

*The Atlantic* “Racism Is Terrible. Blackness Is Not.” by Imani Perry.  
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A lot of kind statements about black people are coming from the pens and minds of white people now. That's a good thing. But sometimes, it is frankly hard to tell the difference between expressions of solidarity and gestures of absolution (*See, I'm not a racist, I said you matter!*) Among the most difficult to swallow are social-media posts and notes that I and others have received expressing sorrow and implying that blackness is the most terrible of fates. Their worrisome chorus: “I cannot imagine ... How do you ... My heart breaks for you ... I know you are hurting ... You may not think you matter but you matter to me.” Let me be clear: I certainly know I matter. Racism is terrible. Blackness is not.

I cannot remember a time in my life when I wasn't earnestly happy about the fact of my blackness. When my cousins and I were small, we would crowd in front of the mirrors in my grandmother's house, admiring our shining brown faces, the puffiness of our hair.

My elders taught me that I belonged to a tradition of resilience, of music that resonates across the globe, of spoken and written language that sings. If you've had the good fortune to experience a holiday with a large black American family, you have witnessed the masterful art of storytelling, the vitality of our laughter, and the everyday poetry of our experience. The narrative boils down quite simply to this: “We are still here! Praise life, after everything, we are still here!” So many people taught us to be more than the hatred heaped upon us, to cultivate a deep self-regard no matter what others may think, say, or do. Many of us have absorbed that lesson and revel in it.

One of the classic texts in African American studies is Zora Neale Hurston's 1928 essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.” Her playful yet profound articulation resonates for me now. She wrote, “I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all but about it ... No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.”

Some of her words, I must admit, are too hopeful, at least for me right now. In fact, I *do* weep at the world; I am, in a sense, part of the sobbing school; and I am skeptical that my lone oyster knife can cut any of the rot out of this nation. But, like Hurston, I refuse to see the story of who I am as a tragedy.

Joy is not found in the absence of pain and suffering. It exists through it. The scourges of racism, poverty, incarceration, medical discrimination, and so much more shape black life. We live with the vestiges of slavery and Jim Crow, and with the new creative tides of anti-blackness directed toward us and our children. We know the wail of a dying man calling for his mama, and it echoes into the distant past and cuts into our deepest wounds. The injustice

is inescapable. So yes, I want the world to recognize our suffering. But I do not want pity from a single soul. Sin and shame are found in neither my body nor my identity. Blackness is an immense and defiant joy. As the poet Sonia Sanchez wrote in a haiku about her power—and her struggles:

Come windless invader  
I am a carnival of  
stars a poem of blood

People of all walks of life are protesting the violent deaths handed out by police officers. This is extraordinary both because the victims were black—and when does black death elicit such a response?—and because Americans in general have a hard time dealing with death. Think about how uncomfortable many Americans are with grief. You are supposed to meet it with a hidden shamefulness, tuck yourself away respectably for a season, and then return whole and recovered. But that is not at all how grief courses through life. It is emetic, peripatetic; it shakes you and stops you and sometimes disappears only to come barreling back to knock the wind out of you.

Black Americans right now are experiencing a collective grief, one that unfolds publicly. And we are unable to tuck it away. I do think Hurston would have to admit this too, were she around today. She wrote her essay before *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Montgomery bus boycott, the Birmingham crusade, the March on Washington, Freedom Summer, the Voting Rights Act, the Civil Rights Acts, the rise of black mayors, the first black governor, the first black president. She wrote her essay before we understood how tightly this nation would grasp onto its original sin even after legions of black people came with razor-sharp oyster knives and hands full of pearls.

Black Americans continue to die prematurely—whether under the knee of a police officer, or struggling for breath on a respirator, or along the stretch of the Mississippi River known as Cancer Alley, or in the shadow of Superfund sites, or in one of the countless other ways we are caught in the spokes. The trauma is repetitive. We weep. But we are still, even in our most anguished seasons, not reducible to the fact of our grief. Rather, the capacity to access joy is a testament to the grace of living as a protest—described by Lorraine Hansberry, who, as one of the greatest playwrights in the history of American theater, wrote *A Raisin in the Sun*. Whenever she recounted the story of black America in lectures or discussions, she pointed to the extraordinary achievements we attained under obscene degradation. “Isn’t it rather remarkable that we can talk about a people who were publishing newspapers while they were still in slavery in 1827, you see?” she said during a speech in 1964.

Some of us who comment on racial inequality these days are averse to such accounts of black history, thinking them romantic and not frank enough about the ravages of racism. So I hope that no one is confused by my words. American racism is unquestionably rapacious. To identify the achievement and exhilaration in black life is not to mute or minimize racism, but to

shame racism, to damn it to hell. The masters were wrong in the antebellum South, when they described the body-shaking, delighted chuckle of an enslaved person as simplemindedness. No, that laugh—like our music, like our language, like our movement—was a testimony that refused the terms of our degradation. In the footage of the protests over the past several weeks, we have seen black people dancing, chanting, singing. Do not misunderstand. This is not an absence of grief or rage, or a distraction. It is insistence.

And so, I must turn the pitying gaze back upon any who offer it to me, because they cannot understand the spiritual majesty of joy in suffering. But my rejection of their account also comes with an invitation. If you join us, you might feel not only our pain but also the beauty of being human.

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## Find Out More

“Imani Perry Breathe” A Letter to My Sons.” Book Conversation with Tracy K. Smith at the Strand Book Store, New York City, September 24, 2019. YouTube-Strand Book Store Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxShfS7lhWo>

“Imani Perry: More Beautiful.” OnBeing with Krista Tippett, September 26, 2019. <https://onbeing.org/programs/imani-perry-more-beautiful/>

*Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry* by Imani Perry. Beacon Press, 2018.