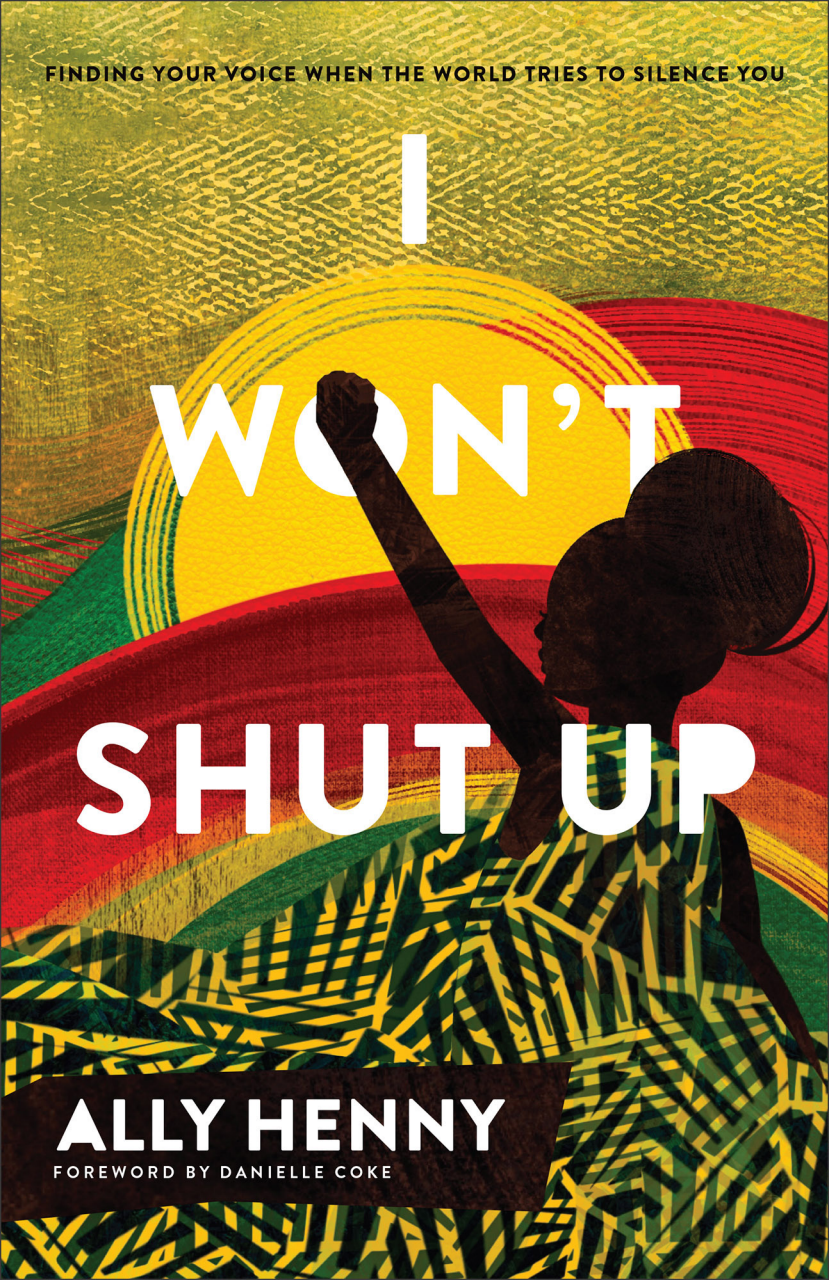


FINDING YOUR VOICE WHEN THE WORLD TRIES TO SILENCE YOU



I WON'T SHUT UP

ALLY HENNY

FOREWORD BY DANIELLE COKE

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TRIES TO SILENCE YOU



ALLY HENNY



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For my Ancestors.
To my descendants.

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FOREWORD

Danielle Coke

I first came across Ally Henny and her work in a way that you probably can relate to—a witty, honest social media post about the Black experience in white America. She was responding to an incident where a Black woman’s work had been stolen by a white woman, and the internet was, justifiably, in an uproar. While Ally’s comedic take on the issue drew me in (and had me cackling), it was her persistent pursuit of justice and her dedication to using her voice for the good of others that made me want to stick around.

If there’s one thing I’ve learned after years of being a Black woman and artist speaking out against racism on this wild internet, it’s that there is no “right” way to do it that will keep you in the good graces of the white gaze. Whether you’re shouting out against injustice in the streets through protest, or you’re quietly sitting at home sharing art as a form of digital activism, you will always be too harsh, too aggressive, too intimidating—too loud—for white supremacist culture. In this book, Ally doesn’t just want you to face this fact. She wants you to use it as fuel.

Through a collection of personal experiences, careful reflections, and unfiltered truths, Ally is setting us free. On these pages, you will find language that confirms those thoughts you've long held in the back of your mind as you've navigated a justice-focused life as a Black woman, along with a safe space to bring those thoughts out in the open. You will be given tools that you can use right away to keep honing your voice and owning your story. You will be able to rest in the fact that you're not alone and that *your life has always mattered*.

