ELOQUENT RAGE

A BLACK FEMINIST DISCOVERS HER SUPERPOWER

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I don't know what changed. Maybe, with all of my schooling complete, I felt like I really had made it. Maybe my twenty-eight-year-old body would no longer be denied. Maybe I had been looking for permission and I was ready to listen. Robin's resistance to the crazy-making sexual politics of the church helped, too. She was brave enough to see past all the ways that church and culture told Black women "no." She was brave enough to go in search of her own "yeses." Brave enough to trust that God does, in fact, have some yeses for grown-ass women. Brave enough, like my grandmother was, to recognize that all the stuff we're made of God calls "good." Because of her, I braved the roiling waters of my own heart and decided to, for once, stand on my own side. Spiritual attitude adjustment complete, I set out on a quest for the good stuff.

Brittney Cooper
from Eloquent Rage

ORCHESTRATED FURY

Respectability politics died the day Michelle Obama showed up to her last official engagement as First Lady with a thrown-together ponytail-bun combination and a facial expression fit for a funeral. She looked flawless as always. She also looked fed up and ready to go. Respectability politics, the belief that Black people can overcome many of the everyday, acute impacts of racism by dressing properly and having education and social comportment is, first and foremost, performed as a kind of sartorial prerogative. What I mean is that your fashion choices are subject to great scrutiny. Black people are taught to care how they look and how their children look. If you see a little Black girl out in public with her hair unkempt—her parts unintentionally jagged, her edges unsmoothed, her ponytails askew, or her hair ornaments not in their proper place—you can be assured that there is some Black woman somewhere asking, "Who does that baby belong to?"

Black women's hairstyles are their own cultural vocabulary, which change depending on mood, life circumstance, and who exactly will be seeing us on any given day. Mrs. Obama's hairstyle was the kind you put together after you'd been up all night packing and it's time to get your shit, leave the keys on the counter, and go. It's not public hair. It is not hair given to inaugural pomp and circumstance. It is everyday Black-girl hair. We learn this complex hair vocabulary as we sit perched, often for hours, between the knees of mothers, aunties, and hairstylists, trained and untrained, from babyhood forward.

Every night, my mother painstakingly parted my hair and greased my scalp, and then plaited or rolled my hair for ease of styling in the morning. The next morning, I would sit between her legs while she parted my hair into three or four neat sections, affixed rubber bands to the tops of each section, and then twisted my ponytails. She finished by tying ribbons at the tops and snapping barrettes on the ends. At the end of each day, she would fuss and scold when I came home with those same barrettes missing and ponytails askew and unraveled after "ripping and running and not being careful" at recess. At age twelve, when my mother finally decided it was time for me to get a perm, my hairdresser, Mrs. Earline, asked my mother "Are you sure?" And, later, when Mom came to pick me up with my newly permed, silky tresses, Mrs. Earline said, "I prayed over this baby's head. When I didn't see any hair on the comb as I worked it through, I knew the Lord was saying it was going to be alright." Maintaining my head of long, thick hair was a community project.

At age fifteen, when I accompanied my mother and her three sisters to see the movie premiere of *Waiting to Exhale*, I knew what it meant, then, when Bernadine, after being newly separated from her cheating husband, went to the hairdresser and asked her stylist to chop off nearly every inch of her beautiful, luxurious mane. Even though I didn't have the emotional maturity to understand the devastation of losing a marriage, I knew how much effort it took to grow that length and thickness of hair and keep it beautiful. I knew how much Black women and girls envied having long, thick hair in a world where white women's ability to grow and regrow hair like weeds was the standard of beauty. Chopping it all off meant she was going through something exceedingly terrible.

