Chapter Two

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Chapter Two

America: How Did We Get Here?

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Part I: What Has Happened?

This second chapter of the Healing History Web Page is an exploration of how some of the hardest parts of our nation’s history ever took place.

In 21st-century America, we suffer from deep divisions across racial and cultural lines, and many people experience physical and behavioral health challenges that have their deepest roots in longstanding inequities. These challenges have been compounded by denial and minimization of the inequities and their consequences—a call to bury the past and get on with the present. But when history has left us with trauma, history doesn’t stay buried, and silence deepens the wound.

Written for people in the behavioral health field, this chapter explores how our inequities started, how they gained such a strong foothold in our society, and how they may have affected many of the African Americans who need our services. This is important information for the field to read and understand, but it is not a chapter to be read in vulnerable moments. It has three purposes:

- to tell the truth—better late than never—of a history that most of us grew up knowing very little about,
- to explore the facets of human nature that have made the worst of this history possible, and
- to help us understand our current challenges more deeply.
There is finally enough well documented information available to help us all learn with confidence a lot of the “what” and the “why” of history—the subject of Part I of this chapter. The links and authors cited throughout the Healing History Web Page point to an abundance of reliable sources, and more are being published every month. History offers us abundant information about the oppressive conditions under which African Americans have lived and the transcendent strengths with which so many have survived, thrived, and overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

But our history also tells us about centuries’ worth of human beings doing unthinkable things—things like buying and selling other human beings, denying their humanity, hating people sight unseen, torturing and killing them, selling their children, burning their homes, cheating them out of any hope of success or power, and tolerating the wholesale betrayal, abuse, and murder of millions of people. It almost seems wrong to launch into the what and the why of this story without at least raising the question, how in the world could all this ever have happened? So the psychological aspects of that question—how could it have happened?—will be the subject of Part II of this chapter. Until we understand the conscious and unconscious beliefs and motivations that have led to a misconception or a mistake, it’s very hard to help individuals, families, communities, or societies correct it.

The Birth of Slavery

The deeply embedded human fear of scarcity and want—of not having enough to survive—has made money and power potent drugs. Long before industrialization and the information age paved the way for the sky-high profits we see today, many powerful people learned that they could increase their wealth by paying less for labor—and magnify their wealth many times over by forcing human beings to work for free.

Slavery had existed in many forms since ancient times. Often people were captured and enslaved by conquering nations, or indentured servants were obliged to work off their debts. Then the “discovery” of North and South America and the islands in the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico opened up a huge market for enslaved labor, and supply quickly followed demand. The trans-Atlantic slave trade of the 16th through 19th centuries ran on a massive scale, involved many countries (primarily Portugal, England, Spain, France, Holland, and Denmark), concentrated heavily on plundering Central and West Africa, and used kidnapped human beings as merchandise to be bought, sold, and traded.
As Isabel Wikerson wrote in *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, “The institution of slavery was, for a quarter millennium, the conversion of human beings into currency, into machines who existed solely for the profit of their owners, to be worked as long as the owners desired, who had no rights over their bodies or loved ones, who could be mortgaged, bred, won in a bet, given as wedding presents, bequeathed to heirs, sold away from spouses or children to cover an owner’s debt or to spite a rival or to settle an estate” (Wilkerson, 2020, pp. 44-45).  (To read the *National Geographic* article, “How Slavery Flourished in the United States,” click here.)

America was not the first market for this new “currency,” but it rapidly became a thriving market. In 1619, the first captives to reach this continent were some 20-30 enslaved Angolans aboard the White Lion, to be traded to Virginia colonists for provisions. (To read Isabel Wilkerson’s description of the arrival of slavery in the Colonies, click here, and to read Ibram X. Kendi’s description of “A Community of Souls,” click here.  “Those men and women who came ashore on that August day were the beginning of American slavery,” wrote Nikole Hannah-Jones in *The 1619 Project*.

“They were among the 12.5 million Africans who would be kidnapped from their homes and brought in chains across the Atlantic Ocean in the largest forced migration in human history until the Second World War. Almost two million did not survive the grueling journey, known as the Middle Passage” (Hannah-Jones and New York Times Company, 2021).

In Chapter One of the Healing History Web Page, “Africa: Ripe for the Plunder,” we took a closer look at the trans-Atlantic trade routes, the many directions their human “cargo” travelled, and the cultures that arose from this massive forced migration. In this chapter, we will focus on the land that became the United States.  
(To open Chapter One, click here.)
(For more on the history of slave ships, click here.)
The Growth of Slavery

“In the early days of colonial America, the vast majority of people compelled to work for landowners were vagrant children, convicts, and indentured laborers imported from Europe,” wrote Dorothy Roberts in *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*. Most of these indentured laborers had come from Africa, Scotland, Ireland, and England. “The wealthy settlers who benefited from their unfree labor did not at first distinguish between the status of European, African, and Indigenous servants” (Roberts, in Hannah-Jones and New York Times Company, 2021, p. 49).

“These laborers, known as bondsmen or indentured servants, were employed for a specified number of years by wealthy landowners,” wrote Resmaa Menakem. “After each laborer had fulfilled his or her contract of servitude, he or she would be given freedom, as well as a chunk of money or, sometimes, a small parcel of land” (Menakem, 2017, p. 69).

But over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, wrote Roberts, “...as the slave trade mushroomed, Africans began to be subjected to a distinct kind of servitude: they alone were considered the actual property of their enslavers” (Roberts, in Hannah-Jones and New York Times Company, 2021 p. 49). This highly profitable practice, called “chattel slavery,” used the law to deny people freedom and ordinary human and civil rights, and to do so until the end of their lives. Chattel slavery gradually became the norm for enslaved Black people in the United States and many of the island countries. *(For a video of Rhiannon Giddens’s haunting version of “Wayfaring Stranger,” click here.)*

In 1676 and 1677, Nathaniel Bacon led a civil war in Virginia, rallying both indentured servants and enslaved Black people in his effort to gain power in the colony (Suggs, 1981). These violent rebellions were almost successful, but after Bacon’s death amid a crumbling regime, the British Royal Navy intervened and defeated the last of the rebels. This show of unity between enslaved Black and indentured White servants had intimidated the White government in Virginia, which reacted by shifting from a reliance on indentured servitude to a reliance on unpaid slave labor. This move set the stage for the concept of “whiteness” and the emergence of race as a pivotal factor in determining the value of human beings and the worth of their labor (Simba, 2022).

“Colonial legislatures enforced the distinction between Black and White people through a series of new laws passed in the mid-1600s that established a legal regime that differentiated the political status of Europeans and Africans,” wrote Roberts (2021). “It was particularly concerned with sex because enslaved Black women gave birth to enslaveable children even if the fathers were White,” so “control over Black women’s bodies was key to creating a permanent labor supply” (Roberts, in Hannah-Jones and New York Times Company, 2021, p. 50).
In 1860, the U.S. Census counted nearly four million enslaved people living in the 12 slave states (Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia) (Strochlic, 2019). “By the time the Civil War began, in 1861, Southern states had established an elaborate governing framework for race relations,” wrote Hannah-Jones. “Through trial and error, as well as careful planning, White authorities had created oppressive laws and systems of patrolling, surveillance, and punishment, all of which were designed to protect enslavers and the White citizenry from the consequences of their own unmitigated violence and to ensure centuries of prosperity for the planter elite.

