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REIMAGINING CRITICAL RACE THEORY IN EDUCATION:  
MENTAL HEALTH, HEALING, AND THE PATHWAY TO  
LIBERATORY PRAXIS

Ebony O. McGee

Peabody College  
Vanderbilt University

David Stovall

Department of Educational Policy Studies  
University of Illinois at Chicago

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**ABSTRACT.** Long-standing theoretical education frameworks and methodologies have failed to provide space for the role mental health can play in mediating educational consequences. To illustrate the need for such space, Ebony McGee and David Stovall highlight the voices of black undergraduates they have served in the capacities of teacher, researcher, and mentor. Building from the theoretical contributions of intellectual giants like Frantz Fanon and W. E. B. Du Bois, the authors attempt to connect oppressive social systems to the psyche of the oppressed in a way that is relevant to black students. McGee and Stovall pose a challenge to the current research trend of attributing the survival of black students at traditionally white institutions primarily to grit, perseverance, and mental toughness, noting that research on the aforementioned qualities often fails to properly acknowledge multiple forms of suffering. Utilizing the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT), the authors also challenge the construct of grit to consider the extent to which the mental health concerns of black students go undetected. Although critical race theorists have unmasked and attacked the racial trauma experienced at all levels of the educational system, the connection of CRT to mental health and wellness research is in its embryonic stages. For these reasons, McGee and Stovall argue that CRT scholars need to incorporate praxis to address mental health and wellness in order to address a fuller spectrum of black students' racialized worlds. Ultimately, they seek interdisciplinary perspectives that can help identify and foster strategies to support black students in the project and process of healing from multiple forms of racialized trauma they experience within and beyond their educational encounters.

#### INTRODUCTION

"Weathering," a term put forth by Arline Geronimus and colleagues, is a phenomenon characterized by the long-term physical, mental, emotional, and psychological effects of racism and of living in a society characterized by white dominance and privilege.<sup>1</sup> Weathering severely challenges and threatens a person's health and ability to respond in a healthy manner to their environment. This can cause wear and tear, both corporeal and mental, and lead to a host of psychological and physical ailments, including heart disease, diabetes, and accelerated aging. These physiological manifestations of social inequality are not given sufficient attention, particularly in how they affect the academic outcomes and experiences of students and faculty of color. Long-standing theoretical education frameworks and methodologies have failed to provide space for the role mental health can play in mediating educational consequences. To illustrate the need for such space,

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1. Arline T. Geronimus, Margaret Hicken, Danya Keene, and John Bound, "'Weathering' and Age Patterns of Allostatic Load Scores Among Blacks and Whites in the United States," *American Journal of Public Health* 96, no. 5 (2006): 826–833; and Arline T. Geronimus, "The Weathering Hypothesis and the Health of African-American Women and Infants: Evidence and Speculations," *Ethnicity and Disease* 2, no. 3 (1991): 207–221.

we present the voices of black undergraduates we have served in the capacities of teacher, researcher, and mentor. Although we are explicitly discussing black college students in this conversation, we are by no means undervaluing the vital work being done on behalf of all students, teachers, administrators, and faculty within the African diaspora, and with other historically marginalized racial, gender, and socioeconomic groups. With this in mind, we are interested in the extent to which black students are experiencing mental health concerns that go undetected. Even as we have showcased our research on the academic survival of black students, we have grown accustomed to talking about grit, perseverance, and mental toughness without properly acknowledging the multiple forms of suffering they have confronted (and still confront) as part of that story.

We contend that current research on “grit” and “resilience,” at least as these concepts are sometimes defined and operationalized, does not account for the toll societal racism takes on students who may be viewed as successful. The majority of this research refers to static definitions of resilience, such as the innate ability to bounce back from obstacles, without properly acknowledging how structural racism breeds the racial practices, policies, and ideologies that force black students to adopt a racial mental toughness in order to pursue traditional forms of educational advancement. This static definition often leaves it up to individuals to rise above their challenges and roadblocks without recognizing the stress and strain associated with surviving (and even thriving) academically despite encounters with racism.

For the purpose of this account, we endorse more ecologically robust conceptions of resilience frameworks. For example, Margaret Beale Spencer’s Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory of human development (known as PVEST) examines the interaction between environmental context and identity development, and starts with the assumption that an individual’s perception of his or her environment and context is crucial to understanding his or her experiences and responses.<sup>2</sup> A PVEST-informed vulnerability–resiliency perspective accounts for the *vulnerability* of people of color who are burdened by unique and often underexamined levels of risk while acknowledging potential sources of support.

