

## **BLACK RAGE: THE PSYCHIC ADAPTATION TO THE TRAUMA OF OPPRESSION**

Integrating the story of a young Freud's racial trauma with a novel application of the concept of moral injury has led to a realization and conceptual formulation during the pandemic uprisings of the mental construct of Black Rage as an adaptation to oppression trauma. As formulated here, Black Rage exists in a specific dynamic equilibrium as a compromise formation that is a functional adaptation for oppressed people of color who suffer racial trauma and racial degradation, an adaptation that can be mobilized for the purpose of defense or psychic growth. Black Rage operates as a mental construct in a way analogous to the topographical model, in which mental agencies carry psychic functions. The concept of Black Rage is crucial to constructing a theoretical framework for a psychology of oppression and transgenerational transmission of trauma. Additionally, in the psychoanalytic theory on oppression suggested here, a developmental line is formulated for the adaptive function of Black Rage in promoting resilience in the face of oppression trauma for marginalized people.

**Keywords:** Black Rage, race, racism, oppression, trauma, transgenerational trauma, mass trauma, slavery, racial trauma, Freud, Hannibal

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*To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage, almost all of the time.*<sup>1</sup>

—JAMES BALDWIN

In his much-discussed and often disputed *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (1920) posited the fundamental duality between Eros and Thanatos—the life and death instincts, our constructive and destructive forces—even before he fully elaborated the theory on aggression, and it is here that any psychoanalytic formulation related to racial hatred must begin. At the root of Freud’s thinking is the ominous idea that there lurks something dark and destructive in all of us. The idea that racism can take expression in the most extreme forms of violence and inhumanity, in my mind, exemplifies the darkest realization of how racism can be recruited as an accomplice in humanity’s potential destructiveness. Yet Freud formulated a theory of the “universal mind,” detached from cultural and social context, which allowed him to disavow the pain of his own racial trauma, a precedent that made it difficult for psychoanalytic theory to subsequently recognize, formulate, and integrate the experiences of the oppressed. As a consequence, we have for a long time seen an extraordinary lack of reflection on how this silence on racial oppression has impeded the development of theory, limited the diversity of our professional organizations, and blinded many to the reality of racial violence in society generally.

### **FREUD’S NEGLECT OF RACE AND RACISM IN PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY**

Freud, as a Jew, had his own lived experience of racism. He knew poverty and discrimination; he knew devaluation, degradation, and despair at the hands of racial hatred, and, in his writings, he made many references to his Jewishness. That Freud endured anti-Semitism, especially during his

<sup>1</sup>Full quote: “To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage, almost all of the time—and in one’s work. And part of the rage is this: It isn’t only what is happening to you. But it’s what’s happening all around you and all of the time in the face of the most extraordinary and criminal indifference, indifference of most white people in this country, and their ignorance. Now, since this is so, it’s a great temptation to simplify the issues under the illusion that if you simplify them enough, people will recognize them. I think this illusion is very dangerous because, in fact, it isn’t the way it works. A complex thing can’t be made simple. You simply have to try to deal with it in all its complexity and hope to get that complexity across” (James Baldwin, 1961 radio interview, WBAI New York).

medical training, is well documented. Sander Gilman's scholarly research (1991, 1993) has documented that Jews were considered the "Negroes of Europe" and that "the male Jew and the male African" were seen as "equivalent dangers to the 'white races' in the anti-Semitic literature of the late nineteenth century," with Freud being referred to as a "black Jew" (1993, p. 19).

In evolving a universal theory, Freud had a dream, not unlike the African American dream, that he would be judged by the content of his character and understood by the content of his universal unconscious, regardless of color, creed, or race—in essence, that our shared humanity would trump difference. He did not theorize racial trauma as germane to psychoanalytic theory, and many have pointed to his quest to disidentify his theory with Jewishness even though he, as a Jew, was all too familiar with oppression. Understanding this aspect of Freud's history might allow us to reconceptualize his perspective as that of a racially traumatized Jew. A knowledge of the developmental aspects of racial trauma can help us understand why, despite this lived experience, he forged a universal theory that discounted social and cultural contexts.

Our connection to our group affiliation in racial and ethnic identity comes together in latency and early adolescence, and so racialized experiences at this nodal point in development, as in the following account, carry added valance (Stoute 2019). Moskowitz (1995), using Peter Gay (1988) as his source, recounts a story of a young Freud: When Freud was about ten or twelve "his father told him about an incident in which the elder Freud was walking down the sidewalk, all decked out and wearing a new fur cap, when along came a Christian man who knocked the cap into the muck and shouted, "Jew, off the sidewalk!" Freud asked his father, "What did you do?" His father answered, "I stepped into the road and picked up my cap." The young Freud "was deeply disillusioned and developed fantasies of revenge. He identified with the Semite Hannibal, who had sworn to conquer the mighty Romans. He also came to see himself as part of a suppressed minority that must always be in opposition to mainstream culture" (pp. 550–551). This fantasy of Hannibal—the humiliation and the identification with the minority—proved to be an important connector to an understanding of Freud's neglect of racial trauma and the subsequent effect on his theoretical writings. Extending psychoanalytic theory here to the more robust integration of racial trauma and psychic adaptation to trauma allows us to make sense of how the

lived experience of racial trauma reawakened during the Covid-19 pandemic uncovered a dark reality for us all.

Our experience during the pandemic was a far cry from, but not totally disconnected from that of psychoanalysts in attendance at a meeting of the British Psychoanalytical Society during World War II. When air-raid sirens were heard during the meeting, D. W. Winnicott reportedly rose to say, "I should like to point out that there is an air-raid going on." Those present took little notice, and Winnicott sat down as the meeting continued (Phillips 1988, p. 61). During the 2020 pandemic, analysts could no longer ignore the external world, the social and cultural backdrop, as the threat of the virus and the threat of racism closed in on the analytic dyad, forcing a recognition anew of our shared cultural space (Winnicott 1967).

As I wrote this paper in June 2020, during the pandemic, the background noise was constant: It came from the demonstrations every day on the streets of the city where I live, and from demonstrations across the cities of our nation and the world. It prompted an essential question: How do we make sense of the disavowal of personal responsibility for the violence, cruelty, suffering, pain, and denial of promised freedom in understanding the narrative of the American psyche, the fact that our legacy of racism has prevented us from becoming a universal "we" even in a pandemic? It is not possible to present the theoretical formulation of Black Rage as the psychic force that galvanized a social movement without localizing my perspective as a psychoanalyst, because psychoanalytic exposition must involve a socially embedded narrative. If we formulate from the perspective of a socially embedded narrative, we come to the useful concept of a culturally embedded self that internalizes the influence of race, culture, ethnicity, gender, class, the social surround, and historical context. We have each brought our own psychic, cultural, racial, ethnic, gendered, and societal reality to this conversation on the pandemic, as we all grapple with the sense of ongoing threat in the social surround impacting our internal psychic reality.

