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I Can Breathe

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I Can Breathe

Cover Page Footnote

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I Can Breathe

For many college professors, Covid-19 prompted an abrupt shift to online learning. Colleagues scrambled to plan the rest of the spring semester as the transition's ambiguity led to anxiety and frustration. I, on the other hand, breathed a sigh of relief. A few days before the stay-at-home order went into place, I was the victim of a hate crime on campus. Someone believes that I am a nigger and felt compelled to let me know by vandalizing my car. After nearly a decade of university employment, I felt comfortable in my surroundings, perhaps a bit too comfortable. As one of the few Black faculty members on campus, I rarely blend in, and many people tend to know of or recognize me well before I remember them. As a Black woman in America, I am not foolish enough to believe that I could escape the impact of systemic racism, implicit bias, or even the distrustful looks of students, uncertain about how to respond to their first Black professor. However, I suppose I wanted to believe that explicit racism would not occur in my day-to-day professional environment.

In her book, *What I Know for Sure*, Oprah Winfrey discusses the impact of Jesse Jackson's 1969 speech and how hearing it changed the way she sees life. The speech, which focused on earlier generations of Black Americans' sacrifices, admonished Winfrey and her peers to be *excellent*. In the book, Winfrey writes that Jackson asserted, "Excellence is the best deterrent to racism. Therefore, be excellent."¹ Like Winfrey, my parents were raised in the Jim Crow South; still, they held onto a similar narrative, believing that excellence would change their children's life trajectory. Born and raised in Clarendon County, South Carolina, black codes overtly limited my mother's educational opportunities. Equally challenging, my grandparents only allowed their children to attend school when it did not interfere with farming.

Nevertheless, my mother and a few of her sisters promised each other and themselves that no matter how difficult the journey, they would graduate from high school. After years of protesting educational inequality, Clarendon County, as a part of *Brown v. Board of Education*, led the charge in changing the face of education across the country and cemented my mother's belief that her children would be academically excellent. My mother and her sisters recognized that education was the salient contributor to improving their and their offspring's quality of life; as such, these brave women established the foundation upon which I and others in my family now stand.

¹ Oprah Winfrey. *What I Know for Sure*. (New York, NY: Flatiron, 2014).

Just 60 miles down the road from my mother, my father grew up in Plantersville, South Carolina, an all-Black town inhabited by Gullah Geechee² descendants in Georgetown County. Being raised in a self-sustaining all-Black community created a certain security level, self-confidence, and normalcy that was uncommon for Blacks in the Jim Crow South. Whiteness was not the measure of acceptability in Plantersville. The community used its cultural identity to set its rules, roles, and norms. In Plantersville, my dark complexion is not an oddity. I am not cute for a "dark-skinned" girl. I am beautiful because of, not despite, the deep, rich, melanin complexion that adorns my skin and the skin of my family. In Plantersville, we are the norm. We set the standard rather than function as an aberration of mainstream society.

Through meaning-making practices such as stories, themes, and rituals, I learned where I come from and how I fit both individually and collectively within my family histories.³ My family histories inform the way I understand the world. On the one hand, I carry my mother's dogged pursuit of excellence, even in unwelcoming environments. On the other, I manifest my father's innate assumption that I belong wherever I decide that I belong. I earned my degrees. I taught, researched, and served my way into tenure and promotion. I paid my dues, and I decided that I belong in every room I enter. Stories of overcoming adversity were commonplace during my adolescence. My family created a narrative that promoted perseverance, discipline, and respectability. They taught me that character, one of the few things a person can control, matters.

Be that as it may, the perpetrator still lurked in the shadows, intent on reminding me that excellence in life is not enough to escape racism. Exiting my car, I walked across the parking lot and entered the academic building, unaware that someone was watching me. As the campus community prepared for spring break, the perpetrator approached my car and brazenly dragged their fingers across the hood, bumper, and sides of my car, repeatedly inscribing the word "nigger" on its surface along with caustic images of penises and swastikas. "It is just in the dirt – no *real* damage," I try to convince myself. But, in just a few short moments, one traumatic incident severely diminished my sense of safety and connectivity to my professional home.

There is *real* damage.

A few days later, the university released a statement that we would move to remote learning, and I *exhaled*. Anxious colleagues sent text messages and e-mails back and

² Descendants of enslaved Africans who lived in isolation along the rice coast and retained African traditions, customs, and created their own language.

³ Lynn Turner & Richard West. *Perspectives on Family Communication* 5th Edition. (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 2018).

forth as Covid-19 discussions dominated university communications. I, on the other hand, was elated. I sashayed around my house in sweatpants and a blouse, swiftly removing my hair bonnet a few minutes before each synchronous class meeting.