“If the Confederacy had been a separate nation when the Civil War began, it would have ranked among the richest in the world. As the historian Steven Deyle writes in Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life, the monetary value of the enslaved population in 1860 was ‘equal to about seven times the total value of all currency in circulation in the country, three times the value of the entire livestock population…twelve times the value of the entire U.S. cotton crop, and forty-eight times the total expenditures of the U.S. federal government that year’” (Hannah-Jones and New York Times Company, 2021, p. 112).

With that kind of economic power—and the political clout that went with it—the many financial interests dependent on slavery and the slave trade were able to build and support a massive body of lobbyists, officials, cooperative authors, and journalists. It is no surprise that this lobby wielded critical influence over legislative, judicial, and executive decisions, and over the press and White political will. This influence:

• helped shape our governmental structure (e.g., favoring rural states with small populations by creating the Electoral College and giving an equal number of Senators to each state);

• gave rise to countless policies, loopholes, and compromises that gave slaveholders and slave states more power, more protection, more financial gain, and greater license to do whatever they wanted (Wilkerson, 2020; Jannah-Jones and New York Times Company, 2021; McGhee, 2022);

• had tremendous power over the post-Civil War decisions that destroyed Reconstruction, created the web of Jim Crow laws and myths, spawned widespread violence against the newly
freed African Americans, and forced huge numbers of people to flee the South for a North that turned out to be little better (Wilkerson, 2010); and

- led to the ongoing myths about African Americans and to the conscious and unconscious bias, inequitable policies, widespread disparities, and deep historical trauma that we see today (McGhee, 2022).

Future chapters of this web page will look more closely at the role of policy in directing the course of history—and the role of history in shaping policy.

**Chattel Slavery in America**

Jumping into the deep end of history can be overwhelming, and the experience of enslaved Africans in America is definitely the deep end of history. Much historical information has been uncovered, and much of it reveals that what happened was sometimes brutal beyond belief. As James Baldwin wrote in his 1963 masterpiece, *The Fire Next Time*, “For the horrors of the American Negro’s life there has been almost no language” (Baldwin, 1963, p. 68).

Depending on the color of our skin, the beliefs we were raised with, our life experiences, and our tolerance for psychological discomfort and pain, we might choose to react to those horrors by:

- denying, minimizing, intellectualizing, or avoiding the subject, afraid of being overwhelmed by grief, trauma, rage, shame, or guilt;
- letting it all in and letting ourselves be taken over by grief, trauma, rage, shame, or guilt; or
- studying at our own pace and using what we learn to build a sense of purpose, dedication, responsibility, and community with all who are trying to honor these truths.

Historical sources report that the experiences of enslaved African Americans ranged from situations where the only abuse was the loss of freedom and agency, all the way to the most extreme forms of physical, mental, sexual, and spiritual brutality. Some of those historical conclusions were based on public records and others on the isolated individual accounts that have surfaced.

That said, we must also remember that, from the most severely oppressed to the most prized and pampered, each enslaved person lived in a nation where the enslavers and their agents had the legal license to inflict any amount of damage on any enslaved African American. And, after passage of the second Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, any White person had the legal right—and the legal duty—to return enslaved people to bondage if they had escaped (Wilkerson, 2020).
In the words of Isabel Wilkerson, “The vast majority of African-Americans who lived in this land in the first 246 years of what is now the United States lived under the terror of people who had absolute power over their bodies and their very breath, subject to people who faced no sanction for any atrocity they could conjure” (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 47).

“Enslaved people could not legally marry,” Wrote Hannah Jones (2021). “They were barred from learning to read and restricted from meeting privately in groups. They had no claim to their own children, who could be bought, sold and traded away from them on auction blocks alongside furniture and cattle or behind storefronts that advertised ‘Negroes for Sale.’

“Enslavers and the courts did not honor kinship ties to mothers, siblings, cousins. In most courts, they had no legal standing. Enslavers could rape or murder their property without legal consequence. Enslaved people could own nothing, will nothing and inherit nothing. They were legally tortured, including by those working for Jefferson himself. They could be worked to death, and often were, in order to produce the highest profits for the white people who owned them” (Hannah Jones and the New York Times, 2021, p. 12).

According to Wilkerson, “‘Whipping was a gateway form of violence that led to bizarrely creative levels of sadism,’ wrote the historian Edward Baptist. Enslavers used ‘every modern method of torture,’ he observed, from mutilation to waterboarding’” (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 46).

Reconstruction

In an achingly beautiful 1903 collection of essays called The Souls of Black Folk, W.E.B. DuBois described his trip through Georgia’s “Black Belt” in the years following Reconstruction, including some of the people he met there. “‘This land was a little Hell,’ said a ragged, brown, and grave-faced man to me,” wrote DuBois. “We were seated near a roadside blacksmith shop, and behind was the bare ruin of some master’s home. ‘I’ve seen niggers drop dead in the furrow, but they were kicked aside, and the plough never stopped. Down in the guard-house, there’s where the blood ran’.” Reflecting on this glimpse of history, DuBois wrote that “With such foundations a kingdom must in time sway and fall” (Du Bois, 1903, p.48).
And fall it did, but “It would take a civil war, the deaths of three-quarters of a million soldiers and civilians, the assassination of a president, Abraham Lincoln, and the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to bring the institution of enslavement in the United States of America to an end.” (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 48).

Those who formed the Confederacy and seceded from the Union had insisted that these actions were not about slavery, but about preserving the Southern way of life. “The war has naught to do with slaves, cried Congress, the President, and the Nation,” wrote DuBois (1903); “and yet no sooner had the armies, East and West, penetrated Virginia and Tennessee than fugitive slaves appeared within their lines.

“They came at night, when the flickering camp-fires shone like vast unsteady stars along the black horizon: old men and thin, with gray and tufted hair; women with frightened eyes, dragging whimpering hungry children; men and girls, stalwart and gaunt—a horde of starving vagabonds, homeless, helpless, and pitiable, in their dark distress” (DuBois, 1903, p. 8).

With the end of the Civil War and the passage of the 13th Amendment, our nation began its first long, slow attempts to meet two great challenges: How to heal a sharply divided nation and how to turn a deeply oppressed minority into free, healthy, flourishing citizens. “For a brief window of time, the twelve years known as Reconstruction,” wrote Wilkerson, “the North sought to rebuild the South and help the 4 million people who had been newly liberated” (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 48).

“To these black folk it was the Apocalypse,” wrote DuBois. “The magnificent trumpet tones of Hebrew Scripture ... became a strange new gospel. All that was Beauty, all that was Love, all that was
Truth, stood on the top of these mad mornings and sang with the stars. A great human sob shrieked in the wind, and tossed its tears upon the sea—free, free, free” (Du Bois, 1935, p. 124).

