



.....

.....

Special Praise for *My Grandmother's Hands*

“*My Grandmother's Hands* is a gripping journey through the labyrinths of trauma and its effects on modern life, especially for African Americans. In this important book, Resmaa's penetrating insight into trauma is profoundly impactful, but even more powerful and useful are his strategies for addressing it—for healing. A brilliant thinker, Resmaa is able to bring a multitude of research and experience together to guide us in our understanding of how trauma affects our lives; how trauma is a part of all of our lives; and of how the history and progression of trauma has produced a culture in which no one is immune. This is essential reading if we are to wrest ourselves from the grips of trauma and discover the tropes in which our bodies and our minds are free of it.”

Alexs Pate, author of *Amistad* and *Losing Absalom*

“Resmaa Menakem cuts to the heart of America's racial crisis with the precision of a surgeon in ways few have before. Addressing the intergenerational trauma of white supremacy and its effects on all of us—understanding it as a true soul wound—is the first order of business if we hope to pull out of the current morass. As this amazing work shows us, policies alone will not do it, and bold social action, though vital to achieving justice, will require those engaged in it to also take action on the

injury, deep and personal, from which we all suffer.”

Tim Wise, best-selling author of *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a*

Privileged Son and *Dear White America: Letter to a New Minority*

“As a career peace officer, I entered this noble profession to serve my community, but I had never received any instruction in the police academy

.

.

.

or been issued a piece of equipment that prepared me to recognize or examine community trauma . . . or my own. *My Grandmother’s Hands* gave me a profound and compelling historical map tracing law enforcement’s role as sometimes unknowing contributors to community trauma. The book gives peace officers tools that can help in the healing of their communities and emphasizes self-care so that the men and women entrusted to be guardians and protectors of our communities are taken care of as well.”

Medaria Arradondo, Acting Chief, Minneapolis Police Department

“*My Grandmother’s Hands* invites each of us to heal the racial trauma that lives in our bodies. As Resmaa Menakem explains, healing this trauma takes courage and a commitment to viscerally feel this racial pain. By skillfully combining therapy expertise with social criticism and practical

guidance, he reveals a path forward for individual and collective healing that involves experiencing the sensations of this journey with each step. Are you willing to take the first step?”

Alex Haley, Assistant Professor at the University of Minnesota’s Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing

“Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois put his finger on African American consciousness when he wrote, ‘One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.’ But even Du Bois never addressed the process of healing the psychological wounds of the ‘two-ness.’ In *My Grandmother’s Hands*, Resmaa offers a path of internal reconciliation for a person enduring the generational trauma of American racism and gives us all a chance to dream of a healing from it.”

Keith Ellison, Member of Congress and Deputy Chair of the Democratic National Committee

.

.

.

“Offers a well-needed paradigm shift on how we think, dream, and strategize against white supremacy in our bodies, cultures, and institutions.

A must-have for anyone interested in advancing racial justice and healing.”

Chaka A. Mkali, Director of Organizing and Community Building at Hope Community and hip-hop artist I Self Devine

“My Grandmother’s Hands is a revolutionary work of beauty, brilliance, compassion and ultimately, hope. With eloquence and grace, Resmaa Menakem masterfully lays out the missing piece in the puzzle of why, despite so many good intentions, we have not achieved racial justice. Yes, we need to understand white supremacy, but as Menakem so skillfully explains, white supremacy is not rational and we won’t end it with our intellect alone. White supremacy is internalized deep into our bodies. We must begin to understand it as *white body supremacy* and go to the depth of where it is stored, within our collective bones and muscles. To this end, *My Grandmother’s Hands* is an intimate guidebook toward racial healing, one that achieves that rare combination for its readers; it is deeply intellectually stimulating while also providing practical ways to engage in the process of repair, even as we read. I believe this book will change the direction of the movement for racial justice.”

Robin DiAngelo, Racial Justice Educator and author of *White Fragility*

“Forget diversity. Forget teaching tolerance. Forget white guilt. With clarity and insight, Resmaa offers a profoundly different approach to healing

racism in America.”

John Friel, PhD, and Linda Friel, MA, directors of ClearLife Clinic and *New York Times* best-selling co-authors of nine books, including *Adult Children: The Secrets of Dysfunctional Families*

.....

.....

.....

“A fascinating, must-read, groundbreaking book that offers a novel approach to healing America’s long-standing racial trauma.”

