A Psychology of Liberation and Peace:

For the Greater Good

Chalmer E. F. Thompson

Dedication

To the Silver Spring badass moms: Mrs. Sarah Thompson, Dorothy Dines, and Rosalind Brown

About the Series

The *Pan African Psychologies* book series is a collection of works by psychologists and other applied professionals who have dedicated years of our lives to the meaningful improvement of Black lives. We come from societies across the globe like South Africa, Jamaica, Senegal, Uganda, and the United States. We may refer to ourselves variously as professionals in Black/African, liberation, radical, Fanonian, critical, or cultural psychology or related fields. No matter what labels we choose, our common thread is to demonstrate how we have helped evoke growth, maturity, and enhanced life quality in the lives of African-descended people. Healing, in our view, is to take into full account the centuries of bloodshed, exploitation, and corruption that influence Black lives, rather than ignore, exaggerate, or diminish these devastations. The serious study of Black well-being requires an understanding of the "whys" and the "hows" — why the devastations continue to happen, how it is continually stoked, and how Black people are enduring them in their daily lives.   To us, the connection between the person and his or her environment is an irrefutable one; our focus is to liberate, therefore we insist that the healing of societies is as important as the healing of people. Racism, ethnoviolence, class exploitation, sexism and men's violence against women, and violence against people on the basis of their sexual orientation and trans identity are infestations that seep into our socialization — how we see the world and interact with people— and destroy the prospect of morally strong and just societies.

We place a high premium on fostering strong relationships with other Black people as well as all those who have been historically oppressed. We honor healthy discourses even though they can trouble the proverbial waters, and we embrace such discourses over unhealthy ones that feed into oppression. We emphasize the crucial need to build coalitions with others, professionals and laypersons alike, who are on similar quests to act strongly against injustice and violence. We pay homage to those who lead and participate in harmony-affirming rituals that help people mend generational trauma and its trajectories.

Our intent in this series is to share with readers the array of psychologies that exists throughout the African Diaspora but with a very specific focus: it is to spread knowledge about the freedom to "be" and revel in the freedom that many already experience, at least psychologically, as they experience liberation personally and professionally. In some cases, we transcend our regional spaces by addressing similarities across contexts within the Diaspora. This particular effort to engage transnationally is one we hope will inspire our readers to (continue to) act toward liberation and peace at the global level.

Chalmer E. Thompson

Preface

Life re-shapes our lenses, and ultimately re-shapes our purpose for living and loving. If we are fortunate, we embrace the re-shaping and avail ourselves of new tools to help improve the lives of others.

For many years, I have dedicated countless hours to studying, writing about, teaching and/or otherwise influencing others based on the tenets of Helms' racial identity development theory (e.g., Thompson, 2003a, Thompson & R. T. Carter, 1997; Thompson, Murry, Harris, & Annan, 2003; Thompson, Alfred, Edwards, & Garcia, 2006). Arguably the most comprehensive of the racial identity theories, Helms' (e.g., 1990a, 1990b, 1995) conceptualization is an explication of how racism is a malignancy that wreaks havoc on our lives. The theory bridges psychological concepts of cognition and perception, moral development, as well as human and organizational development. It also guides psychologists and other professionals to encourage people to think complexly and flexibly, engage in calculated risk-taking, and deliberately search for *truth* in societies that thrive on subterfuge, secrecy and distortions. It is a theory that also challenges professionals to bridge distances that adversely influence intra-racial interactions, for example, relationships *among* Black people, as well as inter-racial interactions among all groups. This challenge is what we, the professional, adopts for ourselves and what we encourage others, like our psychotherapy clients, fellow community activists, and students to do as well. With the theory as a guide, we are equipped with courageous acts to forge against the tides of racial oppression. Because is concerned about all aspects of human complexity besides race, it invites us also to understand and address the intersecting aspects of identity, like gender, socioeconomic class, sexuality, and nationality as integral to our healing mission.

