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A woman looks at a mural showing the face of George Floyd, an unarmed black man who died after a white policeman knelt on his neck during an arrest in the US, painted on a section of Israel's controversial separation barrier in the city of Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank on June 10, 2020, with text reading "I can't breathe, I want justice not O2".—AFP

## Oscars to draw up diversity rules for nominees

Hollywood's motion picture academy will introduce new eligibility rules to boost diversity among Oscars nominees under a raft of new measures announced Friday. The move comes after years of criticism over a lack of diversity among the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' members, and among the Oscar nominees and winners they select. "To ensure more diverse representation," a new task force will be set up "to develop and implement new representation and inclusion standards for Oscars eligibility," the organization said in a statement. The measures will not affect films in contention this year. The Academy did not give any details about the new rules, but said the changes are intended to "encourage equitable hiring practices and representation on and off screen."

It will also host a series of panel discussions on diversity, including a talk hosted by Academy governor Whoopi Goldberg on "the lasting impact of racist tropes and harmful stereotypes in Hollywood films."

The changes were announced following mass anti-racism protests that have swept the country since the killing of George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis on May 25. Since 2015 and the #OscarsSoWhite campaign, the Academy has made concerted efforts to broaden its membership.



In this file photo an Oscars statue is displayed on the red carpet area on the eve of the 92nd Oscars ceremony at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California.—AFP

The annual intake of new members reached 50 percent female for the first time in 2019, while non-white membership has doubled in five years. But less than one-third admitted were people of color. "To truly meet this moment, we must recognize how much more needs to be done, and we must listen, learn, embrace the challenge, and hold ourselves and our community accountable," said Academy President David Rubin.—AFP

## Fight the Power: The soundtrack of US anti-racism protests

Anti-racism protesters have rolled out a creative batch of chants to soundtrack the ongoing US demonstrations, but both fresh music and timeless classics are also front and center. Rapper YG's recently released "FTP"—F\*\*\* The Police—has become a de-facto anthem for the thousands of people pouring into the streets, whose demands include sweeping reforms of law enforcement after the latest death in custody of an unarmed black man, George Floyd. Spotify's "Black Lives Matter" playlist—a 66-track song list that includes justice-minded hits from James Brown, Killer Mike, Nina Simone, N.W.A, Childish Gambino, Beyonce and Kendrick Lamar—has won over nearly one million subscribers.

And the streaming platform's daily "Viral 50" list has seen classics like Gil Scott Heron's "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised"—a spoken-word song from 1970 whose title came from a slogan used by US Black Power movements—break into the top 10. Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" has also seen a resurgence. The Prince estate meanwhile released a new video centered on police brutality for the late artist's song "Baltimore," which he originally wrote and released in 2015 following the death in police custody of Freddie Gray, who was black. Singer Trey Songz released the gospel-tinged song "2020 Riots: How Many Times," in response to the recent wave of protests, while folk and soul singer Leon Bridges released "Sweetener," a meditation on racism.

"The death of George Floyd was the straw that broke the camel's back for me," Bridges, who was born in Texas, posted. "I have been numb for too long, calloused when it came to the issues of police brutality," he said. "It was the first time I wept for a man I never met. I am George Floyd, my brothers are George Floyd, and my sisters are George Floyd. I cannot and will not be silent any longer."

For Fredara Hadley, an ethnomusicology professor at the Juilliard School, the black experience has long been the primary driver behind protest music in the US, from abolitionists latching on to spirituals to the 1960s Civil Rights movement powered by jazz, rock, soul and R&B. "Black music and black ambitions were allowed to occupy spaces that... the general black population could not," she said. "It served as an ambassador and avatar of blackness in complicated kinds of ways." "You had those musicians writing music that directly responded to and was engaged with whatever was happening in the movement."—AFP



## A World Redrawn: Novelist says Syrians will remain unheard

The novel coronavirus pandemic briefly gave Syrians a sense of belonging to the rest of the world after years of isolating war, Syrian author Khaled Khalifa said. But the international community is too busy to look their way and the planet will continue to be as barbaric as ever, with no lessons on the value of nature learnt, said the award-winning writer of the novel "No Knives in the Kitchens of this City". Khalifa spoke to AFP in his home in the Syrian capital Damascus, where the government has announced 144 cases of the COVID-19 disease and six deaths in areas it controls.

### What has the virus meant for Syrians?

"For years during the war, Syrians were preoccupied with their limited world, a world of daily death. But today their tragedy has become part of humankind's as a whole. They shared in the meaning of fear and death with the rest of the world. Today their fear has become communal, shared with others. It's probably the first time that they feel they are part of humankind. But despite this, we have remained on the margins and our problems interest no one. The world is too busy with the coronavirus to hear Syrians. Tomorrow, there will be other reasons for it to be busy and unable to hear us. Nothing will change and the war will continue."