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2. See Margaret Beale Spencer, “Fourth Annual Brown Lecture in Education Research — Lessons Learned and Opportunities Ignored Since *Brown v. Board of Education*: Youth Development and the Myth of a Color-Blind Society,” *Educational Researcher* 37, no. 5 (2008): 253–266.

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EBONY O. MCGEE is Assistant Professor of Diversity and Urban Schooling in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Vanderbilt University’s Peabody College, 1930 South Dr., Nashville, TN 37212; e-mail <ebony.mcgee@vanderbilt.edu>. Her primary areas of scholarship are the racialized experiences and career outcomes among historically marginalized students and faculty in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

DAVID STOVALL is Associate Professor of African American Studies and Educational Policy Studies in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at University of Illinois at Chicago, 1040 W. Harrison St., MC 147, Chicago, IL 60607; e-mail <dostoval@uic.edu>. His primary areas of scholarship are Critical Race Theory, the relationship of education to housing and law enforcement, and concepts of social justice in education.

Recognizing the need for hard work and persistence has long been cited as a factor in academic perseverance.<sup>3</sup> In a series of longitudinal studies, researchers have asked whether grit, defined as perseverance and a passion for long-term goals, predicts a range of objective outcomes of success after accounting for individual differences in ability. Notably, grit has been shown to predict the grade point averages of undergraduates better than standardized test scores such as the SAT.<sup>4</sup> “Gritty” individuals are described as tortoise-like and distinguished by their propensity to maintain their “effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress.”<sup>5</sup> Grit has been touted as the missing link for students trying to earn a degree in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), as this pursuit requires traditional measures of success (for example, a high GPA) along with focused and sustained application over a long period of time. Angela Duckworth and Lauren Eskreis-Winkler frequently use the following quote to describe grit:

The only thing that I see that is distinctly different about me is I’m not afraid to die on a treadmill. I will not be outworked, period. You might have more talent than me, you might be smarter than me, you might be sexier than me, you might be all of those things — you got it on me in nine categories. But if we get on the treadmill together, there’s two things: you’re getting off first, or I’m going to die. It’s really that simple.

— Will Smith, *Oscar-nominated actor and Grammy award-winning musician and producer*<sup>6</sup>

While it is debatable whether pushing oneself to the limit to outwork the next person is an admirable quality, we have witnessed black students work themselves to the point of extreme illness in attempting to escape the constant threat (treadmill) of perceived intellectual inferiority. However, what grit researchers do not adequately examine is the role that race plays in producing anxiety, trauma, and general unpleasantness in students of color engaging in high-pressure academic work. The psychological and emotional energy required to manage stress in academic and social contexts as well as systemic and everyday racism can be overwhelming and taxing. We argue that the current enthusiasm for teaching African American students with psychological traits like grit ignores the significant injustice of societal racism and the toll it takes, even on those students who appear to be the toughest and most successful.

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3. Susan D. Holloway, “Concepts of Ability and Effort in Japan and the United States,” *Review of Educational Research* 58, no. 3 (1988): 327–345; and Angela Lee Duckworth and Patrick D. Quinn, “Development and Validation of the Short Grit Scale (GRIT-S),” *Journal of Personality Assessment* 91, no. 2 (2009): 166–174.

4. Angela Lee Duckworth, Christopher Peterson, Michael D. Matthews, and Dennis R. Kelly, “Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92, no. 6 (2007): 1087–1101; and Duckworth and Quinn, “Development and Validation of the Short Grit Scale (GRIT-S).”

5. Duckworth et al., “Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals,” 1087–1088.

6. Angela L. Duckworth and Lauren Eskreis-Winkler, “True Grit,” *The Observer* 26, no. 4 (2013): 1–3.

The key theoretical constructs we use to frame the lives of our study participants include the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as developed by Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso.<sup>7</sup> Their tenets are italicized in the list below, and each is followed by a brief description of how it informs our theoretical perspective.