As an African American, cisgender woman of mixed cultural descent, my American narrative, therefore, starts with the slave, is carried from slavery into freedom fighting, and includes migration and immigration; it is this cultural, intellectual, and religious history that centers me even as a psychoanalyst. The American narrative for me reaches back to that of the indigenous people, because they are the people with whom I share the first socially sanctioned position of the Other in this narrative. Akira

Kurosawa's *Rashomon* attempts to get at the "truth" of an event while taking into account the perspective of each person who witnessed it. From my cultural context, the Black Panther Party cofounder Huey P. Newton takes up a similar idea in conversation with Erik Erikson: "People seem to think," he explains, "that because they live in the same geographical space and in the same period, they must be living the same reality, but there are several realities, and the official one is defined by power" (Erikson and Newton 1973, p. 30). Race in America defines psychosocial position, and that has never been more evident than during the pandemic. We went from the pandemic of the virus to a pandemic of anxiety to a pandemic of racism. We were forced to take notice together of the impact of social reality on our experience, our work, our theories; I will use psychoanalytic theory here to shed light on the unprecedented series of societal events that have unfolded. Integrating the story of a young Freud's racial trauma with a novel application of the concept of moral injury led me to a conceptualization of Black Rage as a defensive and mobilizing force at the heart of the 2020 uprisings across the globe.

### **FORMULATING HOW BLACK RAGE CATALYZED A MASS REALIZATION DURING THE PANDEMIC**

In March 2020, when the pandemic hit full force in the United States, I thought, as Freud might have, that the teams were human beings versus the virus, and in a pandemic, the virus knows no race. Patient and analyst faced the challenge together and simultaneously. We were all afraid. Like the crack in the Liberty Bell, though, the stark reality became clear as the data organized along the familiar racial fault line. The highest risk factor, the preexisting condition that affected my health status most, was being Black in America. This should not have been surprising, since accounts in the public health literature on epidemics in our nation's history—from the yellow fever epidemic of 1793 (Hogarth 2019a,b), to the smallpox epidemic of the 1860s (Downs 2012), to the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 (Gamble 2010)—reveal similar racialized narratives: racism and segregation limited access to diagnosis and care and led to propagandized unsubstantiated prejudices about susceptibility to illness (Hogarth 2019a,b; Viboud and Lessler 2018). None of these epidemiological analyses predicted the challenges we faced as events unfolded for us.

**Figure 1. Racial epithet received by Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms**



keishabottoms

Today 10:00 PM

FRM:[ReOpen@Georgia.gov](https://www.reopenatlantaga.gov)  
MSG:Nigger, just shut up  
and RE-OPEN ATLANTA!

On her Twitter account Mayor Bottoms revealed this racial epithet was texted to her phone number by an anonymous source. In her response she quoted the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.: “Conscientious stupidity or sincere ignorance.”

Forcing us into a state of global anxiety and fear of annihilation, the pandemic had us trapped in our homes, quarantined for days, weeks, months on end. There was no shopping, diminished material indulgence, no bars, no in-person social gatherings; instead we were mesmerized by daily counts of the dead. Doctors were turned into frontline soldiers with inadequate protection. Some of the sick got care; others, often people of color, were turned away from hospitals to die at home. In Georgia, where 83 percent of Covid-19 cases were African Americans, Governor Brian Kemp, a white man, against all medical advice in April, shockingly lifted the state’s shelter-in-place order to reopen businesses while infection rates continued to rise. And when Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms of Atlanta, a Black woman, toed the public health line by maintaining the shelter-in-place, she received a disturbing text message that she then tweeted (see Figure 1).

Then the euphemism “essential worker” was coined. In the past, that term would have been a step up for slaves, but it stirs ambivalence now. What did we get? Rationalization, fanning of racial hatred, depraved indifference, blatant denial, a government that says there is no systemic

racism. We, as citizens in a democratic nation, felt betrayed, as we all experienced some measure of devaluation by a government that acted immorally. The veil was lifted to reveal a deep violation of what is right for us all. If, before Covid-19 African Americans carried moral injury by proxy for generations as descendants of slaves, now it was moral injury front and center for all of us. We did not know it would be a perfect storm for an uprising, but maybe we secretly hoped, because how else could we discharge the rage of betrayal than by living out the American tradition—from the Boston Tea Party through the civil rights movement—of protesting injustice.

Against this social backdrop, on May 25, 2020, a murder—no, a lynching—shook our nation. George Floyd was an ordinary man, killed over a twenty-dollar bill. The crime might have ended up in the police files, along with those of thousands of other ordinary, unarmed, murdered Black men. But Darnella Frazier, a seventeen-year-old high school student, in the face of four armed Minneapolis police officers, stood her ground and videorecorded the lynching with her cellphone. Her pictures exposed Officer Derek Chauvin’s cavalier, almost casual expression—as if he were posing for a photo—as his knee compressed George Floyd’s chest and neck for eight minutes, forty-five seconds, while Floyd gasped “I can’t breathe” sixteen times.<sup>2</sup> That video shook the world (see Figure 2). Was it just the iPhone we needed to crack the disavowal of reality and personal responsibility for the endemic racial violence, and call attention to the fact that people of color live under constant threat every day? Amy Cooper’s call to the police, for example, positioned Christian Cooper, an African American Harvard-educated birdwatcher walking peacefully through New York’s Central Park on that same fated day in May, but one step away from becoming a twenty-first-century Emmett Till.

On June 7, 2020, CNN reported that demonstrations in Brazil, Argentina, Kenya, South Africa, France, Germany, and a host of other nations mirrored those in the U.S. A young Black man interviewed during a demonstration that day was asked by the reporter, “Being in the crowds,

<sup>2</sup>News reports at the time gave eight minutes, forty-five seconds, as the time Floyd’s neck was pinned by his assailant’s knee. At the trial of ex-officer Derek Chauvin, however, it was revealed that Chauvin held his knee on Floyd’s neck for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds, holding his knee in place even after his victim had stopped breathing and was dead. The prosecuting attorney, Jerry Blackwell, broke down this span of time into three intervals: “4 minutes and 45 seconds as Floyd cried out for help, 53 seconds as Floyd flailed due to seizures and 3 minutes and 51 seconds as Floyd was non-responsive” (CNN News, March 29, 2021).

