In Defense of Black Life: 
Community Altar Building 
Toolkit
In 2016, Black Feminist Future led a call to action to Defend Black Womanhood in response to police murders of Black women (cis and trans) and girls. Twenty six community altars were built across the country to honor our dead and commit to fighting for the living. In 2020, we are raising the call as a part of The Movement for Black Lives In Defense of Black Life Week of Action June 1st- June 5th, to participate in community altar building across the country. While we have identified Thursday June 4th as a day of action, we welcome your participation on any day that you and your community can find time to do this activity together.

In this toolkit you will find info on:

- In Defense of Black Life Week of Action
- Why Altars?
- Keeping safe while being together
- Where, when and how to build altars
- The supplies for altar building
A message from the Movement for Black Lives

We are living testaments to a lineage of resistance. We are products of slave rebellions, uprisings against state sanctioned violence, and organizing. When we are in the streets- digitally or physically-are honoring our ancestors who declared unapologetically that Black Lives Matter.

Our lives are proof that resistance matters. We at the Movement For Black Lives believe that it is our mandate, in a moment where the police and vigilantes have increased their terror, that we make a clear and proud commitment to be in Defense of Black Lives.

Yesterday thousands of us gathered online to hear from resisters on the ground and receive direction for how we can join the fight. Here is a beautiful recap of the powerful conversation.

We know that after another night of rebellions across the country, and intense state repression in almost every major city, our communities are angry, and tender. The national guard has been deployed across the country and curfews have swept the nation. Last night was for so many people another example of the exacting terror inflicted at the hands of police and military.

The Movement For Black Lives, and organizers from across the country, invite you to rise up with us and say no more! We are calling for a week of action June 1st to 5th In Defense of Black Lives. This is an opportunity to uplift and fight alongside those turning up in the streets and on the airwaves.
WHY ALTARS?

As descendants of Afrika, particularly West Afrika, altars have always been an important part of our culture in Black America. Often kept in secret, disguised or hidden in the woods because in many places our cultures were outlawed and wiped out. The altar represents different things to different folks and traditions: the seat of the ancestors; the place of solace, ritual and magic-making; a religious symbol; a reminder of those who left us too soon.

It's impossible in this brief toolkit to give information on the thousands of Afrikan cultures and the significance of altars within them. So we won't even try! However, please do your research to utilize traditions in a respectful manner.

Examples:

- Pouring libations and saying the names of those who have gone before us.
- Placing a white cloth to honor the purity of the soul.
- Ringing a bell.
- Burning an herb such such as sage, palo santo or impepho.

STAYING SAFE WHILE BEING TOGETHER

We are also living during a COVID pandemic that is threatening the health and wellness of Black people. We value your Black life and want you and your community to be safe while building an altar together. In order to be safe we ask that participants:

- Practice social distancing (avoid hugging, touching, etc.)
- Wear mask and gloves
- Have hand sanitizers or some way to sanitize your hands
- If you are not feeling well, please do not attend an altar build

If you are organizing an altar build, Black Feminist Future may be able to send you some masks, gloves, and sanitizer. Email paris@blackfeministfuture.org by Tuesday June 2nd to receive the supplies.
WHEN

We will be building our altars Thursday June 4th with day and time will be determined by the local organizers. Choose a time that works for you and folks in your community. You can build an altar in your home but we invite you to make this a public altar that will take up space and can allow for community participation. There can be multiple altars and gatherings in many different spaces. We will use Facebook and Instagram to share info about altar locations happening across the country. If possible, we will also try to send masks and gloves to support social distancing and our collective health during this time.

LOCATION

- When thinking about possible locations for your altar you may want to consider the following prompts to help brainstorm ideas.
- A sight of violence that you want to reclaim and restore.
- An area of community importance or significance
- An area you want to reclaim
- An area that will be heavily trafficked by folks in the neighborhood so people can more easily plug in
- The location can be inside or outside

THE FEEL

Each location should create a space that makes sense to them. One location may be jubilant and celebratory. Another location one of grief and sadness. Most importantly, create a space for community building and togetherness.
Here is an example of a community built altar for a meeting.

Here is an example of a community altar.
Potential Roles to be filled for the event

Roles:

- Safety team
- Facilitators/Coordinators
- Someone to greet folks as they arrive
- Folks who are able to do a vibe check and check in with folks
- Documentation
- Media contact
- Clean up crew

Non Altar Items that you might need:

- Drums/Music/Amplification
- Supplies for folks to create pieces for the altar
- Snacks and water

ALTAR SUPPLIES

- Photos of those who have passed
- Candles
- Fabric
- Flowers
- Fruit
- Water and/or Strong Drink (alcohol as offering to the ancestors)
- Sage, frankincense, copal, etc
- Posters and artwork
- Supplies for people to add names to the altar- paper, markers

Calling on spiritual leaders - think about asking a knowledgeable elder or spiritual teacher to be present. Do not be discouraged if this is not available in your area. This may be an opportunity to build new connections by reaching out to others.
Say Her Name: Black Women We Have Lost

For the Defend Black Womanhood altars, we said the names of Black women and girls who we have lost at vigils and events. You may also want to do this at the altar. After saying each name you could either say- Ashe, ring a bell, or say her name.

