

Chapter One

“I CAN’T BREATHE!”¹

“SO WHAT!

F* YOUR BREATH”²**

The brutal atrocities of white supremacy in the American past and present speak volumes about the harsh limits of our democracy over against our professed democratic ideals.... Race is the crucial intersecting point where democratic energies clash with American imperial realities in the very making of the grand American experiment of democracy.³

ON SEPTEMBER 24, 2014, A GREENE COUNTY, OHIO, SPECIAL GRAND Jury, after hearing from 18 witnesses and considering both audio and video evidence, failed to indict Sean Williams for the fatal shooting of 22-year-old John Crawford III, gunned down in a Walmart. Because Crawford was carrying an (unloaded) air rifle, which he’d picked up off the shelf a short time earlier, the jurors ruled that the officer who fired the two shots that killed Crawford followed active shooter protocols to the letter and was therefore justified in doing what he did.⁴ But Crawford was neither active nor a shooter. He was merely a young, Black shopper, talking on his cellphone to the mother of his children, menacing no one, yet still frightening enough to be met with deadly force from a highly trained officer. Sadly, this kind of story has become increasingly familiar in recent months; similar tragedies in Ferguson, New York, Milwaukee, Charleston, and Baltimore have sparked national discussions about racial politics in America.

While there is widespread agreement about America's racist roots, we seem unable to come to any consensus on racism in the twenty-first-century United States.

For Black America, the outcomes of the justice system undeniably leave much to be desired. The absence of guilty verdicts—indeed, the absence of trials—rubs coarse salt in the still-fresh wounds of the families, the loved ones, and the communities affected by these tragedies. Rather than seeing these parents offered a pittance of consolation for their loss, we watch as they grapple with yet another travesty of justice.

For Black America, such travesties are, if not old news, at least familiar stories. In 1989, five New York City African-American teenagers, “The Central Park Five,” were interrogated without legal representation and forced to confess to raping a white woman and other crimes they did not commit. In the racially tense and crime-ridden New York of this period, all of the young men were convicted, even without any airtight evidence placing them at the scene. Each of the young men spent at least four years in prison; thanks to a new confession and a re-examination of the prosecution's evidence, all of these convictions were vacated in 2002, but, by this time, their sentences had been served.⁵

In 1991, Rodney King was beaten to within an inch of his life by white police officers in Los Angeles. In 1994, a Black New York City police officer was mistaken for a criminal and shot by a white officer (a story repeated in 2009). In 2012, Trayvon Martin was chased and killed by George Zimmerman (an over-zealous neighborhood-watch vigilante who assumed that Martin was behind a spate of recent break-ins). Zimmerman, thanks to Florida's Stand Your Ground law, was acquitted. Conservative and even centrist media outlets focused on Martin's baggy clothes, his discipline issues at school, and his love of hip-hop; the pull of racial undercurrents was palpable. Speculations that painted Martin as a criminal or a neighborhood menace implied (and sometimes explicitly stated outright) that Zimmerman's actions were legally (and morally) justifiable. Zimmerman was protecting his community; Martin was a thug. Zimmerman may not have been a police officer, but he acted—and was justified as such an actor in the ensuing discussions—as a figure of authority, as a preserver of civic order. His behavior may not have been explicitly sponsored or

endorsed by the state (the lack of culpability does not an endorsement make), but his act of aggression with a young Black man as its target was excused. The act and its vindication continued the practice—supposedly long ago criminalized—of the extra-judicial killing of young Black men.

Whether these various aggressions were initiated by the state or not, it’s difficult to see them as anything but state-sanctioned lynchings—or perhaps it’s more accurate to call them *culturally permissible sacrifices* and label their victims as collateral damage. When citizens are not held accountable for killing young people of color, police officers escape conviction for inappropriate use of deadly force, and the media rationalize racial violence as an excusable inconvenience, necessary to keep the public order, the stage is set: it’s open season on Black bodies. What happens next is that Sandra Bland blows smoke from her cigarette during a traffic stop in Waller County, Texas—and this turns out to be one of her last autonomous acts. She dares express frustration and confusion at being pulled over on a technicality, and this is determined to be “threatening” action by trooper Brian Encinia, who responds, “I will light you up.” Seventy-two hours later, she’s dead in her cell. Then, an eight-year-old Native American girl is tased and slammed against a wall in Pierre, South Dakota for holding a paring knife; a Native Lives Matter activist, Allen Locke, a Lakota (Native American) tribe member, is killed by officer Anthony Meirose on December 19, 2014, for being “threatening” (like Sandra Bland); finally, to add insult to injury, a young girl in a bathing suit is pinned to the ground by a grown man outside a neighborhood pool party in McKinney, Texas, in July 2015. What we see, what we learn, what we must come to understand is that we live in a society that has become accustomed to monthly, weekly, and sometimes even daily acts of domestic terrorism, exacted upon young citizens of color by white citizens with badges. We seek reasons to blame the victims; we grasp at any available excuse to rationalize the behavior of the perpetrators of these violent acts. We hold them in reverence, these officers of the law, but rarely hold them culpable.

