

Understanding racial hauntings

Aileen Alleyne explores the lingering impact of racialised traumatic events

The subject of this article, and of the book from which it is extracted,* is an unheeded dimension of trauma that is, paradoxically, omnipresent. It is everywhere in our midst but, like a virus, is unseen yet impactful. I have coined this as 'racial hauntings', advancing and offering a new perspective on the Freudian analytical concept of 'hauntings' explored by Professor Stephen Frosh in relation to victims of the Holocaust.¹ My aim is to reveal its presence and to shine a light on its complex workings, offering an in-depth understanding of a historical phenomenon that produces deep psychological wounding to a collective of people.

Hauntings in the context of racialised trauma are not about the occult, scary ghosts, spirits, shadowy apparitions or creepy paranormal activity that spook in the night. Racialised hauntings are the prolonged mental impact that remains in the consciousness of a black person after a racial impingement from the outside world. The unpleasant nature of hauntings lingers way beyond the racialised traumatic event. Over time, they have the impact of pervading the black psyche. Racial hauntings occur in the wake of the seven types of racism that Cole² defines, beyond the dictionary meaning:

Interpersonal racism: Occurs at close quarters in the interactions between black and white people and is expressed via micro and macroaggressions; workplace unconscious bias, practice and behaviour; racist assumptions, slurs and negative racial thinking, including stereotyping, marginalising and having low expectations of black people.

Interactional racism: Hate crime; emotional and physical harm to black lives.

Discursive racism: Racial slurs; hate speech; code words such as 'urban' and 'foreign' to communicate explicit or implicit hierarchies that perpetuate inequalities in society.

Representational racism: Racial stereotypical depictions, particularly in the media, popular culture and advertising, of black men mainly as criminals, thugs or athletes; black people depicted in roles in which they pander to, serve or care-take whites, and/or are given secondary roles that can be easily dispensed with.

Systemic/structural/institutional racism: Racist beliefs that create policies, practices, behaviour, stratifications and biased representations built into the very foundations and structure of organisations and perpetuate white supremacy and privilege.

Ideological racism: World views, archaic colonial, imperialist and Eurocentric beliefs, race-dominant biased thinking that are all rooted in negative and reductive stereotypical views and beliefs about black and brown people. This form of racism has a negative impact on people of colour and denies them equality of opportunity and respect.

Covert racism: The knowing and, in some cases, unintentional forms of racism that are kept hidden from public view or covered up by dangerous actions and tropes such as 'We are a tolerant nation'. In the colour-blind

policies built on such notions of national acceptance and general open-mindedness, this also includes the unfortunate perpetuation of racism occurring in examples such as the cock-eyed view that to notice someone's race is being racist in itself. Such notions may be intended to create racial affinity but, in fact, they do the opposite.

I would like to add to Cole's seven forms of racism, a key finding from my doctoral research that identifies a complex form of internalised racism. This aspect manifests as an antagonist or internal enemy that is within the self:

The internal oppressor:^{3,4,5} The internal oppressor is distinct from internalised oppression, as it is an internal adversary that becomes part of the self and ego structure. It is constructed through the internalisation of negative stereotypical societal attitudes and beliefs that are held about black people and coming to believe these perceptions to be true.

Black ontology

As neither the therapy nor analytic worlds have attributed much research to the generational impact of black people post-slavery, as it did successfully with Jews post-Holocaust, little attention has been given to black people and their social ontology emerging from a brutal historical past. Ontology is the branch of philosophy that studies concepts such as existence, being, becoming and reality. When social,

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psychological, analytical and educative elements are applied to ontology, many questions about people and the nature of social groups can be explored and understood. In this way, differing world views between cultures can be interrogated and evaluated.

Black ontology has generally been marginalised in psychology and psychoanalysis, so, unsurprisingly, the more ethereal and shadowy aspect of what impinges, lingers and threatens it has not been addressed in any depth. Frantz Fanon⁶ argued that the study and interpretation of ontology was flawed, insofar as white people can, with their gaze, minimise people of colour as objects. By contrast, people of colour do not do the same to white people. Ontology's concept of existence, being, becoming and reality cannot be neutral, as the white group is free to objectify and the black group is fixed into and objectified in the unfree position set by the white other. Fanon goes on to argue that those with dark skin have to confront the constructed histories about their cultures and origins dictated by the majority group in colonialist societies.