Joseph L. White, PhD, Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Psychiatry at UC Irvine and co-author of *The Psychology of Blacks*, *Black Man Emerging*, *Black Fathers*, and *Building Multicultural Competency: Development, Training, and Practice*

“Resmaa’s book is an intimate and direct look at the way the Black-white dynamic is held, not only in institutions such as policing, but also in the bodies of all of those involved. Building on Dr. DeGruy’s work in *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, Resmaa looks at how history is held and replayed by the body’s survival responses, specifically focusing on the experience of Blackness and trauma, the history and experience of whiteness and the white body, and the creation of and experience of the

police force

“In addition to providing theory and analysis, this book also offers concrete practices that are part of the work of shifting the violence of the original wound.”

Susan Raffo, shared owner of Integral Somatic Therapy, bodyworker, writer, and community organizer, The People’s Movement Center

“*My Grandmother’s Hands* is full of wisdom and understanding. In it, Resmaa Menakem offers a new way to understand racism and, more importantly, to heal it. This book lays out a path to freedom and peace, first for individual readers, then for our culture as a whole. A must-read for everyone who cares about our country.”

Nancy Van Dyken, LP, LICSW, author of *Everyday Narcissism*

“At once disturbing, fascinating, and hopeful, this book provides a fresh new roadmap for personal and shared steps to eradicate racism and heal our nation. Very timely!”

Bill Eddy, lead author of *Splitting: Protecting Yourself While Divorcing Someone with Borderline or Narcissistic Personality Disorder* and co-author of *Splitting America*

MY GRANDMOTHER'S HANDS

MY GRANDMOTHER'S
HANDS

Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to
Mending Our Hearts and Bodies

RESMAA MENAKEM

 **CRP**
CENTRAL RECOVERY PRESS
LAS VEGAS

Central Recovery Press (CRP) is committed to publishing exceptional materials addressing addiction treatment, recovery, and behavioral healthcare topics.

For more information, visit www.centralrecoverypress.com.

© 2017 by Resmaa Menakem

All rights reserved. Published 2017

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form

or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written

permission of the publisher.

Publisher: Central Recovery Press

3321 N. Buffalo Drive

Las Vegas, NV 89129

22 21 20 19 18 17

1 2 3 4 5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Menakem, Resmaa, author.

Title: My grandmother's hands: racialized trauma and the pathway to mending our hearts and bodies /

Resmaa Menakem.

Description: Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, [2017]

Identifiers: LCCN 2017018669 (print) | LCCN 2017029917 (ebook) | ISBN 9781942094487 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: African Americans--Social conditions. | United States--Race relations. | Whites--

Race identity--United States.

Classification: LCC E185.615 (ebook) | LCC E185.615 .M38 2017 (print) | DDC 305.896/073--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017018669>

Author photo © by Nancy Wong. All rights reserved.

The descriptions of the anchoring practices in Chapter Twelve first appeared, in slightly different

form, in the author's book *Rock the Boat*, published by Hazelden Publishing. They are copyright ©

2015 by Resmaa Menakem.

Every attempt has been made to contact copyright holders. If copyright holders have not been

properly acknowledged, please contact us. Central Recovery Press will be happy to rectify the

omission in future printings of this book.

Publisher's Note: This book contains general information about racialized trauma, somatic healing

methods, and related matters. The information is not medical advice. This book is not an alternative

to medical advice from your doctor or other professional healthcare provider.

Our books represent the experiences and opinions of their authors only. Every effort has been made to ensure that events, institutions, and statistics presented in our books as facts are accurate and up-to-date. To protect their privacy, the names of some of the people, places, and institutions in this book

may have been changed.

Author's Note: This book is for informational purposes only. It is not intended as a substitute for psychotherapy from a qualified counselor. If you feel you can benefit from therapy, please consult a

trained mental health professional.