Similar narratives—with identical implications about justifiable violence perpetrated on purportedly terrifying Black bodies—have emerged with appalling regularity since the Zimmerman case made a hot-button issue of state-sponsored (or state-vindicated) violence



Millions March, Oakland: Rally against police brutality and failure to prosecute the officers who commit these crimes. <https://flic.kr/p/q8D1no>. Credit: Amir Aziz, 13 December 2014.

against young Black men. With the coverage surrounding the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, and other unarmed Black citizens in recent years, the pattern is no less clear, especially when an almost certainly culpable officer walks free after taking the life of a young Black man or woman. Take the case of Officer Michael Brelo, who was found not guilty of voluntary manslaughter: he shot 49 of the 137 shots that killed Timothy Russell and Malissa Williams in Cleveland, Ohio, standing on the hood of a car as if he was playing a Call of Duty video game—but with unarmed Black lives as his targets. The pertinent questions seem to revolve around the stature of the victim and, in the case of Brown, his actions in the hours before the shooting. The amnesic, mainstream public and the equally forgetful justice system—including even the District Attorney’s Office—gives the officers the benefit of the doubt, forgetting that such racist and even predatory behavior is not an anomaly in Missouri, New York, or Baltimore; rather, it is the continuation of a palpable pattern of violence targeting Black bodies. It is part of a broader history of justified violence that stretches back to the establishment of the first colonies and the transatlantic slave trade upon those “generally dishonored persons.”⁶

Although these patterns and their punctuations are deeply saddening, and although they highlight a continuing issue with race

in this country, the attention they receive is limited (often focusing on the occasionally violent demonstrations that, with their images of broken windows, looted shop fronts, and burning cars, make for extraordinarily good copy). When the fires subside, the 24-hour news cycle changes the topic.

This is not to say that our country has not made vast improvements in dealing with race. To say so would be to ignore the seismic shift in race relations ushered in by the Civil Rights Movement. Many of those changes were monumental: forbidding violence and other forms of mistreatment against Blacks and, at long last, outlining legal protections for all races. Following the conclusion of the third phase of the Civil Rights Movement,⁷ and especially with the implementation of policies aimed at correcting socioeconomic injustices by offering unprecedented assistance to minorities, it was almost as if there was a collective sigh. It felt as though America had turned a corner, as though maybe, just maybe, progress had been and was being made. Things were looking up. We took these first steps as a nation without really knowing where we were headed; while we started the journey together, the path became harder to follow as the distance in time between the Civil Rights Movement and the present grew larger. While we are still making progress, we have lost the path (and especially the togetherness that characterized our first steps on it), and we have become more and more lost, unsure of the future.

We still grapple with ubiquitous racism, and yet it is not our mother’s or our father’s racism. Rather, it is more subtle, more covert, and arguably more insidious for being so. Subtle though they may be, many of the racial stereotypes and racist practices (covert and overt) that non-white Americans have long struggled against remain dishearteningly prevalent today. They are still deeply rooted in our culture and institutions; this is why our country has been unable to take the giant culture-wide leap forward it so desperately needs to become the place we imagined it could be half a century ago.

By leaving the deeper issues unaddressed, we have allowed superficial progress to stand in for the real thing. Prashad, Blackman, and Kelley find that our eagerness to pivot on a dime from self-recrimination to self-congratulation has made it virtually impossible to discuss (let alone address) deep-seated racial issues in any significant way in this country: “[T]he problem of the twenty first

century ... is the problem of the color-blind. This problem is simple: it believes that to redress racism, we need to *not* consider race in social practice.... The state, we are told, must be *above* race” (21). In other words, we have attempted to leap in a single bound the deep chasm that separates White and Black America. This hasty rush to a post-racial never-never land paints racial unrest on one side and overt/covert racism on the other as little more than deeply entrenched and manifestly false positions that Americans can discard so long as they are willing to do so. Perhaps most worrying is the clear evidence that some among us believe not only that we can do so, but that we have done so—that American racism is a problem that’s been solved, and, but for a few stalwart holdouts (racial agitators), we are ready to hold hands and march forward together singing “Kumbaya” in chorus. We may be talking about equality, but this conversation is no stand-in for the real thing. We find ourselves now—as then—in a place of false progress, perhaps even false hope.

Being above race is a lofty goal, but it is a premature one, ignoring as it does behind-closed-doors racism and the continued existence of the racial hierarchies that inform the daily injustices and humiliations suffered by Black Americans. We may talk about race openly and relatively even-handedly in the twenty-first century, but such conversations are largely superficial—mainly because our obsession with sound bites and gaffes has made all but the most prejudiced pundits and quote generators afraid to misspeak. There is, without doubt, a taboo surrounding overt racism which has birthed a new generation of race deniers, each of whom wears identical lenses that blur or erase distinctions between the races. C.R. Lawrence recognized this almost 20 years ago, seeing in the way that race was being discussed in America a growing “color-blindness.” The primary mechanism by which “color-blindness” sustains itself is denial. And further sustaining this denial is a societal taboo against honest talk about what we see, feel, and know about racism.⁸ In lieu of this difficult but honest conversation, “straight shooters” feed us the “straight dope,” which paints Black America as somehow a victim of its own success; the powerful race card or victim card (these two are interchangeable) has apparently been overplayed, which has resulted in a culture of entitled freeloaders and ne’er-do-wells who lack the motivation or the work ethic that they need to succeed in America. When Abigail Fisher is

able to take her University of Texas reverse-discrimination case all the way to the Supreme Court, and when the political Right uses the election of Barack Obama as our nation’s conversation moment away from racism into color-blindedness, those of us who don’t see race-neutrality are mistakenly living in the past, obsessed with a problem that has been solved. Progress was apparently made while our backs were turned.