You are about to be taken on a journey through the places that shape us. From the predominantly white spaces that try to rob us of our light to the pews where we are taught that we better let that light shine, Ally reminds us that we are always worthy—even when the winds of white supremacy seek to blow us out.

Here, you won't need to be "resilient" or "strong," but you will need to be brave. Be brave enough to believe that the voices who say you are too much—or not enough—do not get the last word. You don't have to shrink or edit yourself for, as Ally puts it, "Dwight Mahn." Your voice has unimaginable power, and you have every right to use it. This book will show you how.

Ally's words are bold, empowering, and necessary. She is loud on purpose, and through sharing her story with us, she's equipping us to be the same—without apology. As long as racism rears its ugly head in our culture, it will continuously require bold opposition. Rise to the occasion.

Never shut up.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is a work of nonfiction, but it is neither an autobiography, encyclopedia entry, newspaper article, nor courtroom transcript. I have tried to retell the life events contained in this book to the best of my recollection, calling upon old journals, correspondence, and other personal writings to help give me an accurate (if not always precise) account of what happened. In some instances, I have changed names and other identifying information in order to maintain privacy or for narrative clarity. In other instances, I retained names and identifying information so that my work doesn't feel like I'm talking about someone else's life. Occasionally, I combined two or more people, incidents, and/or events to streamline the narrative. I tried to be truthful in everything shared within this book's pages—even when those truths hurt.

As I have written this work, I have worked to prioritize intersectional equity by taking into account various minoritized histories and experiences, and I have tried to use inclusive language. In order for this work to also be readable, I took some shortcuts with language so that my larger point would not get bogged down. There are times where I use “Black,” “Black people,” or “Black folks” where some iteration of the phrase “people of color” could also

fit. Please know that the spirit of this work is inclusivity, even in places where my language isn't as inclusive as it could be.

Additionally, I come to this work as a Black, straight, cisgender, gender-role noncompliant, relatively able-bodied (except for these ankles and knees, Jesus), country-born, city-dwelling, mid-Atlantic informed, Midwest raised, geriatric millennial, Christian woman and with all of the privileges and shortcomings that might accompany those identities and perspectives. I have attempted to do the difficult work of pulling universal truths from my experiences while also attempting to speak to an audience with unique yet overlapping experiences. I don't claim to have done this well, but I gave it my best shot.

Finally, I want to acknowledge and honor the fact that many (if not most) of my readers do not share my Christian spirituality. I want to say up front that the bulk of my adult life and work experience up to this point has been in the Christian church, and so it is an unavoidable fact that parts of my story would be set there. With that said, the church is merely a setting. The truths and wisdom that I pull from the harm that I experienced in the white Christian church are for anyone who wants to be free from racism. Any references to spirituality are for narrative or illustrative purposes; I am not trying to convert you to Christianity.

I hope that this work invites you in and creates space for you to ask questions, wrestle with hard truths, and experience the beauty of healing and liberation.

OVERTURE

Confessions of a Loud Black Woman

I am a loud Black woman.

All of these things are outside of my control, yet I have grappled with each of them in some way for as long as I can remember.

I am a loud Black woman.

I am loud.

I am Black.

I am a woman.

LOUD.

BLACK.

WOMAN.

Each of these identities has been under attack my whole life. Proclaiming my loudness, my Blackness, and my womanness is an act of defiance and resistance. The world continuously tells Black women who we are as if we don't know ourselves. They weaponize our attributes against us, taking the things we celebrate about ourselves and twisting them into something unrecognizable, undesirable, and inadequate. When we are witty, they tell us we are crass or insubordinate. When we display self-confidence, they

tell us we are domineering. When we emote, we are told we are exaggerating, angry, or—even worse—threatening.

I refuse to allow the world to force its harsh, dishonest, and out-of-touch definitions on me, which is why I am determined to tell this world exactly who I am. By telling the world who I am, I aim to defy the stereotypes and limitations that society has tried to place on me individually and on Black women collectively. Engaging in self-definition is how I resist the lies that society has tried to tell on loud Black women.

I am a loud Black woman.

Loudness, Blackness, and womanness are considered repulsive by the dominant white male culture. White, straight, cisgender men have made themselves the gold standard, and it is they who dictate how and whether others get to exist in this world. People who hold contested identities regularly find themselves at odds with power structures and systems that were not constructed for their flourishing. These systems are rarely concerned with anything other than protecting and maintaining the status quo of white male dominance. Marginalized folks are expected to act in accordance with this system without resisting. They must push down every part of themselves that doesn't conform to the dictates of the dominant culture. Living in such a world means that it took me a long time to fully own my identity, particularly the loud part.