Cover design by The Book Designers. Interior design by Sara Streifel, Think Creative Design.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Do Not Cross This Line](#)

[Watch Your Body](#)

[Acknowledging Our Ancestors](#)

[Our Bodies, Our Country](#)

[**Part I: Unarmed and Dismembered**](#)

[Chapter 1 Your Body and Blood](#)

[Chapter 2 Black, White, Blue, and You](#)

[Chapter 3 Body to Body, Generation to Generation](#)

[Chapter 4 European Trauma and the Invention of Whiteness](#)

[Chapter 5 Assaulting the Black Heart](#)

[Chapter 6 Violating the Black Body](#)

[Chapter 7 The False Fragility of the White Body](#)

[Chapter 8 White-Body Supremacy and the Police Body](#)

[Chapter 9 Changing the World Begins with Your Body](#)

[Part II: Remembering Ourselves](#)

[Chapter 10 Your Soul Nerve](#)

[Chapter 11 Settling and Safeguarding Your Body](#)

[Chapter 12 The Wisdom of Clean Pain](#)

[Chapter 13 Reaching Out to Other Bodies](#)

[Chapter 14 Harmonizing with Other Bodies](#)

[Chapter 15 Mending the Black Heart and Body](#)

[Chapter 16 Mending the White Heart and Body](#)

[Chapter 17 Mending the Police Heart and Body](#)

[Part III: Mending Our Collective Body](#)

[Chapter 18 Body-Centered Activism](#)

[Chapter 19 Creating Culture](#)

[Chapter 20 Cultural Healing for African Americans](#)

[Chapter 21 Whiteness without Supremacy](#)

[Chapter 22 Reshaping Police Culture](#)

[Chapter 23 Healing Is in Our Hands](#)

[Chapter 24 The Reckoning](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Five Opportunities for Healing and Making Room for Growth](#)

[Acknowledging My Contemporaries](#)

This book is dedicated to Jodi Nowak.

Thank you for being my friend.

Love always.



If the persistence of white supremacy in twenty-first century America surprises you, this book will give you a startlingly different understanding of why. You will discover the vital force behind white supremacy is in our blood—literally—and in our nervous systems. However light or dark our skins, we Americans must all contend with these elemental forces.

If you are not surprised that widespread white supremacy continues to injure America, but have no ideas or little hope for overcoming it, keep reading. This book offers a profoundly different view of what we can do, individually and together, to grow beyond our entrenched racialized divide. This process has little to do with ideology, politics, or public policy and

everything to do with neuroscience and the body.

If you see white supremacy as a belief system or ideology, in this book you will discover only a fraction of it exists in our cognitive brains. For the most part, white supremacy lives in our bodies. In fact, white supremacy would be better termed *white-body supremacy*, because every white-skinned body, no matter who inhabits it—and no matter what they think, believe, do, or say—automatically benefits from it. (Beginning with Chapter 1, *white-body supremacy* is the term I’ll use.)

If you are convinced that ending white supremacy begins with social and political action, *do not read this book unless you are willing to be challenged.* We need to begin with the healing of trauma—in dark-skinned bodies, light-skinned bodies, our neighborhoods and communities, and the law enforcement profession. Social and political actions are essential, but they need to be part of a larger strategy of healing, justice, and creating room for growth in traumatized flesh-and-blood bodies.

If you believe America’s racial tensions lie not in white supremacy but in its dark-skinned people and the power they wield, *do not read further.* The pages ahead will trigger your trauma reflexes and make your life more painful than it already is.

“But all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm,

racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. . . . You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.”

TA-NEHISI COATES, *BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME*

“The reality is that we are bodies born of other bodies, bodies feeding other bodies, bodies having sex with other bodies, bodies seeking a shoulder to lean or cry on . . . Bodies matter, which is why anything related to them arouses emotions.”

FRANS DE WAAL, *OUR INNER APE*



[WATCH YOUR BODY](#)

As you experience this book, you'll learn to pay attention to your body.

If you have a white body, there will be times when it will reflexively constrict in order to protect you from some of the truths you'll encounter.

This constriction will be followed by a thought such as "I'm not like that; I'm a good person," or "White-body supremacy has nothing to do with me," or "This isn't about me because I don't belong to a racist organization."

When this occurs, just notice what you're experiencing without doing anything about it. Don't try to undo the constriction. Don't try to hold onto it, either. Just watch your body closely and notice what sensations, impulses, and emotions arise.

Don't take the reflexive thoughts seriously, either. Don't try to support them. Don't debate them. Don't act on them at all. Just observe them as

they arise, and note any images or other thoughts that may follow.

If you have a Black or other dark body, there will be times when your body will experience a sudden shock of recognition or understanding.

Things you hadn't fully grasped before may suddenly become clear. This might be followed by a rush of energy in the form of joy, or anger, or outrage, or a felt sense of clarity and rightness. Let yourself experience these sensations fully, but don't hang onto them. Let them move into and through your body like a wave; then let them go.

