

Racialized violence in the lives of Black people: Illustrations from Haiti (Ayiti) and the United States

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Abstract

Notwithstanding the cessation of the transatlantic slave trade in the 19th century and the end of ‘classical’ colonization across the globe (Bulhan, 2015), racialized violence continues to have an impact on the lives of Black people throughout the Diaspora. Socially, politically, and economically, the structural manifestations of this violence include unjust practices that constrain the fulfillment of basic needs, the rupture of regional and global communities of color resulting in lower-caste Blacks being at greater risk of state-sanctioned attacks, and the promulgation of underdevelopment and impoverishment of African nations alongside the increasing wealth base of the Global North. Psychologists need to address the compromised freedom of a supposedly freed people in order to help develop, align themselves with, and promote solutions for the problems Black people face. Historian Trouillot (1995) argued that moving toward a more just future entail a study of how history works and for whose benefit (e.g., Trouillot, 1995); likewise, we propose that this understanding can serve, at least in part, to move people toward more psychologically healthy societies. Recognizing the power elements associated with the storyteller, we provide snapshots of historical accounts of the often silenced and distorted experiences of African-descended people during and following the Maafa, or the Great Disaster. The ongoing struggle for emancipation must summon efforts to incite a practice of deliberately recognizing pervasive racialized violence, urging the un-silencing of voices in all spheres of life, and advancing constructive, collective and ever-day activism.

Key words: Freedom, Emancipation, Blacks, Slavery, Humanity

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A humanitarianism that is rooted in the belief of the worth of all human beings and the insistence that the rewards of life are more than merely survival, is the humanitarianism that looks to, rather than away from, the painful realities of the world. Over the past 30 years, our work has been to understand the root causes of the ailments impacting the lives of Black people across the globe and develop prevention and intervention strategies aimed at assisting individuals cope and heal from such ailments. Through this work, what has become abundantly clear is that the root cause of the majority of the challenges (i.e. economic, education, health, etc.) faced by Black people across the various continents is systemic racism. While individual interventions are necessary to equip individuals with the skills needed to effectively combat the impact of such a powerful force, systemic interventions are needed to ensure that such insidious disease do not continue well into the future, ravaging the lives of future generations. Therefore, we focus on the realities of violence and its role and function in the construction of racism as pertaining to people of African descent. These realities also force us to know history, but more important, to conceive of how renditions of the past that honor the lives and memories of people are essential to meaningful humanitarian work.

We draw on historical sources to show the relevance of the past to current realities that shape people's perceptions of themselves, others, and the world and of the need for action against violence. We center attention on racialized violence and its impacts on the lives of Black people in regions throughout the world, but due to space limitations, concentrate our examples on Haiti and the United States.

History, the Present, and Racialized Violence

Historians have long noted that the history of Black people throughout the world is replete with events and lived experiences that reveal how the major forces that profoundly

affected Black lives --- the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism --- have morphed into the present-day lives of Black people throughout the Diaspora (e.g., Clarke, 1998; Daniels, 2008; Du Bois, 1963). Evolving from a myriad of conditions, and tempered by forceful resistance including revolts and international support (Aptheker, 1939; Camp, 2004; Cheek, 1970; Horne, 2014), violence can take on new forms while erupt in hostilities toward ‘lesser’ groups and maintain a status quo of injustice. Galtung (1969) defined structural violence as the form of violence that is built into social structures and that rob people of basic needs like food, safety, and shelter. A similar definition was offered by Bulhan (2015) who coined the term *meta-colonialism* to refer to the evolution of the violence that emerges from “classic” and neo-colonialism. Meta-colonialism refers to the sustained nature of the violence that effects everyday living. The concept also explains how the perpetrators of violence, whether in brute physical form or structurally, can resemble the people to whom the violence is directed.