According to DuBois, those hopes were tempered by the chilling fear that bondage and trauma had written on human hearts, minds, and bodies. “…the Negro knew full well that, whatever their deeper convictions may have been, Southern men had fought with desperate energy to perpetuate this slavery under which the black masses, with half-articulate thought, had withered and shivered. They welcomed freedom with a cry. They shrank from the master who still strove for their chains; they fled to the friends that had freed them, even though those friends stood ready to use them as a club for driving the recalcitrant South back into loyalty. So the cleft between the white and black South grew” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 14).

In 1865, abolishing slavery and involuntary servitude “except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted,” the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution left a door open for the use of involuntary Black labor. In 1865 and ’66, the new Southern state legislatures adopted a series of “Black Codes” modeled on the earlier “Slave Codes.” The Black Codes were designed to control the words, actions, movements, social interactions, and housing and employment options and conditions of the newly freed African Americans. These codes were also designed to funnel Black people into the prison system, with “vagrancy” laws that allowed African Americans to be arrested and committed to involuntary labor for minor “crimes” such as being in public places outside of narrowly prescribed hours. Over time, “Convict leasing,” in which landowners paid the prisons for the time and labor of their inmates, became a form of de facto slavery (Wilkerson, 2020).

Understanding that true reconstruction had not even begun and that the Black Codes could easily erase the gains won through emancipation, Congress passed the Freedmen’s Bureau and the Civil Rights Act (both in 1866) and the Reconstruction Acts of 1867, which:

- divided the South into five military districts and assigned military governors who would serve until the states adopted acceptable state constitutions;
- gave all men, regardless of race, the right to vote and—excluding former Confederate leaders—to participate in constitutional conventions in their states; and
- required each state to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment (granting citizenship to “all persons born or naturalized in the United States,” including formerly enslaved people) (DuBois, 1935).

“For this fleeting moment known as Reconstruction,” wrote Hannah-Jones, “the majority in Congress seemed to embrace the idea that out of the ashes of the Civil War, we could create the multiracial democracy that black Americans envisioned even if our founding fathers did not. But it would not last” (Hannah-Jones, 2019, p. 28).

According to Du Bois, Reconstruction “was a tremendous undertaking. Here at a stroke of the pen was erected a government of millions of men—and not ordinary men either, but black men emasculated by a peculiarly complete system of slavery, centuries old; and now, suddenly, violently, they come into a new birthright, at a time of war and passion, in the midst of the stricken and embittered population of their former masters” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 11).
However, while they sent the Freedmen’s Bureau to set up these new rights “in the midst of the stricken and embittered population of their former masters,” Congress neglected to appropriate any money for salaries and expenses. There were no provisions for the funds that would be necessary for the formation, protection, and functioning of a government that would rule and transform the lives of the millions who had long been deprived and traumatized—and whose success was sure to be vigorously opposed by powerful people who believed that Black people didn’t deserve even the most basic freedoms (Du Bois, 1903).

“Anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country,” wrote Hannah-Jones, “as does the belief, so well articulated by Lincoln, that black people are the obstacle to national unity. The many gains of Reconstruction were met with fierce White resistance throughout the South, including unthinkable violence against the formerly enslaved, wide-scale voter suppression, electoral fraud and even, in some extreme cases, the overthrow of democratically elected biracial governments. Faced with this unrest, the federal government decided that black people were the cause of the problem and that for unity’s sake, it would leave the white South to its own devices” (Hannah-Jones, 2019).

According to Wilkerson, “…the federal government withdrew for political expediency in 1877, and left those in the subordinate caste in the hands of the very people who had enslaved them. Now, nursing resentments from defeat in the war, people in the dominant caste took out their hostilities on the subordinate caste” (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 48).

Jim Crow and Lynching

The Jim Crow era—starting with a range of punishing local and state statutes unofficially named after a popular
“blackface” minstrel show caricature—came on with a vengeance. Fueled by outrageous stereotypes and lies about African Americans—augmented by exaggerated and false claims about the excesses and abuses of Reconstruction—many White Southerners with and without political power became the de facto “masters” of their impoverished Black neighbors.

With Jim Crow laws all but forbidding them to live, work, earn money, find a home, travel, congregate, go out in public, marry, go to school, learn to read, vote, receive basic services, seek protection under the law—and, of course, interact with White people in any but the most obsequious ways—Black Southerners entered a new kind of slavery. From the thousands of Black men serving hard time in prison for being unemployed or “loitering” (in today’s terms, “standing while Black”) to the sharecroppers whose backbreaking labor only brought them deeper in debt to their landowners, they knew the game was rigged against them, but it was the only game accessible to them.

Black Southerners also lived in constant fear of of “lynching,” a practice commonly used to terrorize and control Black people in the 19th and 20th centuries (NAACP, n.d.). “From 1882 to 1968, 4,743 lynchings occurred in the U.S., according to records maintained by NAACP. Other accounts, including the Equal Justice Initiative’s extensive report on lynching, count slightly different numbers, but it’s impossible to know for certain how many lynchings occurred, because there was no formal tracking. Many historians believe the true number is underreported” (NAACP, n.d.).

According to the NAACP, lynching most often involved the arrest (often on trumped-up charges), mobbing, seizure, torture, mutilation, castration, murder, and severe desecration of African Americans (and, in some cases, of White people who had defended Black people or opposed lynching) (NAACP, n.d.).

In a particularly bizarre twist, lynching sometimes attracted crowds of avid spectators, bringing their children (and their picnic lunches) and milling around in a festival atmosphere. These events were often commemorated in souvenir photographs (Wilkerson, 2020).

“The lynching era left thousands dead; it significantly marginalized Black people in the country’s political, economic, and social systems; and it fueled a massive migration of Black refugees out of the South” (Equal Justice Initiative, 2017). The White mobs responsible were almost never prosecuted for their crimes (National Archives, n.d.).
Isabel Wilkerson wrote that, “Across the South, someone was hanged or burned alive every four days from 1889 to 1929, according to the 1933 book *The Tragedy of Lynching*, for such alleged crimes as ‘stealing hogs, horse-stealing, poisoning mules, jumping labor contract, suspected of killing cattle, boastful remarks’ or ‘trying to act like a white person.’ Sixty-six were killed after being accused of ‘insult to a white person.’ One was killed for stealing seventy-five cents. Like the cotton growing in the field, violence had become so much a part of the landscape that ‘perhaps most of the southern black population had witnessed a lynching in their own communities or knew people who had,’ wrote the historian Herbert Shapiro. ‘All blacks lived with the reality that no black individual was completely safe from lynching’” (Wilkerson, 2010, p. 58).

Beyond their concrete physical effects, “…lynching—and other forms of racial terrorism—inflicted deep traumatic and psychological wounds on survivors, witnesses, family members, and the entire African American community. Whites who participated in or witnessed gruesome lynchings and socialized their children in this culture of violence also were psychologically damaged. And state officials’ indifference to and complicity in lynchings created enduring national and institutional wounds that we have not yet confronted or begun to heal” (Equal Justice Initiative, 2017).

