

More Than Our Pain

**AFFECT AND EMOTION IN THE ERA OF
BLACK LIVES MATTER**



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Chapter 6

I can't breathe

Visual Economies of Resistance

SIONA WILSON

Almost immediately after the cell phone video showing the death by illegal police chokehold of Eric Garner went viral, people began to walk around New York City (and elsewhere) with handwritten signs inscribed with his final words: "I can't breathe." Not just at protest marches but going about their business—on the way to and from work, out for an evening—black women and men wore this statement of ultimate bodily crisis against their bodies. It served as both a living memorial to the life, and a protest against the tragic, brutal death of Mr. Garner. While this phrase referenced his inhuman treatment on the video footage, it also served to overwrite this disturbing visual record with language, his words. This substitution of the images of state violence with the victim's words was also accompanied by another, bodily substitution. Living activists stood in place of the dead victim. With the deceased's final cry held against the bodies of the living, they served as an embodied form of witness to the injustice of his death. Mr. Garner's final words soon after traveled elsewhere and became a rallying cry in protests against other police shootings. For example, on August 9, 2014, when an unarmed eighteen-year-old African American teenager, Michael Brown, was shot in Ferguson, a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri, Mr. Garner's words appeared as part of the widely reported series of public protests that followed. Later in the year, "I can't breathe" became more than a reference

to Mr. Garner's death, it served as a broader metaphor for the feelings of exasperation at the inability of the justice system to adequately respond to blatantly illegal police killings. The substitution of the visual footage with Mr. Garner's words became all the more significant when the cell phone footage showing his death failed to function as visual evidence. This reinforced a long-established pattern in the U.S. justice system in which visual evidence of violence against black men and women was routinely disregarded.¹

I can't breathe was also the title of an exhibition that I curated at the gallery of the College of Staten Island, the City University of New York, in spring 2016. In re-performing this phrase as part of an exhibition, I sought to emphasize bodily vulnerability as a site for political agency. Although only one of the artist's works, Patricia Silva's *Mass Swell* (2016), directly references recent political events—it was a short film about the Ferguson protests—the exhibition also included a visual timeline of activism by Staten Island Against Racism and Police Brutality (SIARAPB). This group of student, faculty, and local Staten Island residents formed after the failure to indict Officer Daniel Pantaleo in the death of Eric Garner in December 2014. The timeline was designed by a photography student, Charlie Tagel, and includes a range of vernacular photographs from demonstrations and events donated by the group (see figure 6.1). The other works in the exhibition, by Non



Figure 6.1. College of Staten Island. Detail of SIARAPB activist timeline from *I can't breathe*. Photo courtesy of Jay Arena and Danielle Yhap.

Faustine, Kara Walker, and Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa, focused on the black female body in states of public vulnerability and evoked longer histories of violence, but the whole exhibition was prefaced by this contemporary visual timeline of local activism. Together with the phrasal title, these affectively charged vernacular images reframed and offered a political anchor for the issues of gender, race, embodiment, visibility, and the circulation of images that were thematized in the exhibition as a whole.

My use of this exhibition title was partly a memorial to Eric Garner in the borough that he lived and died, and, like other uses of the phrase it was a metaphor for ongoing struggles. At the same time, my decision to emphasize the female body and the work of women artists was indebted to the movement #SayHerName, which began in 2015. While the majority of media attention had been focused on police violence against black men and boys, #SayHerName sought to highlight less widely known women victims and in doing so to draw attention to the particular issues that black women faced. Furthermore, the exhibition responded indirectly, in its gendered theme, to the powerful role women have played in positions of (often unacknowledged) leadership in the Black Lives Matter movement. For example, it was three women, who identify as queer, Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors, who invented the widely disseminated hashtag in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's killer, George Zimmerman, in 2013 in Florida.² Again, two queer women, Alexis Templeton and Brittany Ferrell, played a powerful role in the Ferguson protests and in the course fell in love and were married. These two women figure centrally in Silva's video *Mass Swell*. And finally, women leaders were also central to SIARAPB and took up a place of visual prominence in the timeline of images on display.

The exhibition activated different temporalities, different forms of embodiment, and very different affective states without providing a clearly drawn chart for how to bridge the links.³ Images showing the furious energy of contemporary protest and its visual dissemination coexisted alongside quieter reflections on the legacy and visual history of America's formation as a slave-based capitalist democracy. Like the students shown in numerous contemporary protests, the historically-charged art works also emphasized embodied experience.⁴ While this open-ended structure was intended to invite viewers to build their own connections, it also had unforeseen effects. As we drew close to going public, the conservative politics of the borough, its official political culture, began to play a more active—if invisible—influence. *I can't breathe* became subject to attempted censorship at many different levels of the College administration, and even via Facebook's algorithm. This was focused on Faustine's work in particular, or rather, the image by