Psychologists (Bulhan, 1985; 2015; Fanon, 1961; Nobles, 2012; Sutherland, 1996) also have written not merely of the Maafa, but also of the sustained violence that has followed Black people’s lives. These are the experiences in which Black people reacted in various ways to the terror of violence: they endured complacently, as well as resisted and exerted action to give voice to the wrongness of the violence. These examples of resistance took on forms of retaliation violence in some cases, as well as manifested itself in ways that showed a resolve to assert one’s dignity along with the desire to survive. Yet when survival was taken as a priority over resistance to act against the violence, divisions were spawned which created allegiances between those who were relatively less likely to escape the fury and those to whom the fury was more fully thrust. Meanwhile, the silencing of the experiences of violence, and especially of the variations in how people reacted to them, can translate into problems in uniting a people to whom violence has been long directed, and whose solidarity historically has served to aid them

in important ways. Survival was not always possible, yet the assurance of a people who shared a similar cultural and racial heritage, and in who could champion a shared humanity, seemed important to a sense of hope. On the other side of the ledger, learning about silenced accounts of the past to inform the present lends significance to a holistic view of reality. A show of the outpouring of humanitarian aid by the Global North to Haiti after the January 12, 2010 earthquake, which devastated hundreds of thousands of people, in the absence of a history of collusion and violence by their political leaders, could taint images of the relative 'worth' from those of the North compared to the perennially struggling people of Haiti and other Global South countries.

Trouillot (1995) wrote that history, that is, the recreating of stories from the past based on memory, artifacts and/or interviews, occurs with each of us --- we are all historians. With history as an academic discipline, the stories that are disseminated and widely perceived as 'truth' are part of a dominant voice and that their sanctity as truths also minimizes and silences the experiences and renditions of those people whose experiences would add to or even counter these stories. Trouillot also wrote that the power exercised by people whose versions of them settle into common understandings about past events --- what happened, how they happened, who the major players were, and why the account of such events matter to anyone --- takes on a reverberating effect. The stories may not be accurate yet have lasting power because they appear in approved history textbooks by school boards, in celebratory commemorations that become well-steeped traditions in communities, and affirmed through the number and size of monuments, their appearance in libraries, and other structures considered sacrosanct in said society. History therefore can be seen as something real, legitimate and tangibly real without consideration of the power it holds in what is told and for what benefit. An example of this is the often-told history of Christopher Columbus' conquest of the Americas. Columbus' popularity

became cemented only after the reigning sovereignty in Italy was concerned about its failing economy and maneuvered to catapult stories of Columbus' conquest during two world fairs. The maneuvers worked as was the cementing of Columbus' travels shorn of the immense violence he and his men exacted onto the lives of indigenous people in these lands.

Psychologists have written about the importance of the past on the present lives of our clients, research participants, consultees, and students. Spanning disciplines --- like counseling, community, clinical, and social psychology and foundational to the precepts of liberation, Black/African, and critical psychology, the attention to healing individuals as well as societies in view of structural injustice and violence. All concern themselves not merely with research, but action and to longstanding conditions that are at the root of contemporary problems people experience. For example, Amer (2014) noted that community psychologists engage in projects that are not restricted to current events and changing contexts but can focus on longstanding societal conditions.

Nicolas' 24-year project involving her U.S. students and the development of mental health services in Haiti, she writes of the significance of these longstanding conditions. Nicolas, Byers, & Guillaume (2013) noted that short-term solutions to medical care often come from people traveling from other countries to help fill in gaps, what is often refers to as helicopter aid, yet these initiatives cannot lead to sustainable care in these regions. With 80% of the population in Haiti living below the poverty line, the authors noted that

Well before the devastating January 12, 2010 earthquake, the Pan American Health Organization identified Haiti (the only Low-Income Country in the insular Caribbean) as one of five 'priority countries' in most need of long-term care. The PAHO commented on the nation's severe health challenges. . . Of the Caribbean nations, Haiti is reported to

have the highest rate of infant and maternal mortality, chronic malnutrition and HIV (WHO, 2012).

Nicolas has help realized five principles for creating sustainable, culturally competent care to Haitians, understanding the longevity necessary for the work. These includes: (1) In-Country Partnership; (2) Enhancing Cultural Knowledge; (3) Building a Culturally Competent team; (4) Building Culturally Relevant Curriculum; and (5) Building Capacity. Collectively, these principles highlight the need for creating programs that are grounded in the culture of the community with strong cultural team and curriculum and will live beyond the creator. Failure to create sustainable program that will impact the communities is to create program that will seek to sooth the suffering of the program creator while denying the needs of the recipients.

We point out manifestations that are borne out of the Maafa, the Great Disaster, and point to how continued violence became forged in which people of European descent waged violent that took on. . over time. These morphed manifestations did not occur in the absence of resistance; indeed, the survival and thriving of generations of Black people throughout the world emerged from the countervailing acts of resistance. Yet, greater resistance to the forces of violence and exploitations are needed in the promotion of a freer people and to their mental health needs.

