



DR. IMANI PERRY, SCHOLAR, PROFESSOR

“There’s something particular to me in my identity as a mother to sons that is different from whether you’re an uncle, to nephew, or father to sons.”

Imani Perry, Excerpt from Interview

As I planned the National Black Writers Conferences and attended literary and academic conferences in African American Studies, I observed Imani Perry’s emergence as an exceptional scholar in race, culture, and African American Studies. Her interdisciplinary work was in alignment with the mission of the Killens Reading Series sponsored by the Center for Black Literature at Medgar Evers College. I started my interview with *Breathe, A Letter to My Sons* (Beacon, 2019), a book that resonated with me as soon as I read it.

Perry’s message to remind her sons to “breathe” in the midst of fear and tragedy was very real and present as I thought of the many young Black and Brown boys who were

murdered and/or targeted while growing up in these states called America, the land of the free, the land that enslaved African diasporic people and that continues to disproportionately subject thousands of young Black and Brown men and women to the prison industrial complex. Like Imani Perry, I too had two sons, and like her, I was concerned about their survival. I too wanted to show them ways to “breathe.” An excerpt from my interview is below.

Greene

You call the book *Breathe, A Letter to My Sons*. The tragic murder of Eric Garner immediately came to mind when I saw the title. However, your book is a metaphor for much more than that the tragic murders of Black youth, men, and women. What were you thinking about when you decided to write this letter to your sons?

Perry

For me, the title was imperative. I am saying that it is like reclaiming our breath and breathing as resistance. It’s a letter to all of us, a sense of possibility, a refusal of the terms and of the ways in which we are suffocated, an insistence upon living and life. This is a somewhat terrifying world, but we have to give our young people some sense of possibility, something to draw upon.

Perry further elaborates on the message that she wanted to convey to her sons, Freeman Diallo and Issac Garner. For her, it was important that their voices and the issues they faced be represented in authentic ways; thus, she gave her sons an opportunity to read the book before it was published. She describes her relationship with her sons as “a sort of living, breathing thing.” Writing the letter allowed her to remember the lessons her sons brought to

her, stimulate conversations with them, and to make this a meaningful experience for her as a mother.

The book is divided into three parts: fear, flight, and fortune. When asked why the book was structured this way, Perry responded:

There's a lot of earlier works of Black literature that directly shape this structure.

The sections track the sections in Richard Wright's *Native Son*: fear, flight, and fate. I wanted to switch flight to fly because I wanted it to be focused on what it means to actually invest in our children so that they might fly. I didn't want it to be focused on fugitivity or on a foregone fate. I also wanted them to think about the abundance of traditions in our cultural and literary memory so I drew upon writers and books that have influenced me: W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, and TaNehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*.

Greene

As I was reading *Breathe*, I thought of the message in Maya Angelou's poem "And Still I Rise." "You may write me down in history with your bitter twisted lies; You may trod me in the very dirt; But still I rise; Like dirt, I rise." Ta-Nehisi Coates' *The Water Dancer*, and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* also come to mind. Coates and Whitehead use magical realism to illustrate how people resisted enslavement and sought freedom. And of course Virginia Hamilton's *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* is a classic children's book in the tradition of slave narratives and supernatural tales.

Perry

That's very much a part of who we are and that came to mind when I saw the sections of fear, flight, and fortune. I feel that I am losing my ability to dream a world. We need ways to survive and to dream a world. I was trying to be honest. We pour our hopes into our children when we feel vulnerable or unsure. I've been mindful of not wanting to burden my children without hope and anxiety. There are moments when I don't know which way to turn and there's a humility. We have to listen. They have the greatest imagination.

Elizabeth Alexander's essay, "The Trayvon Generation" (2020) extends the metaphor of Imani Perry's "breathe" for young Black men and children. Alexander also has two sons and wrote the essay as a message to young Black and Brown people who have grown up in the past 25 years. The words and names Trayvon, Laquan, bikini, gazebo, loosies, Skittles, two seconds, I can't breathe, traffic stop, dashboard cam, and sixteen times reach out to the reader. She provides multiple scenarios of instances where Black people have been murdered: a young man who is jogging and shot three times; a man who is murdered by a policeman while the full weight of a knee is placed on his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds; and a young woman who is found dead in her cell after having a stun gun thrust into her face on the highway by a policeman are just a few of the examples cited by Alexander. She echoes the truth of so many Black mothers and fathers: "They always knew these stories. These stories formed their world view. These stories helped instruct young African-Americans about their embodiment and their vulnerability." Like Imani Perry she both fears for her sons and the sons of the community. She

asks, as does Perry, what does it mean for a Black boy to fly, to dream of flying and transcending?

Imani Perry is the National Book Award-winning author of *South to America* and seven other books of nonfiction. She is the Henry A. Morss Jr. and Elisabeth W. Morss Professor of Studies of Women, Gender and Sexuality and of African and African American Studies at Harvard University and is a 2023 MacArthur Fellow. Her recent book, *Black in Blues: How a Color Tells the Story of My People*, is featured in the 2025 National Book Festival. Perry received the National Black Writers Zora Neale-Hurston Award at the 18th National Black Writers Conference.

These literary meditations on the reflections of Imani Perry represent a window into the world of my book project. I would love to hear from you. Please visit my website at

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