Fully committed to this mission, I began appreciating the importance of developmental stagnation when I personally it in my own racial identity development about 10 years into my career as a professor. It was not long after I received tenure and I began conducting a series of studies that were extensions of my pre-tenure research program. This earlier work entailed examinations of counseling interactions involving White and Black counselors paired with Black clients (Thompson & Jenal, 1994; Thompson, Worthington, Atkinson, 1994). Whereas

the earlier studies were based on one-time interactions, the new studies involved 12-session counseling interventions involving mainly White counselors with Black and Asian clients and did not include certain experimental conditions. In other words, these students allowed these dyads the opportunity to develop relationships and move much further beyond the initial discourse of problem-solving and sharing and into a commitment of time and action for the sake of the clients' progress and well-being. Potential participant-clients were selected on the invitation to talk about interpersonal problems that pertained to the racial and/or cultural matters they experienced and were willing to address with a therapist.

What my team and I discovered quite vividly was that these interactions were often characterized by a string of therapist derailments when the clients raised issues concerning racism. These derailments were not entirely surprising as we expected there to be some initial issues in applying this learning in counseling, but what became more revealing was that my efforts to assist the practitioners in creating more engaging, authentic discourse over the 12 sessions did not yield the progress for which I had hoped. These volunteer therapists, most of whom were students, were selected because they had already shown "sensitivity" to racial issues yet they showed considerable difficulty transferring their learning from supervision sessions to the actual counseling of their clients. To their credit, the therapists were aghast when I pointed out the derailments in playing the videotapes of their sessions. They tended eventually to become more silent during the sessions, explaining to me later that they were at a loss for words even after we had practiced certain exchanges during the supervision.

An equally significant finding was that throughout the course of the counseling relationship, clients expressed satisfaction with these encounters. In interviews conducted by student researchers intermittingly across sessions, the clients sometimes acknowledged certain mishaps in the counseling interactions, but tended not to talk about the limited attention to their racial problems in these sessions (Thompson, 2003b; Thompson, Berrian, Brown, Cumberlander, Murry, Chow, Hayes, & Mullen, 1997).

I dedicated time at the conclusion of the study meeting with the client-participants. I presented preliminary findings of the study and information on the relevance of their racial

problems to their overall health. They seemed pleased with the information and eager to learn more and I offered them referrals. Yet the distressing realization that my research team and I reached was that these clients expressed satisfaction with the counseling and counselor in part because they were able to dodge the proverbial bullet of difficult, racial discourse.   They were presented with opportunities to speak about these problems to be sure, but the efforts for understanding and doing something concrete about the dilemmas were largely absent on the part of the counselor. There also was a flow to these interactions that was experienced as normative and relatively unfettered when the discourse was absent racial issues.

These were not the only events that would rattle my racial identity development. I also witnessed other implicit contractual arrangements in a variety of interactions, for example when attending a so-called diversity training workshop where Black and White presenters colluded to elude racial qualifiers (with usage of such terms as "a diverse person," "someone who is different," and so forth), followed by a multi-racial group of audience members expressing their satisfaction with the workshop. A few Black and Latinx members attending the workshop posed questions during the question-answer period about race and ethnicity that followed a similar pattern of racial erasures and codification.

I also recalled when my husband, a local activist, told me about a meeting he attended where presenters were to give "tips" to Black parents on parenting; the presenters were White and no mention of the differences was uttered or explained (to which he stood up, told the presenters that he had trouble with the "optics" of having White people talk to Black people about parenting, and promptly left). I observed these contractual arrangements when students in my graduate classes — all of them, but most prominently among the White students, would embark zealously on social justice education while they were enrolled in my courses, yet resist struggling with new concepts related to social justice during qualifying examination and dissertation committee meetings. These students showed a willingness to struggle with other topics, but when it came to racial issues in particular, they often spoke dismissively. In one case, a student was rescued by a committee member who himself made an effort to respond e

to a question I posed to a student taking her qualifying exam. This faculty member did not respond to the question well.

"Flow" became synonymous for the desire for acceptability, for the sanctity of the self whether in the presence of White or status-quo supporting people of color. That desire for acceptability simultaneously jeopardizes needed discussions on racism, and its spurious intersections with sexism, economic exploitation, and nationality. At times, the other forces besides racism were spoken about more liberally. I recall a conference of the African Studies Association when the European presenters in three separate sessions emphasized culture while eliminating race as pertinent to their research analyses and findings.