The hope of freedom and safety that had been born in Reconstruction had been replaced by terror and widespread flagrant injustice, often with little or no hope of relief (Wilkerson, 2010).

**The Great Migration**

One important difference between Jim Crow and slavery was that, for many people, it was easier to escape Jim Crow. “From the early years of the twentieth century to well past its middle age, nearly every black family in the American South, which meant nearly every black family in America, had a decision to make,” wrote Isabel Wilkerson in *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* (Wilkerson, 2010, p. 20). Faced with that choice, an estimated six-to-seven million
African Americans chose to join the sprawling, leaderless exodus that historians would come to call the “Great Migration.”

“It was during the First World War that a silent pilgrimage took its first steps within the borders of this country,” wrote Wilkerson. “They fled as if under a spell or a high fever... The fever rose without warning or notice or much in the way of understanding by those outside its reach. It would not end until the 1970s and would set into motion changes in the North and South that no one, not even the people doing the leaving, could have imagined at the start of it or dreamed would take nearly a lifetime to play out” (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 20).

The pace of migration rose during the First and Second World Wars, when the deployment of troops to Europe and the decline in European immigration left many industrial jobs vacant in the North. There was a powerful need to survive and escape the oppression of the Jim Crow South. It drove many northward even during the Great Depression, when jobs and resources were scarce everywhere and these migrants were opposed and resented for being “different” and bringing more mouths to feed. Individuals and families continued to flee the South even after the illusion that Black people would be welcomed and treated as equals in the North had been smashed by stories of violent White backlash, segregation, widespread discrimination in jobs and housing—and even by resistance from some African Americans already living in the North. After all, a tiny fragment of hope seems better than no hope at all.

It had become abundantly clear that, under Jim Crow, life in the South was not going to grow less dangerous or less demeaning. “Oftentimes, just to go away is one of the most aggressive things that another person can do,” wrote John Dollard, a Yale scholar studying the South in the 1930s, “and if the means of expressing discontent are limited, as in this case, it is one of the few ways in which pressure can be put” (Dollard, 1937, quoted in Wilkerson, 2010, p. 23). “But more remarkably,” wrote Wilkerson, “it was the first mass act of independence by a people who were in bondage in this country for far longer than they have been free” (Wilkerson, 2010, p. 22).
Individuals and families left behind everything they owned and everything they had known, often with encouragement from family and friends up north, guidance and support from organizations such as the Urban League and the NAACP, and job-seeking help from Black newspapers such as the Chicago Defender.

In many cases people had to leave their homes and communities carrying few possessions, pretending they were going to return soon, for fear of being stopped by employers whose terms were unlivable or lynching mobs whose trumped-up charges would end their lives (Wilkerson, 2010).

The path of each individual and each family was a story in itself. By train, by bus, by automobile, by horse-drawn cart, and even by foot, most of these refugees set off for major Northern industrial cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, or New York City. There were many dangers and difficulties, stops along the way, and changes of plans that altered lives, careers, and family histories. The main migration corridors were:

- from the Southeast (Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia) to the Northeast (e.g., Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York City, and New England);
- from the South Central states (Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, and Kentucky) to the Midwest (e.g., Louisville, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Chicago, Toledo, Milwaukee, and Detroit), and
- from the Southwest (Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas) to the Midwest (e.g., St. Louis, Quincy (IA), Davenport (IA), and Minneapolis) and the Far West (e.g., Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Oakland) (Smithsonian American Art Museum, n.d.).

“The Great Migration would not end until the 1970s, when the South began finally to change—the Whites-only signs came down, the all-White schools opened up, and everyone could vote,” wrote Wilkerson. “By then nearly half of all black Americans—some forty-seven percent—would be living outside the South, compared to ten percent when the Migration began....Those millions of people, and what they did, would seep into nearly every realm of American culture, into the words of Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison, the plays of Lorraine Hansberry and August Wilson, the poetry and music of Langston Hughes and B.B. King, and the latter-day generation of Arrested Development and Tupac Shakur. It all but consumed the work of Richard Wright, the bard of the Great Migration” (Wilkerson, 2010, pp. 20-26).
Wilkerson wrote that “The Great Migration would become a turning point in history. It would transform urban America and recast the social and political order of every city it touched. It would force the South to search its soul and finally to lay aside a feudal caste system. It grew out of the unmet promises made after the Civil War and, through the sheer weight of it, helped push the country toward the civil rights revolutions of the 1960s” (Wilkerson, 2010, p. 21).

Of course, this progress came at the price of new trauma, in overcrowded Northern ghettos and public housing projects, in violence from White Northerners enforcing segregation, in many of the race massacres described in the following pages, and in the many “Black-only” hospitals locally known as “the place where you go to die” (Sanders, 2023, p. 3). At any point along this history, we can see its contributions to the physical, financial, and behavioral health challenges of African Americans.

Race Massacres

In the old South, the presence of free enslaved labor had kept the wages of White workers at rock bottom, and the mythology of the South had blamed the Black people who had been brought there in chains and forced to work for no wages. After Reconstruction, landowners benefitted by sustaining negative myths about Black people—including the belief that they were to blame for White people’s woes—to prevent any sort of solidarity from forming between impoverished Black and White workers. Wages remained low after the newly freed sharecroppers were forced to work for little or nothing (McGhee, 2022), and White resentment continued to grow. The boll weevil infestation of 1915 further threatened the Southern cotton economy and sent more Black laborers northward.

As the Great Migration threatened the supply of cheap and convict labor in the South—and increased both competition for jobs and White fear of integration in the North—racism flourished in every region of the country. As important as migration was for the African Americans who would have
been killed in body or spirit if they had stayed in the South, these refugees were in many ways haunted by the same kind of scapegoating, hatred, and violence that had forced them to leave. “From the moment the emigrants set foot in the North and West,” wrote Wilkerson, “they were blamed for the troubles of the cities they fled to” (Wilkerson, 2010, p. 20).

So resentment of African Americans both remained and festered in the South and followed the paths of migration north. It escalated the pace of lynching in the Southern states and left virtually the whole nation open to a wider, more explosive form of violence called the “Race Riot” or “Race Massacre.”

For many Americans who grew up in the late 20th or early 21st centuries, the term “race riot” is associated with an uprising of Black people in response to a high-profile injustice or the pressure of long-term poverty and discrimination. But the history of the late 19th and early 20th centuries provides quite another meaning. When it first came into use, “race riot” was another name for a “race massacre,” in which angry White mobs violently attacked African American individuals, families, and communities.

The earliest of these massacres broke out shortly after the Civil War, and they continued steadily, becoming more frequent after the 20th century began. As Black service members returned from World War I, many were no longer willing to take a subservient place in the society they had risked their lives and sacrificed so much to defend. Racial tensions, fear of unemployment, and White resentment all began to escalate (Hannah-Jones and New York Times Company, 2021). The Summer of 1919 won the title “Red Summer” for its widespread violence against African Americans and their communities, with an estimated 24 to 48 separate riots.