**Figure 2. Derek Chauvin's knee on George Floyd's neck as Floyd gasped for air**



A still image taken from a video, courtesy of Darnella Frazier via Facebook, shows Derek Chauvin, then a Minneapolis police officer, during the arrest of George Floyd. Credit Darnella Frazier, via Agence France-Presse–Getty Images.

are you afraid of getting the virus?" He replied, "I can risk the virus if it means I fight for social justice." It is both profound and powerful that people willingly risked exposure during the pandemic of the virus to fight the pandemic of racism. The words of Claude McKay (1953) are uncannily apropos: in his poem "If We Must Die," written as a response to white mob attacks on African American communities during the



infamous Red Summer of 1919,<sup>3</sup> he wrote, “If we must die, O let us nobly die / So that our precious blood may not be shed / In vain; then even the monsters we defy / Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!” (p. 36).

As the demonstrations waged day after day, we craved moral leadership. And so, it happened: In the absence of a moral leader to unite us, a symbol of injustice was created to mobilize the people. The hero of the moment became “we the people,” who galvanized an uprising—the Black Lives Matter movement. George Floyd came to symbolize for the movement the moral injury that, for African Americans, stretched back generations, but now afflicted the nation. The parallel mirroring international demonstrations communicated to the world that the real pandemic was racism, and that Black Rage could be a shared, mobilizing human experience. Somehow, the daily demonstrations that month, almost two thousand nationwide, cracked the societal disavowal of personal responsibility for the violence, cruelty, suffering, pain, and denial of promised freedom in understanding the narrative of the American psyche; until then, the legacy of racism had prevented us from becoming a universal “we” even during a pandemic. The shocking effect of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations galvanizing the movement during a pandemic, however, made me ask, how did the murder of George Floyd catalyze a worldwide reaction that exposed a deeper questioning of the racial fractures in American society?

### MORAL INJURY AS FOUNDATIONAL

As I was pondering how to explain the basis for the moral injury—essential to understanding this series of events—without a lengthy exposition of American history, my unconscious took me to a book I had read at age sixteen that helped me integrate these ideas. Frederick Douglass’s speech “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro” (1852) helped me organize a

<sup>3</sup>On July 27, 1919, an African American teenager drowned in Lake Michigan after violating the unofficial segregation of Chicago’s beaches and being stoned by a group of white youths. His death, and the police’s refusal to arrest the white man whom eyewitnesses identified as causing it, sparked a week of rioting between gangs of Black and white Chicagoans, concentrated on the South Side neighborhood surrounding the stockyards. When the riots ended on August 3, 15 white and 23 Black people had been killed and more than 500 people injured; an additional 1,000 Black families had lost their homes when they were torched by [mainly white] rioters” (History.com editors 2009, “The Red Summer of 1919”).

psychoanalytic framework to understand the connection of the social upheaval during the pandemic to the Black Lives Matter protests in response to the lynching of George Floyd.

Douglass escaped slavery in 1838 and lived as a free man in Massachusetts. In 1852, at the Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society in Rochester, New York, he spoke on the occasion of the Fourth of July. Here is what historians consider the most moving passage of his famous speech:

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of these United States, at this very hour [p. 192].

Douglass's speech helped me make the connection between the enduring sense of moral injury that dates back to slavery right up to myriad reports of contemporary racial violence in our country. In the American narrative, the two powerful stories of dehumanization and degradation are those of Native Americans and African Americans. Native Americans had their land stolen and suffered genocide. Africans were kidnapped from their home continent and enslaved. The two groups are united in moral injury, a concept I will explain. It is at the core of our suffering as oppressed groups in America.

Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist and classics scholar, coined the term *moral injury* while working with Vietnam vets. In his defining paper, Shay (2014) explains: "Moral injury is present when there has been a betrayal of what is right either by a person in legitimate authority or by one's self in a high stakes situation. . . . moral injury impairs the capacity for trust and elevates despair, suicidality, and interpersonal violence" (p. 182). In *Achilles in Vietnam*, Shay (1994) finds the template for the concept in Homer's *Iliad*, in which Achilles is enraged when his commander betrays him. The moral injury of betrayal, Shay writes, "impairs a person's dignity by a violation of what's right" (p. 21). Shay describes Achilles's "indignant rage," signaling that this is rage at being treated

unfairly, as the “word *dignity* [is] hidden in the word *indignant*” (p. 21). He distinguishes it from *berserk* rage, which refers to a “blood-crazed” state of fury (p. 77). Shay recognizes that the challenge is to exercise the rage of indignation while controlling the retaliatory murderous rage.

Mildred Antonelli (2017) further develops the moral injury concept to refer to “a core component of trauma that occurs when one’s actions have profoundly violated one’s code of ethics, when one has been a victim of such violation, or when one has been a passive witness of such violation” (p. 406). In essence, it is “inhumane behavior experienced as a betrayal of what is right” (p. 407). The concept of betrayal trauma in the literature on domestic violence also draws on the importance of this core element of the betrayal of trust (Platt, Barton, and Freyd 2009).

How do we understand the cause of the moral injury in this circumstance? My answer: Frederick Douglass indicts his fellow countrymen in an unparalleled, poignant address for betraying the Constitution’s promise of liberty and protection for the descendants of slaves brought to this country from Africa. The betrayal occurs on many societal levels, whether it is the betrayal of their humanity by making them property or that of inflicting on them such violence that the contract of equal rights and equal protection under the law is broken. Those are betrayals reaching back generations for African Americans, and the national guilt has never been absolved.

This history of violence and injustice is recalled every time an unarmed Black man is killed. Approximately three hundred Black Americans are killed by police annually. In 2018 *The Lancet* published a study by David Williams’s group at Harvard (Bor et al. 2018). Mental health reports were correlated with data on shootings, revealing that every time an unarmed Black American is shot in the United States, the mental health of African Americans in the state where the shooting took place is adversely affected for three months, while that of white Americans usually remains largely unaffected.

If George Floyd’s murder had occurred in isolation, the mourning might have been restricted to the African American community. But it occurred in the setting of a world crisis that magnified and extended the communal effect. The uprising carrying the indignant rage of moral injury—could we believe our eyes?—stretched across culture, race, gender, age, and national boundaries. As the uprising swelled with the Black Lives Matter movement at its core, it was carried along by the outcome of

African Americans' moral injury: Our moral injury is a specific kind of rage—Black Rage. For African Americans, living in a racist society entails daily devaluation and degradation. Black Rage, conceptualized here as an adaptive mental construct, carries a unique transgenerational valence and, from a psychoanalytic standpoint, is a powerful and necessary defensive psychic force. Black Rage protects, preserving dignity and self-worth, thereby mitigating the impact of racial trauma. This point is essential in understanding racial trauma and its damaging effects at the individual and group level, as well as the protective value of nurturing and mobilizing Black Rage as an adaptive and dynamic defensive construct.

