

White Supremacy is an
Illness—
for white folks too



American Flag, Robert Rauschenberg 1977

"What white bodies did to Black bodies, they did to other white bodies first."

- Janice Barbee

"I think we are finally at a place where we can accept the truth that no one escapes from oppression, not one of us. Everyone is deeply wounded.

It's true, some people seem to be in a position of what we call privilege, but we have to rethink that word. We get stuck on this notion of white privilege, or dominant privilege, as if the marginalized people want what the people with privilege have. But I want no part of it. I want no part of any illness that renders people unable to see the beauty of all of our differences; the beauty of my own mixed raced-ness, blackness, queerness, all of the things I am. I want no part of an illness that renders me unable to connect to love. That is not a privilege. So we have to begin by recognizing that the construct of white supremacy is an illness. I don't wish it on anyone—not on myself, and not on you. We have all been told a lie, and our work—particularly for those of us who say we identify with this path of liberation—is to free ourselves of that lie, to get in there and observe that construct and the ways in which it limits us from our full potential."

—Rev. angel Kyodo Williams, excerpts from *Your Liberation is on the Line*, Lion's Roar, February 2, 2020.

The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in White-on-White Brutality

A fellow activist friend once told me that the most succinct way she knows how to define whiteness is "developmental trauma that has been institutionalized." In my blood and bones this rang of truth, even if I wasn't yet familiar with the history that supported this concept. Ancient Europeans were earth-honoring peoples who had their own indigenous wisdoms of medicine, song, earth and spirit. In the early days of empire development, these folk became known as 'commoners', tending the land known as 'the commons,' the forests and fields the community shared to grow food, and had rich folk traditions of celebration and revelry. During much of the Middle Ages, European elite forcibly dispelled commoners from their land in order to enclose it for commercial use, as well as taking most of their agricultural production for further wealth accumulation. They created conditions to discourage idleness, revelry and sexuality in order to maximize production and wealth generation. Commoners fought back to protect their birthright to their land and culture, and thus commenced centuries of violent white-on-white conflict, torture, mutilation, and other forms of oppressive savagery that undeniably created trauma in the hearts, minds and bodies of those involved.

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"As a result, when European "settlers" first came to this country centuries ago, they brought a millennium of inter-generational and historical trauma with them, possibly stored in the cells of their bodies.

Most white immigrants to the "New World" didn't heal from their trauma. Instead, beginning a little over three centuries ago, the elite among them created the concepts of

whiteness, of blackness (and redness and yellowness), and of white-body supremacy which sprung from the seedlings of xenophobic and ethnocentric Greek and Roman empires into plants and trees of race, racism in the British colonies and the supremacy of the white body.

Elite white bodies invented and institutionalized the myth that the white body is the supreme standard by which all other bodies' humanity are measured. Then they blew much of their trauma through the bodies of Africans and their descendants — and made lynching into an American spectator sport. This served to embed trauma in Black bodies, but it did nothing to mend the trauma in white ones.

Much of our current culture — and most of our current cultural divides — are built around this trauma, and then codified in our institutions.

As a result, in [2020], in many American bodies, the Crusades, the American Revolution, or the American Civil War rages on. None of us asked for this trauma. None of us deserves it. Yet none of us can avoid it. It is part of our historical, inter-generational, institutional, personal and national histories.

Today we're at a reckoning. We Americans have an opportunity — and an obligation — to recognize the trauma embedded in our bodies; to accept the necessary pain of healing; and to move through and out of our trauma. This will enable us to mend our hearts and bodies — and to grow up.

That conflict is the battle for the bodies and souls of white Americans. This battle has been fueled by trauma as old as the Middle Dark Ages, and it has been simmering in white American bodies since long before we became a nation. Now the heat has been turned up, and the conflict has reached critical mass.

This is a conflict that white Americans must heal in themselves, for themselves, and among themselves. We non-white Americans can support this healing if we want to, but it cannot be outsourced, either to us or anyone else.

For centuries, it was possible for white Americans to accept white-body supremacy without questioning it; to enjoy its privileges and to take them for granted; and to ignore or deny the ways in which white-body supremacy routinely harmed dark bodies. Those days are now over."