In each case there was some incident that touched off the violence and served as an excuse for the angry mobs to take up arms and organize their attacks. For example, in the Chicago Massacre of 1919, it was a young Black swimmer who allegedly strayed past the imaginary line that had been drawn on that particular portion of Lake Michigan, entering “White” water. In the thriving Greenwood community in Tulsa, Oklahoma, it was a White woman’s accusation that a young Black man (later acquitted) had attacked her in an elevator that sparked the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, with widespread armed violence by White vigilante mobs—violence that did not end until the community had been destroyed and the Oklahoma National Guard had taken over the scene.
White resentment toward African Americans was intense, so it took very little fuel to kindle uncontrolled violence. Even the few Black communities that were able to organize resistance—a response that became more common after World War I—were greatly outnumbered and outgunned, and African Americans were severely punished for defending themselves. Examples of these riots and massacres include the following:

- One year into Reconstruction (1866), police killed or injured 100-200 people in Downtown New Orleans, people who were walking to support a change in the State Constitution that would give Black residents the right to vote (WWNO New Orleans, 2016).

- That same year, the Memphis Race Riot of 1866 killed 46 Black people and 2 White people, jailed hundreds of African Americans, destroyed four churches and 12 schools, and left 5 Black women raped and more than 70 people injured (Britannica, 2020).

- The Meridian, Mississippi Race Riots of 1871 lasted three days and resulted in the murders of a judge and nearly 30 African Americans by a mob of White vigilantes led by the Ku Klux Klan (BlackPast, 2018).

- The Wilmington (North Carolina) Race Riot (or Wilmington Coup) of 1898 flared up after White Democrats had stuffed ballot boxes and won the election, resulting in more restrictions on Black voters.

- In the Atlanta Race Riot of 1906, White mobs killed dozens of Black Georgians, wounded scores of others, and inflicted considerable property damage in African American communities.

- The East St. Louis Race Riot of 1917, a spree of lynchings, “mayhem,” and brutal burning of people and buildings left eight White people and somewhere between 38 and 100 Black people dead (Keys, 2017; PBS American Experience, n.d.).

- With roughly four dozen (known) riots and massacres, 1919 was the year of the infamous Red Summer, with massacres in Washington, D.C., Knoxville, TN, Longview, TX, Philips County, AL, Chicago, IL, Omaha, NE, Millen, GA, Charleston, SC, Vicksburg, MS, New London, CT, Anapolis, MD, Brisbee, AK, Norfolk, VA, Orono, ME, Syracuse, NY, and Elaine, AK (considered the bloodiest of the Red Summer)

• On November 2, 1920, at least 50 African Americans were killed because they had tried to exercise their legal right to vote in Ocoee, Florida, purging that quiet citrus town of its Black population for more than 60 years (Byrne, 2014).

• The massacre best known to contemporary Americans may be the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, mentioned briefly above. Thirty-five city blocks of the affluent Greenwood Community—known as “Black Wall Street” for its order and prosperity—were burned to the ground, dozens of White rioters were deputized by local law enforcement to keep order, somewhere between 36 and 300 people were killed, more than 800 people were treated for injuries, and 6,000 people were left homeless (Tulsa Historical Society and Museum, 2021; History.com, 2022).

• And in 1923, the predominantly Black town of Rosewood, Florida was attacked by large groups of White aggressors and entirely destroyed, with all its residents driven out permanently and its public memory lost until the 1980s (History.com, 2018).

The Pendulum

With slavery leading to Reconstruction, the end of Reconstruction giving way to Jim Crow, the oppression of Jim Crow forcing the Great Migration, and all these experiences followed by waves of racism and waves of social change, one might picture a sort of pendulum effect, with:

• oppression and violence toward African Americans inspiring Black efforts to survive, escape, resist, and seek social, political, and economic empowerment—and inspiring the efforts of some White Americans (and the Civil War deaths of more than half a million) in support of their cause;

• any progress from these efforts rapidly awakening:
  o deep resentment in White supremacists;
  o fear in others who could be convinced that Black people jeopardized their safety, their history, or their livelihood—or threatened to “replace” them in their own communities;
o concern among employers, investors, and policymakers who profited from inequity; and

• the rise of hate speech; policies that further disempowered, disadvantaged, and endangered African Americans; and White supremacist violence that spread to other disaffected segments of the White population.

Were the stakes of hatred and oppression buried so deep in the Southern soil—or our culture as a whole—that nothing could have dislodged them? Clearly the lack of realism, lack of funds, and lack of sustained federal support for Reconstruction set the stage for much of the hatred and violence that rose along with it and took over when it was defeated. We don’t have the luxury of finding out what would have happened if Reconstruction had been well planned and well carried out, with customized social, economic, educational, and psychological support for Black and White communities alike. We’ll never know if well supported and sustained Reconstruction efforts could have stopped the pendulum’s swing.

As a nation, we still live on that pendulum. We carry the wounds of all that oppression, violence, fear, resentment, and inequity—and, in the behavioral health field, we treat those wounds every day. White Americans who fear that they will be disempowered or displaced by Black success show signs of psychological harm just as surely as do the Black Americans whose communities have been disempowered and displaced for centuries. Every human being needs health, dignity, love, peace of mind, connection, community, and—often most important—the ability to distinguish truth from lies.

Of course, the pendulum didn’t stop swinging after Jim Crow went underground, not even after all the gains made in the mid-twentieth century Black Freedom Struggle. In future chapters, this web page series will include information about:

• the struggle to forge equitable policies—and to enforce policies made in the after the Civil War but left unenforced in an unwilling South;

• a closer look at policies and practices in the behavioral health field, and how they have affected African Americans; and

• the strengths that have helped and will continue to help African Americans overcome oppression, adversity, and inequity—and bring their brilliance into the world.

But first, it’s important to step back from history and look at what it has to teach us. The conditions in which enslaved people lived and worked, the poverty and terror that Jim Crow and lynching inflicted in the South, the devastation of race massacres, and all the anti-Black violence that has
followed—in each case it has happened at the hands of human beings, who must have had human feelings and values.

If we return to our troubling question—*how could all this have happened*—what answers might we find to satisfy a field whose life’s work is human behavior? How could so many people engage in so much brutality over such a long span of time? We’ll explore this question next, in Part II of this chapter, starting with a quick look at the human brain and the “contagion” of trauma from Europe to America.

**Part II: How Could It Have Happened?**

**Fear and Trauma**

Especially in the behavioral health field, it’s tempting to blame many things on the human brain, that brilliant but delicately balanced organ whose most powerful urge—among many competing urges—is to keep us alive and functioning.

- Although the sophisticated “higher brain” is capable of unselfish moral and spiritual decisions, the task of individual survival is left in the power of the ancient and primitive “survival brain.” Fueled by powerful chemicals and automatic reactions, the survival brain mobilizes the body to cope with high stress and escape immediate physical danger (van der Kolk, 2014).