Minorities in this country can all speak to the disingenuousness of these claims, but it seems that the Supreme Court finds them entirely convincing. In 2003, the Court ruled in the favor of two white Michigan residents, Jennifer Gratz and Patrick Hamacher, who leveled claims of reverse racism at the University of Michigan over its affirmative-action admissions policy.⁹ In 2013, the University of Michigan was again the subject of a Supreme Court case, when the Court overturned a 2012 Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals decision, ruling that the state’s ban on affirmative action was, in fact, constitutional.¹⁰ That same year, the Supreme Court gutted sections of the *Voting Rights Act* that protected minorities from discriminatory voting restrictions in historically racist states. All of these decisions were justified with reference to the tremendous leaps and bounds made since the Civil Rights Movement. So far have we come that there is little to no difference between the black experience of America and the white one—or so we are told.

The fact that such patently false characterizations of Black America are given any truck in our media means that, as a society, we have let ourselves off the hook. We have allowed a false assumption to guide us, namely, that by addressing the legal, economic, political, and educational effects of *de jure* segregation, we had also taken the necessary steps to address the sociological and psychological effects of 300 years of *de facto* segregation. It is true that white men can no longer legally chain and maim Black bodies or hang them from trees; no man or woman in this country can be refused goods or services based on the color of their skin. Our country, it is true, has changed. Our president is regularly invoked as example of this, and, indeed, he does exemplify a more inclusive America, but the continued miscarriages of justice, the constant reminders that we are not, as yet, an equal society, the persistent structures of inequality and institutionalized racism—these are all albatrosses that we can’t seem to rid from around our necks in the present. This current social climate, especially

the persistent stigma surrounding blackness, is, as Imani Perry argues, “a derivative, but distinct, zeitgeist” (2). We have yet to address in any significant way how this cloud of racism that hangs over our nation makes us feel—as Blacks, Whites, as Americans of all colors—and that has muddied our conception of what a truly post-racial society might look like. Though we are frequently told otherwise, we do not live in a post-racial America—not if we are collectively unwilling to articulate how we can address our past and present in remotely satisfactory ways. Doing so means—at the very least—engaging in the nitty-gritty dialog between Whites and Blacks that will compel us all to understand what generations upon generations of institutionalized racism have heaped not just upon Blacks but upon us all, as a people and as a nation. There’s no doubt that this dialog will be difficult, and a discomfort is sure to loom in its shadow, but the future of our culture and our society hangs in the balance.

In order to have this conversation (and, more importantly, to make it a meaningful one), there must be some sense of agreement with respect to the nature of the problem. A good place to start would be the fact that race means different things to different people in different contexts. Rather than a racial monolith, there are competing “frames”—systems for understanding and presenting the problems suffered by African Americans.¹¹ The conservative framing of the race issue imagines that American democracy, business, and social life are, at least in essence, equal—that the playing field is a level one for all participants. Anything outside of that frame—be it police violence, income inequality, or social marginalization—is explained with reference to the frame: as criminality, laziness, a culture that is incompatible with the mainstream. The frames themselves are morally neutral; in practice, however, they have the power to produce detrimental and racist effects. Racially insensitive conservatives frame the African-American experience in a way that denies their lived experiences, burdening those who experience racism daily with responsibility for its continuation. This frame acknowledges that America had a problem with race in the past, but improvements since then have made its continued discussion an exercise in futility. With a Black man in the Oval Office, race is posited as a ready-at-hand excuse for what actually boils down to a lazy fatalism. Blame shifting and the overplaying of the race card are the real problems—not systemic

discrimination, not the racial and economic tiering of American life. Crucially, pointing this out is an act, not of racism, but of charity. Those who frame race in this way paint themselves as racial pioneers, as prophets of a new post-racial age. Ask them what needs to be done to address the issue of race in this country, and their answer is as predictable as it is inane: “We have already done too much.”

Such beliefs, and the arguments that sustain them, are blinded by privilege. With America’s cornucopia at their feet, the privileged find it preposterous that anybody could not travel the same road to success that they have walked. The pernicious social structures, the institutional interference, the quotidian discrimination—such are illusory, for those either born into or easily awarded privilege never experienced any of it. It seems a common human quality to ascribe one’s success to character traits—honesty, perseverance, and intelligence—that seem to be the exclusive property of those atop the social ladder. Those they look down upon (and especially the dark faces that protest from below) are a mere negative image of success.