Having developed in the particular cultural context of African American history and oppression, Black Rage as a construct also contains the superego imperative of what is right and the collective unconscious store of transgenerational traumas and defensive directives that manifests in an enduring sense of moral injury. It can be said that there is a libidinal cathexis to the superego imperative when the sense of what is right is violated in moral injury. The rage is recruited intrapsychically to counter the attack from the racist's projection and the devaluation inflicted on the self. In this situation, the Black Rage construct does more than shield the self and the self's sense of worth. It protects the self from internalizing the devaluation of racism and, at the same time, reinforces a superego imperative that is experienced in a sense of moral injury. Shielding the self with the mobilized rage creates a metaphoric force field, as it were, protecting the vulnerable self with a counterphobic defense, as for the oppressed person there is an intrapsychic tradeoff: it is better to feel rage than fear or devaluation. If the person of color can modulate and control the activated rage affect, by mobilizing the Black Rage construct toward defensive aims when under racist attack, the individual is able to stave off retaliatory aggression, resist internalizing the incoming aggression and devaluation, and convert psychic turmoil into an adaptive response.

Would it surprise you to know that I, too, a Black psychoanalyst, have Black Rage?

It is well-encapsulated, stored in my mind; it protects my sense of self and fuels my drive to write, because Black Rage, as an adaptive construct, promotes defensive sublimations. The activated Black Rage construct serves a protective function as I work to modulate the reactive rage while living in a racist society that assaults my consciousness daily. Michelle Obama once said, "When they go low, we go high." Stacey Abrams fueled

**Figure 3. Black Lives Matter Plaza, Washington, D.C., 2020**



Robinson Shantay, "The Significance of the Black Lives Matter Mural," from website of *Black Art in Life*, vol. 1, issue 1.

her rage at her manifestly unfair loss of the 2018 governor's race in Georgia into an historic grassroots campaign against voter suppression in the South. Without doubt this campaign galvanized the 200 percent increase in voter turnout that turned Georgia from red to blue in the 2020 presidential election. Might one postulate that these are examples of controlled, functional Black Rage acting as a mobilizing force?

Another extraordinary contemporary example of Black Rage, which by definition promotes controlled and functional defensive operations, is depicted in Figure 3: a stretch of 16th Street in Washington, D.C., was renamed Black Lives Matter Plaza in response to the many demonstrations for social justice. And if riots are "the language of the unheard," as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1966) once remarked, then Mayor Muriel Bowser, in big bold yellow letters, silently screamed to the demonstrators "I hear you!" On the group level, as the rage was modulated and the call for justice given recognition, the Washington demonstrations became more peaceful. One might go so far as to say that the experience of recognition by Mayor Bowser had a therapeutic calming effect on the protesters. Harnessed on a global level, as we have all borne witness, Black Rage catalyzed a mass realization and galvanized a movement.

In theorizing on the psychic resilience of oppressed people, it is necessary to point out that rage may not always be mobilized in an adaptive

way. In the early days of the pandemic, as steam had been building in the pressure cooker of our society's unacknowledged racism, the sense of moral injury had become acute. At the time George Floyd was murdered, it was difficult to modulate the reactions of rage on an individual and group level. Here, the affect of rage in the rage reaction must be distinguished from Black Rage as an adaptive defensive construction. Unmodulated rage as an affect, if not mobilized adaptively, can be internalized or externalized to an excessive degree and should be distinguished from controlled, modulated Black Rage as a defensive adaptation. The sequelae of internalized rage, when it cannot be mobilized toward an adaptive end, can produce severe psychic consequences, including but not limited to mood symptoms and problematic effects on interpersonal functioning. If externalized, unmodulated and uncontrolled rage can be discharged and lead to violence, especially when the moral injury is not given recognition, as, for example, in the demonstrations of 2020 that led to destruction of property.<sup>4</sup>

That Freud's early work on conceptualizing trauma was foundational to psychoanalytic theory, and that psychoanalytic theory is conceptually crucial in understanding racial trauma, might seem ironic. His retreat from conceptualizing a theory of oppression and racial trauma demonstrates the extent to which internal conflict and trauma, even for a genius of his magnitude, had far-reaching implications inhibiting the development of psychoanalytic theory—and consequently, our field.

### CONCEPTUALIZING FREUD'S SECRET BLACK RAGE

In "A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis," Freud (1936) identified the "limitations and poverty of our conditions of life in my youth" as contributors to his dissociative neurotic symptom at the Acropolis, which was indicative of his success neurosis (p. 247). Dorothy Holmes (2006) eloquently reinterprets this symptom with reference to the poverty and anti-Semitism Freud endured. His emphasis on oedipal conflict as a

<sup>4</sup>The further extension of rage, and more complicated examples of how to modulate it in times of social upheaval, can be found in the mobilizing of rage toward revolution in colonialism, as discussed by Fanon, in the struggle for freedom by many African nations, later including South Africa, and in the civil rights movement in the United States. Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), also pointed to the necessity of revolutionary counterviolence as the only way to overcome racialized trauma.

wholly adequate explanation for his success neurosis may have further contributed to the early focus on oedipal theory over deeper considerations of race and class in the field as a whole. That the young Freud fantasized about Hannibal is telling in this connection. Hannibal the Semite was actually an African general, a true conqueror feared by many, which fits quite nicely into the narrative.<sup>5</sup> For the boy whose father could show him no model to fight back against racist degradation and relieve him of humiliation, the secret identification with the Black general both encapsulated and expressed, I believe, Freud's Black Rage.

Freud stopped short of conceptualizing racial trauma as significant in theory, or race as a factor in the development of identity; however, I speculate that in fantasy Hannibal represented a powerful, wished-for African general father figure as a model who asserted Blackness, and that this fantasy served as an unconscious container of Freud's secret Black Rage. Freud's allusion to fathers in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) lends credence to this focus on the importance of one's father as a role model and stabilizing force: "I cannot," he wrote, "think of any need in childhood as strong as that for a father's protection" (p. 72).

This unconscious reservoir of Black Rage contained in the fantasy of Hannibal, it is my contention, fueled Freud's ambitious climb to an intellectual Acropolis—an oedipal triumph that was a challenge for him to manage as he held at bay the humiliation and damaging assaults of anti-Semitism along the way. Imagining a psychic sphere in which there was no race with the vision of a universal mind idealized the dream of human equality and represented a defensive solace to endure the brutal anti-Semitism of which he was surely a constant victim. His internalized racism is still represented in his writings—in part, in his references to a primitive racial Other. There was no analyst to help heal his racial trauma,

<sup>5</sup>There is general agreement among historians that Hannibal was the son of Hamilcar Barca, the Barcas line being one of the most distinguished families in Carthage (Bradford 1981, p. 21). It is also often said that his family traced its origins back to Queen Elissa (Dido), the legendary founder of that great North African city. Little is known about his mother. There is historical debate as to whether being a native of a North African region implies Hannibal was a lighter-skinned African or a darker-skinned African (for a detailed historical review, see Chandler 1988). There are accounts of him as having a "dark-skinned face" (Donavuer 1932, p. 244). Whether he was a Black (dark-skinned and indigenous) African or a light-skinned African, either would serve a role in the identification of African with Blackness. Freud was labeled a "black Jew," a curious racial/ethnic designation that had a connection to the social identity of Blackness as the symbolic oppressed minority. The line of historical debate, beyond my scope here, that speaks to the practice of intermarriage in North Africa at that time further complicates the issues.

to help him mobilize his Black Rage further into an antiracist stance. In some ways, this crippled him intrapsychically from envisioning antiracism, even in theory.