My social media and text feeds lit up the moment we got a good look at Mrs. Obama's last inauguration hairdo. Throughout her two terms as first lady, and particularly in the second term, Mrs. Obama's public hair was always long and flowing, with unique kinds of cuts and styles. Black women were culturally obsessed with both her fashion choices and her hair. Was it permed or was it natural? Was she rocking bangs? Who was her stylist and what were they doing to give her hair all that bounce and body? How were Malia and Sasha wearing their hair? These questions are all forms of cultural assessment that Black women and girls do with other Black women and girls. Though sometimes it can morph into mean-girlness, in Mrs. Obama's case, our running cultural commentary about her hair was one of seeing her and feeling seen. It meant that there were Black girls in the White House with hair—challenges, and woes, and

triumphs—just like us. So when I saw her hair on her last day, it was clear that she had not spent hours in a stylist's chair getting her 'do done just right. Presumably, she would have wanted to be a fashion stunner for her final formal public appearance. Instead, this bona fide fashion icon showed up to the inauguration of Donald Trump with a quick and convenient on-the-go 'do, and what looked like a good church dress she had pulled from the closet. Certainly, she may simply have been gracious in letting Melania have her moment. But there was also something about the refusal to perform the public standard—a standard that Mrs. Obama had herself set—that marked an unceremonious ending.

Her hair was a signal to the world that what we were about to witness was some bullshit. She knew it. We knew it. "Do y'all see this shit?" that hair asked of all of us who were watching or deliberately not watching our complicated American homeland being placed in the hands of a mentally unwell fascist. Like the rest of us, she might have to accept it, but she didn't have to like it. The "I-refuse-to-be-botheredness" of that ponytail evinced rage of both the eloquent and the elegant varieties. It wasn't so much about the actual hairstyle. A bun or ponytail can be elegant and appropriate. It was the combination of this kind of informal updo with a dress that was pretty, but also unremarkable, that signaled a kind of pulling back, a disengagement, with the American public. Mrs. Obama didn't throw her middle fingers up at the system that had just elected Donald Trump. However, the subtlety in her refusal of pomp and circumstance belied a deep disdain for the way in which the American people had

rejected her work, and that of President Obama, by installing his nemesis—a man who had started a whole movement questioning his citizenship—in the White House.

Respectability politics are at their core a rage-management project. Learning to manage one's rage by daily tamping down that rage is a response to routine assaults on one's dignity in a world where rage might get you killed or cause you to lose your job. Mrs. Obama had to learn this lesson quickly, and on the national stage, after being accused and publicly caricatured as an Angry Black Woman when Mr. Obama ran for his first term. She chose to channel her energy into slaying the American public in another way, by offering an impeccable standard of fashion to a watching world. Sometimes that is what Black women do when we can't give in to the murderous levels of rage we feel at the indignities we experience. We can't kill. But we can *slay*.

Rage is a fundamentally more reasonable response to America's cultural investment in the disrespect of Black women than being respectable. That's why it's damn near impossible for rage and respectability to reside in the same place. On her last day, Mrs. Obama didn't sublimate the rage over Trump and his wife to the province of *the slay*. She simply refused. Rage is a kind of refusal. To be made a fool of, to be silenced, to be shamed, or to stand for anybody's bullshit. It is a refusal of the lie that Black women's anger in the face of routine, everyday injustice is not legitimate. Black women's rage is a way of looking these mischaracterizations in the face and responding, "You got me *all the way* fucked up."

This is what I heard—what I *felt*—when I saw Mrs. Obama's

ponytail. Having had her anger hyperpoliced since 2007, when her husband announced his candidacy, on her very last day on the job Mrs. Obama became, as comedy writer Damon Young might say, "fuck-deficient." Since the definition of respectability politics is that you absolutely give a fuck (because you have to) about what white folks and everybody else thinks, respectability politics and fuck-deficiency pretty much *cannot* coexist in the same body.

Audre Lorde, the first writer to offer a Black feminist theory of anger, famously argued in "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," the essay that I always keep close at hand, that "Women of Color in america have grown up within a symphony of anger, at being silenced, at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service. And I say *symphony* rather than *cacophony* because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart." Black women's rage is a kind of orchestrated fury. Lorde went on to say, "We have had to learn to move through them and use them for strength and force and insight within our daily lives. Those of us who did not learn this difficult lesson did not survive. And part of my anger is always libation for my fallen sisters." Michelle Obama's negotiation of Trump's inauguration, the manner in which she both expressed her disdain but kept it respectful at the same time, was nothing short of symphonic.