### What is a virus in war?

"Syrians are those to least fear the coronavirus because they have been, and continue to be, bogged down in death, but... the virus has compounded the difficulties of their daily lives. All burning issues in Syria have remained (burning issues) during the pandemic and will afterwards. We live in a tunnel of perpetual waiting. One cannot compare the coronavirus to war, as it belittles (the suffering of) millions of human beings. We are speaking of a huge human tragedy, 10 years of hardship for a huge group of human beings. What has happened in Syria remains unique in its production of collective suffering."

### What will the world look like afterwards?

"The world will remain just as barbaric as before the battle against COVID-19 and become even more brutal. It will not change or learn from this lesson that came as final warning that we cannot defy nature. In the battle against coronavirus, nature is not an enemy but the one attacked. All that it does is try to defend itself. The attacker are the large companies abandoning all principles in the quest of profit. The third party afflicted along with nature are people who would like life to be more humane."

### Who will win this battle?

"Some people say the conflict will intensify in the markets with even greater abandon of values and even more encroachment on nature. In realistic stories, the good never prevails, it's always evil that wins in the end. But this time we can't let it, because it's clear this will be a last stand. For 30 years, we have not heard a politician in the world say: 'These are our principles.' They all say: 'These are our interests.' We need to produce new values to preserve humaneness, adapted to all humanity."



Writer Khaled Khalifa speaks during an interview with AFP at his home in the Syrian capital Damascus.—AFP

### How has the pandemic affected you?

"The coronavirus allowed me to give wider rein to my imagination. Years ago when I wanted to write something very imaginative, I was scared no one would believe it. But now everything will be easy to believe because what has happened was once unimaginable. I think hundreds of screenwriters are thinking of making films about the coronavirus. But the virus in Syria is different to the virus in America. Even if it's the same illness, its social consequences are totally different. The coronavirus forced me to think more and ask myself questions we still have not answered. How did these humans become so selfish? Why is there all this production and waste of resources today? Why is there no justice? Why are murderers living on, protected by bank owners and large companies? Are we able to build a more humane, less criminal future?"—AFP



Tour guide Mike Anderson takes visitors on a 'plague walk', taking them around sites in Stockholm's old town related to pandemics of the plague in the 14th and 18th century, and an outbreak of cholera that hit the city in the mid-19th century.—AFP photos

## Stockholm guide offers COVID-weary Swedes a tour of pandemics past

With tourists confined at home and Stockholmers avoiding crowds, a guide is trying to boost business with tours of the city's previous pandemics, from the black death to cholera outbreaks. On a sunny Saturday, Mike Anderson led a group of history buffs on a 'Plague Walk' through Stockholm's Old Town, pausing by churches and in the shadows of narrow orange and yellow houses that line the streets to point out how the city was marked by pandemics past. "I think it's quite interesting when you take things that happen today and connect it to history and see people have been through this before," said Anderson, 46.

Dressed in a long, rough cotton shirt over his clothes—along with a long, beaked mask, his costume for the tour—Anderson led the group through the cobbled streets. Four friends had dressed in black for the occasion, one of whom had fashioned a repli-

ca of a mask worn by plague doctors in the Middle Ages from a paper bag, featuring a long beak and narrow eye holes. They listened as Anderson took them back to the outbreak of bubonic plague that wracked the country in the 1350s, killing up to one third of its population.

Further on, they stopped in shaded churchyards to hear stories about a plague that swept through Sweden and the Baltic region in the 1710s and an outbreak of cholera in the mid-19th century. One visitor was unsure what parallels to draw with today's coronavirus, but glad of the afternoon out. "I had studied a bit before, but there was a lot of new things" in the tour, 27-year-old Stockholm resident Vera said. "It was exciting," she added, holding the makeshift plague mask she had brought along.

The group listened to Anderson as he used a series of props to illustrate his tales, occasionally run-

ning ahead and leaping out to surprise the group, as the streets of the normally bustling Old Town were almost empty. Anderson's business dropped off as concerns over the novel coronavirus mounted and governments imposed measures to prevent the virus's spread from February onwards. Sweden avoided a full lockdown but gatherings of more than 50 people were banned as the virus spread. Sweden has reported nearly 5,000 deaths from the virus.

As the number of bookings for his Old Town 'ghost walks' dropped, Andersson came up with the new idea as "kind of a survival instinct". He now plans to offer the tour more regularly and hopes it might help Swedes face the current pandemic without panicking, as well as some relief. "Most of all, I want them to have entertainment for one hour," he said.—AFP