### **DEFINING BLACK RAGE AS A FUNCTIONAL AND ADAPTIVE MENTAL CONSTRUCT**

The concept of Black Rage dates back to the seminal 1968 book *Black Rage* by William Grier and Price Cobbs, both African American psychiatrists, who described the myriad ways Black people living in a racist society feel devalued. In *Black Rage*, published in the aftermath of the rioting that followed Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, amid the specific societal and cultural context of the civil rights struggle and the rise of the Black Power movement, Grier and Cobbs called for a revised psychoanalysis of racism that located the afterlife of slavery in our psyche, not just our politics.

From their work with urban youth with substance-abuse disorders forty years later, Hardy and Qureshi (2012) built on Grier and Cobbs's ideas to formulate the concept of rage as "the culmination of pervasive, chronic, and recurring experiences with devaluation and the dehumanization of loss without benefit of redress that is directly and poignantly linked to experiences with degradation, marginalization and devaluation" (p. 335). Rage can be dysfunctional if suppressed; internalized, it turns in on the self, especially in the face of ongoing trauma, leading to depression, self-destructive behavior, substance abuse, and even suicide. If externalized, dysfunctional rage can lead to violence. Black Rage is contextualized in African American culture, then, and defined as operative in the sustained response of oppressed people who endure repeated acts of injustice without opportunity for redress. Black Rage builds up as an accumulated adaptive reaction to experiences of racism and discrimination over generations and applies, specifically, to the reaction to ongoing oppression. In this context Grier and Cobbs, and Hardy and Qureshi, all seemed to recognize that Black Rage, if mobilized in a functional way, has a culturally specific adaptive potential that can be transformative.

Black Rage, formulated here as a mental construct, exists in a specific dynamic equilibrium as a compromise formation in the psyche that is a functional adaptation for oppressed people who suffer racial trauma and racial degradation, one that can be mobilized for the purpose of



defense, adaptation, or even psychic growth. The connection to an enduring sense of moral injury makes clear its defensive protection of the dignity of the racial self<sup>6</sup> for oppressed people, for whom there is a libidinal cathexis to the superego imperative when the sense of what is right is violated in moral injury. Psychoanalytic theory is conceptually crucial in understanding racial trauma, and integrating the construct of Black Rage into our theoretical formulations extends our understanding of oppression and racial trauma with far-reaching implications for our theory and clinical work. Integrating the concept of Black Rage as an adaptational psychic construct into analytic theory validates and directs therapeutic attention to the traumatic experiences of the oppressed.

### **AN EVOLVING PSYCHOANALYTIC FORMULATION OF FUNCTIONAL BLACK RAGE**

The concept of otherness as a theoretical construct had not yet been formulated but was implied by Freud when he wrote, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, “It is always possible to bring together a considerable number of people in love so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness” (1930, p. 114). Formulating the concept of Other on the basis of race came much later in psychoanalytic theory. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon (1952) wrote, “There is no longer any doubt that the true Other for the white man is and remains the Black man” (p. 206). Fanon wrote poignantly of the damaging consequences to the psyche of internalizing racism for the Black man who is the persistent object of devaluation, projected aggression, and racist degradation, substantiating the importance of psychic defense in mitigating the associated racial trauma. While expressions of racism can manifest in a multiplicity of ways, there is always a projected devaluation of the person of color which, Fanon maintained, is internalized by Black people as a sense of inferiority. Taken together, individual and group experiences become components of a social system that bombards people of color daily with evidence of systemic disregard and devaluation of a person or group’s humanity in order that another group might assert its privilege and domination. A society structured by racism does this in

<sup>6</sup>See Holmes (2016b) and Stoute (2019), respectively, for discussions of how to define dignity and the importance of protecting the dignity of the self in racial trauma.

many forms and in varying degrees, always creating a moral injury and individual racial trauma, as well as what I will term group *oppression trauma*. The oppressed know this, but the oppressors, who exist in a moral void, must be shown it.

To understand how race is recruited as a marker of difference in the American arsenal of Othering requires psychoanalytic formulation from the reference point of a socially embedded narrative. The American cultural ego ideal of greatness for whiteness thrives while projecting its destructiveness onto a racial Other; whiteness projects while Blackness endures. The construct of Black Rage psychically bolsters that endurance. As a construct in the mind, similar to the topographical model, where mental agencies have psychic functions, Black Rage carries associated mental representations drawn from both the individual and the collective cultural unconscious and serves a crucial defensive and adaptive function. As such, these state and functional qualities influence how rage as an affect is experienced and expressed.

The construct of Black Rage as a mobilizing adaptive defense is a missing link in psychoanalytic theory conceptualizing the psychic functioning and resilience of oppressed people whose dignity is constantly assaulted. Black Rage as a construct functions as an adaptation to oppression trauma for those who endure the projected destructiveness in the position of a socially sanctioned Other living in a racist society. It proved difficult to construct this analytic scaffold. Rage, as a reaction, is not usually conceptualized as part of a defensive construct or adaptational response.

In a racist society, built on the paradigm of a white superiority / Black inferiority binary, socially sanctioned ego distortions, coupled with defective and regressive superego functioning, promote the disavowal of the persistent violence and aggression directed at the Black Other. A Eurocentric theoretical formulation devoid of social context that ignores racial trauma as a fundamental vicissitude in development, and the fact that derivatives of oppression can become intrapsychically embedded in traumatic ways, limits our understanding of otherness. To fully elaborate the adaptive function of the Black Rage construct, then, theory must factor in the contributing cultural effect of the white-supremacist social backdrop of American society, in which the individual is not “raceless” but is in fact a Black racialized Other. It is through white supremacy’s racializing lens that Black people are othered and experienced as objects of constant threat. Indeed, the white-dominant, white-supremacist

paradigm is projected onto the entire social frame, requiring ongoing psychic vigilance for the person or group of color.

Such vigilance requires that people of color modulate and control rage reactions on an ongoing basis. Mitigating and suppressing the reactive rage and converting the resultant psychic turmoil to an adaptive response requires the defensive operations of repression and sublimation.