Black folks codified the ideology of respectability in the decades following Reconstruction after the federal government, helped along by indifferent white Northerners, left

newly freed Black folks in the South to fend for themselves against the terroristic whims and fancies of angry white Southerners, who were still licking their wounds over their Civil War loss. Women and men like Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Booker T. Washington reasoned that if Black folks learned to work hard, educate themselves, and stay out of trouble, white people would see that we were good, respectable people, *human beings*, worthy of both citizenship and protection. Initially, respectability politics was a survival strategy in the face of the massive potential for violence. It was a conservative strategy but an imminently reasonable one for nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Blacks faced with high rates of illiteracy, housing and job insecurity, and cyclical influxes to the North of Black folks looking to make a better life. Showing these Black people how to present a respectable image became a key strategy in securing their survival in hostile and violent conditions.

The problem with all provisional strategies, particularly when they begin to work for the exceptional few, is that they rise to the level of ideology. Soon, Black folks began to blame other Black people for bringing the race down. The Respectables, as I like to call them, claimed that our refusal to practice chastity and piety and avoid crime led to our low esteem among white people. Taken to its extreme form, respectability politics will net you Black people who don't love Black people. Ben Carson and Clarence Thomas are the chiefs among these anti-Black Judas types.

But the Obamas themselves practiced and subscribed to a mild, everyday politics of respectability, too. During an infamous commencement address at historically Black Bowie

State University in 2013, the First Lady critiqued the propensity among Black youth who had been taken in by the lure of celebrity. "Today, instead of walking miles every day to school, they're sitting on couches for hours, playing video games, watching TV. Instead of dreaming of being a teacher or a lawyer or a business leader, they're fantasizing about being a baller or a rapper." This is the language of respectability. It comes from the same place as Sunday sermons that wag fingers at young men to pull up their pants. It comes from the same place as Barack Obama's unique penchant for telling Black men to be good fathers to their children, a message he never felt compelled to share with predominantly white audiences. The ways the Obamas engaged Black audiences during their time in the White House were filled with what we might call the everyday respectability politics of our parents and grandparents, who implored us: "Act like you got some sense," and "Don't make me have to come up to that school."

The Respectables' credo is two-fold: You have to be twice as good to get half as far, and Never let 'em catch you slippin'. (But the Respectables ideally would say this in completely proper English, without my Hip Hop–era remix.) This sounds like good sense. It sounds like Black people taking on the very high levels of personal responsibility that those on the right love to talk about so much. But it doesn't acknowledge that when you are twice as good, white folks will resent you for being better. And all human beings deserve at least a few slips. It's inhuman to demand otherwise.

When we saw the Obamas exit their caravan and walk down the streets of Washington, D.C., smiling and waving

on January 20, 2009, these guiding principles reached great commandment status. We felt our ancestors smiling. We felt new possibilities taking shape for our children. For once, America had let us win. The project of respectability had triumphed. It had proven that if Black people would simply get educated, be upstanding and respectable, and work hard, they could be absolutely anything—even president.

But the respectability project was particularly burdensome for Michelle Obama. She was policed and critiqued from head to toe by every community—white, Black, and in-between. When she turned inward to focus on her children, a safe stance that made her more palatable to broad American audiences, white feminists expressed disdain for her embrace of the "mom-in-chief" role, calling it antifeminist. They conveniently forgot that their ancestors had long claimed ladyhood uniquely for themselves, refusing, to the great chagrin of Black women, to acknowledge that sisters of a darker hue were ladies, too. However, Black women refused to cede the volatile turf of American ladyhood to white women, taking to public outlets to remind white women that it was a privilege for a Black woman to be able to *just* focus on raising her kids. This battle to define ladyhood for ourselves, and to access its protections, was longstanding. I think again of Ida B. Wells being ejected from the ladies' car after she had refused to sit in the smoky, filthy, segregated colored car of the train. A few years later, Anna Julia Cooper wrote about needing to use the bathroom at a train station. When she approached the door, each was marked with a sign, one reading "for ladies," and the other "for colored." Which sign should she, a consummate colored lady, choose?