Black ontology would, first of all, question what silent damage is being done to the quality of black life when it is constantly interrupted by the menace of racial hauntings, almost always without notice. It would be a most unusual situation to find a black person who does not recognise the phenomenon of having the peace of their everyday life interrupted (directly or indirectly) by some racialised incident that leaves an unpleasant presence that is harboured internally as thought, feeling or activated memory. According to Isaacson,⁷ the limbic system is a set of brain structures that control the main emotions associated with fear, anxiety, happiness and anger. The functional relevance of the system is that it operates in ways to keep us safe, and is thought to be an important element in regulating high levels of cortisol. This is the main stress hormone in the body that becomes over-activated during trauma - such as racialised trauma. Our bodies continuously monitor cortisol levels to maintain homeostasis (steady levels). Higher-than-normal or lower-than-normal cortisol levels can be harmful to a person's health. When racial hauntings are activated, the limbic system is forced into an overworked state to maintain emotional equilibrium. Black bodies ►

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go into overdrive to deal with the production of excessive cortisol, which is a necessary task for mental preservation. Over time, these constant silent internal goings-on of racialised trauma impact the quality of black lives. The damage is not only to our bodies but also to our mental systems and, ultimately, to our souls. Conclusively, racial hauntings change notions of safety and freedom for black people.

Intertwined and enmeshed

If we view black-white historical relationships as intertwined and enmeshed, then it would make sense to see the two sides as being affected by each other. Therefore, hauntings are present in both white and black people's psyche. The distinction for black people is that hauntings are experienced as attacks on their race - hence my reference to racial hauntings. The phenomenon is carried as a heavy presence when the menace of racism interrupts and threatens black ontology, which I have previously described as having a grounded sense of being in the world. For whites, I am suggesting that hauntings (perhaps without the 'racial' prefix descriptor) are the ever-present terror of retribution for the sins of the past. In this sense, hauntings from a troubled colonial and imperial history continue to spook the white conscience, leaving something in the white collective unconscious that is scared or frightened of the black other.

For white colonialist Western societies, the spectre of payback time for a terrible past, unatoned and unrepented, continually lurks in shadowy spaces where catastrophic fantasies create an ever-present hypervigilance for the possibility of an almighty uprising from 'the natives'. What I am describing here, conceptually, is a phenomenon I refer to as the 'white fright guilt complex'. This is a repressed historical guilt that manifests as hyper-alertness to a perceived danger from the black presence or from witnessing black equality and independence as an existential threat. The dynamics of this phenomenon can be observed in everyday instances, such as where a white woman instinctively clutches her bag closer to her chest on sight of or in close proximity to a black man, or where two or more black males in conversation at an office water cooler may quickly stir suspicions that they are hatching a plot or are up to no good.

It would not be a stretch too far to suggest that black minorities have developed an acute

alertness to the racial impingements from the outside that do harm to the soul. Black people have learned the art of adopting an amphibious nature - that is, having mixed and twofold abilities to switch effortlessly into protection mode and back into relaxation mode. This is not unlike the simple activity of changing into one's 'going-out clothes' when stepping outside for social engagements and then changing back into one's 'house clothes' when we get home. This learnt skill is so authentically mastered that it offers two identities, or two selves - not in the schizoid sense, but in the sense of an authentic adaptation to negotiate the impingements in the white world. This social dexterity allows us to know the ways of both worlds. However, although this twofold nature and skill is a blessing, it is also a curse that we are forced to negotiate in the outside world.

Racial hauntings are so inextricably linked to having a full understanding of the impact of generational burden that further direction is needed on how to manage its presentation in psychotherapy practice. I offer three vignettes - one hypothetical and two personal examples - to demonstrate how therapists can identify the phenomenon and address the psychological and emotional impact on black lives.

Vignette 1: Giles, a white male who prides himself on being 'woke' because he has done the work on himself, is in a work meeting where there is only one black member of staff amid the predominantly white group. Giles states that he strongly believes there is a hangover from history for black men and their relationship with authority. He boldly goes on to back this up with what he claims he has read as evidence. He states that Jamaica was the chosen island for rebellious slaves and this legacy has left an imprint of rebelliousness in black Caribbean men's relationship with white authority. The implication in this arrogant claim is one of gross judgment, pathologising

of black men, biased uninformed thinking, and plain and simple racial offence. He also demonstrates a profound ignorance of black history and geography by implying that Jamaica is representative of the whole of the Caribbean, also known as the Island Countries. His lack of awareness of as many as 700 islands, of which 26 are countries (each one culturally different and unique), is an example of racial homogenisation.