Society is cruel to Black people, and it doles out a special kind of punishment to *loud* Black people. We can't do ordinary stuff like have a cookout or hang out with our friends without white people hovering over us and trying to place limits on how we express and entertain ourselves. Our mere presence in a space is often all that is needed for us to be perceived as a threat or causing a disturbance, our actual volume notwithstanding. When white people believe that we are disrupting their sense of comfort, which they interpret

as us creating a disturbance or posing some type of threat, they try to police us. When we fail to comply with their intrusive attempts to control us and Jump Jim Crow, they will call the actual police to put us in our place. The BBQ Becky incident is the perfect example of this kind of behavior.

In 2018, a white woman named Jennifer Schulte (aka BBQ Becky) called the cops on a group of Black people for having a cookout at a park in Oakland, California, because they were using charcoal in an area that had recently been made off-limits to charcoal grilling. Instead of finding a park ranger—or better yet, minding her business—BBQ Becky resorted to calling 911. Of all the actual emergencies that she could have used William Shatner’s three-digit hotline for, she chose to call it on some Negroes who were barbecuing in a park on a sunny day.

One might think that, being in California, Schulte was simply concerned that the charcoal could have sparked a wildfire. Considering California’s recent history with fires, one might even be inclined to view her actions as heroic. However, a quick listen to the recordings of Schulte’s 911 calls during the incident should be enough to show it ain’t that deep. Although Schulte said she was concerned that the “coals” from the barbecue grill could “burn more children,” her ultimate motivation was to ensure that her and her fellow gentrifiers’ taxes didn’t go up.¹ Her concern for kids only extended as far as their protection meant that she didn’t have to pay more money in taxes. Put more directly, she was full of crap and gave a full-of-crap explanation to justify her racist actions. A frequent and reliable tactic of toxic whiteness is to use protecting “the children” and not wanting higher taxes as an excuse for racist behavior. White women are particularly adept at using their concern, outrage, and tears as cover for racial wrongdoing and violence.

1. “LISTEN: ‘BBQ Becky’s’ viral 911 call made public,” YouTube video, posted by “KTVU FOX 2 San Francisco,” August 31, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LgaU1h0QiLo>.

If BBQ Becky was actually concerned about the untold danger that used charcoal briquettes posed to society, she could have contacted a park ranger, the fire department, or Smokey the Bear to help her keep her taxes low. Instead, she chose to call the cops, not once but twice, and spend two hours surveilling Black men who were doing nothing more than attempting to have a relaxing time at a public park.

BBQ Becky wasn't out there tryna protect the earth, the children, or even her tax rate. She was doing what white people have tried to do for half a millennium: exercise authority and control over Black people who are doing nothing more than tryna live. When she was met with resistance, she attempted to flip the script and make on like she was the victim—a tactic that is frequently employed by white women seeking to exert power over Black people.

BBQ Becky is proof that being Black and loud in public often draws the voyeuristic eye of white folks who deem themselves to be morally superior and are determined to find a way to shut you up. They will fight, lie, and even fake cry to make sure you regret the moment when you realize that all you have to do in this world is stay Black and die.

Sometimes shutting you up means making an unnecessary call to the cops. Other times it means deciding to take matters into their own hands—which can have a fatal outcome.

For Jordan Davis, a seventeen-year-old boy from Florida, being shut up meant taking several bullets to the chest for listening to loud music. A white man got upset that a group of Black teenagers dared to hang out in a convenience store parking lot, bumping music that he disliked at a volume that he determined was too loud. That white man was sentenced to life in prison. Jordan's parents no longer have their child. Being Black and loud can cost you your life.

Jordan Davis's murder, BBQ Becky, and dozens of similar incidents are exactly why I am not about to let white supremacy tell me that I am too loud. I refuse to accept that I need to tone down my "rhetoric" or shut up. I will not let white supremacy tell my

people that we deserve to be harassed, jailed, or killed because our existence makes white people feel uncomfortable. Black people have the right to exist and to take up at least as much space as everybody else. We shouldn't have to adjust ourselves beyond what is required for being a compassionate, ethical person. We shouldn't have to censor, filter, and regulate ourselves while doing ordinary things. We shouldn't have to be afraid that doing everyday stuff might make some white person angry or scared for their lives and so we end up in prison or dead.



A frustrating aspect of white supremacy is that Black people not only have to deal with the white supremacy inflicted on us by white people but we must also contend with other Black folks' internalized white supremacy and anti-Blackness. Respectability politics is one of the main ways that white supremacy shows up when we are amongst ourselves. Respectability politics is the belief that people from a minority group will experience less oppression if they behave in a way that is pleasing to the dominant group, which usually means attempting to imitate the dominant group's ways.

Black people must also cope with white supremacy and anti-Blackness from other racial and ethnic groups. When promoted by non-Black people, respectability politics results in lateral oppression, that is, the harm that marginalized groups enact on one another. In the hands of non-Black people of color, respectability politics becomes a means to reinforce the racial hierarchy that frequently places Black people at the bottom.

