

# The Effect of Racial Violence: Collective Cultural Trauma

Brainy Akpala

Poolesville High School

## ABSTRACT

Trauma has mainly been viewed as an isolated experience, but upon further research, sociologists and researchers alike have come to realize that trauma can be shared as a collective. The coined term for this being cultural trauma, a trauma that is carried through generations due to the transfiguration of the collective psyche and identity in the wake of horrifying events. Using the African American community as the leading example of such trauma, due to their long history of responses to the lynchings of the 1950's and the police brutality of the 2000's, such as cases like Emmett Till's and George Floyd. This article expands on the theory of cultural trauma by explaining the idea of the healing in this community to be nearly impossible if the routine of racial violence that changes the collective sense of self has been weaved into the systemic structures of the country and presents itself in different forms throughout the decades.

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Malcolm X, a pillar in the black community for his works as a human rights activist, deduces in his autobiography that he has no mercy or compassion in himself “for a society that will crush people, and then penalize them for not being able to stand up under the weight.” (X, 27). His words can be conceptualized as the idea that the core system of our country has been built against African Americans from its creation. Continuously crushing them with tragedy after tragedy, and yet still holding them to unfair expectations. This phenomenon can be seen in a report from researchers at Yale University, the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine, and Drexel University, which determined that police shootings of unarmed black people in the United States were three times higher than that of white people between 2015 and the beginning of 2020 (Ingeno, 2020). This raises the question: To what extent is it possible to reverse the cultural trauma African Americans have sustained as a collective from the racial violence the American system subjects them to? Presently, the intensity of racial violence is still as prominent as it was decades ago, except it is now seemingly concealed. So, while the racial violence faced by African Americans systemically and the collective and cultural trauma formed as a result is considered to be repairable, in truth it is not because of how fresh of an open wound this issue is as it seems to transcend time, considering it's importance regarding the ongoing debate about the nation's problems with police brutality.

Racial violence has been felt throughout the black community since their presence in America was manifested by the sin of slavery, causing a ripple effect of trauma intergenerationally, otherwise referred to as cultural trauma. As defined by Jeffrey C. Alexander, a Lillian Chavenson Saden Professor of Sociology at Yale University, and a Co-Director of the Center for Cultural Sociology, transpires when members of a distinguishable group feel they have been imposed to an appalling event as a collective that leaves “indelible marks” on their group consciousness, “marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.” (Alexander, 2004) This trauma has forced them to form, as W.E.B Dubois coined it, a double consciousness. Splitting their identity into two parts, one an American, the other a Negro, “two souls, two thoughts” (Awkward, 2009). The fragmentation of one's self-identity is so crucial when one identity repeatedly falls victim at the hands of the other. Hence, this split is birthed by the earliest and most notable remembrance of racial violence in America, slavery. And though not every African American that experiences “double consciousness” has experienced slavery, Ron Eyerman,

a professor of Sociology and Co-Director of the Center for Cultural Sociology alongside Alexander at Yale University, resolves the trauma sustained is carried by the memory of the gruesome acts committed against their ancestry as represented in speech and artwork, that “grounded African American identity.” (Eyeran, 2004). The whole idea of the emergence of the African American identity was in fact bore on the back of slavery. This is why it has come to be a collective cultural traumatic experience because generations of black Americans, one after the other, are reliving the history of slavery as they are learning it.

The African American cultural experience up to this point has been learning about one racially driven act of violence while experiencing another in real-time leaving one without any proper time to grieve. Cases in point are the Emmet Till murder trial of 1955 and the George Floyd case of 2020 which both aptly encapsulate the persistent issue of America’s inclination to support and enable racial violence. Emmett Till was a 14-year-old boy lynched after being falsely accused of whistling at a white woman. His case was a prime example of the system failing yet another black individual. In Till’s case, “it was not any shock to the routine but rather the judicial affirmation of African Americans’ routine exclusion from full citizenship and legal protection (as represented by the not guilty verdict for the two known murderers) that formed the basis for the group’s cultural trauma.” (Onwuachi-Willig, 2016). In other words, the court’s not guilty verdict reaffirmed the country’s long history of giving white men and women, slaps on the wrists and non-punishments when the crimes of violence they commit are against black individuals. As Onwuachi-Willig, a dean and Ryan Roth Gallo & Ernest J. Gallo Professor of Law at Boston University School of Law, as well as a renowned legal scholar and expert in critical race theory, explains it; failures like this had become an unfortunately familiar routine in the country. This is why “Till’s mother, largely expected the all-white, all-male jury in Mississippi to acquit Milam and Bryant of the murder charges against them.” Nelson Mandela corroborates Onwuachi-Willig idea of routine in *A Long Walk to Freedom* when he explains that “Routine is also comforting for the prisoner, which is why it can be a trap.” African Americans have become conditioned to racial violence allowing them to be desensitized to its frequent occurrence and its frequent dismissal. Therefore, the acquittal was more of an expectation from the African American community because they have become so accustomed to the trauma they faced collectively to go without being amended by higher authorities. Correspondingly, not only do higher authorities not help relieve them of their trauma but are main contributors on a large scale, a prime example of this being George Floyd’s case. On May 25, 2020, a nearly 9-minute video showcasing a Minneapolis police officer murdering George Floyd, a black man, by pressing his knee on his neck for the entirety of the video, circulated and quickly became national news. As Derick Chauvin kept his knee on Floyd’s neck, George Floyd muttered the infamous words “I Can’t Breathe,” which quickly became the slogan for the mass protests that followed days and weeks later. Originally, the Minneapolis Department attempted to continue the routine of protecting white lives that sought to hurt black bodies, as the police department fired Chauvin, and the three other officers that assisted in holding Floyd’s body down and keeping the crowd away, “without charging any of them with a crime” ( Bazian, 2020). As modern African Americans were learning about cases such as Emmet Till, which seemed like a thing of the past, simultaneously they were experiencing a new wave of cultural trauma, with cases such as George Floyd’s. Continuing to live in a routine of violence and systemic failings, Floyd’s case was one of many that depicted such a gross display of police abusing their position of power. With George Floyd’s murder, the African American community was processing this new subsection of racial violence this country has come to see, police brutality cases, while they were experiencing it yet again.