This is due to what prominent social psychologist Lee Ross called the “fundamental attribution error” or “correspondence bias.” It explains why, if we are cut off in traffic, we’re less likely to assume that the other driver is in the midst of some kind of emergency or made an understandable error in not checking his blind spot. Instead, we assume the worst: either that he is a reckless driver or that he is insensitive to the needs of other drivers. So if a conservative is asked to explain high levels of underemployment or unemployment among African Americans, the fundamental attribution error leads him to believe that all things are equal and that those who languish in poverty lack the motivation to reach out and grasp the low-hanging fruit that is available (they say) to all Americans. Institutional racism doesn’t so much as enter into the frame. The solutions they propose reveal a laughably myopic understanding of the effects of systemic racism. Don Lemon’s “pull your pants up” solution, for instance, rejects out of hand the effects of poor schooling, inadequate health-care provision, and policies that effectively shift resources out of minority neighborhoods. The real problem, according to Lemon, is trends in Black male fashion.¹²

White privilege blinds those who would claim that Black America is its own worst enemy. They say that Black-coded culture (hip-hop

in particular) uses racist language so much as to make it practically meaningless. Whites are merely echoing this language when they use it—even if the tone and context clearly indicate that the meaning they intend is more insidious (and much older) than the one contained in hip-hop lyrics. It is this view that allowed Joe Scarborough to dismiss the University of Oklahoma’s Sigma Alpha Epsilon chapter’s racist chant with a wave of his hand, claiming that the transparently racist chants were merely echoing contemporary hip-hop lyrics.¹³ Never mind the fact that this excuse was never so much as mentioned by anybody connected to the incident; never mind the fact that hip-hop music has not (at least not to my knowledge as a hip-hop educator) ever made light of lynching—especially not in a way that would lead any reasonable listener to think that the taboo surrounding the subject had been lifted. The Scarboroughs of this world, though, seem eager to throw Black America under the bus whenever racist whites are caught on hot mics or hidden cameras. Furthermore, he, and in this case his co-host Mika Brzezinski, think that they have license (or at least an excuse) to re-appropriate language within hip-hop’s vocabulary, all while knowing little to nothing of that vocabulary’s explicit or implied meaning.

Any Black person who has ever been in a classroom or a town-hall meeting in which black and white mix or collide can tell you about the prevalent assumption that Blacks are somehow responsible for educating Whites on how racism is prevalent in society. I see this frequently in predominantly white classrooms in which I teach. White students—in an attempt to understand racial issues that must be at least partially commended—ask minority students to speak about the Black or Hispanic experience *in toto*, as though every minority were a deputy spokesperson of sorts for their race or even for all non-white races. In a relatively benign example of the mindset that informs this behavior, Starbucks recently debuted (and almost immediately canceled) a Race Together campaign that asked servers to write “race together” on their white and green cups in order to start a conversation about race with customers.¹⁴ Rather than showing a commitment to advancing the national discussion on race through scholarship, in-house workshopping, or other self-focused activities, Starbucks’ marketing and management teams preferred to cast their organization in the role of the facilitator. They didn’t have anything palpable to add to

the dialog, but, by encouraging it, they felt, they were doing enough. In this fantasy, Starbucks cafés could be the locus for heartfelt and inclusive dialogs between White and Black Americans—with the latter educating the former (or occasionally vice versa). This was an attempt on the part of an American brand so white as to be almost translucent to manage its image at a time when racial tensions were running high, and the immediate backlash made it clear that Black America and its sincere sympathizers were not amused.

This privileged mindset—grounded as it is in an often-sincere desire to understand racial issues in America—is frequently defended vigorously by the well-intentioned sympathizers who are blind to the privilege that informs the questions they ask or the tone in which they ask them. This aspect of privilege is, therefore, resistant to change in ways that more blatantly racist attitudes are not. Take the word “mulatto,” for instance: informing somebody that the term, with etymological roots in the Spanish word for mule, is highly offensive is often met with some surprise on the part of the speaker (so long as he or she isn’t using the term in a purposefully offensive way). Since generations of Americans used the word without thinking, a surprising number of people still think the term is an appropriate one to use when describing those of mixed race. Inform them that the term is no longer acceptable and the speaker will usually promise to strike the word from their conversation altogether and apologize for any offense caused. The problem is that disavowing racism (or, at the very least, particular manifestations of racism) in this way allows many white Americans to feel that they can wash their hands of systemic racism, in terms of both the benefits they enjoy from it and the pernicious effects it has in Black communities. It leaves privilege unaddressed.

Tell somebody that their privilege is blinding them to the position they take in conversation about race with minorities and you’ll get a host of defensive responses. Challenge them further and it becomes clear that they feel that their actions have been uncharitably misinterpreted and that they are doing their part to combat racism by seeking to better understand American experience through the eyes of the country’s minorities. Jay Smooth, one of America’s pre-eminent hip-hop deejays and commentators, has found that the best way to avoid this kind of defensive reaction is to point out that no claims are being made about whether the person is or is not a racist; what is being

claimed is that the *action* or the *words* are racist.¹⁵ Tell somebody that they're the problem and the response you'll get will be predictable (either dismissive or hostile); tell that same person that something they're doing or saying is problematic and you might just get them to see their privilege for what it is—even if only for a moment. To see white privilege operating in oneself is to want to resist it and eventually to overcome it; as this resistance moves from inward to outward, one can actually begin to make claims about actively fighting racism. It is then that claims to be free of racial prejudice can ring true.