Understanding and interrupting racial haunting: The unpleasant spectre of racial haunting will be heightened and compounded if what is claimed by Giles is met with silence and goes unchallenged by his white colleagues. It will raise questions about collusion for any black staff member present in this team, leaving them to work in an environment that feels deeply unsafe. It therefore requires white colleagues to own their outrage and

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challenge this male's cocky, offensive and overtly biased behaviour.

Feedback, however, must give value to the receiver and not release for the giver, and therefore some helpful challenges might be offered in the form of comments such as:

'I find your claims to be racially offensive and naïve.'

'Have you considered the impact of what you are saying?'

'Put yourself in a black person's shoes - how would you be feeling after hearing that racist assertion about black men?'

It is important not to let such racist judgments go unchallenged, as it will implicate the whole white team with the charge of racial indifference. A racist work culture is judged by what is tolerated in its midst, and therefore, if you are not a solution to the problem, you are colluding with the problem. Such an incident should not be left unchallenged and the offence should be pointed out, not in an overzealous way to shame Giles, but to educate.

The following is likely to happen if this comment is left unchallenged:

- The lone black staff member will experience the incident as a microaggression or outright racist behaviour (this is the initial impact of racial hauntings that cause interruption to black ontology).
- Racial hauntings will be activated and will linger and pervade the work environment long after the incident (this is the heavy, unpleasant presence of the activated racial haunting).
- The black staff member will be left to stand alone in their upset or distress during and after the incident (this is the internal and external rupture - the dislocation).
- The workplace will become a distrustful environment (hypervigilance is a product of the activated racial haunting).
- The black worker will ask themselves questions such as 'Who can I trust?'; 'From whom can I expect support in matters of race conflict in the workplace?' (black worker experiences isolation in the workplace).

Racial hauntings activated by such workplace incidents can pervade a black person's mental space and may often be compounded by other similar incidents. It therefore helps if the things left out of conscious recognition are given a

voice. Thus it is necessary for white colleagues to speak up, own their own outrage, name the offence, challenge the offender and not leave black folks to do their work.

Vignette 2: Althea Gibson was the first African-American tennis player and professional golfer, and first black athlete ever to cross the colour line of international tennis in the 1950s by winning a total of 11 Grand Slam titles, at Wimbledon, the US Nationals and the French Championships. In a radio programme celebrating her amazing and talented life, a white English male interviewer was heard asking the sports historian brought in as an expert commentator whether Ms Gibson had been desperate to turn her hand to these many talents. My enjoyment in listening to this wonderful exaltation of a black woman's achievements through racial adversity was rudely interrupted by the use of the ungracious word 'desperate'.

Understanding and interrupting racial haunting: As I was aware of the reasons for the dislocation and rupture, I made a conscious effort not to become hostage to what is all too familiar. However, the incident did not go unobserved and without consequence:

- It caused me to physically bristle (this is the initial impact of ungracious bias that caused the violent interruption to my reverie).
- Spontaneous hot tears spurted from my eyes (this is the somatic response that arose from the heavy presence of the activated racial haunting).
- I asked myself where was the interviewer's sensitivity, tenderness and care. I wondered why it always happens to us (this is my attempt to make sense of my dislocation and the rupture to my enjoyment).
- The impact of this incident lingered for the rest of the day (this is the racial haunting activated vicariously on behalf of another black person).

Through self-awareness, I avoided darting back to the past and hovering on the ways blacks have historically been treated by whites. I mentally tuned out of my rage. The work of mending psychic ruptures caused by racial hauntings means finding ways to ritualistically engage in mental hygiene: de-escalate historic ruminations; take care of the mind through forms of relaxation, meditation, journaling;

learn how to turn down the volume of the internal noise, and shut out the interloper by smoking out the ghosts of the past, using incense, uplifting mantras and breathing in fresh air. Rituals of this nature are vital for restoring and reclaiming control of one's healthy mental space.