In the case of research participants, supervisees, and students in my classrooms, all were instances in which I was in the position to exercise influence. Yet it had become increasingly clear that my efforts to chart new understanding and different courses of action were merely band-aid approaches to a gaping, festering, and enormous wound.

My experiences were not entirely bleak. I experienced the gratification and rewards of working with students, consultees, fellow community activists, and colleagues in my use of the theory. I founded and for six years led an African-centered and social justice intervention in which mostly Black teachers showered Black children with love and attention, and who met voluntarily for hours outside their regular work day to ensure that the children were blessed with the knowledge they did not receive at their school.   However, it appeared that my circle of interactions was limited and that the people who were most desperate for gritty discussions about racism were outside of my reach. I would come to learn that those who were courageous enough to disrupt the disturbing calm of malevolence also rattled my own participation in the calm. I had to admit that I too often participated in the flow even though I used to pride myself as someone on the frontlines of racial injustice.

Consequently, I began many years ago heeding the words of the late poet Audre Lorde (1984) who wrote that "[t]he true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situation that we seek to escape, but the price of the oppression which is planted deep within

each of us" (p. 76).   I deliberately and patiently reflected on the deep-seated oppression that had narrowed my view on racism and that affected by scholarship, teaching, and praxis.

The violence associated with Blackness is difficult for people *not* to notice, so much of my journey entailed serious contemplation about how and why *I* had managed not to notice it. Up to about 10 years ago, I was often inclined to avoid depictions of violence on the television news and in movies. This avoidance likely emerged from my experiences in the aftermath of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination on April 4, 1968 and the riots that followed in the city in which we, my family, lived, the southeast section of Washington, D.C. Our home was so close to the riots that we heard the sirens of the police cars. I remember that we all felt quite frightened and helpless, not only because of the possibility that the rioters would come to our house, but also because we felt unprotected. By the age of 11, I already had come to know that the police were not inclined to serve and protect Black people. This fear would become re-kindled again and again by my parents' insistence that my 5 siblings and I were under attack from all sides: White people, harassing police officers, "thugs," and virtually any stranger. These warnings went beyond helping to arm us against reasonable threats to a certain neurotic distrust of all people.

But the not-noticing was more than the outgrowth of family dynamics. It was the hegemonic insistence that Black people caused their own violence. In cases like police action shootings of Black people, the insistence at times that the officers *could* be Black which would erase the painful, racial entanglement. And the hegemony is even worse: it was the conclusion that we were numb to the violence, which was ever-reaching and pervasive, and that Blacks who were killed, whether by White people (often termed racial violence) and practically written away in media and legislative efforts), Black people, or other racial groups, were killed because they lived in dangerous places like Black slums (hence we mourn but "move on" when we hear of drive-bys or houses shot up), were involved in drugs and therefore, they were criminal and simply met their demise because they made bad choices. It followed then that I succumbed to the chaotic belief that I personally could elude violence by staying away from the ghettos, by not protesting too loudly or with the wrong words, and by being always at the right place at the

right time. The message was that eluding violence was a personal responsibility; that Black people are disproportionately targeted for violence more than Whites was, for me, to think theoretically and culturally beyond individualistic renderings about violence and safety.

Although I had long avoided the visual violent images, I was impossible for me not to be aware of overwhelming violence of Black people based on conversations, print media, and other ways in which I would be exposed daily to compelling local, national, and international events. Locally, I learned about police beatings and the fights that happened between the people from one particular housing project and another. On television there was the continual drone of news stories about Black-on-Black crime, or of tribal warfare that were at times attributed to "historical tensions." Like others, I hoped that these problems would eventually dissipate, as if the passage of time would somehow erase the violence. The not-noticing was akin to burying my head in the sand and this realization became the most painful to my self-search: violence against Black people was not only not dissipating into nothingness, but that is was not intended to end.

This reality influences personal neuroticism and family dynamics. My parents physically escaped the racialized oppression of the South where they both were raised while psychically living with it from day to day. To them, opportunities for jobs and promotions would sail by them. Their children were appraised unfairly at school in comparison to the White counterparts. My parents would encounter everything from minor slights to major offenses as they walked city streets, entered retail establishments, and encountered civil service employees, White pastors, and errant, hate-mongers who hurled racial slurs at them as they entered unsuspected unsafe places. Along with the barrage of hate, my parents wisely passed along words of wisdom on how to combat it. They were critically conscious and encouraged us to learn and embrace African traditions and history; they insisted that we internalize a strength of worth based on culture and spirituality and sociopolitical awareness. Even if this inspirited socialization was constant, we had the bombardments to contend.