To be a Black woman is to be always confronted with these kinds of profane distinctions, to be asked to choose between your race and your gender. Black social life in the nineteenth century was marked for Black women by a lack of access to the protections of ladyhood, and by a steadfast refusal among white people to even make gender distinctions among Black people. Those ideas shaped the way in which Michelle Obama was both perceived and policed. There was a minor public outcry when she took her official White House portrait in a sleeveless dress. And there was the time U.S. Congressman Jim Sensenbrenner referred to her as having a big butt. One of the perks of being a lady is not being subject to people's lewd, thinly veiled sexual commentaries. Michelle Obama enjoyed no such perks. It also bears noting that white people's regulation of Black women's bodies in the public sphere is one reason that Black people have been obsessed with outward appearance. Michelle Obama's ascent to ladyhood, despite these persisting obstacles, conquered that offensive history, proving that Black women could be the arbiters of American femininity and style, too.

Meanwhile, Melania Trump represented everything that Mrs. Obama did not. During the 2016 campaign, not only were Mrs. Trump's educational credentials in question and her open brand of sexuality deemed antithetical to respectable American ladyhood, but in her Republican National Convention speech, she *plagiarized Michelle Obama*. Yet this is the couple that the American people chose to succeed the Obamas in the White House. Meanwhile, Melania Trump was allowed to float above criticism, even though she initially refused to live in the White House and to take on the

social demands of First Ladyhood. Had Michelle Obama dared to be so resistant, we would never have heard the end of the insults and bellyaching of the American public. But Mrs. Trump is the beneficiary of America's silence.

Of course, on Inauguration Day, Michelle Obama was *put out* with this whole state of affairs. Being compelled by law and custom to hand the mantle over to someone who tried to obtain it by biting your beats is almost too much to bear. But it also is perhaps the most symbolic evidence of the failure of the project of African American respectability.

A Black woman, descended from enslaved people, became the First Lady of a country that historically used Black women's bodies merely to reproduce noncitizens. One of the most unique things about Black women's experiences in this country is that we are the only group of people whose bodies have ever been legally mandated as the place that reproduced noncitizens. Indigenous women were never striving for their children to have American citizenship, but rather sovereignty on their own terms. And Latina immigrant women who are unfairly maligned for giving birth to children on American shores are hated precisely because they, too, can pass on the rights of citizenship to their children, even if they have been denied access to it themselves. It is Black American women whose bodily history is bound up with the burden of reproducing the condition of unfreedom for our children. It, therefore, meant something—possibly even everything—to have a Black woman, descended from these Black women, to ascend to the highest role our nation designates for women (since the presidency still eludes us.)

But by January 20, 2017, as Melania Trump stepped to the

podium in her baby-blue suit, that project had proved itself unsustainable. African American respectability might bring us to the highest office in the land, but it could not ensure any level of long-term respect for Black humanity, Black womanhood, Black manhood, or Black childhood. During the Obama administration unarmed Black men, Black women, and Black children had all been murdered by the police, while most of the offending officers never lost their jobs or freedom. So it made sense that Mrs. Obama showed up looking somber, as if she were attending a funeral.

Maybe Michelle Obama hasn't divested from respectability politics forever. Truth be told, they have served her well. But a well-timed diss can let you know the limitations of a way of thinking or mode of being in the world. If you weren't looking for it carefully, Lady Obama's class and social position might have allowed you to miss her microresistance. In myriad ways Black women daily resist messages that try to shame us into submission or otherwise steal and kill our joy. That dissent doesn't just happen on national stages. Sometimes it goes down in the everyday spaces that Black women frequent, spaces that are rife with misogynoir (a term that specifically refers to hatred of Black women) and that are tasked with the work of disciplining Black women and girls into respectable ladyhood.

My mother was the first to teach me this lesson. She had come to pick me up after I had spent six weeks attending the Upward Bound summer program at a local Black college. This federally funded summer experience for working-class youth was the closest most of us rural and semirural Southern Black children would ever get to going to summer sleepaway

camp. For six weeks, we stayed on campus in the dorms, being exposed to what college life might look like, while we spent our days doing math and science enrichment, attending cultural experiences like plays and poetry readings, and taking long-distance field trips. Those programs mattered to single moms like my own, who had big dreams for their children but very few resources.

