they can address Black Lives Matter in a way that will avoid a protest but not upset the apple cart.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not opposed to CIG funding. I'm opposed to the criteria created for CIG funding eligibility. The City gives valuable real estate to predominantly White institutions and, in exchange for their willingness to preserve Eurocentric values, they get priority funding to maintain the status quo.

When **Black Lives Matter** made their legitimate demands on the Arts & Culture community to return the culture misappropriated from the Black and Brown

community, what did these “major” institutions do? Nothing! Oh, that’s not fair, some published statement of solidarity in the form of a web page letter which said how much they supported the movement but, in between the lines, was saying “please don’t picket our institution.”

Here’s what we did:

- Immediately after the murder of George Floyd, we asked the Arts & Culture community to change their home page to black with the phrase “I Can’t Breathe” on it for three days of respectful contemplation. Many small arts and culture organizations did exactly that. Even funders followed suit. I believe only two CIG grantees joined the campaign. The goal of the campaign was to stimulate an answer to the question, “what do we do on day four?”
- What *we* did after day four was to conduct a series of workshops on developing an anti-racist arts & culture organization. To date, we have trained 100 arts & culture executives representing 60 organizations and about 80% were White organizations and the remainder organizations of color. And, by last count, only two (2) CIG grantees participated in the training.

So, I challenge you to step up to the plate and create a ***Black Lives Matter Culture Initiative*** described below. ***Doing nothing is unacceptable.*** Gathering testimony that gathers dust is worse than nothing. It is an insult.

To honor George Floyd and the other martyrs in our community, I ask that:

DCLA establish a special capacity building fund for organizations of color with a budget of under \$5 million who will be required to use their capacity expansion grant to address racial and social injustice;

DCLA establish two artists incubators which will train artists of color to provide arts & culture services using the new digital platforms and assist artists to develop entrepreneurial ventures through culturally competent technical assistance;

DCLA fund, on a pilot basis, the Institute for Racial and Social Justice for Arts and Culture in anticipation of a competitive RFP after completion and evaluation of the pilot;

Mr. Chairman and committee members, our community needs you, not just to recognize

the power of arts and culture to heal and unify our community, but more importantly, to put your money where your words are. I close with a new phrase worthy of consideration: collaborative reimagining. If you want to do this work, don't ask us to testify. Ask us to sit at the table as equal partners.

Thank you for your time. And yes, **Black Lives Do Matter**.

###