- The primitive survival brain is in many ways more powerful than the higher and more sophisticated “thinking” brain. It makes quick decisions based on very little information, and it acts on these decisions long before the higher brain can clarify the situation (Scaer, 2005).

- This internal alarm system (including the amygdala) is also prone to overreaction. Its chemical responses to long-term stress and trauma—the experience of overwhelming distress—can leave lasting physical and psychological challenges that can harm our health and resilience (Rothschild, 2000). These challenges can even affect our genetic codes and be passed down to the next generation through a process called “epigenetics” (Lehrner and Yehuda, 2018).

- A history of trauma can also make us prone to extreme stress responses, clouding our judgment and giving us powerful “fight, flight, freeze, fawn, or flop” urges—even in situations where we really need clear thinking, compassion, wisdom, and moral courage (van der Kolk, 2014). If we lash out in anger or fear, we can pass our stress injuries on to the people around us. This is one reason some experts speak of the “contagion” of trauma (Blanch and Shern, 2011).
The survival brain and many of the emotional structures in the limbic system tend to have overwhelming power even over our moral decisions. We may think it is our higher brain that is making those decisions, but moral psychology research shows that the higher brain generally takes its cues from the emotional brain, simply providing rationalizations for our emotionally derived moral judgments (Haidt, 2013).

We might well wonder what could have been going on in the minds of people who bought, sold, and enslaved human beings; who imposed cruel rules and inhumane conditions; and who enforced those rules by any means they thought necessary.

But if we do, we might also wonder what was going on in their brains. How often were they reacting to stress—too full of adrenaline to get any input from their higher, “thinking” brains, and instead taking the primitive advice of their emotional brains? And what kinds of experiences had set the tone for their stress responses?

In other words, who were those people who inflicted so much trauma on the Black and Brown lives under their power? Who were they, and what had been their own experience of trauma?

“Throughout the United States’s history as a nation, white bodies have colonized, oppressed, brutalized, and murdered Black and Native ones,” wrote author and trauma specialist Resmaa Menakem. “But well before the United States began, powerful white bodies colonized, oppressed, brutalized, and murdered other, less powerful white ones.” Those words are from Menakem’s healing and highly practical 2017 book, My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies.

“The carnage perpetrated on Blacks and Native Americans in the New World began, on the same soil, as an adaptation of longstanding white-on-white practices” (Menakem, 2017, p. 62).

According to Menakem, “The 1500s and 1600s in England were anything but gentle times. People were routinely burned at the stake for heresy, a practice that began in the twelfth century and continued through 1612. Torture was an official instrument of the English government until 1640. The famous Tower of London was, in part, a huge torture chamber...During much of the Middle Ages in England, torture wasn’t just wildly popular; it was a spectator sport.”
“It is not hard to understand why so many people from England fled to the American colonies,” he wrote. “Many of the English who colonized America had been brutalized, or had witnessed great brutality first-hand. Others were the children and grandchildren of people who had experienced such savagery in England.

“Isn’t it likely that many of them were traumatized by the time they arrived here?” asked Menakem. “Did over ten centuries of medieval brutality, which was inflicted on white bodies by other white bodies, begin to look like culture?” (Menakem, 2017, p. 59-61).

Driven by the demons of their own historical trauma, how many of the slave traders and slaveholders—and the financially strapped Whites they hired as enforcers—found in their enslaved victims, not only a chance for profit or survival, but also a safe outlet for their pain and their rage?

Of course, this raises another question: Where was the wiser, more sophisticated higher brain through all this? Is the higher brain, as moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt said, just a “rubber stamp” for the moral judgments of more primitive brain structures (Haidt, 2013)? Why didn’t the higher brain step in like the adult in the family, imposing order and reason?

The Invention of “Race”

As it turns out, the higher brain was there all along. There were Black and White abolitionists who fought the slave trade and sought to end slavery—though, of course, not enough of them, and they were nowhere near powerful enough. But there were also many nimble White minds who were busy building rationalizations to “justify” slavery, inhumane treatment, and all the laws and codes necessary to protect these practices (Kendi, 2016).

“When we look back on our history, we often wonder why so many Americans did not resist slave trading, enslaving, segregating, or now, mass incarcerating,” wrote Ibram X. Kendi in his epic Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America. “The reason is...racial ideas. The principal function of racist ideas in American history has been the suppression of resistance to racial discrimination and its resulting racial disparities” (Kendi, 2016, p. 11-12).

In How to Be an Antiracist, Kendi defined “racism” as a marriage of policies and ideas that produce and normalize racial inequity (racial inequity being a state in which “two or more racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing”) (Kendi, 2019, pp. 17-18). And perhaps the central racist idea was the invention of the concept of “race” itself.
You’ve probably heard this before, but if you haven’t, it may surprise you: **There is actually no such thing as “race”!** Apart from small and inconsistent differences in skin pigmentation, hair texture, and dimensions of certain facial features, there is no fundamental genetic difference between what we in the United States have been raised to think of as different races. DNA—the genetic codes that tell our bodies how to develop and function—can give us an idea of what regions of the globe our ancestors came from, but they cannot pinpoint any particular racial group (Wilkerson, 2020; Kendi, 2016).

In other words, race is only an idea invented by human beings, and millions of people have suffered and died at the hands of that idea.

According to Kendi, “The word race first appeared in Frenchman Jacques de Brézé’s 1481 poem ‘The Hunt,’ where it referred to hunting dogs. As the term expanded to include humans over the next century, it was used primarily to identify and differentiate and animalize African people. Thanks to this malleable concept in Western Europe, the British were free to lump the multiethnic Native Americans and the multiethnic Africans into the same racial groups” (Kendi, 2016, p. 36). *(For more from Prof. Kendi on racist ideas, click here.)*

In Kendi’s exhaustive history of the development and use of racist ideas, he learned much by studying the sources that the early American race theorists consulted, sources dating back to Aristotle (384 to 322 BCE) (Kendi, 2016). Kendi identified several theories that were used to justify the colonies’ particularly brutal and absolute form of slavery, including:

- Aristotle’s “climate theory” (that people who come from countries that are too cold or too hot are inferior and meant to be slaves),
- the “curse of Ham theory” (that Noah cursed his son Ham for walking in on him when he was naked, so people from Africa—presumably descended from Ham’s son—are doomed to slavery forever), and
- polygenesis theories (theories identifying the first ancestors of Indigenous Americans and Africans as something other than the traditional Judeo-Christian Adam and Eve—for example, an ape or a “second Adam”) (Kendi, 2016).

In her graceful and encyclopedic book, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, Isabel Wilkerson discussed American racism as one example of a “caste system.” “A caste system is an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of
one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups on the basis of ancestry and often immutable traits,” wrote Wilkerson. “A caste system uses rigid, often arbitrary boundaries to keep the ranked groupings apart, distinct from one another and in their assigned places” (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 17).

According to Wilkerson, “The tyranny of caste is that we are judged on the very things we cannot change: a chemical in the epidermis, the shape of one’s facial features, the signposts on our bodies of gender and ancestry—superficial differences that have nothing to do with who we are inside” (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 379). (For more thoughts from Isabel Wilkerson on “Labeling the Human Container,” click here.)