So the challenge for those who want to have an honest discussion about racism in America is to set both the inward and the outward frames properly, which starts with an understanding that, even if overt racists are a dying breed, the *effects* of racism remain. White privilege is becoming ever better at hiding or excusing itself (conservative media outlets are providing its would-be defenders with plenty of ammunition), so even recognizing these effects for what they are is not necessarily a straightforward process. Hence the difficulty, even for African Americans, to see the true contours of the American landscape. As tempting as the post-racial vision of America may seem, it comes with a cost: it neuters blackness, rendering it powerless to assert itself; it lulls blackness to sleep, leaving a hollow and silent shell.

The combination of this lulling effect and the veil that white privilege places between fantasy and reality allows conservative commentary to frame racial solidarity and resistance that dares to raise its voice above a murmur as irrational, emotional, and over-reactive. Part of this is a residual of older prejudices that see Black bodies as savage or primitive things positively brimming with violent and sexual energy. Consider, for instance, the NFL commentator who called the Seattle Seahawks' Richard Sherman a "thug" for expressing excitement—next to a white woman, no less!—after a victory on the field. Another part of placing verbalized discontent inside a frame of uncontainable violence, though, is strategic: it is representing White America as attempting to transcend its past, to move past all the unpleasantness and to have a civilized conversation with Black America. No matter how conciliatory our tone, though, that conversation seems never to happen. That conversation, between Black America and the powers that be, is the carrot tied to the stick and dangled just beyond our reach. African Americans are told to sublimate their often-justifiable

anger, to bear their burdens as though they were entirely of their own making and as though White America had done everything it can and will do to atone for its transgressions (again, the assumption being that these transgressions are entirely in the past). David Ikard and Martell Teasley echo this point in their study, *Nation of Cowards: Black Activism in Barack Obama’s Post-Racial America*: “What this rhetorical erasure of white culpability in oppressing Blacks communicates to Americans in general and African-Americans in particular is that Black America has somehow arrived at this point of socio-economic crisis due, in large part, to their failure to see past systemic white oppression” (29). Conservative commentators such as Bill O’Reilly and Laura Ingraham are saying, in essence, *Get over it. Racism will end when you join White America in the assumption that it has done so.*

The fact of the matter is that the election of a Black president does not signify that racism is over. It means we’ve come a long way since slavery, yes. It means we’ve made progress since the Civil Rights Movement, certainly. But it does not mean that we live in a society that is free of racial tension, free of the systematic and structural oppression of Black people, and free of racist thought in action. Until an essential humanness replaces the hierarchized core of our racial discourse, we will continue to dehumanize the dark-skinned in both word and deed. Until the roots of structural racism are uprooted and an egalitarian worldview is planted in its place, the financial poverty of America’s inner cities will remain a reflection of the moral poverty of our nation. Until the assumptions that underlie our racial discourse—that is, the concept of race as something that distinguishes one of us from the other—are eradicated, these discussions will continue ad nauseam, and our debates will be circumlocutory by definition. The hopeful seeds we cast on the earth will fall on barren soil.

Contrary to what some conservative pundits on the right or wide-eyed optimists on the left might believe, Obama’s presidency has not improved racial relations in this country. We cannot sit back and feel good about ourselves because his election underscores a utopian ethos, a nascent dream-nation where democracy does, in fact, speak for and through people of all races, creeds, and colors within the country. Quite the contrary, it has torn the veneer off of our quasi-civilized national racial discourse. For those who are not willfully blind to the signs, it has shown America (White and Black alike) just how far we

are from the post-racial ideal. Our Black president has flushed the vestigial vultures from the bushes, and they circle overhead once again, their broad wings darkening the land. Obama the bridge builder, Obama the peacemaker, and Obama the hope harbinger walks amid these shadows, but his hope keeps his gaze trained on the distant horizon. Hope as we might that Obama will face his racist detractors and throw some shade of his own, we all know why he'll never do so. The dignity of his office won't allow him to be a Dick Gregory, an Angela Davis, or an H. Rap Brown (towering examples of existentially free Black brothers and sisters unafraid to speak truth to power), won't allow him to call a cracker a cracker, even though his opponents might call a spade a spade.¹⁶

So long as White America refuses to recognize the vivid contours of its racially stratified country, so long as it remains blind to the fact that Black brothers and sisters fear (and justifiably so) those who are supposed to protect them, the Black bridge builder must continue to step wise, to talk in code to his radical brothers and sisters and let them know that he is there, working every day to push the country forward (sometimes against its will). In the face of this ongoing denial on the part of White America, the struggle must continue. We cannot allow the past to be whitewashed or to allow complacency or parochial successes to weaken our resolve. We cannot allow our justifiable outrage at the continuing legacy of white supremacy to be soothed by the lullaby of ersatz progress. It must be said, however, that progress *has* been made these last decades. Obama spoke of this change in generational terms during a 2013 press conference in the wake of the Zimmerman verdict:

I don't want us to lose sight [of the fact] that things are getting better. Each successive generation seems to be making progress in changing attitudes when it comes to race. It doesn't mean we're in a post-racial society. It doesn't mean racism is eliminated. But when I talk to Malia and Sasha and I listen to their friends and I see them interact, they're better than we are—they're better than we were—on these issues.¹⁷

What kind of role models do we want to be for this generation? Do we want to pass down to the next generation the same structures of inequality and injustice that inspired the hip-hop generation to use

the microphone as a weapon against the powers that be, or do we want the next generation to inherit a world that is changed for the better—one in which the near-perfect multi-racial democracy is more than a bad-time story? Malia and Sasha’s generation sees race with eyes unclouded, but the blush of hope could very well be off the rose if they enter adult society with the structures of injustice and inequality virtually unchanged. We need to find the tipping point where the next generation can change the world, not be changed by it.

This means we need to accelerate our progress exponentially. Our society, which is enamored with comfort, convenience, easy answers and self-congratulation, must face the present with unclouded eyes. As the Black Liberation Movement has always done, we must ask in a clear voice whether we are serious about our democratic ideals, or—as we do with notions of freedom, equality, and justice—whether we are merely paying lip service to a hollow idol, one we only pay homage to in the abstract, never the concrete.¹⁸ Our need to be safe and secure in our own homes and in our own land must not make us afraid of that which should be protecting us. The arbitrary and disproportionate use of power (physical power, political power, economic power, social power) as a means of keeping the poor, the dispossessed, and the disaffected at arm’s length from the spiritual and physical comforts of the satisfied life is what feeds upon our complacency. This complacency means that we hedge until we have reached a crisis, and we then claim to be powerless as we watch that crisis become a catastrophe. Engaging in the process early on, adding our voices to the movement, and changing minds mean that we are active agents in our moment of crisis. This keeps us from being passive observers of our catastrophe. Time and again we’ve seen the turmoil that precipitates meaningful change, and, now, in this moment, we stand poised on the threshold of a new dawn. If we are to leave a legacy for the next generation that is substantively different from the one we inherited, we must resist the magnetism of the status quo; we must stake our claim on this land and demand as loudly as is necessary the equal democracy and justice that America promises.

The task for mainstream Black leaders is monumental. Sadly, in order to effect institutional change, they must behave as if we lived in a post-racial society, while understanding full well that we don’t. Their job is to serve as the vanguard for the Black radical. They must

act as spies in the house of love, as it were, while the Black radical works the streets with fiery rhetoric. The radical must make noise. He must make a nuisance of himself, expecting the fire hose and the Taser from those he challenges. He must shout at the top of his lungs from the mountaintop and the rooftop, never allowing the American public to be lulled back into complacency by post-racial lullabies. Institutional change is glacially slow, ever tending toward inertia. Men like President Obama have a Sisyphean task. Over and over they push the boulder up the hill, but time and again it rolls back down. They are up against structures that will not change in one year, four years, or eight years. Their job is the work of generations; their job is to sit across from the racists and smile, to take what is possible, and to recognize when (even if only for a moment) to stop pushing and allow the boulder to roll down the hill once more.

Though our leaders must act with urgency, they must recognize that it will take several generations more before we live in anything resembling a truly post-racial society. The radical of today will become the bridge builder of tomorrow; tomorrow's bridge builder will look like a sellout to tomorrow's radical—such is the nature of these things. At the same time, there must exist an unspoken, horizontal integration of the mission: the radical must understand that the job of those who work within the system is to compromise, and those who work within the system must recognize that the job of the radical is to push, push, and push again against the boundaries of what is, seeking always for what must be. They must work separately, but toward the same mission, each understanding the role of the other. Though they may never join hands in the light of the public eye, the radical and the bridge builder are united in purpose and vision. Though they must work independently, neither should allow his role to blind him to the affinity and necessity of the other.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that we need a constant tension between conciliation and dissent. When the levee breaks (as it has recently done in Baltimore and Ferguson), conciliation is not an act of bridge building but of pacification. To quote my dear brother Eddie S. Glaude Jr., “One of the most efficient (and insidious) ways to discipline dissent is the appeal to civility.”¹⁹ This appeal to civility is undeniably seductive. Its demand for calm and a return to civilized