Respectability politics tells us to tuck ourselves in and pull our pants up so that white people will treat us with respect and basic human dignity. It tells us that our worth is determined by our level of education, our ability to speak with "good diction," our appearance, and even our ability to avoid being "loud." The fear of harm from white people is real, and respectability politics is

a misguided and maladaptive attempt to stay the hand of white wrath. Respectability is a tool of white supremacy because it assumes the inferiority of Black people, our ways, and our culture.

The Black community has always had folks, including some of the Ancestors, who were heavily invested in the notion that assimilation is the key to freedom. We have always had people who connected our oppression to a failure to present ourselves to white people in an “acceptable” manner. It’s more than having different preferences from the mainstream of Black culture; engaging in respectability politics involves intentionally distancing oneself from things associated with Blackness out of the misguided assumption that Black people and our culture need fixing or refinement. While these ideas may have served some of our Ancestors’ clear and present need for survival, they have done very little for the long-term flourishing of the Black community.

To be clear, I give the Ancestors all of their roses for the work that they did for us. I would not be writing this book if it weren’t for the sacrifices of women like Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer, and my personal hero, Ella Baker. Not all of the Ancestors were down with respectability politics (the women I just mentioned weren’t), but the influence of respectability politics on our discourse and freedom-seeking efforts is undeniable. The Ancestors did what they felt they had to do in order to survive in their time. Adhering to the politics of respectability was one of those things. We can celebrate our Ancestors’ accomplishments while also acknowledging the long-term negative impact that some of their ideas have had on our community. It is important for those of us who are alive in this day and age to recognize just how messed up it was that our Ancestors had to demonstrate their humanity to white people by attempting to act like them.

Respectability politics is a tool of white supremacy, and we should want no part of it. We can’t be out here doing the work of white supremacy as if we aren’t still contending with actual white supremacists. Sadly, there are some Black people who are intent on

doing the work of white supremacy because they are not yet free enough to see that respectability is a concept that doesn't deliver what it promises. Everybody has a journey that they must walk of liberating themselves from white supremacy and internalized racism. Fighting for freedom means fighting for people who don't yet realize that they need to be free.

Respectability politics don't save us. Being a professor at Harvard didn't save Henry Louis Gates from having the cops called on him when he tried to get into his own house. Being rich didn't stop someone from telling Oprah that she couldn't look at a handbag. Being a worship leader at a church didn't save Botham Jean from being shot to death in his own apartment. Being a SigRho didn't stop Sandra Bland from dying in jail after getting picked up for a traffic offense. Being a football player at an HBCU didn't stop the cops from shooting Jonathan Ferrell twelve times. Respectability politics won't save us.

What respectability does is steal from us. It steals our esteem for who we are as Black people and replaces it with a sense of shame. It makes us ashamed of our communities. It makes us ashamed of our vernacular. It makes us ashamed of our culture—the food, art, beliefs, and everything else that makes Blackness unique. It makes us ashamed of any aspect of our culture that doesn't jibe with the mandates of whiteness. It even makes us ashamed of one another.

One of the first things that respectability politicians will say about other Black folks is that they are loud, and they will make sure everybody knows that they prefer to carry themselves in a more dignified manner. They will express disdain for certain Black celebrities they say are loud. They won't watch certain Black shows or listen to certain types of Black music because they associate them with loudness. They won't dress in certain clothing styles because they are too loud.

Respectability politics usually defines loudness as any attribute, attitude, or action that is not carried out in a subdued or understated manner. On this wise, loudness isn't necessarily determined

by volume, though volume is part of what is considered loud. Loudness, essentially, is drawing attention to oneself by breaking certain social norms. There is a strong element of subjectivity to loudness; what is deemed loud in one setting is not necessarily considered loud in other circumstances. Social class, education, and geographic location often determine what people might deem loud. Generally, what people call loud is considered loud because it trends away from what is considered normal by the dominant, white culture.



It is no small coincidence that what respectability politics tells us is loud is also what is looked down upon by white society. White society takes issue with loudness. In white culture, loudness is associated with being uncouth, which is why virtually any place that white culture esteems as a paragon of sophistication and taste is quiet, if not totally silent. Museums, orchestra concerts, theatre productions, and high-end restaurants are just a few of the places where white culture demands restraint—if not absolute silence—from its patrons.

White culture associates loudness with being uneducated, uncultured, and poor. This is why a lot of white comedians, especially those of the blue-collar variety, are loud and bawdy. By embracing the speaking volume of the working class, they push the aesthetic boundaries of whiteness. It's not that loud white people don't exist, because they do, but being a loud white person is not seen so much as a problem to be eliminated as it is an attribute in need of refinement. The behavior of loud whites is rarely regulated and is often seen as a negligible quality of a group of people who carry a certain provincial charm. In other words, whiteness confers the privilege of loudness on poor white people.

Poor white people get to be loud because their whiteness shields them from being seen as a threat, and, if anything, their loudness

is viewed as an endearing quality that comes with their social status. White loudness is nonthreatening and entertaining to other white people, and if there is anything that middle- and upper-class white people love, it is to be entertained by working-class white folks. They enjoy laughing at the expense of poor white folks almost as much as they love being entertained by Black people. Middle-class white people get to laugh at and be entertained by the loud, poor white folks. The poor white folks get to feel seen by society, all the while laughing at themselves to keep from crying about their marginalized status in the white power structure.