Vignette 3: I reflect on a very personal experience as a black Caribbean woman who had a cherished 20-year relationship with a white English family. I felt like a member of this unit and was embraced as such. In many ways, they became my surrogate family in England. The spectre of racial hauntings reared its head in an incident that not only ruptured the profound bonds between us but severed all ties, never to be mended.

The incident unfolded when one of the family, who was in a relationship with a black man, decided to adopt a very young mixed-race child. The child had suffered both emotional and physical abuse at the hands of their black biological mother, who herself had struggled with mental health problems and an abusive relationship with her partner. The child had subsequently developed an anxious fear-response towards black women and would become very agitated and distressed in their presence.

With the appropriate and balanced corrective emotional experience, children's capacity for resilience enables them to respond well, repair well and thrive well. However, the overzealous matriarch of this white family decided to take matters into her own hands in order to 'protect' the child. One strategy was to unceremoniously instruct me to avoid being anywhere near the child, as my blackness would cause the child distress. Another strategy implemented by the matriarch was 'flooding' therapy, which involved 'swamping' the child with pictures of my (black) face, to prepare them for an eventual meeting with me.

I found all of this upsetting and ridiculously ironic, as the family resided in a multiracial inner-city area. Although I believe the measures employed were of good intent, they caused deep hurt and feelings of being let down and pushed out. I also felt depersonalised, reduced to being just a black face for some psychological experiment. In this objectification, my feelings seemed to not matter; there was only an exaggerated 'white' ►

desire to repair the 'black' damage the child had suffered.

I was bitterly disappointed that, after 20 years of a cemented relationship, there was no trust in me to exercise my wisdom to do the right things. I was left haunted by this breakdown, which seemingly focused on one racial signifier - dark skin. The wound was deep and, vicariously, made even deeper as I was left with questions about how such a traumatised child would thrive in the real world, where there are people of every hue.

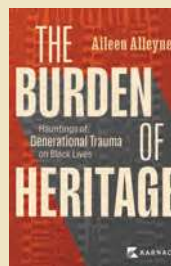
Understanding and interrupting racial haunting: If this story were brought to a therapeutic situation, the therapist should above all facilitate the telling of the client's story, as experienced in my case and circumstances. The therapist would learn that the spectre of racial hauntings was powerfully activated on many levels for the client in her painful experience. The therapist would come to understand that the event triggered complex dynamics of race conflict, overzealousness, power and privilege, which opened up generational conflicts of black-white historical relations. The story would also reveal how the dynamics had poisoned the relationship with the friend and damaged all closeness and trust with the family, known for 20 years. What was left in the wake of the client's experience was unprocessed hurt, a nasty atmosphere and unpleasant feelings that would keep racial hauntings alive for a very long time after the incident.

The following should be held in mind when working with a client in such a scenario:

- Explore with the client how the experience is affecting her and in what ways.
- Ascertain whether the experience has been a trigger for other or similar difficulties.
- Be forthcoming in picking up, facilitating and exploring all references pertaining to current and historical material that highlight power imbalances and difficult race dynamics in black-white relationships.

- Ask explicitly what role race plays in the experience of being hurt and the depth of feelings carried.
- If you are a white therapist, enquire how your being white may be impacting the therapy process.
- If you are a black therapist, ask how being black may be impacting the therapy process.
- Make space for a range of emotions to be 'rinsed' - that is, expressed again and again.
- Allow expressions of anger and rage to be aired, and be careful not to judge these as scary emotions to withdraw from in the work.
- Related to this, be mindful that, rather than judging anger as potential aggression, it needs to be held therapeutically as a manifestation of profound hurt.
- Assess what the client wants to do with her feelings and to what end, and discuss her choices for dealing with the hurt.
- Respect and follow the client in her therapy, even if she decides to deal with the racial hauntings by letting go and ending the relationship.
- Facilitate mental hygiene healing work for the client so she can reclaim her control and mental realignment.

It seems that one cannot escape the phenomenon of racial hauntings unless one chooses to exist in a racial silo. Racial hauntings are inescapable for the simple reason that they are part of the very nature of burden - the transmissions and impact of black historical trauma that are left out of the world's conscious recognition. In carrying this burden alone, black people can work at lightening the load. However, whatever the nature of the trauma, as long as it is continually directed at one's racial identity - in other words, the core elements of self and being - the inevitable impact is bound to activate old whiplash-type mental injuries that will go on to ache and leave a presence - in the form of racial hauntings. ■



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