If you're a public safety professional, you may experience *both* sets of sensations and thoughts. When one appears, allow it to flow fully into your body and mind, without doing anything about it. Then let it go, like a steadily shrinking image in your rear-view mirror.

Whatever your profession or skin color, as you read this book, at times you may sense profound hope, relief, or both. Let yourself fully experience these as they arise. Then let them go as well.



[ACKNOWLEDGING OUR ANCESTORS](#)

Our bodies exist in the present. To your thinking brain, there is past, present, and future, but to a traumatized body there is only *now*. That *now* is the home of intense survival energy.

Most of this book is set in the present, but small parts of it will trace two bloodlines of trauma from the past to the present.

First, we'll trace trauma as it was passed from one European body to another during the Middle Ages, then imported to the New World by colonists, and then passed down by many generations of their descendants.

Second, we'll trace trauma as European colonists instilled it in the bodies of many Africans who were forcibly imported as indentured servants, and later as property, to the New World. They, in turn, passed down this trauma through many generations of their descendants.

On this same soil, trauma also followed another earlier path: one that spread from the bodies of European colonists to the bodies of Native people and then through many generations of their descendants.

An estimated eighteen million Native people were custodians of the North American continent when European colonists arrived. They and their ancestors had lived here for an estimated 14,000 years.

Today this same land contains over 204 million white Americans, over forty-six million Black Americans, and just over five million Native Americans. The story of the unique arc of trauma in the Native American body is only now beginning to be told. I don't describe this arc (except tangentially) in this book. I hope a wise and compassionate Native writer soon will.

In the meantime, I offer my respect and acknowledgment to the people who were stewards of this land long before folks from Africa and Europe made it their home.



[OUR BODIES, OUR COUNTRY](#)

As I write these words in early 2017, America is tearing itself apart. On the surface, this war looks like the natural outcome of many recent social and political clashes. But it's not. These conflicts are anything but recent. One hundred and fifty-six years ago, they spawned the American Civil War. But even in the 1860s, these conflicts were already centuries old. They began in Europe during the Middle Ages, where they tore apart close to two million white bodies. The resulting tension came to America embedded in the bodies of Europeans, and it has remained in the bodies of many of their descendants. Over the past three centuries, that tension has been both soothed and deepened by the invention of whiteness and the resulting racialization of American culture.

At first glance, today's manifestation of this conflict appears to be a

struggle for political and social power. But as we'll see, the real conflict is more visceral. It is a battle for the souls and bodies of white Americans.

While we see anger and violence in the streets of our country, the real battlefield is inside our bodies. If we are to survive as a country, it is inside our bodies where this conflict will need to be resolved.

The conflict has been festering for centuries. Now it must be faced. For America, it is an unavoidable time of reckoning. Our character is being challenged, and the content of that character is being revealed.

One of two things will happen: Ideally, America will grow up and out of white-body supremacy; Americans will begin healing their long-held

*

trauma around race; and whiteness will begin to evolve from race to culture, and then to community.

The other possibility is that white-body supremacy will continue to be reinforced as the dominant structured form of energy in American culture, in much the same way Aryan supremacy dominated German culture in the 1930s and early 1940s.

If Americans choose the latter scenario, the racialized trauma that wounds so many American bodies will continue to mutate into insanity and create even more brutality and genocide.

This book offers the necessary new insights, skills, and tools for creating the first scenario. It is written for every American—of any background or skin color—who sees this scenario as vital to our country’s survival and who sees the second scenario as America’s death warrant.

When people hear the words *white supremacy* or *white-body supremacy*, they often think of neo-Nazis and other extremists with hateful and violent agendas. That is certainly one extreme type of white-body supremacy. But mainstream American culture is infused with a more subtle and less overt variety. In her book, *What Does It Mean to Be White?*, Robin DiAngelo^{[1](#)} describes white supremacy as

. . . the all-encompassing centrality and assumed superiority of people defined and perceived as white, and the practices based on this assumption White supremacy does not refer to individual white people per se and their individual intentions, but to a political-economic social system of domination. This system is based on the historical and current accumulation of structural power that privileges, centralizes, and elevates white people as a group I do not use it to refer to extreme hate groups. I use the term to capture the pervasiveness, magnitude, and normalcy of white dominance and assumed superiority.

One aspect of this type of white-body supremacy involves seeing “whites as the norm or *standard* for human, and people of color as a *deviation* from that norm . . . an actress becomes a *black* actress, and so on.”