Together, Mama and I sat at the final Upward Bound banquet, a celebration of our achievements that summer, listening to a local preacher giving the keynote address. He was in the middle of his sermon text, a classic passage from Proverbs, when my mother began shaking her head: "The Bible *says* 'train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.' Some of your children are acting up, and the *Word* says that means y'all aren't doing your jobs." A chorus of "amens" rose up around the room, affirming this conventional "wisdom." But my mother's head continued to shake. Eventually, a clear but quiet "no," formed on her lips. The head shaking drew eyes to our table, so much so that the preacher stopped, looked at her, and said, "You don't agree?" "No." She shook her head again. He said to her, surprised, "Well, that's alright." Murmurs went up around the room, as other mothers looked at my mother curiously, some with disapproval, some with surprise, and maybe, hopefully, at least a few, in relief. Satisfied that her disagreement had been registered, my mother nodded her head, letting him continue.

Later, in the car on the way home, my mom explained, "That verse says, 'When they are *old*, they won't depart from it.' Y'all aren't old yet." Blaming Black mothers for having

normal boundary-testing teenagers didn't sit well with my mother, a single mom herself. Her act of solidarity with the other single mothers in the room mattered all the more because my mother was raising a veritable, rule-following, Bible-toting Goody Two-Shoes. But she refused the carrot of thinking herself better than other folks because her own child didn't have the behavior problems or classroom demeanor of some of the other children. Mama knew she was an underdog in a room full of underdogs, and like she has told me on more than one occasion, "I always root for the underdog."

Too often, Black leaders think rooting for Black folks means shaming them into respectability. Southern Black male preachers are masters of propagating sexist common sense to achieve respectable outcomes. On more Sundays than a few, their rhetoric shames single Black mothers for failing to raise their children in traditional nuclear families. But my mother was the first to teach me that we don't have to accept nonsense simply because it is common. I learned that day that sometimes you have to say no, even in a room where everyone else is offering sacrificial "yeses." Those "yeses" were a sacrifice because assenting to one's own public shaming is not an affirmation any Black woman can ever afford. Saying yes to a religious narrative about bad Black mothering that props up an even more pernicious state-based narrative that pathologizes Black mothers costs too much. A Black male preacher asking Black mothers to collude in their own denigration is unholy.

Black church ladies love the Bible verse that says, "Let all things be done decently and in order." My mother was out

of order in every respectable sense. She had challenged a preacher—in public. She challenged his biblical interpretation in a culture that believes preachers have a direct, anointed line to God. She dissented from him openly, forthrightly, and unapologetically. This, too, was eloquent rage—against the theological and social machine of respectability. This, too, was orchestrated fury, in the form of a symphonic disruption—a refusal to let "the man of God" use rhetoric to beat up on vulnerable women trying to make a way in the world for themselves and their children. My mama didn't turn over any tables in the temple like her Jesus might have done, but she did cause just enough of a disruption to make clear that an injustice was being done. Eloquent rage isn't always loud, but it is always effective.

Fourteen and a bit nonplussed by my mother's decision to make a scene, I didn't even know you could do something as bold as challenge a preacher. In Southern Black communities, the Great Chain of Being goes something like God, Black Male Preachers, and the Rest of Us. But sometimes the only thing that is in order is to act out of order. To turn up, show out, and disrupt. That preacher was touting a particular order of things, a hierarchy of shame that placed Black women on the bottom. Inherent within his remarks was an indictment of the kinds of Black families in the audience. These were working-class Black people raising children in one of the poorest states in the union. These Black families weren't two-parent, middle-class Black families. There were a few fathers, but mostly there were mothers, grandmothers, aunties, and younger siblings in that room.

Here was the Moynihan Report rearing its ugly head

again. Black mothers, according to Moynihan, were the source of our deepest, most faulty conditions. The roots of Black social wrongness ran deep. They ran to the womb, to the mothers, to the maternal labor that birthed us and made space for us. Parroting the logic of Moynihan, and many Black sociologists who had come before, this preacher argued that the reason that Black children were out of line was that fathers were absent and mothers weren't mothering well. My mother insisted on a different story. And she was willing to be disruptive in order to make that story heard.

