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Embodying Anti-Racism

by Emma Cohen

As you read this, are you aware of the rhythm of your breath? The sensation of your feet on the ground? The pressure of your chair against your back?

Or, on the other hand, have you become a pair of disembodied eyes or ears? Personally, ignoring my body for the sake of over-intellection is one of my favored trauma responses, reading my cherished method for soothing myself into dissociation.

Luckily, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* does not allow for such an easy out. The book repeatedly calls readers back to their bodies, encouraging them to grow mindful of their physical reactions to the words they are reading, and even directing them to step away and undertake embodied exercises throughout the course of the book.

Written by Resmaa Menakem, a licensed social worker and trauma specialist, *My Grandmother's Hands* highlights the importance of somatic practice in the work of anti-racism. While it is common to view white supremacy as an ideology that must be dismantled through unlearning and strategic action, Menakem emphasizes just how much this highly cognitive understanding of racism misses. After all, despite the fact that race is a construct not founded in biological reality, racism and its effects are deeply embodied. To underscore this point, Menakem replaces the term "white supremacy" with "white-body supremacy," arguing that this more specific term reminds us that "every white-skinned body, no matter who inhabits it—and no matter what they think, believe, do, or say—automatically benefits from it."

White-body supremacy, according to Menakem, is more than just learned bias. It is the effect of racialized trauma, trauma that lives on in our nerves and our sinews, our blood and our viscera.

Though discussion of trauma has made its way into popular discourse in recent years, it is worth reviewing the basics. Trauma is the

body's response to an event (whether acute or protracted) that is overwhelming in some way. What constitutes a traumatic event proves mutable: the line separating the tolerable from the overwhelming is different for each body. Importantly, trauma does not remain nestled in individuals. It can be passed down intergenerationally, both through learned behavior and genetics; it can be passed on to other bodies when someone acts violently in reaction to their own trauma being triggered (this is what Menakem sees as happening in police shootings); and it can be passed on as vicarious or secondary trauma when someone witnesses a traumatic event.

Menakem sees trauma's tendency to spread from body to body and to persist over generations as one of the primary factors in white-body supremacy's intractability. Over the course of the book's first nine chapters, Menakem begins to map the sources and pathways for the trauma held by many bodies in the United States. He points out that in the Middle Ages, the white Europeans who would later colonize the land known as the United States were incredibly brutal towards one another. The regular presence of violence and torture in everyday life would certainly have left traumatic residue, and Menakem argues that this long-lasting trauma contributed to white European settlers committing atrocities against the Native American and African-American people that they encountered in (or brought to) North America. While past trauma in no way excuses present violence, Menakem highlights this history in order to emphasize that all Americans, regardless of their race, have their own historical traumas to work through.

(Of course, there are plenty of people living in the United States who have no white European, African-American, or Native American ancestry. Menakem explicitly focuses on white bodies, Black bodies, and police bodies, and while he encourages readers to adapt the book's exercises to their own embodied experiences regardless of background, I hope that other authors will offer accounts that more directly address the needs of people who do not fit into these narrow categories.)

While this historical and scientific context is fascinating and accessibly written, the book's greatest strength lies in its second and third sections, which provide more concrete methods for grappling with this traumatic legacy. With separate chapters specifically for white readers, Black readers, and police officers, Menakem offers strategies for increasing awareness of traumatic retentions and for settling the body as a way to fully experience and move through racial discomfort. He encourages Black readers, for instance, to practice mindfulness in moments when they have the urge to put white bodies at ease, and to consider choosing to not follow this reflexive and self-protective impulse. He encourages white readers and police officers, on the other hand, to notice whether their bodies constrict or relax, activate or settle around unfamiliar Black bodies. All readers are encouraged to experiment with activities such as humming, belly breathing, body scans, and chanting. As a white-bodied person, I focused on undertaking the practices outlined in the section for white readers, but, as Menakem suggests, reading the sections oriented towards Black and police bodies deepened my understanding of his overall project.

Importantly, Menakem does not believe that individual healing practices are enough. As he writes, "we cannot individualize our way out of white-body supremacy. Nor can we merely strategize our way out. We need collective action—action that heals." To this end, Menakem concludes the book by urging readers to build new cultures that center embodied, communal healing. Beyond offering suggestions for group harmonizing such as collective singing or healing touch, Menakem makes clear that each group of people is responsible for doing the difficult work of envisioning new ways of being, coming up with symbols, rituals, and role models that are truly anti-racist.

The sections advocating for the creation of a new police culture may be met with some resistance from police abolitionists, particularly now that abolition has more thoroughly made its way into mainstream conversation. Menakem, whose brother is a police officer, ultimately approaches the police from a lens of reform, even if that reform targets the very foundations of policing.

Reading these suggestions for culture-building, I was unsurprisingly tempted to apply Menakem's teachings to the dance world, even as I was hesitant of making too-easy connections. On the one hand, dancers are perhaps more likely than most to take their bodies and their embodied knowledge seriously, and in this way might be primed to take part in the work of healing racialized trauma. But at the same time, the dance world itself can be a traumatizing place—it is only haltingly beginning to undo some of its most harmful structures—and perhaps is not a particularly safe space in which to work through trauma. Still, I am encouraged when I see

conversations like “Decolonizing Somatic Care Practices For The Body in Protest” presented by Danspace project, and when I see the visioning work being done by those taking part in Creating New Futures, Dance Artists National Collective, We See You White American Theater, and other groups.

This is, of course, slow, messy work. But as Menakem reminds us:

“Today we’re at a reckoning. We Americans have an opportunity—and an obligation—to recognize trauma embedded in our bodies; to accept and metabolize the clean pain of healing; and to move through and out of our trauma. This will enable us to mend our hearts and bodies—and to grow up.”

Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017. 334 pp.

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