In a piece for *Salon* she adds, “Thus, we move through a wholly racialized world with an unracialized identity (e.g., white people can represent all of humanity, people of color can only represent their racial selves).” This everyday form of white-body supremacy is in the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the culture we share. We literally cannot avoid it. It is part of the operating system and organizing structure of American culture. It’s always functioning in the background, often invisibly, in our institutions, our relationships, and our interactions.

The cultural operating system of white-body supremacy influences or determines many of the decisions we make, the options we select, the choices open to us, and *how* we make those decisions and choices. This operating system affects all of us, regardless of the hue of our skin.

Here’s a typical example: Two economists responded to 1,300 help-wanted ads in the *Boston Globe* and the *Chicago Tribune* in the fields of customer service, clerical services, sales, and administrative support. In all, they responded with more than 5,000 made-up résumés. The names on those résumés were randomly assigned, but some (e.g., Jamal Jones and

Lakisha Washington) sounded African American, while others sounded white (e.g., Emily Walsh and Greg Baker²). The researchers counted the number of employers who asked to set up interviews or get more information. The imaginary white candidates received interest from one in ten employers; the imaginary African American candidates received interest from one in fifteen. (Similar studies have since obtained similar results.)

Here's another recent example of everyday supremacy: My wife, Maria, purchased some household items at Wal-Mart and was pushing her cart toward the exit. A Wal-Mart employee stopped her, asked to see her sales receipt, and checked the items on the receipt against the items in her cart. Maria was thirsty, so instead of leaving the store, she bought a soft drink and sat down on a bench near the exit. Over the next two to three minutes, she watched as about twenty people left the store. The employee stopped to double-check the receipts of all eight of the Black customers who walked past—and none of the non-Black ones.

Understandably, my wife was not happy about this, and she told the store manager about it. The manager, who was white, was aghast. He immediately called over the employee—who was also white—and confronted her. She was surprised, apologetic, and a bit mortified. She

insisted she was not deliberately targeting Black customers, but only checking people randomly. My wife told me, “She seemed completely sincere. I believe that’s what she genuinely thought she was doing.” The employee was not targeting Black customers deliberately; she was targeting them unconsciously and reflexively. But the pain that such actions create for

Black Americans is felt quite consciously.

Relatively few white Americans consciously recognize, let alone embrace, this subtle variety of white-body supremacy. In fact, there is often no way to measure or recognize it. Imagine a real Lakisha Washington or Emily Walsh. She would have no way of knowing why any particular employer did not respond positively to her résumé. Nor would my wife have noticed anything odd about the Wal-Mart employee’s actions if she hadn’t stopped to relax and have a cold drink.

For most Americans, including most of us with dark skin, white-body supremacy has become part of our bodies. How could it not? It’s the equivalent of a toxic chemical we ingest on a daily basis. Eventually, it changes our brains and the chemistry of our bodies.

Which is why, in looking at white-body supremacy, we need to begin not with guilt or blame, but with our bodies.

1 DiAngelo describes herself this way: “My area of research is in Whiteness Studies . . . I have been a consultant and trainer for over twenty years on issues of racial and social justice . . . I grew up poor and white.”

2 As a cross-check, I had my research assistant search the names Emily Walsh and Lakisha

Washington on Facebook. He found hundreds of Emily Walshes, of which zero were Black. All but

two were white, and one was male. He also found many dozens of Lakisha Washingtons, all but one

of whom were Black. I’d like to see a follow-up study using African names (e.g., Kojo Ofusu)

instead of African American ones, to learn whether employers respond in the same way to Black job

applicants who do not appear to be from America.

PART I

UNARMED AND DISMEMBERED



CHAPTER 1

YOUR BODY AND BLOOD

“No one ever talks about the moment you found that you were white. Or the moment you found out you were black. That’s a profound revelation. The minute you find that out, something happens. You have to renegotiate everything.”

TONI MORRISON

“History is not the past, it is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history.”

JAMES BALDWIN

“There is deep wisdom within our very flesh, if we can only come to our senses and feel it.”

ELIZABETH A. BEHNKE

“People don’t realize what’s really going on in this country. There are a lot of things that are going on that are unjust. People aren’t being held accountable . . . This country stands for freedom, liberty, and justice for all. And it’s not happening for all right now.”