This is what anti-Blackness looks like. This is what misogynoir sounds like. The rub is that these mansplaining men think they are *helping*. Moynihan thought his report would help. The preacher thought his sermon would help. But this is the kind of help that will kill you. In the absence of actual structural resources to ameliorate social problems, sermonic shaming and policy blaming is the opposite of help. It constitutes harm. It sounds eerily similar to the kind of shame and blame that undergirds social-welfare policy in the United States. Dog-whistle policies about welfare moms and Hip Hop anthems about greedy baby mamas and sermons about mothers who don't take care of their children all share a common through line—that Black women aren't shit, that they need to be corralled, controlled, and contained. The logic of otherwise disparately placed men—in public policy, in Hip Hop, and in the church—converges on the truth that if Black women would just be better mothers, the state wouldn't be so taxed, our communities would not be in such a shambles, and brothers wouldn't be so short in the pockets. That's a huge minefield of structurally induced hatred to navigate.

What's even more terrible is that we don't just ask Black women to traverse this difficult terrain. Black girls encounter the daily violence of this hateful cultural landscape, too. Remember, there were girls like me, on the way to becoming women, listening on that day, too, to a narrative of what proper ladyhood looked like. I was too invested in being a "good girl" to ever have thought to disrupt the preacher's message myself. But my mother had been a *bad* girl in many ways, a rebel and a teen mom who liked slightly older bad boys. That's how I got here.

Though good behavior has its place, it's the disruptive girls, the loud, rowdy, attitudinal Black girls, and the defiant, quiet, insolent Black girls who expose every day exactly what this system is made of. In September 2015, a school resource officer in South Carolina confronted a high-school student named Shakara for failure to put away her cell phone as she sat at her desk during math class. To be clear, the term "school resource officer" is a just a fancy name for police officers in schools, doing the kinds of jobs that used to be reserved for principals and school counselors. Although she sat quietly at her desk, Shakara held the phone tightly in her hand, defying her teacher's orders to put it away.

At the behest of the Black male teacher, a white male police officer named Ben Fields arrived and began hassling Shakara. She neither ignored him nor responded to him. Instead, Shakara sat quietly, looking straight ahead, exercising her right to remain silent. An arrest would be forthcoming anyway. Very rarely are Black girls read in ways that recognize what their fear might look like. Fields saw only insubordination, and he responded with escalation, grabbing Shakara

with such force that he tipped the desk over while she was still seated inside it. From that position, he yanked her body violently out of the desk, creating such momentum that, as he dislodged her body, she collided violently with the wall.

Shakara's classmates looked terrified, even as one lone distressed teenager, a girl named Niya Kenny, stood up and yelled, "What the fuck?! What the fuck?! This can't happen." Niya encouraged her classmates to tape the incident, and later, said, "I was screaming, 'What the F___? What the F____?' Is this really happening? I was praying out loud for the girl."

Cussing and praying. Mixing the profane and sacred together. No one can cuss you out more eloquently than a Black woman can. It might be a stereotype, but it's also a truth. We cuss out of rage, and we pray that the cussing will be enough to get all the rage out. We curse those who trespass against us, and we pray usually that the rage won't win. We curse systems, and we pray for divine help to overcome those very same systems. This is why it is so egregious for preachers to use biblical texts to shame Black women and girls into complying with a system that hates them. Most Black girls and women come to lean on that same holy language for divine help when the system shows up to smash them into a million pieces. Rage and respectability can't exist in the same space. But cussing and praying absolutely can. These forms of expression, themselves tethered to those spaces between disrespect and respectability, hold Black women together when the violence we encounter would otherwise rip us apart.

Shakara and Niya were both arrested for the dubious

charge of "disturbing schools." More than a year later, the charges were dropped, but not before students at the high school held protests in *favor* of the school resource officer getting his job back. Many of the children who protested were Black, because Black children learn early that the best way to survive in a broken system is to go along to get along. If Shakara hadn't persisted in her small but mighty act of rebellion, we might never have seen just how violent the world is toward Black girls who don't immediately comply. Shakara's rage was quiet. But it was no less eloquent, no less clear.

