See below for a short reflection on the challenges I've faced with psychological safety at Google, and 3 recommendations for increasing diversity across teams and building a more inclusive company.

The Weight of Silence

A personal reflection on diversity and inclusion at Google, and 3 ways to improve both.

By [REDACTED]

[Soon] after I joined Google, Eric Garner was choked to death by a police officer in New York City. It was the Big Apple's coldest summer in over a decade. That is to say, you could count the 90-degree-days on one hand, and the subway air didn't thicken to July's usual pulp — making the L train nearly bearable during my morning commute from Brooklyn to my new job, and my new life as a Googler.

By the end of my first week, I'd hardly gotten used to riding the subway in the opposite direction. [I was formerly a teacher and] Google's Chelsea office felt worlds away from my former students and their families. I wondered if my students, most of whom are black, were among the millions who'd watched the video of Garner, an unarmed black man, pleading *"I can't breathe"* eleven times before the officer's illegal chokehold left him lifeless. I wondered if my students were afraid, like me, that America might never be safe for black people.

Several weeks passed, and I never asked my new co-workers if they saw the viral footage of Garner taking his final breath. And as the weeks became months, and the world watched Ferugson, Missouri burn after a police officer shot and killed Michael Brown, I realized that my team simply did not have much to say on the issue of police brutality. This was odd — mostly because I'd watched them debate countless other topics, newsworthy and not, with a proud deftness and alacrity. From disappearing Malaysian airplanes to the spread of Ebola to the marriages and divorces of celebrities I'd never heard of, my teammates always had something to say about everything. But when it came to the violent policing of black bodies, they were silent. Until they weren't.

As December began, and dusk fell fast enough to shorten the day, the television in the corner of the office blared CNN's story of the night: "Protests Erupt Over Decision in Garner Case". As has been the outcome for the majority of police-involved civilian deaths, the officer whose chokehold ended Garner's life was not indicted (and 5 years later, is still employed by the NYPD). News of the decision rippled through the city, and soon, waves of peaceful protestors were flooding the streets.

Not long after the ticker tape rolled, my phone began to buzz uncontrollably atop my desk. The teachers I'd once worked with were shooting off text messages with rapid-fire urgency — some sharing pictures of

all-caps cardboard signs reading "I CAN'T BREATHE" in thick black sharpie; others offering succinct instructions: *"Crossing bridge to the city. Thousands of ppl here. Meet us in LES. 20 mins."*

As I went to pack my bag, I noticed that my co-workers had stopped working long enough to stare at the television screen, which showed thousands of protestors filling the New York City streets just blocks from where we sat. Suddenly, one of my teammates spoke up:
"Ugh. This is getting a bit ridiculous," she said. "I'm sorry. Does anyone else think this is ridiculous?"

My hands stopped zipping up my backpack, and I turned my head far enough to see her in my periphery — sitting behind me with her head shaking and arms folded in exasperation.

"These protestors aren't going to solve *anything*," she said. "Like, what are those people even trying to do? Seriously. What are they trying to do? Make people mad about getting stuck in traffic? Piss people off because they can't get to Grand Central? It's *annoying*. I just can't stand it."

She rattled off a couple of other disparaging comments about the peaceful protestors I was preparing to join, repeatedly referring to them as *those people* before a chorus of my team's nodding heads, each bobbing affirmingly behind their desks. With each nod, my co-workers validated my irate teammate's frustration — and her disgust. How could the team I'd grown to trust and respect care so little about an innocent man who'd lost his life?

My hands began to tremble, so I clenched and unclenched my fists to recirculate the blood in my palms, and began to zip my backpack faster and faster. I did not know what to make of her comments then, or how the collective mourning of lost life could be reduced to a traffic jam — an inconvenience she nor my team could be bothered with.

"Where are you headed, [REDACTED]?" another teammate asked with an innocuous timbre as the rest of our pod curiously awaited my response.

Just then, I remembered a mantra repeated at Google's orientation over and over like a magic spell: *Bring your whole self to work*. But I knew better than to believe in magic. More importantly, my parents, who'd lived through violent racism in the South before and after the civil rights movement, taught me to use discretion with who I trusted. What if being honest *backfires*? What if my new team rejects me the way they rejected the protestors? What if I become like the other black employees who've been pushed out Google before realizing their potential? What if I become too different to be liked, or be trusted? What if bringing my whole self to work means risking everything?

I didn't know the term "psychological safety" then, but I'll never forget how it felt to fear thinking freely in the place where I worked. I'll never forget how it felt to reject who I was in order to protect myself.

"I'm not feeling too well," I muttered through my teeth, now clenched in an attempt to contain my lie. "I'm gonna get out of here now, um, if that's OK. Might go to the doctor." Averting my eyes as to not invite conversation, I darted for the door.

I never told my team the truth of where I was going that night. And though I spent my night shouting protest chants, straining my voice until Garner's final words, "*I can't breathe*," cracked against the throat, I returned to work the next day in silence. And after struggling to cope with the fear that my team might not accept me — the activist me and the black me — silence became my strategy for survival.

But as my time at Google continued, even silence could not protect me from ongoing disparaging comments. Over the last 5 years, I've heard co-workers spew hateful words about immigrants, boast unabashedly about gentrifying neighborhoods, mockingly imitate people who speak different languages, reject candidates of color without evidence because of "fit," and so much more.

So, just as I'm doing with this essay, I ultimately resolved to break my silence. And though I eventually grew more comfortable using challenging moments to educate my co-workers, I never stopped feeling the burden of being black at Google. And the more insensitive comments weighed on me, the less safe I felt here — and the less capable I was of being my best self at work, or myself at all.

While I've endured many discouraging experiences at Google, I've also been fortunate to work with Googlers who are taking radical steps to make Google more inclusive. To follow in their footsteps, I wanted to close with 3 recommendations for ways to help Google hire and retain more diverse talent. **I've shared these ideas in my exit survey. However, if you know anyone might be able to turn these recommendations into action, please feel free to pass them along:**

3 Ways to Improve Diversity & Inclusion at Google

Rethink referrals: audit Google's candidate referral program and incentivize diversity

At Google, referred candidates are hired at 3X the rate of those who apply through standard channels. And given that many Americans don't have friends outside of their race, it's highly possible that Google's referral program is widening existing gaps, and relying on a non-diverse hiring network to drive hiring. **The referral program should be audited to determine how it impacts company**

diversity. And if needed, Google should create systems to incentivize referrals for Googlers from underrepresented backgrounds.

10X diversity training with virtual reality: use "perspective taking" to help Googlers build empathy and unlearn biases

If Google wants to expand its 10X thinking to its diversity and inclusion efforts, it should find innovative ways to help employees understand the diverse experiences of their co-workers. Companies like Praxis Labs are using virtual reality to help employees take the perspectives of people different than themselves, build empathy and bust their biases. **As a leader in virtual reality, Google should be the first to understand the power of using VR to transform diversity training — and be amongst the first companies to bring it to their workforce.**

Provide additional mental health support for Googlers of color — especially following critical moments impacting their communities

Throughout my time at Google, my mental health has been heavily influenced by what I read in the news. And in America, that means frequently reading about innocent black men and women who've been killed by police officers. Whether the issue is police brutality, or mass shootings targeting the LGBTQ community, or racist comments from the President debasing immigrants, **Google needs to provide mental health support equitably, which means making a more concerted effort to create opportunities for underrepresented groups to seek counseling and support.**