*

COLIN KAEPERNICK

When I was a boy I used to watch television with my grandmother. I would sit in the middle of the sofa and she would stretch out over two seats, resting her legs in my lap. She often felt pain in her hands, and she’d ask me

to rub them in mine. When I did, her fingers would relax, and she’d smile.

Sometimes she’d start to hum melodically, and her voice would make a vibration that reminded me of a cat’s purr.

She wasn’t a large woman, but her hands were surprisingly stout, with broad fingers and thick pads below each thumb. One day I asked her,

“Grandma, why are your hands like that? They ain’t the same as mine.”

My grandmother turned from the television and looked at me. “Boy,” she said slowly. “That’s from picking cotton. They been that way since long before I was your age. I started working in the fields sharecroppin’ when I was four.”

I didn’t understand. I’d helped plant things in the garden a few times,

but my own hands were bony and my fingers were narrow. I held up my hands next to hers and stared at the difference.

“Umm hmm,” she said. “The cotton plant has pointed burrs in it. When you reach your hand in, the burrs rip it up. When I first started picking, my hands were all torn and bloody. When I got older, they got thicker and thicker, until I could reach in and pull out the cotton without them bleeding.”

My grandmother died last year. Sometimes I can still feel her warm, thick hands in mine.

For the past three decades, we’ve earnestly tried to address white-body supremacy in America with reason, principles, and ideas—using dialogue, forums, discussions, education, and mental training. But the widespread destruction of Black bodies continues. And some of the ugliest destruction originates with our police. Why is there such a chasm between our well-

*

intentioned attempts to heal and the ever-growing number of dark-skinned bodies who are killed or injured, sometimes by police officers?

It’s not that we’ve been lazy or insincere. But we’ve focused our efforts in the wrong direction. We’ve tried to teach our brains to think better about race. But white-body supremacy doesn’t live in our thinking brains. It lives

and breathes in our bodies.

Our bodies have a form of knowledge that is different from our cognitive brains. This knowledge is typically experienced as a felt sense of constriction or expansion, pain or ease, energy or numbness. Often this knowledge is stored in our bodies as wordless stories about what is safe and what is dangerous. The body is where we fear, hope, and react; where we constrict and release; and where we reflexively fight, flee, or freeze. If we are to upend the status quo of white-body supremacy, we must begin with our bodies.

New advances in psychobiology reveal that our deepest emotions—love, fear, anger, dread, grief, sorrow, disgust, and hope—involve the activation of our bodily structures. These structures—a complex system of nerves—connect the brainstem, pharynx, heart, lungs, stomach, gut, and spine. Neuroscientists call this system the *wandering nerve* or our *vagus nerve*; a more apt name might be our *soul nerve*. The soul nerve is connected directly to a part of our brain that doesn't use cognition or reasoning as its primary tool for navigating the world. Our soul nerve also helps mediate between our bodies' activating energy and resting energy. This part of our brain is similar to the brains of lizards, birds, and lower mammals. Our lizard brain only understands survival and protection. At any

given moment, it can issue one of a handful of survival commands: *rest*, *fight*, *flee*, or *freeze*. [3](#) These are the only commands it knows and the only choices it is able to make.

White-body supremacy is always functioning in our bodies. It operates in our thinking brains, in our assumptions, expectations, and mental shortcuts. It operates in our muscles and nervous systems, where it routinely creates constriction. But it operates most powerfully in our lizard brains. Our lizard brain cannot think. It is reflexively protective, and it is strong. It loves whatever it feels will keep us safe, and it fears and hates whatever it feels will do us harm.

All our sensory input has to pass through the reptilian part of our brain before it even reaches the cortex, where we think and reason. Our lizard brain scans all of this input and responds, in a fraction of a second, by either letting something enter into the cortex or rejecting it and inciting a fight, flee, or freeze response. This mechanism allows our lizard brain to override our thinking brain whenever it senses real or imagined danger. It blocks any information from reaching our thinking brain until *after* it has sent a message to fight, flee, or freeze.

In many situations, our thinking brain is smart enough to be careful and situational. But when there appears to be danger, our lizard brain may say to

the thinking brain, “Screw you. Out of my way. We’re going to fight, flee, or freeze.”