Many, many Black folks, the ones who daily tell their children, "Don't make me come up to that school," were incensed at Shakara. "Why didn't she just put the phone away?" They asked similar questions when, months earlier, Sandra Bland was threatened with tasing and then arrested after challenging a dubious citation by a Texas police officer.

Because respectability is a rage-management project, those invested in Black respectability are often deeply uncomfortable with Black rage. Respectability tells us that staying alive matters more than protecting one's dignity. Black rage says that living without dignity is no life at all. This rage is dangerous because it can't be reasoned with, can't be forced to accept the daily indignities of racism, and more than likely will fight back, rather than fleeing or submitting. The consequence of all these antirespectable choices range from violence to death. Ask Sandra Bland. . . . *My anger is always libation for my fallen sisters.*

To be clear, Black living and Black surviving matters. We can't be dogmatic about the rightness or wrongness of embracing rage or choosing safety. It would be irresponsible for

me to tell people to embrace rage and all its consequences when I daily put on a respectable outfit and drive in a solidly middle-class car to a solidly middle-class job. Perfecting the art of respectability in the right moments helped me to make it this far. But the more access I have to halls of power, to places where decisions get made, the more rage I feel. I know how to "count the costs" of my rage, but I wonder if we've learned how to count the costs of our respectability. It makes us emotionally dishonest. It makes us unable to see each other. It causes us to sympathize with the dignity vampires, come to take everything from us while claiming we brought it on ourselves.

Grown Black people resented Shakara's youthful rebellion. Underneath the resentment, clearly people were horrified at the violence. But the view was, "We already know how *they* will treat us. So we can never give them a reason." *Never let them catch you slippin'.* Luckily, Niya's mother had more vision than much of the shortsighted public discourse. After Niya was arrested for "disturbing schools," her mother said, "Looking at the video, who was really disturbing the school? Was it my daughter? Or was it the officer who came into the classroom and did that to the young girl?" Shakara's silence in the face of such violence, and Niya's loud wailing of distress and disruption came to help us. These Black girls asked us to be emotionally honest about how fucked up this world is. They gave us an opportunity, if we would only get in touch with our rage, with the righteousness of it, to imagine a world in which two grown men could figure out a dignified and reasonable way to get a teenage girl to put away her phone. Suppressed rage will cause us to accept gratuitous violence

as a necessary evil. Expressed rage offers us an opportunity to do better.

Two grown men, one Black and one white, one a teacher and one an officer, colluded that day to terrorize two Black girls, and a room full of mostly Black students, into submission. And only the power of Black girls refusing to bow down to this unprincipled show of force alerted the nation to the problem of how Black girls get treated in schools. After she was arrested, Niya left school in pursuit of her GED. Because Shakara was in the foster-care system, her anonymity was protected and it's not clear what happened to her. Niya became another of the disproportionate number of Black girls who are suspended every year compared to their white counterparts. Her contact with the legal system also means that her act of solidarity made her one more Black student forced into what Monique Morris has called the "school-to-confinement pathways" that dog Black girls for the entirety of their educational lives.

Rage is costly. And its costs are directly proportional to the amount of power any given woman or girl has when she chooses to wield it.

But Black women's rage also builds movements. Black Lives Matter. This is the most eloquent statement of rage to come out of Black communities in a generation. Three Black women began proclaiming this simple truth on July 13, 2013, after George Zimmerman was acquitted of killing Trayvon Martin. The entire narrative of the Zimmerman trial had become a story about Black women and rage. Much of the trial decision seemed to rely on the testimony of Trayvon Martin's good friend Rachel Jeantel. He had been on the

phone with Rachel just as Zimmerman started to stalk him around the neighborhood. Rachel heard the initial moments of the confrontation before her phone went dead. And when she took the stand on Trayvon's behalf, Rachel was all hood solidarity and unpolished Black-girl attitude. Her rage over the killing of her friend was apparent, but because she had a speech impediment, and little investment in taking the stand to relive the trauma of hearing her friend be murdered, the inelegance of her speech made her rage seem less eloquent. But it was abundantly, expressly clear that she was mad at losing her friend, and mad at the farce of a trial that eventually acquitted Zimmerman. All us Black girls who love bigheaded Black boys as friends and brothers and cousins were mad.