**The Invention of “Whiteness”**

And, of course, the invention of race—with a Black race of “negroes” at the bottom of the ladder—gave rise to the invention of the “White race” on the top rung. Just who qualified as “White” changed over time, as successive waves of immigrant labor flooded into the new nation. For a while the Irish and the Italians (for example) were designated “Black,” but they lacked the skin pigmentation that would have identified them as Black. It was a lot harder to detect their fundamental “inferiority” when they lost their accents, so eventually they “became” officially White (Wilkerson, 2020).

Becoming White entitled people to something that in contemporary times is called “White privilege”—essentially the privilege of not being part of the group that had been named and treated as a permanent underclass. The “privileges” that came with being White included things like:

- the privilege of making decisions about their own lives, their bodies, their work, their resources, their living situations, and their families;
- the privilege of being educated, being paid fairly for their labor, and being allowed to buy property if they could afford it;
- the privilege of being recognized as and treated like human beings with fundamental human and civil rights;
- the privilege of living through a typical day without being insulted, raped, beaten, arrested, imprisoned, or killed for no valid reason by people in positions of power and/or authority; and
- for men, the privilege of being able to participate in the democratic process that had been instituted to maintain their country’s government.
As mentioned earlier, the presence of enslaved labor had kept the wages of White workers at rock bottom, and wages stayed low after the newly freed sharecroppers were forced to work for little or nothing (McGhee, 2022). So there were large numbers of impoverished White people who would never have considered themselves “privileged.”

Still, many clung fiercely to their Whiteness, particularly as the landed gentry pointed the finger of blame toward the Black people whose slave labor had lowered wages overall. Over and over, Whites were told that Black people were their enemies and the real cause of their misery (Wilkerson, 2020).

“It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage,” wrote W.E.B. DuBois in his essay on *Black Reconstruction*. “They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent on their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them. White schoolhouses were the best in the community, and conspicuously placed, and they cost anywhere from twice to ten times as much per capita as the colored schools. The newspapers specialized on news that flattered the poor whites and almost utterly ignored the Negro except in crime and ridicule” (DuBois, 1935, pp. 700-701).

**Telling Lies**

Nourished by the powerful caste system and the artificial concept of race, lies and slurs about people of African descent had grown like weeds in the New World. Kendi cited a few early examples of common insults, including “black deformed elf,” “filthy sodomits, sleepers, ignorant, beast, disciples of Cham…to whom the blacke darknesse is reserved for ever.” “These were the ideas about African people circulating throughout England and the English colonies as African people were being hauled into Britannia on slave ships” (Kendi, 2016 p. 37).

The most powerful myths were often those designed to justify:

- slavery (Black people are savages and they need White dominance to civilize them),
- brutal treatment (Black people don’t feel much pain, and they’re lazy and won’t work unless you beat them), or
- sexual control (Black people are over-sexed, with women who have insatiable appetites and men who are obsessed with raping White women) (Kendi, 2016).
Particularly interesting were the many widespread myths about Black people that pointed to behaviors that were actually common among White enslavers and enforcers, rather than among their Black captives. For example, many of the people who accused Black people of being brutish were themselves engaged in brutish violence toward Black people. And rape, though uncommon behavior for Black men, was very common among White slaveholders, who could then increase their free workforce with the children they conceived when they raped the women they enslaved (Wilkerson, 2020; Kendi, 2016; Roberts, in Hannah-Jones and New York Times Company, 2021).

Racist ideas might have started out as unfounded theories and convenient lies, but lies repeated over and over can have a hypnotic effect. Over time, the slaveholders and their official and unofficial White enforcers accepted these lies without question, cemented them into the culture, and reinforced them through endless repetition. These lies became their excuses for all the things they did that violated the deeper values and principles of the human community (Kendi, 2016). And the lies were probably reinforced by the fears that drove the lies in the first place, including:

- fear of failing to make enough profit or enough money to stave off poverty;
- fear of losing the higher status they could cling to as long as there was a permanent Black underclass;
- fear of the powerful and violent men their stereotypes had convinced them that Black men were; and perhaps
- fear of finding out that they had been wrong—and that they had been violating their own moral codes all along.

So, the lies spread throughout the culture—North and South—and down the generations. And perhaps the only thing more destructive than making many White people believe these lies was making many Black people believe them.

**Believing Lies**

In his breathtaking 1963 book, *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin described how racism invades Black children’s belief structures. “This world is white and they are black. White people hold the power, which means that they are superior to blacks (intrinsically, that is: God decreed it so), and the world has innumerable ways of making this difference known and felt and feared. Long before the Negro child perceives this difference, and even longer before he understands it, he has begun to react to it, he has begun to be controlled by it. Every effort made by the child’s elders to prepare him for a fate...
from which they cannot protect him causes him secretly, in terror, to begin to await, without knowing that he is doing so, his mysterious and inexorable punishment” (Baldwin, 1963, p. 26).

Baldwin’s work is haunted by the lies that were invented to justify slavery and other inequities—lies that are still tightly woven into the fabric of our society. In Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and its Urgent Lessons for Our Own, historian Eddie Glaude Jr. traced some of these lies through Baldwin’s writing “These are the narrative assumptions that support the everyday order of American life, which means we breathe them like air. We count them as truths. We absorb them into our character. We see these lies every day in the stereotypes that black people are lazy, dishonest, sexually promiscuous, prone to criminal behavior, and only seeking a handout from big government” Glaude, 2020, p. 7). (For more from Eddie Glaude Jr. on James Baldwin and “The Lie,” click here.)

For many people of color, survival and sanity have required that they learn to have their own experience in the moment, but at the same time stay mindful of how that experience is being perceived by the White people around them (Oluo, 2018). This phenomenon did not end with reconstruction or the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s. To the extent that White people have had power over their safety and well-being, this has been an important enduring survival skill, but it has robbed many people of peace, privacy, autonomy, and spontaneity.

Poet-historian W.E.B. DuBois, writing at the end of the 19th century, called this phenomenon “double consciousness.” “It is a peculiar sensation,” he wrote, “this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois, 1897).

With these fundamental lies so deeply embedded in our culture, many African Americans have had to negotiate and adjust to difficult social and psychological challenges all their lives. Much can get lost along the way. “You were not expected to aspire to excellence,” Baldwin wrote to his nephew in The Fire Next Time, “you were expected to make peace with mediocrity” (Baldwin, 1963, p. 7).
And, as Ibram X. Kendi wrote in *How to Be an Antiracist,* “Internalized racism is the real Black on Black crime” (Kendi, 2019, p. 8).

**How Have So Many African Americans Remained Resilient?**

When we ask how African Americans have survived all this, we might really be asking:

- *How have so many people subjected to so much horror both survived and thrived?*
- *How have they done so with their dignity and their humanity intact?*
- *And what has been the cost of their survival?*

Of course, the answers to these questions are too big to fit on a web page—and still the questions are too small. The most important question may be one that no data can answer: *What could African Americans have accomplished if they had spent the past four centuries being treated like worthy human beings, equal to all other human beings?* The answer is, of course, incalculable.