Insistence on a moral imperative in the associated moral injury reinforces the individual's effort to resist retaliating, as the appeal to what is right is recruited from the unconscious transgenerational data bank of African Americans, which includes the cultural dictum to retain the capacity to love even when being hated. Even if this move is successful, it occurs at a psychic cost to the individual because the deflection of devaluation is never complete, and significant psychic energy is expended to quell the retaliatory rageful impulses stirred up. This transformation of initially helpless rage to a mobilizing defensive force is an aspect of what Dionne Powell (2020) has described as resisting "psychic enslavement" to achieve "psychic emancipation." Black Rage, and the social and cultural experience that is its context, can consequently be understood as a deeply held adaptation that enduringly impacts the individual's intrapsychic and interpersonal functioning.

A white-supremacist society, to formulate from a Kleinian perspective, operates on a paranoid-schizoid group level whereby racist projections invade the intersubjective space, and the Black racial Other is forced into the position of deflecting, defending against, metabolizing, or internalizing the toxic projections of the white-dominant society. Socially sanctioned projective attacking of the Black Other is raised from the individual level to the organizing frame of the culture. As the cultural norm, it becomes a ubiquitous contributor to the racial trauma invading the intersubjective field, both analytic and cultural. Early analytic theorists, having whitewashed the cultural field, had not identified this ongoing threat as coming from an external cultural source or realized that the analyst's unconscious racism might collude with the background culture in creating a racialized intersubjective field.

In understanding the significance of this defensive protection, Bion's concept of *linking capacity* (1956) is particularly helpful. Bion (1959) underscored that the main theme was not just an attack on the link but on the consequences of such an attack: "on the one hand the . . . disposition to excessive destructiveness, hatred, and envy . . . [and] on the other the environment which, at its worst, denies . . . the use of the mechanisms of

splitting and projective identification, resulting in [what Bion terms] destructive attacks on the link” (p. 313). So, to apply Bion’s formulation, the Black racial Other is repeatedly forced into the position of psychic shock absorber struggling to withstand these attacks on linking, in order to preserve the capacity to think. The adaptive function of the Black Rage construct affords defensive protection in withstanding the damaging consequences of an attack.

For the Black Other in a racist society, then, the attack on linking is raised further to the level of the cultural frame, in which white supremacy, through its many sophisticated projective forms, dictates the norm and infiltrates individual intersubjectivities and intersubjective cultural spaces. It would seem logical, then, that in a racist society the oppressed are in a constant state of readiness to mobilize and modulate Black Rage as an adaptive defense, even when their affective state is manifestly calm. The social conditions of slavery and the subsequent period of Jim Crow lynching, out of which this adaptive strategy evolved, attest the great survival value of the strategy of holding indignant rage intrapsychically while appearing manifestly calm.

In a society operating on this paranoid-schizoid level, Black Rage would be a necessary construct for the healthy functioning of the Black Other. Attempting a psychoanalytic formulation of Black Rage raises the question of whether a theory of oppression must first be formulated in which the construct, as a functional adaptation, would be a normal developmental acquisition in preserving the integrity of the racialized self that must navigate a racist society. In theory we would then be forced to posit that there exists a racialized self with a developmental trajectory integral to the formation of identity.

### **BLACK RAGE CARRIES TRANSGENERATIONAL MENTAL REPRESENTATIONS IN OPPRESSION TRAUMA**

In the speculative work *Totem and Taboo*, Freud (1912–1913) theorized a type of cultural memory with associated mental representations that could be transmitted across generations; this laid the foundation for modern conceptualizations about the transgenerational transmission of trauma. Operating from his own cultural context, Vamik Volkan (Volkan, Ast, and Greer 2002) integrated his work with other psychoanalysts’ work with Holocaust survivors (Freud and Burlingham 1942; Friedman 1949) and

theorized a mode of transgenerational transmission in the setting of mass historical traumas. He formulated that “transgenerationally transmitted self- and object-images . . . belonging to the survivors of mass shared trauma often initiate specifically history-related *unconscious fantasies* in their descendants, whose task it becomes to deal with the shame, rage, helplessness, entitlement, and guilt that the previous generations have been unable to work through for themselves” (p. 17). Volkan (2013)<sup>7</sup> wrote compellingly of “collective trauma,” referring to specific mass historical events that have caused “a large group to face drastic losses, feel helpless and victimized by another group, and share a humiliating injury,” the mental representations of which become intertwined with the group’s core identity, and are thus labeled the group’s *chosen trauma*. On a dynamic level, Volkan goes on to map out how “large-group historical traumas are thus not simply comprised of static, shared conscious memories of the event. Rather, they are highly dynamic complexes of recollections, fantasies, affects, wishes, and defenses (i.e., mental representations) whose influences are transmitted from generation to generation. . . . It is this complex of mental representation that is passed to future generations who, as ‘carriers’ must cope with the unmastered psychological tasks” (Volkan, Ast, and Greer 2002, p. 25).

This concept of “mental representations” as part of the transgenerational transmission of group trauma, can indeed be applied cross-culturally, and specifically to the African American experience. For African Americans, generations<sup>8</sup> of chattel slavery and its later derivatives, the Black Codes and Jim Crow segregation, promoted centuries-long socially sanctioned and culturally endemic traumatic mass violence. In addition, the related mental representations, oral traditions, and even social structures

<sup>7</sup>Volkan’s lifelong work on conflict resolution, bringing ethnic groups together toward mutual understanding, peacemaking, and resolving interethnic conflict, has commanded accolades, awards, and international recognition including five Nobel peace prize nominations. Yet many LGBTQ colleagues have expressed outrage at Volkan’s reluctance to recant his writings, including a book edited with Charles Socarides about conversion treatments for homosexuality (1992) or renounce his past affiliation as vice president of NARTH (the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality), an organization that supports conversion therapy for minors. This despite the fact that the American Psychoanalytic Association, as an organization, issued an apology to the LGBTQ community in 2019 for discriminatory and exclusionary practices. At present he is, however, reconsidering these objections. Volkan’s reluctance to recant seems ironic since it would be a logical extension of his theoretical position to extend his work to formulate that the discrimination endured by the LGBTQ community is a culturally imposed mass trauma.

<sup>8</sup>Wilkerson (2020) postulates that chattel slavery ran the course of twelve generations in America.

representative of slavery have become psychically imprinted, overlaid now by violent societal events that reactivate traumatic reactions. So, while mass traumatic events can become the focal point in a group's identification and history, as in Volkan's designation of the concept of chosen trauma, the more pervasive nature of ongoing racial violence in American history makes the more global term *oppression trauma* warranted as a descriptor of this culturally specific manifestation.