That very same night, Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi got together on social media and began proclaiming "#BlackLivesMatter." Those words became even more salient on August 9, 2014, when Ferguson, Missouri, police officer Darren Wilson picked a fight with Michael Brown and his friend Dorian Johnson as they walked in the middle of the street within a small apartment complex on Canfield Drive. Wilson pulled his gun and shot Mike Brown multiple times, claiming afterward that Brown tried to grab his gun. After residents stood vigil for four and a half hours as Mike Brown's body lay in the street, the next iteration of the movement was born.

Individualized acts of eloquent rage have limited reach. But the collective, *orchestrated fury* of Black women can move the whole world. This is what the Black Lives Matter movement has reminded us. There is something clarifying

about Black women's rage, something essential about the way it drills down to the core truth. The truth is that Black women's anger is not the problem. "For it is not the anger of Black women," Lorde tells us, "which is dripping down over this globe like a diseased liquid. It is not [our] anger which launches rockets . . . missiles, and other agents of war and death." "Anger," she said, "is an appropriate response to racist attitudes." #AudreLordeTaughtMe

We live in a nation that does everything to induce our rage while simultaneously doing everything to deny that we have a right to feel it. American democracy is as much a project of suppressing Black rage as it is of legitimizing and elevating white rage. American democracy uses calls for civility, equality, liberty, and justice as smoke screens to obscure all the ways in which Black folks are treated uncivilly, unequally, illiberally, and unjustly as a matter of course. Had Darren Wilson been just a bit more "civil," Mike Brown might very well be alive.

The lie we are told is that white rage and white fear are honest emotions that preserve the integrity of American democracy. More often than not, we keep learning that white rage and white fear are dishonest impulses that lead us toward fascism. White rage and white fear are reactions to perceptions among white people that their power might be slipping away. Black rage and Black fear are fundamentally more honest, because they are reactions to the violence of white supremacy. When Black women are the collective arbiters and organizers of Black rage, it is inherently more inclusive. By proclaiming that Black Lives Matter, the leaders of the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) have been insisting that

the American democratic project become as inclusive as it claims to be. White supremacist gaslighting insists that what the statement really means is "only Black lives matter." But that is willful ignorance on the part of folks who refuse to see that the conditions that prompted the proclamation in the first place were conditions that tried to assert that Black lives didn't matter, that they were disposable, and that Black communities didn't deserve justice. Black women, therefore, stood up and said, "We *matter*." *Too. Also.* I simply refuse to believe that white people don't know this.

Whether we are at work, at church, at school, in court, in the halls of government, or in the streets, the rage of Black women and girls does the necessary work of pushing American democracy forward, of exposing its flaws, of dramatizing its injustices, of taking its violent beatings. Black women's rage isn't always healthy, particularly when we turn it on ourselves or on our children. But when we turn it outward and focus it on the powers that would crush us into submission and give back to us a mangled image of ourselves, Black women's rage is a kind of power that America would do well to heed if it wants to finally live up to its stated democratic aims.

WHITE-GIRL TEARS

The problem with the 2016 presidential election is simple: White feminists did not come get their people. Who are the people of white feminists? Other white women. Until the election of Donald Trump, very few Americans, beyond political scientists and analysts, paid attention to the fact that white women have a long history of voting predominantly for Republican candidates in presidential elections. In fact, in 2016, 3 percent fewer white women voted for Trump than those who had voted for Mitt Romney in 2012. That's a significant political shift in one election cycle. But when we woke up on November 9, 2016, to discover that white women were not interested in forming a president in their own image, suddenly we began to train our eyes more heavily on white women, trying to understand what the hell was going on.

As I made clear earlier, I have always known of white women's great capacity to be treacherous. But I did not know