The one shred of hope, the singular bone that the white bourgeois throws to poor white people is that, if they maintain white solidarity, they will never be treated as badly as Black, Indigenous, and Brown folks. A sordid detail of the whiteness conspiracy is that poor whites have always been eager to trade their dignity for a semblance of power over people of color. It was poor white people who were the overseers and enforcers on the plantation during slavery. It was poor white people who carried out America's colonization agenda that led to the genocide of Indigenous peoples. And it was poor white people who seemed to be the most stirred up about Brown people immigrating to the United States from other parts of the world after September 11, 2001, and who chanted "build the wall" during the 2016 election cycle.

White people can keep their loudness as long as it serves the purposes of whiteness and follows its dictates. Everyone else must shut up or be shut up.

I refuse to let white supremacy shut me up.

I am a loud Black woman.

You don't have to allow white supremacy to shut you up either. You have permission to be as loud as you want to.



When we claim our loudness, we flout the standards that the dominant culture tries to impose upon people who are loud, particularly and especially Black women. Being Black comes with the assumption that you are being loud no matter what your actual volume is. Beyond one's speaking volume, loudness is drawing more attention or taking up more space than white people—or Black folks who are doing the work of white supremacy—think you should. Natural hairstyles are loud. Wigs and weaves are loud. Long fingernails are loud. Curvy hips and a full bosom are loud. Speaking slang is loud. Speaking “standard” English is loud. Wearing a dashiki is loud. Wearing high heels is loud. Being athletic is loud. Being fat is loud. Having a GED is loud. Having a PhD is loud. Being on welfare is loud. Making six figures is loud. Existing is loud.

It seems like no matter what Black women do, whatever our choices are, we are seen as loud. And our loudness is perceived as anger, whether we're actually angry or not. Whiteness uses Black women's anger against us as a way to disqualify and discredit us because the dominant culture can only hear those who speak in syrupy sweet tones. And since our very existence has been labeled as loud and angry, our very existence is also thoroughly discredited and disqualified. Therefore, Black women must shut up or be shut up.

Black women are told to shut up because our existence in this world loudly testifies that no one should be forced to fit inside other people's boxes. Try as we might, our bodies do not easily bend to white standards of beauty. As much as our bodies refuse to bend to white norms, our spirits also refuse to be broken by them. We are the daughters of women who survived the slave master's whip and the colonizer's gun. Many of us are the offspring of women who endured and survived the harshness of the Middle Passage. We carry the burdens and the traumas of our foremothers within our own bodies. We come from women who fought to survive, many of them trusting in their God to “make a way outta no

way” when the white man tried to convince them that their only value was found on their backs and between their thighs.

As much as whiteness tries to invalidate, erase, and ignore Black women, still we rise. As much as whiteness attempts to silence us, we keep making noise in stereo. Individually, our loudness has allowed us to push back against our oppression. Collectively, our loudness has supported and carried the cause of Black freedom both within and outside of the Black community.



For me to claim and proclaim the fact that I am a loud Black woman is to dismantle the oppression that comes with carrying these identities. But before I get too deep into proclaiming and dismantling, I should tell you a bit about how being a loud Black woman has shaped who I am. I wasn't always as outspoken about my loudness, my Blackness, or my womanness. Finding my voice in a world that constantly tells Black women we are too loud was hard.

I have had to fight to get to where I am, and that is what this book is about.

I hope that, as you read this book, you will find yourself in my story. I hope that as you find yourself in my story, you will also find your voice. I hope that finding your voice will help you to speak the truth. And I hope that the truth will set you free.



ACT I

THE (NOT SO) SECRET ORIGINS OF ALLY HENNY



1

A WALKING CONTRADICTION

Learning to Lay Down the Burden of White Supremacy

I am a walking contradiction of sorts.

I am loud, but I am also shy. Very shy. *Painfully* shy.

People who have known me for any length of time are often surprised to find this out about me because in situations that require me to be “on,” I can be quite loud and animated without giving the slightest hint that I am feeling apprehensive. In small groups or one-on-one, I can be quite talkative—if I am comfortable around you or if you ask me the right questions.

I have a loud voice. I have worked very hard over the years to develop a range of volume, but my normal speaking voice is usually fairly loud. I chalk it up to growing up in a large, loud extended family—I am actually one of the quieter ones. I also have a loud,

ugly, and extra laugh. I laugh extra and have the audacity to love to laugh. When I laugh, I scream, wheeze, clap, stomp, fall out, jump, cry, cough, shake, dance, and Lord knows what else. I can be in a room by myself and have a thought pop into my head and I'll start laughing uncontrollably and have tears running down my face. In fact, I'm laughing as I write this thinking about how I just be laughing at something that I can't explain to other people because I can't talk about it without laughing.