Yet, despite the intricate structures of our society being irrevocably damaged, resulting in irreversible cultural trauma to the African American community, it is still argued that the potential of healing from this trauma is possible if the community comes together collaboratively to combat it. *Resilience among Haitian Survivors of the 2010 Earthquake* frames this nicely by using the Haitian Earthquake survivors to introduce the idea that the process of recovering from a collective trauma is considered a collaborative and dynamic process controlled by numerous factors rather than just an individual trait. The essay undertakes this claim by showcasing how “all agreed that in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, ‘rich and poor, light- and dark-skinned men and women drank from the same cup,’ as all pitched in to help each other.” Highlighting the significance of social and cultural elements in building

resilience, as well as how resilience is an intricate and context-based circumstance that can only be present through a community coming together in the wake of trauma. However, this approach has been tried and tested with respect to healing the cultural trauma in the African American community and has proven to yield non-lasting results. For instance, George Floyd's case ignited a country-wide and even international response in the form of mass protests under the name of "The Black Lives Matter Movement." This was not the first materialization of this movement but rather the "latest iteration in a centuries-long Black Civil Rights Movement." Comparable to the Modern Civil Rights Movement of the 60s, in the way they both had the goal to "achieve new systems for Black social support and wellness." (Strickland, 2020). However, they did not completely achieve their goals because, as stated before, the foundation of the country has been built against African Americans from its formation, making it no easy task to try and repair it. Still, after Floyd's death, protestors took to the streets demanding change, the arrest of the officers in the case of Floyd, and, demanding justice for other police brutality cases that occurred within the same time frame, such as Breonna Taylor and Aumhad Arbery. However, those protests that marked 2020 eventually dissipated, but police brutality cases remained. The case of Keenan Anderson symbolizes the unbudging issue of police brutality, as on January 3, 2023, he was repeatedly tased by LAPD officers. A 13-minute body cam footage reveals an officer pressing his elbow onto his neck as Anderson begs for his life, as he is overheard in the video saying "They're trying to George Floyd me," (Olson, 2023). As Mandela elucidates in *A Long Walk to Freedom*, "Prison is designed to break one's spirit and to destroy one's resolve. To do this, the authorities attempt to exploit every weakness, demolish every initiative, negate all signs of individuality - all with the idea of stamping out that spark that makes each of us human and each of us who we are." In the same way, the prison Mandela was held in was designed with a motive in mind, and so was the system of America. This motive is to subject African Americans to accept comfortability in violence as well as internalize and revel in their trauma. Orchestrating events such as slavery and lynchings and in the case of George Floyd, police brutality. To continue the cycle of trauma, breaking the black community to the point of no return. However, Mandela pleads with the community not to give up because to do so would be to let the system imprison their minds as well, instead one should survive how the prisoners did with Mandela as they "supported each other and gained strength from each other. Whatever we knew, whatever we learned, we shared, and by sharing we multiplied whatever courage we had individually." This is what the BLM movement essentially was, a way to grasp some level of control in a corrupt system by rallying as one community, sharing information through media with one another, signing petitions to punish wrongful police officers, and so on and so forth. Despite this, the movements cannot permanently change the inner workings of the system, as proven by the Keenan Anderson case of 2023. Therefore, cultural trauma in the community does not heal as it is an ever-growing wound.

Ergo, it is evident that this cultural trauma harbored by the African American community cannot be healed nor reversed for the foreseeable future, as it calls for the dismantling of an entire societal system in which they are the minority. This is not to say that there haven't been solutions drawn that could work in a better society, willing to change its ways to accommodate the trauma of African Americans. Such a solution is provided by Micheal Awkward, a Professor of Afro-American Literature and Culture at the University of Michigan, who explains that what reinforces this extensive collective trauma, therefore, imprinting into African American culture, is the erasure of suppression. In other words, the fact that racial violence is "not incorporated in any discernible manner into the stories that the powerful whites who determined the meanings of our national past have chosen to communicate about it." Thus, painting African American, in the same stories where they are the oppressed, as "criminalized" and "disreputable". Additionally, streaming this harmful and traumatizing rhetoric in the national discourse, repeating this narrative back to the black community. Therefore, he suggests that a solution to reverse this cultural trauma is to let African Americans control the information presented about their mentally and "physically disruptive experiences," such as slavery, lynchings, and police brutality. (Awkward, 2009). Despite progress in some aspects, the black community still has a way to go before they begin to scratch the surface of repairing the cultural trauma they have sustained, but this goal should not rest on their shoulders, as they are the victims of this generational injustice. The ultimate role of reversing this trauma lies in the hands of the American internal systems such as the police departments, that continue to brutalize black lives or better yet the criminal justice system that turns a blind eye to such injustices. Until the fundamental

systems of American society are altered to incorporate the inclusion of black healing, the cultural trauma within this community is proven to be irreparable.

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