I avoided accounts and displays of violence because I could not make sense of them. However, it was vital that I try to make sense of the senseless violence that had lasting power. This quest was profoundly personal and professional.

A history buff, I read thousands of journal and newspaper articles and dozens of books and watched countless documentaries about the past lives of Black people in the United States and throughout the Diaspora. I tuned in to the more obscure accounts of violent actions involving Black people, like YouTube videos and social media sources of violent accounts, as well as non-Black people, and the mainstream stories, captivated by the differences between the received view and the perspectives by many close to these events. I even began watching violent feature movies, something I had persistently avoided all my life. I found a need to understanding this billion-dollar industry that largely targeted young male audiences. I would learn that the growing spread of violence is not only numbing, but dangerous to our ability to trust one another and truly know one another without fear of conflict. Finally, and although it was not outwardly an intentional goal, I found myself developing close and lasting relationships with people who have known the violence of the "streets," or war, and of rape and abuse.

In working through the stagnation, I also found myself receiving more attacks and rejections as I took more risks to talk openly about race. Some of these reactions came not solely during these engagements, but more generally as the "word" got out that I was prone to speaking candidly about racism. I initially feared these reactions but have become less threatened and more emboldened over time. I have learned to relinquish the false invincibility, the pretense of displaying a brave front, and replaced it with more honesty and with greater effort to avoid ugly realities (see Brown, 2010).   My understanding of racism has led and continues to lead me to the *constant* observation and study of nuances in racial interactions that reveal ugly as well as beautiful engagements. I learned, for one, how racial discourses can too often run the course of obliterating or downplaying other important socializing forces like culture, sexism, and religion and therefore, quell complexity in our thinking about individual people and contexts. These discourses can also shut down interactions, subdue relationships, and invoke self-insights that are far from flattering: to confront race beyond the surface level

and with the objective of embracing the humanity of each person is to wrestle with a sense of personal mortality and purpose in the world.

What I share in this book is the outgrowth of what I have learned thus far. I re-fashion Helms' racial identity theory by focusing on violence as the principle structure that underlines racism. In the United States, and in some instances in other racialized societies, people take part in a series of constructions in which Black people's existences are cast as lowly and expendable in relation to White people's existences, which by comparison are considered more sacred and worthy. White people's lives can become a proxy for institutional and organizational structures that govern the sociopolitical hegemony in these societies, like laws, media, and how schools are generally run, consequently, the equation of White people need not only include White people, but also Black people and other People of Color who uphold these structures. Moreover, hidden structures of violence reinforce racism. When Black people conform to the norm by downplaying, distorting, or defending the myriad manifestations of racialized violence, they invariably affirm the violence. This complicity can appear like peace-promotion.

When we fight against the norm —the flow, the repercussions can be mildly unpleasant on one end of the spectrum, and rejecting, corruption-ridden, and deadly on the other end. It means we distance ourselves from one another generally, but especially when the people whose lives are perceived to be most precarious, like protestors against vile violence, the "thugs," and the ones who are not afraid to be who they are naturally and without the need to fit in. We dedicate more attention to separating ourselves from those who are most targeted for violence than we do to dismantling a system that is morally bereft.

Fighting against the norm is to wage liberation and peace. It means availing ourselves of opportunities to make connections with people most affected by or vulnerable to physical violence. Rather than maintaining or creating greater distance between ourselves and the people we consider to be "less" than us, we see the "other" in ourselves. Creating a psychology of liberation and peace means that we put forth the efforts to help Black people overcome our inclination to resist confronting oppression and resist reproducing new stratifications that keep

us from restoring and embracing our culture. Rather than replicating the stratifications, we can break from it and commit more fully to the battle against violence.