[Here is a link to Black women and girls murdered by state violence](#). This list is not exhaustive so please feel free to include additional names and has not been updated since 2015.

It has been difficult to find a list of all Black people killed by the police but this graphic has a majority of the names from the last 10 years.

- ERIC GARNER
- JOHN CRAWFORD III
- MICHAEL BROWN
- EZELL FORD
- DANTE PARKER
- MICHELLE CUSSEAX
- LAQUAN MCDONALD
- GEORGE MANN
- TANISHA ANDERSON
- AKAI GURLEY
- TAMIR RICE
- RUMAIN BRISBON
- JERAME REID
- MATTHEW AJIBADE
- FRANK SMART
- NATASHA MCKENNA
- TONY ROBINSON
- ANTHONY HILL
- MYA HALL
- PHILLIP WHITE
- ERIC HARRIS
- WALTER SCOTT
- WILLIAM CHAPMAN II
- ALEXIA CHRISTIAN
- BRENDON GLENN
- VICTOR MANUEL LAROSA
- JONATHAN SANDERS
- FREDDIE BLUE
- JOSEPH MANN
- SALVADO ELLSWOOD
- SANDRA BLAND
- ALBERT JOSEPH DAVIS
- DARRIUS STEWART
- BILLY RAY DAVIS
- SAMUEL DUBOSE
- MICHAEL SABBIE
- BRIAN KEITH DAY
- CHRISTIAN TAYLOR
- TROY ROBINSON
- ASSHAMS PHAROAH MANLEY
- FELIX KUMI
- KEITH HARRISON MCLEOD
- JUNIOR PROSPER
- LAMONTE JONES
- PATRICK BROWN
- DOMINIC HUTCHINSON
- ANTHONY ASHFORD
- ALONZO SMITH
- TYREE CRAWFORD
- INDIA KAGER
- LA'VANTE BIGGS
- MICHAEL LEE MARSHALL
- JAMAR CLARK
- RICHARD PERKINS
- NATHANIEL HARRIS PICKETT
- BENNI LEE TIGNOR
- MIGUEL ESPINAL
- MICHAEL NOEL
- KEVIN MATTHEWS
- BETTIE JONES
- QUINTONIO LEGRIER
- KEITH CHILDRESS JR.
- JANET WILSON
- RANDY NELSON
- ANTRONIE SCOTT
- WENDELL CELESTINE
- DAVID JOSEPH
- CALIN ROQUEMORE
- DYZHAWN PERKINS
- CHRISTOPHER DAVIS
- MARCO LOUD
- PETER GAINES
- TORREY ROBINSON
- DARIUS ROBINSON
- KEVIN HICKS
- MARY TRUZILLO
- DEMARCUS SEMER
- WILLIE TILLMAN
- TERRILL THOMAS
- SYLVILLE SMITH
- ALTON STERLING
- PHILANDO CASTILE
- TERENCE CRUTCHER
- PAUL O'NEAL
- ALTERIA WOODS
- JORDAN EDWARDS
- AARON BAILEY
- RONELL FOSTER
- STEPHON CLARK
- ANTWON ROSE II
- BOTHAM JEAN
- PAMELA TURNER
- DOMINIQUE CLAYTON
- ATATIANA JEFFERSON
- CHRISTOPHER WHITFIELD
- CHRISTOPHER MCCORVEY
- ERIC REASON
- MICHAEL LORENZO DEAN
- BREONNA TAYLOR

G E O R G E F L O Y D

HOW TO HOLD SPACE FOR OTHERS

Grief, sadness and rage in addition to other emotions may come up during your event.

Expressing emotion is an important part of the process in this altar movement. If possible, call on people in your community who are trained to hold this space. Some things to consider:
Black folks often feel that we have to suppress our rage to survive in this society. It is important that folks feel this is a safe space to express.

Healing and grief go through several stages. It may be helpful to remind people that what they may be feeling is normal. Everyone processes differently.

If someone needs support beyond what you are able to offer, please refer them to a local resource such as a spiritual or crisis center.

**SHARED MESSAGE**

This is an opportunity to amplify and using a shared message can help. Please feel free to create your own Facebook event for your local event and use the text and image. Use the hashtags #DefendBlackLife #DefundThePolice#DefendBlackWomanhood #SayHerName to show unity in what is happening across the country.

**SOCIAL MEDIA**

We can use social media to increase the visibility of state violence against Black people. Please take pictures of your altars and tag using the hashtag #DefendBlackLife. Post to your Facebook Event page. Do a live streaming of your altar building. Use Instagram. Do all the things. And make sure you tag the local activists and organizations doing work on the ground on this issue.

**RESOURCES**

Work on the intersection of Black women and girls and state violence has been happening for decades. This list is not exhaustive but a starting point. Please email blackfeministfuture@gmail.com to include more resources.

- [INCITE Women of Color Against Violence](#)
- [#SayHerName: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women](#)
- [National Day of Action: #JusticeForRekia](#)
- [In Defense of Korryn Gaines, Black Women and Our Children](#)