A lot of people conflate loudness with extroversion and assume that since I'm loud, I must also be an extrovert. This couldn't be farther from the truth. I am an introvert, but after I warm up to a situation and have the opportunity to talk about something I'm passionate about, I will talk long and very loudly about it. The truth is, I would rather try to brush an alligator's teeth than be in a social situation with people I don't know. I have spent many a restless night worrying about what I was going to say and how I was going to act in a new social setting. I'm always grateful when a close friend or relative is able to be with me in a new environment so I can figuratively "hide behind" them—I would literally hide if I could.

The complicated fears, concerns, and emotions that I feel in a new social situation make it hard for me to find my words at first. I need time to get my bearings and read the room before I can come out of my shell. I don't think my shyness is serious enough to be considered full-blown social anxiety, but it is enough that I often feel nervous and have to prepare myself for possible interactions with people by reviewing my "social script," which is nothing more than a few generic interactions I run through in my mind to remind myself of how to talk to people.

Having a social script is a skill that my mom taught me, and it has served me well throughout my life. My natural, unrefined impulse when I walk into a new situation is to put my head down and wait to be seen or acknowledged, but my mom taught me to hold my head high and engage with the space that I'm in. Thanks

to her coaching from childhood to college, I've been told by many different people that I often command attention when I enter a room.

If I could articulate how I manage to fool people into thinking I am a commanding and confident person, I would market it and make a bunch of money. Perhaps the secret is having a Black mother who asks, "What do you say when you walk into a room?" every morning as you stumble half asleep into the bathroom with a full bladder that needs to be relieved, but you have to stop and say, "Good morning," before you can plop down and squeeze out a drop.

Still, I spend a lot of time worrying and wondering if my mouth is doing justice to the ideas and observations that I feel so confident about when they live in my mind. I worry and wonder if my words, my gestures, my body, and my voice are taking up too much space.

I love hearing other people's thoughts, and I love sharing my thoughts and exchanging ideas. I just have to get past the initial wave of shyness that comes first. I have been this way for as long as I can remember.



When I was five years old, my mom took me to see Miss Estelle at Headhunters Salon for my first relaxer. Miss Estelle was a white woman who knew how to do Black people's hair: a precious commodity in a small, predominantly white town. If you were a Black woman in my little rural Missouri town, you either did your hair yourself or you depended on friends and relatives to do your hair in their kitchen salons. If you wanted professional quality perms, cuts, or styles, you drove the two hours to Kansas City to get your hair done at one of the Black beauty shops there. Of course, going to the city to get your hair done meant that it was a half-day, if not an all-day, affair—not to mention gas

money and salon prices—which is why it was a big deal when a white woman who claimed she could do Black hair set up shop locally.

As we drove up to the shop, I took extra notice of its sign. It was black and had “Headhunters Salon” painted on it in bamboo-style letters, and there was a picture of a person sitting in a cauldron with another person looming over them. I would never patronize a place with such a politically incorrect and demeaning sign today, but it was the early 1990s in rural Missouri and this kind of problematic kitsch was—and still is—everywhere. I had seen this sign countless times, but I suddenly became aware of its implications. I couldn’t read the name of the salon, but I had seen enough Bugs Bunny cartoons to understand that sitting down in a cauldron could be bad news. I instantly became wary of what might be taking place inside.

I was relieved to learn, upon entering the salon, that I would be sitting in a chair and not a cauldron full of hot water. That still didn’t allay the nervousness I felt. I was nervous about getting my hair done (it was my first time in a salon, after all), but I was also nervous because I didn’t know Miss Estelle.

“Have a seat,” Miss Estelle said, swiveling the black chair in my direction. We were the only people in the big, empty salon. Although I was tall for my age, I felt very small among the chairs, sinks, and hair dryers that multiplied into infinity in the mirrors that surrounded us.

I climbed into the chair and was surprised when it started inching its way upward as Miss Estelle pumped the metal bar at its base, the clunky sound of metal and air echoing through the beauty shop. I felt forty feet tall when the chair came to a stop, leaving me almost face-to-face with Miss Estelle. She covered me in a large grayish-black cape and fastened it in the back.

“Too tight?” she asked.

I shook my head, my eyes dropping to the nylon shroud enveloping my body.

As Miss Estelle took my hair out of the four large, puffy, two-strand twists that were my usual style, she asked my mom some questions about my hair. There was a large mirror that went across the opposite wall. I would occasionally lift my eyes from the spot that I was staring at on the cape to look at myself and watch Mom talk to Miss Estelle. After confirming what she wanted Miss Estelle to do to my hair, Mom left me at the salon.

“How old are you?” Miss Estelle turned the chair to one side and gave it one last pump.

“Five,” I replied, my eyes still fixed on my cape.

“Do you go to school?” she asked, donning a pair of plastic gloves.

I nodded.

“Can you lift your head up for me?”

I realized that my head had dropped almost all the way down, and my chin was practically buried in the salon cape. I lifted my head and Miss Estelle started to section my hair. There was some tugging and occasional discomfort, but she was much gentler with my head than Mom usually was, so I didn’t complain.