We draw from historical accounts and indeed, from historiography, to show how histories of violence have lent to newer forms. Many of these accounts may not be known or reported in conventional sources like 'traditional' school history books. They also may be downplayed, distorted, or 'tokenized' --- delivered in a discourse that maintains a dominant voice of who is important and with little attention to incite action in a status quo that fuels practices of racialized injustice. We show snapshots of historical accounts of how these exploitation and violence have shaped Black people and indeed, all people's lives --- within given society. We show that

psychologists who study with this understanding are apt to help develop, align themselves with, and provide solutions for the problems Black people face. Although a complete understanding of the past is said to be an elusive goal, the issue of power in the construction of knowledge and of self can lead to forms of violence prevention that requires a knitting between the past and present, examinations of power arrangements inherent in racialized societies, and for Black people in particular, a restoration/sustaining of cultural traditions that have long sustained Black life over the generations. At the heart of this violence prevention is a promotion of (continued) activism against racialized violence. This is critical today as there continues to be more attention given to these incidents as a result of access to social media. This was evident by the recent incident of two Black men in Philadelphia being arrested for sitting down at a Starbucks. The video of the arrest went viral causing an outcry in the Black community and in the general public, calling for systemic actions moving forward.

As psychologists, we understand the impacts of such violence on the individuals' psychological well-being. Although our focus primarily is on improving the lives of African-descended people in the different regions we live and work, we assert that these impacts have relevance to all people as part of an intersecting world of social, political, and economic networks. Knowledge about this interconnectedness translates into a deep knowledge base which necessitates our need to collaborate with people from all spheres within society and across different societies in the Diaspora. Importantly, we view 'freedom' as consisting of the lack of confinement in how a person sees him- or herself, others, and the world on whole. To be truly free is to have the capacities and the will to exploit one's cognitive abilities and to view reality in all its vastness and truths. Once a person accomplishes this personal freedom, he or she also is able to understand the inextricable tie between person and context and between present and past,

and when the body and mind are able, to exact changes that are necessary to create a better community and world.

Partial Freedoms: A Brief Glimpse

One of the most common quotes by President Lincoln is that “America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.” Embedded in this quote is the unquestionable importance of freedom that is seen as the foundation of life and the heart of any society. Scholars have agreed that when such freedom is comprised, suffering and misery will soon follow and there is the end of freedom. As we look through the history of slavery and colonization, one must ask whether Blacks ever fully reached the level of freedom.

The Maafa

Both the African-descended people from Haiti and the U.S. were affected by the Maafa. This Kiswahilli term means terrible occurrence or great tragedy. According to Clarke (1998), “Nowhere in the annals of history have a people experienced such a long and traumatic ordeal as Africans during the Atlantic Slave Trade” (p. 35). It is the period that spanned from the 15th century through the 20th century and would argue that it persists today.

The barbarism of Europeans was not limited to the acts toward enslaved Africans once they landed ashore from the transatlantic slave trade. Military fixtures, including firearms, daggers, as well as instruments of restraint like branding irons, iron coffers and shackles, and bronze muzzles were carried and used on board of the slave ships (Daniels, 2008). The accounts of the inhumane treatment of the enslaved Africans aboard these trips for the 400 years of the dispersing from African nations mainly to Brazil, the Caribbean, and the United States include descriptions of tightly ‘packed’ bodies treated who the slavers treated like animals, where the vomit and excrement of the men, women and children surrounded their existence, and where

those who died would remain shackled with the living. An estimated 16% of the so-called cargo were recorded as dying on route (Daniels, 2008). Some enslaved Africans committed suicide, while others perished during revolts.