Many of us picture our thinking brain as a tiny CEO in our head who makes important executive decisions. But this metaphor is misguided: Our cortex doesn’t get the opportunity to *have* a thought about any piece of sensory input unless our lizard brain lets it through. And in making its decision, our reptilian brain always asks the same question: *Is this dangerous or safe?*

Remember that *dangerous* can mean a threat to more than just the well being of our body. It can mean a threat to what we do, say, think, care about,

believe in, or yearn for. When it comes to safety, our thinking mind is third in line after our body and our lizard brain. That’s why when we put a hand on a hot frying pan, the hand jerks away instantly, while our thinking brain goes, *What the hell just happened? OW! THAT SHIT IS HOT!* It’s also why you might have the impulse to throw the pan across the kitchen—even though doing so won’t help you.

The body is where we live. It’s where we fear, hope, and react. It’s where we constrict and relax. And what the body most cares about are safety and survival. When something happens to the body that is too much, too fast, or too soon, it overwhelms the body and can create trauma.

Contrary to what many people believe, trauma is not primarily an emotional response. Trauma always happens *in the body*. It is a spontaneous protective mechanism used by the body to stop or thwart further (or future) potential damage.

Trauma is not a flaw or a weakness. It is a highly effective tool of safety and survival. Trauma is also not an event. Trauma is the body's protective response to an event—or a series of events—that it perceives as potentially dangerous. This perception may be accurate, inaccurate, or entirely imaginary. In the aftermath of highly stressful or traumatic situations, our soul nerve and lizard brain may embed a reflexive trauma response in our bodies. This happens at lightning speed.

An embedded trauma response can manifest as fight, flee, or freeze—or as some combination of constriction, pain, fear, dread, anxiety, unpleasant (and/or sometimes pleasant) thoughts, reactive behaviors, or other sensations and experiences. This trauma then gets stuck in the body—and stays stuck there until it is addressed.

We can have a trauma response to anything we perceive as a threat, not only to our physical safety, but to what we do, say, think, care about, believe in, or yearn for. This is why people get murdered for disrespecting other folks' relatives or their favorite sports teams. It's also why people get

murdered when other folks *imagine* a relative or favorite team was disrespected. From the body's viewpoint, safety and danger are neither situational nor based on cognitive feelings. Rather, they are physical, visceral sensations. The body either has a sense of safety or it doesn't. If it doesn't, it will do almost anything to establish or recover that sense of safety.

Trauma responses are unique to each person. Each such response is influenced by a person's particular physical, mental, emotional, and social makeup—and, of course, by the precipitating experiences themselves.

However, trauma is never a personal failing, and it is never something a person can choose. It is always something that happens *to* someone.

A traumatic response usually sets in quickly—too quickly to involve the rational brain. Indeed, a traumatic response temporarily overrides the rational brain. It's like when a computer senses a virus and responds by shutting down some or all of its functions. (This is also why, when mending trauma, we need to proceed slowly, so that we can uncover the body's functions without triggering yet another trauma response.)

As mentioned earlier, trauma is also a wordless story our body tells itself about what is safe and what is a threat. Our rational brain can't stop it from occurring, and it can't talk our body out of it. Trauma can cause us to

react to present events in ways that seem wildly inappropriate, overly charged, or otherwise out of proportion. Whenever someone freaks out suddenly or reacts to a small problem as if it were a catastrophe, it's often a trauma response. Something in the here and now is rekindling old pain or discomfort, and the body tries to address it with the reflexive energy that's still stuck inside the nervous system. This is what leads to over-the-top reactions.

Such overreactions are the body's attempt to complete a protective action that got thwarted or overridden during a traumatic situation. The body wanted to fight or flee, but wasn't able to do either, so it got stuck in freeze mode. In many cases, it then develops strategies around this "stuckness," including extreme reactions, compulsions, strange likes and dislikes, seemingly irrational fears, and unusual avoidance strategies. Over time, these can become embedded in the body as standard ways of surviving and protecting itself. When these strategies are repeated and passed on over generations, they can become the standard responses in families, communities, and cultures.

One common (and often overlooked) trauma response is what I called *trauma ghosting*. This is the body's recurrent or pervasive sense that danger is just around the corner, or something terrible is going to happen any

moment.

These responses tend to make little cognitive sense, and the person's own cognitive brain is often unaware of them. But for the body they make perfect sense: it is protecting itself from repeating the experience that caused or preceded the trauma.