In a contemporary sociocultural analysis, Hardy (2019) similarly applies the term *oppression trauma*, to encompass "the interlocking of sociocultural oppression and trauma that is systemic, pervasive and protracted over time," and continues to postulate astutely that "race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexual locations and mental and physical ability . . . are all social locations [that can be] connected to the experience of sociocultural oppression" (p. 135; see also Hardy 2013). The psychoanalytic formulation presented here integrates and makes particular to the African American experience the ideas of Volkan and Hardy. The traumas and systemic oppression endured by African Americans that began with slavery are represented mentally in the collective cultural unconscious, having been passed down transgenerationally, and are activated, amplified, and repeated by the ongoing violence of systemic racism. That is the definition proposed here of *oppression trauma*. From this perspective, the Black Rage construct as a mental agency operates as a focal vehicle carrying mental representations from the individual, transgenerational familial, and collective cultural unconscious and represents the convergence of psychic and sociocultural trauma embedded largely in the unconscious domain.

This oppression drama not only occurs on an individual level, but also connects on a transgenerational intersubjective level; African American parental role models and family oral traditions serve, in conscious and unconscious ways, to reinforce the cultural moral imperative of voicing the betrayal of the moral injury while also striving to retain the capacity to love while being hated.<sup>9</sup> As James Baldwin reminds us, African Americans generation to generation have demonstrated in word and deed to their sons and daughters, "Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not

<sup>9</sup>This cultural imperative was also reinforced during the civil rights movement through the model of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1957), who took up the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi. Both espoused a moral philosophy of nonviolent resistance that, I would argue, was a derivative form of managing the rage of oppression toward a sublimated end while giving primacy to the sense of moral injury and assaulted dignity.

testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity” (1962, p. 8). Baldwin, in this letter to his nephew, demonstrated in *The Fire Next Time*, in so many ways, that for African Americans there is a transgenerational teaching of defensive strategies drawn from collective unconscious stores that foster group identification, cohesion, and survival. Black Rage, as formulated here, is an example. That victims of collective trauma pass down cultural teachings about threat, group preservation, and the sense of an “historical self” is a well-documented cross-cultural finding (Hirschberger 2018).

Surviving degradation, from slavery to Reconstruction and through Jim Crow to the civil rights movement, provided ample traumatic lived experience to perfect Black Rage as a transgenerational defensive and adaptational weapon that operationally suppresses and sublimates rage reactions to ongoing oppression. At the heart of Baldwin’s advice to his nephew, his namesake, is not only the directive to repress the rage but, further, to do it “with love”: “We, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are and to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change”; he also reminded young James that “you come from sturdy stock . . . men who . . . in the teeth of the most terrifying odds, achieved an unassailable monumental dignity” (p. 10). It is this “with love” that is so powerful in Baldwin. He asks us to withstand hate, while maintaining our capacity to love, using “the word ‘love’ here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth” (1962, p. 95). I believe Baldwin recognized the need to protect (as Bion might interject, protect our linking capacity), to preserve the capacity for receptivity and mirroring inherent in the capacity to love while one endures devaluating attacks in being hated. The mantra *Love so as not to hate* is transmitted transgenerationally in African American families and in the symbolic function of the Black church as the mortar of psychic resiliency.

Creating a theoretical scaffolding for a theory of oppression trauma that encompasses racial trauma will facilitate our understanding the individual familial and cultural mitigating factors that are protective. For African American individuals and families, especially those that are resilient, Black Rage is an internalized adaptive construct that is fortifying. If the defensive directives are cultivated, internalized, and passed down, Black Rage, as a mental agency with defensive functions, supports

African American adolescents in acquiring the ability to metabolize their rage reactions to discrimination across development. An understanding of oppression trauma makes clear that developmental factors that enhance one's ability to tolerate frustration and promote what Bion (1963, 1970) termed the ability to "suffer experience" can be crucial to enduring racial trauma, especially when containing familial objects serve as role models.

This may speak to why historically Black colleges, for example, can provide protective growth-promoting environments for Black adolescents during this important developmental period, to expose them to role models who reflect and support the adaptive mobilization of Black Rage, foster group solidarity, and consolidate group racial identity. Acquiring and exercising Black Rage as a buffer relieves the developing racial self from absorbing the assault from persecution, demoralization, and the self-hatred that can result from internalizing devaluing experiences; it facilitates metabolization of these toxic experiences, thereby preserving the capacity for receptivity and connection, and affords protection of the dignity of the racial self.

### **CLINICAL EXTENSIONS OF BLACK RAGE AS A CULTURALLY CONTEXTUALIZED ADAPTATION**

Enduring discriminatory experiences and the attendant racial trauma exact a biological toll on a physical and psychological level. If the rage activated in withstanding the discriminatory experiences of oppression trauma cannot be controlled and mobilized in a functional and adaptive way, retaliatory aggression cannot be contained. On an individual level, one is left defenseless, vulnerable to assaults on the self and at risk of internalizing one's degradation or devaluation, or acting out the stirred-up anger. Influenced by when in development racialized traumatic experiences occur, by the integrity of one's premorbid personality structure, and by accessible ego resources, a range of pathological manifestations result from withstanding racially traumatic attacks. Symptomatic manifestations include depression, substance abuse, and an array of other psychological and physical symptoms (Roberts and Rollins, 2020; Hart 2021; Stoute in press). A racist society presents ongoing threats, so the allostatic load of enduring these racially traumatic experiences provokes post-traumatic reactions (Hart 2021).



In working with patients in psychotherapy and analysis who have been victims of persistent racial trauma, Hart (2019, 2021) reports, as does Hardy (Hardy and Laszloffy 1995; Hardy and Qureshi 2012), an array of symptoms that adult patients who have endured racially traumatic experience endorse upon presentation for treatment: “depression, suicidality, anxiety, paranoia, phobic reactions, self-destructive or violent behavior, sleep or appetite disturbance, weight loss or weight gain, anhedonia, somatic problems (without a clear physiological cause), acute relationship conflicts, chronic relational difficulties, memory and concentration disturbances, dissociation and related forms of discontinuity, and substance abuse and dependency” (Hart 2019, p. 16). For children and adolescents, the consequences similarly manifest in physical symptoms and mood symptoms but also as anxiety and behavioral problems (Brody et al. 2006). Defensive operations, as in the adaptive mobilization of the Black Rage construct on an individual level, foster resilience and mitigate the allostatic load of racial trauma. In the psychoanalytic theory of oppression proposed here, could a developmental line be established, then, for the adaptive function of Black Rage in the defensive construct that promotes resilience in enduring the assault on dignity that oppression trauma poses for marginalized people of color?