I was managing.

Then another unarmed Black person was killed, and for some reason, this time, the world responded. I struggled to reckon my small *it is just in the dirt* experience with the global display of the reckless treatment and destruction of Black bodies. Still, I recognize it is the same racist system that created an environment that allows these insidious behaviors to occur. The same system that allows these acts to be disturbing for society but inconsequential for many perpetrators. In the article "Three Words. 70 Cases. The Tragic History of 'I Can't Breathe,'"⁴ authors interrogate the problematic circumstances that led to the death of 70 people. *I Can't Breathe* were the last words of Eric Garner, an unarmed Black man killed in 2014 after being placed in a chokehold. Over the last decade, the phrase became a rallying cry, a plea for humanity to end the suffocating assault on Black existence.

During the stay-at-home order, I bathed in the frustration, disgust, and despair that can accompany being Black in America. In the quiet moments, I allowed myself to sit with the pain and to question where my loyalties should lie. For most of my life, I bought into the narrative that being born Black meant that I must work twice as hard and be twice as good at pursuing my professional goals. I also believed this 'twice as hard, twice as good' ideology honored the sacrifices of those who came before me.

In *Lillian Horace and the Respectable Black Woman*, the authors unpack the respectable Black woman's public role during the Jim Crow era. For many, the heroine subscribes to pushing back against racist stereotypes by improving one's standing in life and, in effect, strengthening the Black community. Many of these women were schoolteachers, tasked with shepherding generations of Black children. They were educational activists, using their affiliations to increase opportunities for and within the Black community. Still, people also used Black respectability to appease racists by offering a non-threatening, palatable representation of the Black woman.

⁴ Mike Baker, Jennifer Valentino-DeVries, Manny Fernandez, and Michael LaForgia, "Three words. 70 cases. The tragic history of 'I Can't Breathe.'" *The New York Times*. June 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/28/us/i-cant-breathe-police-arrest.html>

They "served as models of African American righteousness to the white world."⁵ This is problematic for several reasons. On the surface, it suggests that only certain types of Black people experience racism. Moreover, it also perpetuates the narrative that a Black person must task him or herself with convincing a racist not to be racist.

In his book, *Blues People*, Amiri Baraka unpacks the dubious nature of using Black respectability as a tool to reduce racism. "It was not that a Negro was uneducated or vulgar or unfit for society which determined why he was not accepted into it; it was the mere fact that he was a Negro. No amount of education, taste, or compromise would alter that fact."⁶ Hence, when the perpetrator brazenly dragged their fingers across the hood, bumper, and sides of my car, it did not matter that a faculty parking tag dangled from the rearview mirror. My bookish appearance did not somehow improve my acceptability in the offender's mind convincing him *not* to be racist.

For most of my professional life, I ran from the stereotypes of the angry Black woman. I suppressed emotional responses and chose tact and decorum when engaging in professional situations where expressive anger was warranted. In other instances, I allowed the discomfort of deafening silence to speak for me. I was a 'respectable' Black woman.

Now, I am angry.

I am angry because Black folks keep dying in situations where others live to see another day. I am angry because eating lunch on a college campus, barbequing in a park, and even entering one's own home is somehow problematic for the melanin-rich. I am angry because hundreds of miles removed from the Jim Crow South on my northern progressive college campus, I am still a nigger in someone's eyes. It would be nice if I could proclaim that this was a full-circle moment, that I had an epiphany and am now enlightened. But that is not the truth.

During the stay-at-home order, I embraced a deeper level of self-care. I watch television in smaller doses, hug my children tighter, and reject engaging in things that crush my spirit. Organic connections between colleagues, students, and alumni continue to

⁵ Nikki Brown, Alisha Knight, Brian M. Jack, Bruce A. Glasrud, Angela Boswell, and M. Giulia Fabi. "Lillian Horace and the Respectable Black Woman: Black Women's Activism in Combating Jim Crow." In *Recovering Five Generations Hence: The Life and Writing of Lillian Jones Horace*, ed. Karen Kossie-Chernyshev (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2013, 246).

⁶ Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. 1963; repr., New York, NY: Perennial, 2002), 185.

remind me that life *is as clear as mud*. Some will always view melanin-rich people as less than, and some will not. That is not my battle to fight.

I am weary but unwavering. I am angry, yet I persist.

A few semesters later, I am still swiftly removing my hair bonnet a few minutes before each synchronous class meeting. I am still carrying my mother's dogged pursuit of excellence, even in unwelcoming environments, and I am still reminding myself that I belong wherever *I* decide I belong.

I *can* breathe.