In other cases, people do the exact opposite: they reenact (or precipitate) situations similar to the ones that caused their trauma. This may seem crazy or neurotic to the cognitive mind, but there is bodily wisdom behind it. By recreating such a situation, the person also creates an opportunity to complete whatever action got thwarted or overridden. This might help the person mend the trauma, create more room for growth in his or her body, and settle his or her nervous system.[4](#)

However, the attempt to reenact the event often simply repeats, re-inflicts, and deepens the trauma. When this happens repeatedly over time, the trauma response can look like part of the person's personality. As years and decades pass, reflexive traumatic responses can lose context. A person may forget that something happened to him or her—and then internalize the trauma responses. These responses are typically viewed by others, and often by the person, as a personality defect. When this same strategy gets internalized and passed down over generations within a particular group, it

can start to look like culture. Therapists call this a *traumatic retention*.

Many African Americans know trauma intimately—from their own nervous systems, from the experiences of people they love, and, most often, from both. But African Americans are not alone in this. A different but equally real form of racialized trauma lives in the bodies of most white Americans. And a third, often deeply toxic type of racialized trauma lives and breathes in the bodies of many of America's law enforcement officers. All three types of trauma are routinely passed on from person to person and from generation to generation. This intergenerational transmission—which, more aptly and less clinically, I call a *soul wound*⁵—occurs in multiple ways:

- Through families in which one family member abuses or mistreats another.
- Through unsafe or abusive systems, structures, institutions, and/or cultural norms.
- Through our genes. Recent work in human genetics suggests that trauma is passed on in our DNA expression, through the biochemistry of the human egg, sperm, and womb.

This means that no matter what we look like, if we were born and raised in America, white-body supremacy and our adaptations to it are in our

blood. Our very bodies house the unhealed dissonance and trauma of our ancestors.

This is why white-body supremacy continues to persist in America, and why so many African Americans continue to die from it. We will not change this situation through training, traditional education, or other appeals to the cognitive brain. We need to begin with the body and its relation to trauma.

In *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates exposed the longstanding and ongoing destruction of the Black body in America. That destruction will continue until Americans of all cultures and colors learn to acknowledge the inherited trauma of white-body supremacy embedded in

*

all our bodies. We need to metabolize this trauma; work through it with our bodies (not just our thinking brains); and grow up out of it. Only in this way will we at last mend our bodies, our families, and the collective body of our nation. The process differs slightly for Black folks, white folks, and America's police. But all of us need to heal—and, with the right guidance, all of us can. That healing is the purpose of this book.

This book is about the body. *Your* body.

If you're African American, in this book you'll explore the trauma that

is likely internalized and embedded in it. You'll see how multiple forces—genes, history, culture, laws, and family—have created a long bloodline of trauma in African American bodies.

It doesn't mean we're defective. In fact, it means just the opposite: something happened *to* us, something we can heal from. We survived because of our resilience, which was also passed down from one generation to the next.

This book presents some profound opportunities for healing and growth. Some of these are communal healing practices our African American and African ancestors developed and adapted; others are more recent creations. All of these practices foster resilience in our bodies and plasticity in our brains. We'll use these practices to recognize the trauma in our own bodies; to touch it, heal it, and grow out of it; and to create more room for growth in our nervous systems.

White-body supremacy also harms people who do not have dark skin. If you're a white American, your body has probably inherited a different legacy of trauma that affects *white* bodies—and, at times, may rekindle old flight, flee, or freeze responses. This trauma goes back centuries—at least as far back as the Middle Ages—and has been passed down from one white body to another for dozens of generations.

White bodies traumatized each other in Europe for centuries before they encountered Black and red bodies. This carnage and trauma profoundly affected white bodies and the expressions of their DNA. As we'll see, this historical trauma is closely linked to the development of white-body supremacy in America.

*

If you're a white American, this book will offer you a wealth of practices for mending this trauma in your own body, growing beyond it, and creating more room in your own nervous system. I urge you to take this responsibility seriously. As you'll discover, it will help create greater freedom and serenity for all of us.

Courtesy of white-body supremacy, a deep and persistent condition of chronic stress also lives in the bodies of many members of the law enforcement profession, regardless of their skin color. If you're a policeman or policewoman, you've almost certainly either suffered or observed this third type of trauma. This book offers you a vital path of healing as well. While I hope everyone who reads this book will fully heal his or her trauma, I know this hope isn't realistic. Many readers will learn something from this book, and perhaps practice some of the activities in it, but eventually will stop reading or turn away. If that's ultimately what you do, it