discourse presupposes that civility and indoor voices are remotely effective or even appropriate in the circumstances. The lure of this appeal has caught a number of (mostly affluent) Black figures. On *The Daily Show*, Common exemplified this “good boy” approach: “We’re not saying, ‘you did us wrong!’ It’s more like, ‘Hey, I’m extending my hand in love. Let’s forget about the past as much as we can and let’s move from where we are now.’”²⁰ Pharrell has offered a similarly conciliatory approach: “The New Black doesn’t blame other races for our issues.”²¹ The fact that prominent Black voices are urging the Black community to blame only itself for the conditions against which it struggles daily and to forget the past (even if only partially) is completely blind and deaf to reality. The evidence is everywhere. “Black folk are dying, Doc,” as my mentee Dalitso Ruwe often reminds me, and when the justified outrage that emerges in the wake of these killings spills into the streets, we play along with the media as they paint protests as senseless rage, protesters as thugs, widespread issues as isolated incidents. We ought not to be ashamed of our anger or its momentary expression. Only a recognition of our outrage as justified will force a new approach to the issue, one that deals with the systemic issues at its root, one that acknowledges that Black America’s suffering is something that is not (at least not entirely) self-inflicted, one that recognizes that the violence, the poverty, and the misery can no longer be ignored.

Neither can they be apologized for: “Even if their apologies are sincere,” says Gus T. Renegade, “the historic, ongoing, international context of collective white hostility toward Black people renders even the authentically ashamed white an impotent anomaly.”²² Renegade goes on to note how Jewish people have never been remotely expected to absolve the Germans for their role in the Holocaust, but that is precisely what Black America is being asked to do; after centuries of slavery, and a century of *de jure* segregation, “the Black petition for reparations is ignored and ridiculed as whining for welfare.” And we allow this to happen, telling each other and ourselves that moving on is the only possible course because we have internalized the attitudes of our oppressors. The only way we will convince White America that we deserve better is for us to stop convincing ourselves that we do not.

Black lives matter—such is the latest rallying cry of the subaltern²³ at protests against police violence around the country—bespeaks the guttural groan of voiceless and generally dishonored Black souls in these United States. William Jelani Cobb puts it this way: “it’s [Black Lives Matter] a statement that these forms of violence reinforce each other in a vicious cycle of human devaluation.” In essence, it does exactly what Spivak called for, which was voice for the oppressed that challenges the hegemonic, the universal affirmative.²⁴ Admittedly the statement is not inclusive enough for those seeking refuge and unification under the aegis of an intersectional (Black women’s lives matter), a feminist (women’s lives matter), or a general postmodern democratic (all lives matter) discourse. A reformulation is needed, one that demands that the speaker say something of substance, something that challenges the hearer to examine his or her internalization of America’s age-old racial hierarchies. In which case it may not be enough to say solely that Black lives matter, but rather to reinforce the issue that Black lives (indeed, all lives) matter equally. But that is the beauty of mass protest and democratic engagement, for we all can march and scream for the subaltern position we find ourselves in. For me as an overweight man, about Eric Garner’s weight and age, watching his death looped on CNN was, in fact, my clarion call: “I can’t breathe,” he said, “I can’t breathe.” I lost my breath watching it. The chorus of Black Lives Matter is complicated by the dissonance of “f*** your breath,” consequently resulting in the deafness of multi-racial democratic energies; from fat lives, the underemployed lives, to F*** the breath of gay lives, F*** the breath of women’s lives, but most specifically and far too concurrently, F*** the breath of Black (mostly male) lives. Even a cursory examination of race in America makes it quite clear that we have not come to this most basic of democratic realizations as a country. To paraphrase Cornel West, the handling of race is the litmus test for mature democracies.²⁵ Put to this test, America has proved itself over and over again to be but a bawling infant. It is time that we recognize we are much, much too old for the pacifier of false progress. It is time for us to use our words, to have a meaningful and, yes, at times angry conversation about how we are to begin to address racial inequality and injustice in this country.



A black body choked-out by the hands of law enforcement in Watts, California, 1965. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wattsriots-policearrest-loc.jpg>. Credit: New York World Telegram, 12 August 1965; Wikimedia Commons.



Daily News and New York Post covers depicting the choking of Eric Garner and the acquittal of the police officer involved. <https://flc.kr/p/q1Z6QF>. Credit: Mike Mozart, 5 December 2014.

Notes

- 1 The last words of Eric Garner, the Staten Island, New York, man killed by an illegal chokehold administered by an NYPD officer who accused him of selling loose cigarettes (no cigarettes were found on his person).
- 2 The invidious words of Tulsa, Oklahoma, police officer Joseph Byars, spoken to a dying Eric Harris, who was complaining about not being able to breathe.
- 3 West, *Democracy Matters* 14.
- 4 Mark Piepmeier, the Special Prosecutor assigned to the Grand Jury's presentation of the case against Williams, responded to questions about Williams's conduct by noting that officers had recently been trained by their Ohio state police officers' academy "to be aggressive" when responding to active shooters.
- 5 Edward Conlon, "The Myth of the Central Park Five," *The Daily Beast* 19 October 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/10/19/decoding-the-crime-of-the-century-the-real-story-of-the-central-park-five.html>.
- 6 The quotation is from the end of historian Orlando Patterson's definition of slavery, where he describes the system as "the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and *generally dishonored persons*" (13; my emphasis).
- 7 I would identify three separate phases. Phase one (1857–1954), during which the struggle for equal protection under the law became recognizable as a movement, included individual African Americans but also a number of fledgling African-American organizations. During phase two (1955–59), efforts to desegregate public transportation and education began. Added to these efforts were attempts to guarantee voting rights for African Americans. Black activists openly organized and conducted mass confrontations that directly challenged the white power structure. Phase three (1960–69) saw the rise of the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), which sought to achieve its ends through acts of civil disobedience. At the same time, the third phase also saw a nascent Black Power Movement, which was decidedly less peaceful. Its members used militant, sometimes violent actions that emphasized racial pride and the creation of separate Black political and cultural institutions.
- 8 From Lawrence 4. See also West, "Race Matters," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRZcfEToN-A>, arguing that race is a taboo subject in America. And see generally Crenshaw, who discusses how the taboo surrounding race affects legal education.
- 9 Pete Williams, "Gratz v. Michigan: Undergraduate Affirmative Action Program Struck Down," NBC News, 9 June 2003, <http://www.nbcnews.com/id/3071007/t/gratz-v-michigan/#.VTVDdbFwpS68>.