Every time Miss Estelle asked me a question, my cheeks felt hot and prickly as I replied. But her voice was warm and inviting, so I began to feel at ease. Soon my replies got longer and longer until I didn’t need her questions anymore. The next thing I knew, I was telling Miss Estelle everything I knew about the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and any other subject that came to mind.

I talked as she applied the relaxer.

I talked as she washed the relaxer out.

I talked as I sat under the hair dryer.

I talked when it was time to go back to the salon chair for styling.

I talked as my mom returned to the salon to collect me.

“I didn’t think that she would say very much, but she talked *the whole time*.” Miss Estelle chuckled.

Unfazed, Mom replied with her usual speech. “She can talk. She talks so much that I have to tell her that I need a break sometimes. She even talks herself to sleep.”

Mom and Miss Estelle exchanged a laugh.

I felt a little sheepish for talking so much.



Coming from a family of extroverts, I learned early how to navigate the expectations of people who don’t always understand introverts. My elders used to chide me over my facial expressions because they were concerned that people would think I was angry. I wasn’t angry; I was just so deep in thought that my brow furrowed and my jaw hardened. Their criticism hurt because I wanted to be left alone without the burden of managing others’ perceptions of me.

I eventually came to understand why my elders always seemed so critical of me. They were teaching me how to survive in a world that is harsh to Black women. I don’t know if they would have articulated their motives in this exact way, but the principle was clear. Black women can’t afford to give a bad impression because we may never be given the chance to make up for it. We must remain vigilant about the messages we telegraph to others and be mindful about what others might think they see in us.

My grandma, mom, and aunts all grew up under the white gaze during Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement in a rural Missouri town that was just as small and white as where I was raised. Although they lived in other places at various points, a significant portion of their lives were spent in places that were constructed to cater to the sensibilities of whiteness. They were not trying to be hurtful as much as they were trying to pass down the hard-won knowledge that they and our Ancestors had gained along the way. They were teaching me how to live in a world where Black women don’t always get to explain ourselves. They were teaching

me how to survive in a society that polices our every move—right down to our facial expressions.

People act as if Black women are not entitled to privacy; we must always be fit for public consumption. And when we're seen as unfit, well, it's all the more reason for white people to whip us into shape. Of course, they used to use actual whips, but since they can't do that anymore, they've found other ways to beat us into submission.

When we go about our business without feeling the need to smile every second, we're told that we have resting bitch face—a term with both sexist and racist implications when it is applied to Black women. They will call us bitches outright when we are emotionally reserved and don't put all of our business and feelings out on Front Street the way white women do. If it's a white church setting, they'll sanctify it by calling us “unapproachable,” which is just white church folks' way of calling us the b-word.

If you ask hard questions and refuse to accept half-baked answers, they'll call you a troublemaker. If you hold people accountable for their actions and refuse to shut up until you're satisfied, they'll call you pushy and insubordinate. If you don't accept their tone policing and their attempts to exert control over how you conduct yourself in public, they'll call you uncooperative. If you don't allow yourself to be pushed around, they'll call you unteachable and uncoachable. When you refuse to be their beast of burden, they'll tell you that you're not a team player. When you set boundaries, they'll call your dedication into question.

Black women don't get no rest.

The only thing that Black women in white spaces get to be is On. On call. On guard. On point. On mission. On message. Always On. Never off. Never off-beat. Never off-kilter. Never off-brand. Never off-balance. Never off-putting.

Never off.

Always On.

As a Black woman who is talkative in some instances and more reserved in others, I have frequently been the subject of white suspicion and insecurity. White people have constructed entire narratives about me because I wasn't talkative when they thought that I ought to be. They chose to believe that I was angry, stuck-up, unhelpful, or had a chip on my shoulder when I was just chillin'. Being Black and an introvert means that white people frequently read your introversion as a threat.

White culture's concept of Black people is the "happy Blacks" who are always smiling, singing a song, and ready to entertain—as long as we're not too loud while doing it. We are to be available to them at all times. White people don't know what to do with themselves when they encounter a Black person, especially a Black woman, who is emotionally reserved and quiet. They think that everything is by, for, and about them, and so they perceive an introverted Black woman's placid demeanor as a personal slight. Her reservedness must be because she is angry at an individual white person, or even worse, because she hates white people in general. Her silence is because she is angry, plotting, and has a bad attitude that needs to be brought into order.

I've had more than my fair share of run-ins with white individuals who were all up in their feelings because they took my introversion as a personal affront. I have had to reassure them that I am not mad at them or stewing over some interaction they insist must've upset me even though I can't remember anything about it. I have had to explain that I am an introvert who might be talkative sometimes and more reserved other times and that it has nothing to do with them and everything to do with the fact that I can't be On all the time. I shouldn't have to explain myself, but sometimes an explanation is the only thing that will ward off the danger that comes with white people's suspicion and hurt feelings.