I propose that some of the best ways to knit together liberation and peace among African-descended people at interpersonal levels is to build strong allegiances with the most vulnerable, to agree to disagree while not being disagreeable, and continue our legacy of non-violent approaches to addressing structural violence. Creating authentic, expressive relationships is vital to the process of personal emancipation and in building coalitions within and across regions of the Diaspora. I have had the joy and honor of working with small groups of people in my local community on a number of issues related to positive, spirited psychological growth, like African-centered education. My Ugandan colleagues, with whom I have worked to advance agendas of peace and liberation psychology, are some of the best models I know in authentic communication and protecting cultural traditions.

To address racialized violence as it pertains to Black people also means addressing White people, as well as other people of color. Race emerges to polarize. Its creation involves the cultivation of ideologies about Black people and White people in relation to one another. I dedicate some attention to these implications of violence for Whites, but briefly only because of space limitations. Although space also does not allow a fuller examination of the different configurations of people of other races, I acknowledge here that such an examination is important to future analyses on racialized violence. What *is* examined most prominently are the divisions that exist *between* groups of Black people that are spawned by racialized violence. It is these divisions, I propose, that also affirm racial identities in which Black people are seen, by Whites, other Blacks, and other people of color, as being characteristically more or less apt for exclusion and thus, expendability. The importance of overcoming these within-group divisions and confronting the pathology inherent in the between-group divisions between Whites/White institutions and Black people, is at the heart of the book. This book centers primarily on the lives of Black Americans with some attention to African-descended people outside of the United States.

I begin in chapter one with an overview, and in chapter two with an introduction of *racialized violence* in which Black Americans are the targets of maiming, rape, labor exploitation, and murder for purposes of economic greed, and with an explication of how this violence has remained a constant over the generations. Chapter three centers on a re-formulated theory of racial identity, which I propose is a conceptualization that can help us best understand the constancy of violence against Black people in the U.S. and in other racialized societies. It is also a theory that acts as a heuristic to help us advance a movement that will naturally include others besides psychologists and indeed, besides professionals in general. In chapter four, I address how the theory can be applied to guide the work of people who wage liberation and peace on behalf of Black people in the United States. In the final chapter I explain how racial identity theory can be applied to waging liberation and peace at the global level.

Building peace means stepping outside of established or even respectable ways of behaving while still maintaining a high regard for people as humans. Living a liberationist and peace-advancing existence means that our interactions will not always be peaceful or of course, not entirely free of conflict. Yet it need not mean that our relationships are irreparable and our lives subject to complete isolation and despair. When we embrace the value of authentic expression and our vulnerability as humans, we live authentically. Living authentically is liberating because it means we can display a deep care and love for ourselves and other people even when it leaves us open to interpersonal rifts and harm. It is to exist and live for the greater good.

The enormity of violence and the threat of violence in our lives as Black people is immensely tragic and enraging. For many, it is a hopeless reality that seems unstoppable. However, we are fortunate for the ample accounts of organized effort and resources that have helped sustain hope and improve Black lives, love, dignity, and the pursuit of a generations-long revolution against the tyranny of racialized violence. But it is not enough. Meaningful change will not occur merely through corrective socialization or persuasion. It will occur more likely from the increasingly violent response to physical and structural violence. Yet, living and

working authentically requires that we do more than await the inevitable crumbling of societies built on oligarchies, despotism, and corporate greed. In part in requires the establishment of genuine allegiances with other Blacks and other racial groups, the sustaining of cultural traditions, language, and dialect, as well as pursuing the unthinkable, like reparations for past wrongs, doing well with prisons, and developing economic justice avenues that disrupt the violence exacted on Black people, other people of color, and ultimately non-elite White people. As I show at the concluding two chapters of this book, we as practitioners, educators, and leaders can participate and lead projects to (better) understand the barbarism that underlines racism and other intersecting systems of oppression. We must ask ourselves to what degree are we willing to try to reinvent collectivist traditions, true to the work of liberationists, and to act against the violence to create a more just and peaceful future.

