

TRUTH IN LOVE

African Americans Can't Stay Silent Amid Violence in Black Communities

By Parris J. Baker
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From the birth of our nation there have been deliberate and aggressive attempts to silence and control the voices of Black people by white leaders, politicians, and policymakers. Initially, enslaved African people, who had never known freedom in the new America, were caged, castrated, and brutalized inhumanely but their voices were not silenced.

Early in the developing history of America, the truncated voices of enslaved Africans could be heard, “Give us free[1]!” These simple, yet penetrating words inspired the next generation of Africans, now referred to as Negroes. With hope-filled hearts, Negroes sang incessantly, encoded dirges of resistant and fallen freedom fighters. These songs offered honor to those who presented the bodies as human sacrifices for freedom and provided necessary solace for those who endured seemingly endless sadness. From the shanties of southern plantations to the slums and ghettos of the urban north, Negroes all over America were instructed to “Lift every voice and sing, ’til Earth and heaven ring. Ring with the harmonies of liberty ... Let us march on ’til victory is won.”[2]

Charged with the promises of freedom there emerged the collective literary voices of such writers as Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, W.E.B. DuBois, and Langston Hughes and the lyrical and iconic blues and jazz sounds of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, and Ma Rainey. These Negroes spoke of rivers of life and living water, ancient rivers; the Nile and Euphrates, and the singing Mississippi river (“The Negro Speaks of Rivers”[3]). Their regenerated voices called steadfastly for humanity to behave humanely.

Negroes, so fervently believed in a soon coming freedom, purposed, even in the face of death, to never stop speaking. Claude McKay wrote, "If we must die, O let us nobly die, So that our precious blood may not be shed. In vain, then even the monsters we defy shall be constrained to honor us though dead!"

The propitiated patience of colored people too long pacified with the prospect of freedom began to modulate from the muffled and mutilated voices of enslaved Africans, through the Harlem Renaissance, in which Negroes cathartically transformed trauma into innovative new art forms. Songs such as "Strange Fruit," sung by Billie Holiday, and "The Bourgeois Blues," by Lead Belly, are two examples of artists using their talent to address personal and communal tragedy and trauma.

Centuries removed from the subjugated and distorted languages and dialects of their ancestors, Black people, no longer anesthetized by the "tranquilizing drug of gradualism,"[4] began to demonstrate Black dignity and Black pride through Black power and protest. "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud"[5] became the national canticle of a Black Power movement fueled by Black people who demanded a dignity found only through liberation. The angered and agitated voices of Afro-Americans had now forced itself into the American consciousness. In the final quarter of the 20th century, groups such as Public Enemy promoted a social consciousness centered on the prevalent issues of African Americans. Songs like "Fight the Power"[6] offered a refrain of rage and resistance against oppression, racism, and white hegemony.

Now, two decades into the 21st century, the harmonic, hip-hop sounds of African Americans echo another well-defined, three-word message, "Black Lives Matter!" Many of the protest songs were focused specifically on police brutality perpetrated against Black and brown people. Galvanized by songs such as "I Can't Breathe by H.E.R." and "The Bigger Picture" by Lil Baby, the theme of reducing community violence produced at the hands of police officers continue to resonate in predominantly African American communities. Joined by national and international communities of Black indigenous and other people of color, protesters have determined they will not be silent nor silenced.

I am so incredibly proud and humbled to identify as an African American, living in the history and legacy of an indomitable African ancestry. Presented with centuries of repeated inhumane and immoral treatment, multiple assigned group-role identities, the creation of structural and institutional barriers to deny access to human and civil rights, and the manipulation of religious customs to cement oppressive and tyrannical ideologies, in the words of Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise!" The contributions of African Americans to the construction and uplift of America have been amazing.

However, recently, I found myself haunted by the nuanced muteness of Black and brown communities when violent crimes are committed by Black and brown perpetrators. By nuanced muteness, I am suggesting two things: First, the response to acts of violence within Black and brown communities committed by Black and brown perpetrators is woefully inadequate. If the most recent homicides occurred at the hands of an Erie police officer, I believe the call for justice would have reverberated throughout Erie County. Given the brief historic synopsis of the demonstrated abilities of African Americans and other non-white residents to organize, march, protest, and contest for change, I am bewildered at our limited or “nuanced” responses to community and neighborhood violence.

Second, community violence is a symptom of more systemic issues unrelated to law enforcement, corrections, and our judicial systems. Instead of demanding more policing of distressed and impoverished communities, the demand should be for more mental health practitioners, increased affordable and adequate housing, and improved education systems. The relationship among social and economic variables correlated with community violence are elaborate and not easily or readily identifiable as casual agents.

In subsequent essays (I imagine it will require eight to 10 essays), I will share several stories and offer feedback of qualitative interviews with parents who have lost children to gun violence within African American and Latino families and communities. I will present assessment data and several theoretical frameworks that will guide the analysis of important familial, psychological, economic, and socio-political determinants of community violence.

The relevant issues related to community violence within the African American communities are complex and interactive. Finally, I will share my thoughts on ways to reduce community and neighborhood violence, improve or increase community solidarity, and strengthen police community relationships. This essay is a call to action. Black people can no longer remain silent regarding the increased violence in our black communities.

1. *From the movie Amistad (1997). DreamWorks Pictures.*
 2. *Lift Every Voice and Sing. (1900). James Weldon Johnson (wrote lyrics) and John Rosamond Johnson (composed music).*
 3. *Hughes, Langston, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” From the Collected Works of Langston Hughes. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group (1995).*
 4. *King, Martin L. “I Have a Dream. Speech presented at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Washington, D. C. August 1963. [here](#)*
 5. *Ellis, Alfred “Pee Wee (writer) and Brown, James (performer) In 1968 Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud was number one single on R&B charts.*
 6. *Public Enemy, Fight the Power. Released as a single by Motown Records on July 4, 1989. Rap and R & B.*
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