I've also had more than my fair share of run-ins with white folks who were all up in their feelings because they took my loudness as

a personal affront. I have experienced emotional outbursts from people who were angry that I was knowledgeable and confident when they expected me to be ignorant and deferential to them. I have been guilt-tripped for displaying competence and leadership. I have had people treat me as if I were volatile and could say or do something wrong and extremely destructive at any moment. I have been told I should stay in my place and not talk about things that make them feel uncomfortable.

I used to beat myself up for being a walking contradiction because it always seemed to lead to others misunderstanding me. I hate being misunderstood. There have been moments when it felt like I could do nothing to suit anyone. I couldn't trust my instincts because they would lead to a hard conversation with someone I had managed to frustrate or disappoint in some way. I obsessed over how to stand, how loud to talk, when to make eye contact, when to let someone be wrong, and when to stand up for what I believed was right. I tried so hard to lock myself inside of others' boxes that, for a minute, I lost myself.

But I came back to myself when I realized that, while some of my hang-ups and life issues were the result of a need for personal growth, I was also carrying burdens placed upon me by white supremacy. What I had to learn is that being loud or quiet doesn't actually matter. White people will find some kind of fault with you and use it as a reason to treat you as less than. When you assimilate in one area, they'll find something else that needs to be fixed. When you try to do right, they will find something wrong about it.

Black women don't get no rest.



When I was growing up, my family attended a little Baptist church that sat on the edge of what some of the Elders called Black End, which was where most of the Black people in my hometown

lived until we were allowed to buy houses in the other parts of town. Most weeks, we sang an old spiritual that went:

Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Since I laid my burdens down.
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Since I laid my burdens down!

My grandma and other elders in the church would clap and “get happy” as they sang this song. I would listen to them, half terrified because I couldn’t understand why they would suddenly cry out or have a “Baptist fit” and half amused because people catching the Holy Ghost is some of the only entertainment that Black church kids get in a three-hour-long service.

Now that I’m grown, I understand why the Elders used to “get happy” singing about laying their burdens down. Black folks traverse a world that places heavy burdens on our backs, and there aren’t many places where we get to lay those burdens down. Singing about laying down the weight the world placed on them gave my Elders the strength they needed to keep on keepin’ on.

We can learn so much from the simple wisdom found in our Elders’ and Ancestors’ commitment to freedom. They understood what it meant to live in a world where they were constantly disrespected and mistreated. They understood what it was like to feel constant pressure to do right so the worst manifestations of white supremacy wouldn’t be visited upon them. We can use some of the tools they gave us to facilitate our own liberation. For some of us, that might mean leaning into our spirituality and catching the Holy Ghost at an altar in a Black church while laying our burdens at the feet of Jesus. For others, freedom might come in the form of a group chat where we lean into our chosen community to help lighten the load.

Through racialized oppression and violence, society has conditioned Black folks, particularly Black women, to be burden bear-

ers. We often make accommodations without realizing it because life has taught us that we have to bend over backward like Neo in *The Matrix* in order to avoid being harmed by racism. We spend years cultivating a “professional” demeanor by tamping down our personalities so that we can avoid the Angry Black Woman stereotype. We work extra hard to make sure white folks feel comfortable around us so that our directness isn’t coded as unfriendliness. We fear being too loud, and so we shut up.

What would happen if, instead of accepting burden-bearing and making accommodations for everyone but ourselves, we chose self-acceptance? What would happen if, instead of trying to compensate for our perceived shortcomings, we embraced our contradictions?

For many years, I thought that I had to bear the burden of oppression silently, alone, and with a smile on my face. I started to get free when I realized that I am not alone. *You* are not alone. There are others, like you, who want to come out of silence and be set free. You don’t have to be shackled by the heavy burdens that society places on your back. You can lay those burdens down. You don’t have to bear indignity while wearing a smile. You have the power to talk back to injustice.

Unfortunately, talking back is sometimes easier to talk about than it is to do. A lot of us received messaging, from an early age even, that we could not talk back to people who exert power over us. Sometimes this messaging was reinforced with punishment or abuse. We’ve been programmed to associate talking back with negative consequences, and so we struggle to speak up in the face of injustice out of fear of retribution.

When it comes to talking back to racial injustice, the risk of retribution is real. History shows us that white supremacy will inflict violence upon Black people when we challenge its power. History also shows us that freedom comes when Black people talk back to injustice. Our Ancestors didn’t shut up. You don’t have to shut up either.



I didn't come out of the womb fighting injustice. It took time for me to recognize the devastating impact that injustice can bring into our lives and to decide to push back. It took time for me to find my voice. My desire to live in a just world arose as a result of receiving messages that made me question my worth and experiencing things that left me feeling powerless. It took years for me to learn to accept myself and lay my burdens down, but now that I've found my voice, I feel better. So much better. You can feel better too. It's time to lay those burdens down.

I feel better, so much better
Since I laid my burdens down.
I feel better, so much better
Since I laid my burdens down!