If you're a white American, you can't look away anymore. You have to choose. You can move through necessary pain and heal. Or you can run from the pain and the healing — and create much added misery for everyone, including your descendants and yourself.

~Excerpts from Resnaa Menakem's *Healing Your Thousand-Year-Old Trauma*, Medium, 2018

So where do I go from here?

This journey is highly individual, and ultimately you'll follow your own unique path to unravelling the personal, inter-generational, and cultural somatics that live in your particular being. Here are a few suggestions for ways to start, though, based on what has been personally helpful for me (a white person).

~ Be slow, be gentle. Practice non-judgmentally noticing the ways in which cultural conditioning and inter-generational patterns show up in your experience (both internally and behaviorally / relationally). Simply noticing (again, gently and nonjudgmentally – none of this is your fault!) will allow unconscious patterns to move into conscious awareness, and from there, a whole new world of possibility opens up.

~ Join or form a racial-affinity group that meets a couple times a month. Ruth King writes, "Fundamentally, we all need a place where we can be safe, curious, and unedited so that we can discover the ignorance and innocence of our racial conditioning and racial character as a collective" (from *Healing the Broken Body of Sangha* in *Lion's Roar*). All folks no matter how they identify racially can benefit from an affinity group. For white folks in particular: "White people need to see race and understand themselves as racial beings with roots and a collective history of power and privilege. In a racial affinity group, white people can discover together their group identity and discern its privileges and impact without the aid of and dependence on people of color. Together, whites cultivate racial solidarity and compassion for themselves and support each other in sitting with the discomfort, confusion, and numbness that often accompanies racial awakening." Lean into relationship building and mutual aid throughout the tender process of dismantling!

~ Fellow white folk, look into your ancestry! White supremacy positions whiteness as devoid of ethnicity, which just serves to situate whiteness as the norm to which everything else is compared and makes us more apt to co-opt other cultures' traditions to sooth our sense of rootlessness. But no one is devoid of ethnicity! We all have cultural heritage, lineage, and ancient roots. In my personal process of investigating indigenous European knowledges and delving into practices to connect with my Irish and Polish ancestors, I am starting to cultivate a sense of connection with lineage, with roots – and with it, a deep somatic experience of place in the web of humanness and being, of home, of belonging. This process has been a critical component to my sense of healing cultural wounds.

~ Therapy is a great container to process this material, especially with a body-centered / somatic therapist.

~ As Rev. angel said in a talk once, "This system [of white supremacy and racialized capitalism] is not broken. It is working exactly as it was designed to." Allow the body to feel the pain of that truth. "Let that break our minds, let that break our hearts... **we have to be willing to let ourselves be heartbroken if we want to be free.**" Allow your heart to break. The fire that burns from within this breakage is the fire of love, the fire of unity, the fire of yearning to fulfill our birthright to connection. It is the fire that fuels the fight for collective liberation.

~ **Play! Relax. Breath.** Play and joy is an enormous asset to nervous system regulation and opens up the body's innate creativity and wisdom in processing complicated histories stored within. Play is a radical act.

"Pleasure activism is the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy...tuning in to what brings aliveness into our systems and being able to access personal, relational and communal power."

~ Adrienne Maree Brown, *Pleasure Activism*

RESOURCES

for further exploration / healing

- ~ *My Grandmother's Hands*, Resmaa Menakem
 - ~ Rev. Angel kyodo Williams
Radical Dharma
angelkyodowilliams.com
 - ~ *The Story of How Humanity Fell In Love with Itself Again*
by Lyla June Johnston, search online
 - ~ davidbfdean.com/roots-abridged
 - ~ White Awake (whiteawake.org)
Specifically a 4-month course entitled
"Before We Were White," offered in January
 - ~ Tada Hozumi
www.ritualasjustice.school
@tadahozumi, @ritualasjusticeschool
 - ~ *Ancestral Medicine*, Daniel Foor
 - ~ Holistic Resistance, holisticresistance.com
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Feel free to reach out and be in conversation!