Haiti

The history of Haiti is notable for several reasons. Following two hundred years of harsh captivity at the hands of the Spanish and French conquerors of Hispaniola, the enslaved people of the westernmost part of the island revolted in strong solidarity in 1791 and triumphed in freeing themselves from their European captives by 1804. Historian C. L. R. James (1963/1989) described how the victors of the Haitian revolution ended the brutal enslavement of its inhabitants to become the first Black republic. This victory also is notable because the European slavers and colonialists vastly outnumbered the enslaved people who were brought to Haiti during the 400-year transatlantic slave trade where an estimated 10-100 million men, women, and children were abducted from Africa and scattered in Brazil, the Caribbean islands, and the United States (e.g., Clarke, 1998; Du Bois, 1924; Emory University Transatlantic Slave Trade Voyages, 2013). Haiti remains the only country in the world whose people successfully revolted against a brutally violent regime of enslavement and colonialism for their freedom. Despite subsequent later attempts by Napoleon and invasion attempts by Great Britain, Spain, and the United States, Haiti has remained a “free” society. The success of the slaves in Haiti inspired the slaves of many other regions to also rebel and Haitians offered their aid and assistance as needed (Clarke, 1998).

The revolt that freed the Haitian people from slavery was compromised by the French government that imposed a hefty tax that imperiled the growth of the Haitian economy for generations. The conspiratorial alignments between Haitian ‘elites’ --- often the wealthy and lighter complexioned inhabitants and world leaders from Europe and the United States also

proved perilous to the people who comprised the masses, most of whom live in poverty in one of the economically poorest nations in the world, and even the abduction of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide who sought to seek *genuine* freedom by pledging just political and economic practices and independence from outside nations with vested financial interests in the nation. Haiti's history of despotic leaders translated into mass killing sprees, as well as the violence from neighboring Dominican Republic as epitomized by the Parsley Massacre where an estimated 20,000 Haitians who lived on the border of the Dominican Republic were murdered by the country's dictator Rafael Trujillo.

The United States

Blassingame wrote of the extreme nature of the violence that Whites in the U.S. used, where "floggings of 50 to 75 lashes were not uncommon" (p. 263). Blassingame wrote "a fiendish planter once administered 1000 lashes to a slave (p. 263). Planters also on numerous occasions branded, stabbed, tarred and feathered, burnt, shackled, tortured, maimed, crippled, mutilated, and castrated their slaves (p. 262). Rape was common, both aboard slave ships and ashore.

Blackmon's (2008) historical work addresses the evolution of violence that Whites, especially in the South, wielded in order to gain greater political control over Black bodies for the purpose of increasing their wealth. The use of Black codes, rules of conduct that could land Black people in jail for minor 'offences' like not stepping off the sidewalk in the presence of a White person, served the goal of feeding an industry of free labor while the offenders were incarcerated. With vigorous opposition, the Black codes eventually went away, yet a structure remained that gave way to a discourse of fear and anger generated mostly by politicians of Black criminality in the absence of historical and contemporary examinations of Black people's local experiences of terror. A host of factors, including the discourse of fear and anger, the lynching

primarily of Black people, and practices of targeted policing in urban communities have fueled unprecedented incarceration rates in which disproportionate numbers are Black and Brown people. In 1972, there were more than 300, 000 people in U.S. prisons. Today, there are 1.2 million, and the U.S. has the largest population in the world of incarcerated people in prison, and the only country who allows children to be condemned to a lifetime of imprisonment (Stevenson, 2017; see also Alexander, 2010; United Nations, 2016).

Another example of the horrific form of racialized violence affecting Blacks was in the form of lynching. A recent report by the United Nations (2016) calling for reparations for African descent people in the U.S highlighted the following, “*Lynching was a form of racial terrorism that has contributed to a legacy of racial inequality that the United States must address. Thoughts of people of African descent were killed in violent public acts of racial control and domination and the perpetrators were never held accountable*”. The Equal Justice Initiative documented more than 4000 racial “terror lynchings,” in 12 Southern states between 1877 and 1950. They also reported that “lynching profoundly impact race relations in this country and shaped the geographic, social, and economic conditions of African Americans in ways that are still evident today.” Racial violence is practice throughout the world and has been the “trade-mark of racism throughout history” and such violence has excluded Black folks from social, political, cultural, economic and educational benefits.

Finally, we make note of Adams’ research on the impact that White violence against Black people enslaved in the U.S. South has on White Southerners. It is a project that combined history and psychological analyses (see also Kovel, 1970/1984; and Cushman, 1995). What Adams reveals in his research is that Whites responded to violence against Black people ostensibly in varied ways and importantly, that the violence that Whites took part in and observed affected their relationships with one another and notably, between parents and children.