Acknowledgments

Over the past several years, the people who know me very well or with whom I have worked for stretches of time also know of my preoccupation with a psychology of racism and oppression. So many students, fellow scholars, activists, and friends have helped sharpen my thinking through dialogue and action as I grew, obsessively pouring over every article, book, song, film, poem, museum artifact, and interview transcript I could find to add to my education. I first thank my students with whom I have presented papers and published manuscripts and book chapters over the years and who have nurtured my thinking in important ways: Dorienna Alfred, Sherri Murry, Bong Joo Hwang, Yoonhwa Choi, Josh and Angela Manlove, Anne Theis, Matt Sorley, Khym Isaac de Barros, Caroline Shin, Joy Stephens Lane, Jeannie Annan, Patricia Garcia, Mercedes Cannon, and Seunghee Kwon. I thank Joyce Alexander, then chair of my department at Indiana University (IU) in Bloomington who in 2006 allowed me to teach a seminar course on the psychology of oppression, conflict and peace despite the small handful of students who enrolled in its one-time offering. I offer special thanks to this handful of enthusiastic students --- Tim Bagwell, Amy Bartleson, Deleska Crockett, and Seunghee Kwon, who as a group, wrestled beautifully with a most ungraceful project: to develop interventions to promote liberation and peace to the residents of a primarily White community in the U.S. South whose prominent, evangelical members sought to adopt Sudanese children in the midst of centuries-long strife with the Black residents in the town. You all handled this case by anticipating the violence at each and every turn, acknowledging the need for influential townspeople who operated with mature racial identity schemata, and inserting the intermittent messiness and beauty of a perpetually changing region with its ebb and flow of refugees, immigrants, and newcomers of every stripe. The project idea was a gift from Julia Duany whose dedication to peace in her native Sudan and in the U.S. still lifts me to this day.

I thank Khaula Murtadha who invited me to join the faculty at the IU Indianapolis campus when I could no longer resist the calling to work in an urban context, and for the subsequent executive associate deans Patricia Rogan and Robin Hughes who supported my efforts to establish a university-community forum on the school-to-prison pipeline. I thank my

co-organizers of the forum who were just as riled up as I was about the practice of ensnaring of school children into confined spaces that also subjected them to colonized practices of segregation, pedagogy, and discipline: Karen Dace and the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Office at IUPUI, Khalilah Shabazz and her student staff at the IUPUI Multicultural Success Center, Mark Foreman and the Indianapolis Urban League, the late Byron Vaughn of Prisoners Reformed, Inc., Mmoja Ajabu of the Naked Truth, Pat Payne of the Indianapolis Public School District, Mashariki and Kamau Kunjufu of NCOBRA, doctoral student and spoken word artist Robin Jackson, and the staff of the Indianapolis Black Expo. And to my fellow Turnites, the members of the Turner Forum for Truth and Justice: I am because we are.

I extend thanks to my colleagues Edward Delgado-Romero and Barbara Dennis whose collaborations on the critical psychotherapy process studies proved to be important sparks to my formulations on racial identity theory. Barbara has remained an active collaborator to this day and I prize her intellect and scholarship on critical qualitative methodology, as well as her endless warmth and generosity. I offer loads of thanks to my friend from Wales, writer and artist Isabel Adonis, who forced me to think about the impacts of racialized violence on Black people residing in the more remote areas of the world and who urged me to think inwardly.

I am indebted to the early psychology researchers and theorists, like Kenneth and Mamie Clark, William E. Cross, Jr., and Charles W. Thomas, who helped galvanize the flurry of scholarship on racial identity. I am especially grateful to Janet Helms, my adopted mentor and an intellectual giant, whose work continues to help advance my development, and who I admire for her sagacity and captivating wit. I also am grateful for my co-editor of this series on Pan-African Psychologies Guerda Nicolas who accepted my invitation in the midst of completing major projects and expressed delight over the possibility of producing a series of books with a decided emphasis on Black liberation and peace. I also thank Rod Watts, who in support of the project helped connect Guerda and I with other liberation-inspired scholars. Heartfelt thanks to Hussein Bulhan whose warmth and brilliance shines through not only in his writings, but in our conversations and email exchanges, and whose work at the Fanon Frantz University is a global triumph of our times. To my new friend Earline Walker, I extend thanks

Finally, I thank my children Mudiwa, Noni, and Gyasi, who have taught me so much about life and myself, and whose lives I cherish deeply. This book could not have been written without your presence in my life. In each of you, and in the members of my enlarged and loving family, I see future generations of Black people and allies continuing the *struggle* for liberation where every person is fully free and with it, a way of being, living, and loving in which we see ourselves wrapped in the humanity of one another, no one excluded.

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