### **IMPLICATIONS OF POSTULATING RAGE AS AN EMOTIONAL DRIVE WITH A DEVELOPMENTAL LINE**

Panksepp’s revolutionary theory of Affective Neuroscience (2005) debunks Freud’s binary categorization of the instinctual drives, offering instead a nuanced, experimentally based formulation. Panksepp operates from the fundamental premise that “emotional feelings emerge from specific, evolutionarily dictated brain operating systems” (Davis and Montag 2019, p. 2). As demonstrated by experiments using electrical stimulation, pharmacological agents, and anatomical lesions of vertebrate brains, Panksepp identifies seven core primary process emotions that are shared universally by all human (and mammalian) brains; these core emotional systems, he theorizes, operate as “emotional action systems” that are localized anatomically to the limbic system of the human brain. Panksepp characterizes and documents seven primary-process emotional command systems: SEEKING/Expectancy, RAGE/Anger, FEAR/Anxiety, LUST/sexuality, CARE/Nurturing, PANIC/Sadness, and PLAY / Social Joy

(Davis and Montag 2019, p. 3).<sup>10</sup> Based on Panksepp's taxonomy, Solms (2020) speaks to the formulation of RAGE, and each core primary emotion, as an emotional drive.

While the theory grounds these seven core emotional experiences in limbic response systems, childhood experience and cultural factors influence their expression throughout development. Although RAGE, for example, is a genetically based ancestral emotional drive shared by all mammals, Panksepp concedes that there is considerable variation in how and to what extent RAGE is expressed based on childhood experience, maternal-infant interaction, social learning, and cultural influence. Emotional learning and cultural socialization can also create unconscious associations that are trigger points for aggressiveness (Todorov and Bargh 2002). Further, in this new model all the primary emotional systems, including RAGE, have developmental lines, and culture has an impact on development and expression.

Based on Panksepp's neurobiological formulation, I contend that Black Rage as a mental construct is one culturally specific developmental outcome for the expression of RAGE. Mental representations of oppression trauma, incorporated from the individual, transgenerational familial, and collective cultural unconscious, influence the progression and expression of RAGE. Black Rage, having evolved in the African American cultural context, has primed the defensive operations, on an individual and cultural level, that confer psychic protection and resilience in response to the assault on dignity of the dehumanizing experiences of oppression that began with slavery. Defensive operations that prioritize repressing and controlling overt expression of retaliatory aggression toward the aim of sublimation are given primacy and intergenerational solidity. In this way social and cultural derivatives of oppression can enduringly embed trauma intrapsychically.

## **CONCLUSION AND MOVING FORWARD**

It is too early to fully comprehend the forces that led to the Black Lives Matter uprisings of 2020 and the multiracial, multicultural global response, but I will offer a preliminary formulation. Perhaps the interweaving of the Covid-19 pandemic and worldwide uprisings sparked

<sup>10</sup>The capitalization is used to distinguish these emotional brain system labels as formulated in Panksepp's taxonomy from the use of the terms in ordinary language.

anew<sup>11</sup> our awareness of what I envision as a cross-cultural intersubjective space across the globe.

George Floyd became an icon of suffering for all African Americans, especially African American men. Remarkably, he has also become a *symbolic self* for people across the world who have suffered degradation and dehumanization, people who now identify with him—and, through him, with Black America. The image of the white policeman kneeling, with his hand in his pocket, on a Black man's neck, enacting the scene of “conqueror” and “conquered,” evoked the deep sense of moral injury that I believe resides in all of us. Dare I hypothesize that these dynamics of devaluation and oppression reside in the collective cultural unconscious of all nations, and that the symbolic self of George Floyd allowed a reflective mentalization of suffering and recognition across nations? While not everyone who utters “Black Lives Matter” subscribes to the movement, many now see the reality that too often in our past Black lives did *not* matter, and our global community now identifies with the moral injury to which Black Rage corresponds. Without Black Rage as a mobilizing force to carry the moral injury of African Americans, the history of our nation demonstrates that racism would consume us—as individuals, as a nation, and maybe as a global community—and strip us of our moral integrity and humanity, one dead Black or brown body at a time.

The picture that shocked the world, and the iPhone video that amplified its dramatic effects, afforded a vast virtual witnessing and a recognition of racial violence by the global community. Citizens of the world came to recognize the operational moral imperative that Black lives must matter in order for all lives to matter. Black Rage as an adaptive and mobilizing force, and the moral injury it has carried for African Americans across generations, preserved an entry point for white America—and citizens across the globe—to experience symbolically and carry together our oppression traumas as shared, mobilizing human experiences.

Presented here, out of this specific historical and cultural experience, is a unique psychoanalytic formulation of Black Rage as a functional and dynamic adaptive construct operating in the psyches of the oppressed, of its mobilization on a group level in uprisings, and of how, during the

<sup>11</sup>Winnicott (1967) speaks to this concept of cultural space in his classic paper “The Location of Cultural Experience.” This idea was the conceptual forerunner of the concept of intersubjectivity, as Winnicott spoke to “the place where cultural experience is located in the potential space between the individual and the environment” (p. 370).

Covid-19 pandemic, it operated as an intersubjective connecting force across the globe.

Can we import the concept of Black Rage into the psychoanalytic lexicon? Psychoanalytic theory must allow a space for the protective function of RAGE as having a defensive adaptation. In theorizing about the psychic resilience of the oppressed, RAGE can be seen as a culturally primed emotional drive inherent in the Black Rage construct.

Importing the concept of Black Rage into the lexicon of analytic theory is crucial to constructing a scaffolding for theorizing on the psychology of oppression, the damaging effects of racial trauma, and the transgenerational transmission of trauma. We will never have more people of color in the field of psychoanalysis or other mental health fields, especially African American men, until we allow a psychic and theoretical space for the construct of Black Rage as a necessary adaptation to validate and allow for the traumatic experiences of the oppressed. No theory can become truly antiracist without integrating the functional utility of the Black Rage construct in its defensive protection of the racial self.

This opens a new chapter in our developing a psychoanalytic theory that recognizes the damaging effects of racial trauma and oppression as they impact individual subjectivity and the intersubjective cultural field. Further, this formulation elucidates the interface of the biopsychosocial dimensions of trauma on the border of the psyche and the internalization of culture. Not only do culture and the social surround impact the analytic dyad, but culture can be deeply and enduringly embedded in the psyche for oppressor and oppressed alike.

We are a nation that boasts a Judeo-Christian tradition with a moral imperative at its core, but we will never realize *loving thy neighbor as thyself* or administer *liberty and justice for all* until we stop hating and projecting onto thy neighbor as the Other. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud (1930) wrote, "I may now add that civilization is a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind" (p. 122). Can this historical moment become a pivot point for more substantive conversation and action toward healing our culturally derived oppression traumas to recover and preserve our shared humanity? Black Rage is with us, in us and, as oppressed people have always known, can save us. Can we lean into and utilize the moral imperative carried in Black Rage as a radical catalyst for our shared psychoanalytic liberation?

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