Adams showed that Black violence was not contained. The violence spread vociferously to all people, in Adams' examinations Whites were targeted, during the time of slavery and to influence current-day White people in the South.

Conclusions

To us, humanitarianism is to become immersed in people's need for freedom. The surfacing of the violence to add to a more inclusive narrative of historical accounts is important in that it not only helps complete and give fuller shape to the story. It also helps complete the complexity inherent in realities and in the people who constitute them. Studies of discourse and how the language we use to convey the relative importance of some versus others is important to a process of healing in which we recognize this complexity better (see Pilecki, 2014; Tileaga, 2006, 2007).

There is evidence that the process of creating more complex realities and renderings of people can be personally transformational. It can lead to the will to act against the violence and dehumanization that curtails life and societal peace. For example, U.S. Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King who was once widely reviled for his defiant determination in the U.S. Civil Rights movement once wrote of the Black people who had overcome much of their fear and had transformed themselves a collective that had to be reckoned with. "Where there is true unity, every effort to discriminate only serves to strengthen the unity." He wrote further that

The members of the opposition had also revealed that they did not know the Negroes with whom they were dealing. They thought they were dealing with a group who could be cajoled or forced to do whatever the white man wanted them to do. They were not aware that they were dealing with Negroes who had been freed from fear. And so every move

they made proved to be a mistake. It could not be otherwise, because these methods were geared to the ‘old Negro,’ and they were dealing with a ‘new Negro.’” (p. 1958, p. 21).

Fanon similarly wrote of the transformation of a ‘new man’ with the liberation or freeing of the Black person from colonization. It is noteworthy that this transformation can also open up new dangers, an ironic twist in environments that are steeped in violence (e.g., National Public Radio, 2018; Rodney, 1970).

We cannot address the problems borne of the savagery of racism and colonialism without recognizing that the roots, well-tilled and fertilized, are nourished with a constancy of violence. Just as historians of all stripes have contended that we need to confront racism in order to overcome its wrath, we as psychologists contend that confronting violence in all forms is to act toward psychological well-being and peace-building. To build peace is to work for the life of people and societies and is counter to the forces and processes that do harm. Race and racism, as topics that serve as entering points, help us make discernments about why violence continues despite the conventional view that they are on the decline (Neville et al., 2016). But we know that racialized violence in all forms remains all over the world (e.g., Guldbrandsen, 2012; Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, 2016). Thompson (in progress) writes that racial identity theory emerges as a conceptualization that fittingly can address the strain between racial groups, like Whites and Blacks, as well as the spurious strains that occur among Black people based on beliefs of which caste is positioned closer (but never aligned entirely with) to Whites. She proposes that at the apex of the theory that the individual achieves a sense of urgency in and commitment to activism as a result of resolving these interpersonal strains. In re-formulating the theory, she also sees that this resolution is much aligned with King’s and Fanon’s ideas of the ‘new human,’ entails the ‘killing of the oppressor within’ (Bulhan, 1985), and evinces in people a view of the self as unhampered by materiality. Drawing from the stories of the past from

silenced people, she shows that the resolution can also strengthen the individual's commitment to the struggle for liberation and peace despite the dangers that accompany it.

Psychological freedom is possible and essential if we are to live life from the deeper reality of love, peace, wisdom and common sense... the human manifestation of our true spiritual nature; rather than from the blindness of our dead yesterdays... fear, hatred, jealousy, envy and greed. The antidote to the paralysis of fearful thinking lies in understanding the root cause... memory. In understanding the true nature of memory, we experience life free of the crippling affect of all frightening or traumatic past events. With this understanding comes a life of psychological freedom.

As Trouillot wrote, who tells the story, for what reason, and the omissions and distortions of the perspectives of less-powerful people become key questions in these examinations of the past. James Baldwin also wrote that "The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do." For those who have lived through, or who knowledgeable of the history, the feelings of rage, hurt, and bitterness of news reports that cite any of the rash of tragic school shootings as "the worst disaster in U.S. history" when a history of Whites violently driving Black people out of their homes and communities colored the U.S. landscape for a period of 50 or more years (<https://abhmuseum.org/sundown-towns-the-past-and-present-of-racial-segregation/>). There are estimates that hundreds of Blacks were killed during the separate massacres. To understand that dictum that we are living history all the time is to surface painful histories for the purpose of completing the whole, and thus fill in realities to create more complex realities.

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