- 10 Supreme Court of the United States, *Schutte v. COALITION TO DEFEND AFFIRMATIVE*, 134 S. Ct. 1623, 572 U.S., 188 L. Ed. 2d 613 (2014).
- 11 See Goffman.
- 12 See <http://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=youtube.com+don+lemon+sagging+pants+and+littering&FORM=HDRSC3#view=detail&mid=A491AC427BB0DF392459A491AC427BB0DF392459>. See also Christina Coleman, “Sagging Pants and Littering Contribute to Downfall of Black Communities? Why CNN’s Don Lemon Is Wrong,” *Global Grind*, 29 July 2013, <http://globalgrind.com/2013/07/29/cnns-don-lemon-reasons-the-black-community-is-failing-video/>.
- 13 Joe Scarborough, “Morial: OU President Took a Strong Stand,” *Morning Joe*, MSNBC, 11 March 2015, <http://www.msnbc.com/morning-joe/watch/morial--ou-president-took-a-strong-stand-411553347638>.
- 14 Starbucks Newsroom, “What ‘Race Together’ Means for Starbucks Partners and Customers,” 16 March 2015, <http://news.starbucks.com/news/what-race-together-means-for-starbucks-partners-and-customers>.
- 15 Jay Smooth, “How to Tell People They Sound Racist,” *Ill Doctrine*, 21 July 2008, http://www.illdoctrine.com/2008/07/how_to_tell_people_they_sound.html.
- 16 During the 1960s and 1970s, the term *cracker* was used pejoratively by some who sought to respond to white oppression. The term, however, has eighteenth-century Anglo roots and refers to poor whites of Maryland, Virginia (primarily), and even as far as Florida and Georgia. Over the course of two centuries it has loosely been used to represent a person of low class or even a criminal.
- 17 “Obama Trayvon Martin Speech Transcript: President Comments on George Zimmerman Verdict,” *The Huffington Post*, 19 July 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/19/obama-trayvon-martin-speech-transcript_n_3624884.html.
- 18 West, “Race Matters.”
- 19 Eddie S. Glaude Jr., “One of the most efficient (and insidious) ways to discipline dissent is the appeal to civility,” 27 April 2015, 8:23 a.m., tweet.
- 20 See Brennan Williams, “Common Says Showing Love to White People Is the Cure to Racism,” *The Huffington Post*, 24 March 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/18/common-white-people-cure-to-racism_n_6895864.html.
- 21 Stereo Williams, “Common, Pharrell, and ‘The New Black’: An Ignorant Mentality That Undermines the Black Experience,” *The Daily Beast* 19 March 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/03/19/common-pharrell-and-the-new-black-an-ignorant-mentality-that-undermines-the-black-experience.html>.

- 22 Gus T. Renegade, "Are Black People Too Eager to Forgive Racist Behaviors?" Atlanta Blackstar 6 May 2015, <http://atlantablackstar.com/2015/05/06/are-black-people-too-eager-to-forgive-racist-behaviors>.
- 23 The use of the term "subaltern" comes from Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", which is a foundational piece of work in postcolonial and postmodern studies. She coins the use of subaltern from her work on Antonio Gramsci's Marxist critique of cultural hegemony.
- 24 In Formal Logic terms, using the Traditional Square of Opposition that helps us determine inferences that can be made from propositions, the subaltern position is known as the I proposition, also known as the particular affirmative (PA) and is directly under the A proposition, or the universal affirmative (UA). The I then is a subalternate of the A and thus it is assumed that all characteristics of the (PA) are subsumed under the (UA). But in power relationships, of which Spivak speaks clearly within a postcolonial discourse, the universal is oppressive and hegemonic and restricts the voice and energies of the particular.
- 25 In the preface to the 2001 edition of Cornel West's book *Race Matters*, he prophetically exclaims, "The fundamental litmus test for American democracy—its economy, government, criminal justice system, education, mass media, and culture—remains: how broad and intense are the arbitrary powers used and deployed against black people. In this sense, the problem of the twenty-first century remains the problem of the color line" (vii).