If we want to scratch the surface of Black resilience, we can talk about the many cultural strengths that have provided comfort, survival, and growth in the face of adversity—the depth of family ties (including extended family), the ability to process adversity through emotions, empathy born of oppression, dedication to freedom and justice, and irrepressible creativity in the realms of humor, music, and movement and dance (Bell, 2017; Hannah-Jones and New York Times Company, 2020; Wilkerson, 2020; Sanders, 2021). Trauma is lodged in the body (van der Kolk, 2014), but creativity and many cultural traditions can help both body and spirit heal (Menakem, 2017).

We can also look at the powerful role that faith and spirituality have played in Black lives. From the early Christian, Muslim, and Indigenous expressions of spirit that followed the kidnapped Africans to America—to the Black Church and the other branches of organized religion that have found passion, commitment, and leadership in African American communities—Black bodies of faith have played pivotal roles in the community and in the larger struggle for liberation.

**Where Does it Hurt?**

Ruby Sales

In 2016, Krista Tippett conducted a rare and beautiful interview with Civil Rights legend Ruby Sales on her weekly broadcast, “On Being.” [To link to the 2016 interview with Ruby Sales on the “On Being” broadcast, click here.](#)

We can listen to Civil Rights legend Ruby Sales describe the “Black folk religion” that her parents and her community gave her when she was a child. “It was a religion that combined the ideals of American democracy with a theological sense of justice. It was a religion that said that people who were considered property and disposable were essential in the eyes of God and even essential in a democracy, although we were enslaved. And it was...
also a theology of resistance, a theology of reaffirmation: ‘I might be a slave, but I’m somebody.’ It was a theology of hope” (Sales, 2016).

For further consolation, we can echo some of James Baldwin’s words from *The Fire Next Time*:

- “That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth—and, indeed, no church—can teach. He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable.”
- “This past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, human authority, yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful.”
- And “The apprehension of life here so briefly and inadequately sketched has been the experience of generations of Negroes, and it helps to explain how they have endured and how they have been able to produce children of kindergarten age who can walk through mobs to get to school” (Baldwin, 1963, pp. 98-9).

We must speak of Black resilience. But whenever we do, we must avoid the generalizations that leave us with little more than stereotypes. And we must make sure our words aren’t used to dismiss the conditions that continue to tax that resilience—or to justify our complacency and our acceptance of those conditions (Anderson, 2019).

Or we might just sum up the secret of Black resilience by quoting Nikki Giovanni’s poem, Nikki Rosa: “Black love is Black wealth.”

To watch an uplifting PBS News segment about an exhibit in Virginia highlighting the stories and portraits of African Americans in the Jim Crow South, click here.

What Does All This Say About All of Us?

One reason it may be important to ask the question, *How in the world could this history have happened?* is that another question often lurks beneath it: *What does all this say about me—and about us—all of us?*

This might be followed by questions like:

- Who would I have been if I’d lived 400 years ago? What would have happened to me? What might I have done?
• If people who look like me have been subjected to atrocities, what does that say about me? Does it make me a victim? How can I carry history with honor and dignity?

• If people who look like me have committed atrocities, what does that say about me? Does it make me a bad person? How can I carry history with honor and dignity?

• If my ancestors were subjected to trauma and humiliation, how much of their pain am I carrying in my body? Will it ever heal?

We do carry the past, but how much of the past do we carry? Does it determine our future? Our success? (To read the words of Keisha N. Blain on “Our Ancestors’ Wildest Dreams,” click here.)

Though there are many ways trauma is passed down from generation to generation—in our traditions, our customs, our beliefs, and our genes—resilience and healing are also passed down in all those ways. Our brains and our bodies are good at repairing and regenerating themselves, and epigenetic changes in DNA expression can also reflect the progress we’ve made toward health and well-being (Lehrner and Yehuda, 2018).

A few more questions:

*If people who look like us have been oppressed—and/or if we have been oppressed:*

• What do we do with our grief and our anger? Do we have the courage to experience these emotions and work through them, preferably in community with people who will listen, understand, and act as respectful witnesses?

• How do we work on changing the circumstances that have allowed oppressive acts to happen?

• Do we forgive people (or a people) whose oppression—or whose ignorance about our oppression—has done a lot of damage?

Forgiveness is complicated and not just a matter of choice, because the barriers to forgiveness are often wound around the roots of trauma. Sometimes our attempts to remove those barriers can help the healing process, and sometimes they can make things much worse. Sometimes we need time to grieve and feel our anger before we try to forgive. And, if and when we do forgive, that doesn’t mean we should let people treat us badly or trust people who haven’t earned our trust.

And, as author and activist bell hooks told Maya Angelou in 1998, “For me, forgiveness and compassion are always linked: How do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed?” (McLeod, 1998). (To read the full interview transcript, click here.)
And if people who look like us have oppressed others—and we ourselves have made some harmful mistakes in our own lives:

- How do we stop being afraid of these insights, open ourselves up to learning more, and keep looking for ways we can do better?
- How do we transform our guilt and shame into a sense of responsibility and commitment—something that would be much more useful than guilt and shame, and much more pleasant for us and everyone else?
- And, again, how do we work on changing the circumstances that have allowed oppressive acts to happen?

In his dazzling study, *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi starts out with two definitions:

“RACIST: One who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea.

“ANTIRACIST: One who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea” (Kendi, 2019, p. 13).

Notice the words “is supporting” in each of those definitions. Kendi is not saying an antiracist is someone who has done everything right all along—who has always been a successful antiracist. No: I am a racist or an antiracist in this moment, based on what I am doing in this moment. I don’t have to beat myself up for getting it wrong in the past—or for the fact that others have gotten it spectacularly wrong throughout history. I just have to learn how to promote equity through my words and actions now, and keep doing my best to do that.

In *How to Be an Antiracist*, Kendi demonstrated this principle thoroughly in stories from his own life and development. Again and again, he described situations in which his own words, attitudes, and behaviors had fallen squarely within whatever aspect of internalized racism he was describing in that chapter. With honesty and humor, Kendi told how he had hurled himself headlong into approaches that he later realized were harmful or ineffective. He learned—sometimes the hard way—and he went about changing his approach.

(For a powerful video of the traditional spiritual, “Hold On,” sung by the Kuumba Singers with Bobby McFerrin in Leipzig, Germany, click here.)
As we travel through the slowly growing body of chapters, essays, links, and resources on this Web Page, we will try to keep the same courageous spirit that Kendi demonstrated—ready to listen, ready to question our assumptions, and ready to learn more. If our listening, our questions, and our learning do nothing else, they will at least remind us that:

- we are alive in this world,
- we are responsible for our part of it,
- we are not powerless, and
- we are not alone.

Welcome to this journey.
References


Sanders, M. (2021). Personal correspondence from Mark Sanders, LCSW.

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