- *The intercentricity of race and racism*: Race and racism are not monolithic concepts but, rather, complex, dynamic, and malleable social constructions endemic to life in the United States. Due to their shifting contexts, definitions of race can include and exclude particular groups, depending on the historical moment. For example, immigrant and native-born Latino/as in the United States were once categorized as “white”; they now are largely vilified for taking jobs from U.S. citizens. By recognizing the historical and social evolution of race, CRT seeks to problematize the paradigm.
- *Challenge to dominant ideology*: The master narrative on African American and Latino/a students in public education is engulfed in deficit theories. CRT challenges the master narrative on the inability of students of color to excel in academic settings.
- *Commitment to social justice*: CRT offers itself as a theoretical and methodological paradigm aimed at the examination and elimination of race, class, and gender oppression.
- *Centrality of experiential knowledge*: The knowledge people of color acquire in the fight against hegemonic forces in education is legitimate, valid, and necessary for creating spaces where they can engage in justice work.
- *Transdisciplinary perspective*: CRT borrows from legal theory, ethnic studies, women’s studies, sociology, history, philosophy, economics, and other fields to argue for a comprehensive analysis of the functions of race and racism in education.<sup>8</sup>

Applying CRT in education makes it possible to analyze practices and ideologies through a race-conscious lens, which can help to frame critical questions addressing the traumas that directly affect communities of color. As insurgent scholarship rooted in critique and action, CRT “seeks to inform theory, research, pedagogy, curricula and policy.”<sup>9</sup> CRT in education should be viewed as making a valuable contribution to praxis, as it supports reflection and action to promote psychological well-being, organize collective action, and develop a liberating

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7. Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (2002): 23–44. The italicized text in the list is quoted directly from Solórzano and Yosso’s article.

8. *Ibid.*, 7–8.

9. Tara J. Yosso, *Critical Race Counterstories Along the Chicana/Chicano Educational Pipeline* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 7.

education.<sup>10</sup> For the purposes of this article, we understand CRT as central to the larger political project and strategy that helps to frame our experiences as researchers concerned with the well-being of students of color in higher education.

Racialized survival strategies are an intricate set of actions developed to circumvent deeply embedded, persistent historical social problems. Thus, some black students have developed a racial toolkit to help protect themselves from the damage that racial battle fatigue inflicts.<sup>11</sup> William Smith introduced the concept of racial battle fatigue to describe the stress associated with being black in predominantly white educational environments.<sup>12</sup> Smith affirms that being marginalized at predominantly white universities creates racial tension for students of color that takes many different forms, including racial microaggressions and racial stereotyping, which are racial assaults on the character of students of color. However, even those educators and researchers whose central focus is race and racism in education have only rarely theorized the mental health outcomes associated with racial stress and racial battle fatigue. In these instances, the layered complexity of racism creates a context in which black students may demonstrate resilience and grit, but the current framing of these concepts does not engage the nuanced realities encountered in higher education settings. Although toughness is an admirable quality, it cannot be the rationale used to dismiss long-term mental health outcomes. Consequently, the contributions of racial battle fatigue as an operative construct that outlines the role of racialized trauma in mental health outcomes has remained on the fringes of CRT.

#### THE MENTAL HEALTH OF BLACK BODIES

Research on the mental health of blacks in the United States reveals an enduringly troubled and disturbing history. Enslaved Africans were experimented on in horrific ways, such as being burned alive to study the effects of pain, and were doctored in ways intended to perpetuate psychological differences that “proved” blacks’ inferiority and offered a rationale for policies that reinforced their inequality, subjugation, and exploitation.<sup>13</sup>

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10. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1994); and Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres, *The Miner’s Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

11. Ebony O. McGee and Danny B. Martin, “‘You Would Not Believe What I Have to Go Through to Prove My Intellectual Value!’: Stereotype Management Among Academically Successful Black Mathematics and Engineering Students,” *American Education Research Journal* 48, no. 6 (2011): 1347–1389.

12. William A. Smith, “Black Faculty Coping with Racial Battle Fatigue: The Campus Racial Climate in a Post-Civil Rights Era,” in *A Long Way to Go: Conversations About Race by African American Faculty and Graduate Students at Traditionally White Institutions*, ed. Darrell Cleveland (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 171–190.

13. Nancy Krieger, “Shades of Difference: Theoretical Underpinnings of the Medical Controversy on Black/White Differences in the United States, 1830–1870,” *International Journal of Health Services* 17, no. 2 (1987): 259–278.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon painstakingly provides an intimate examination of the colonized psyche, which often suffers from mental disorders, and the links between mental pathology and the French colonization of Algeria starting in 1830.<sup>14</sup> Fanon has largely been characterized as a revolutionary anticolonial activist and intellectual, while his role as a psychiatrist has been downplayed. Fanon spent a significant portion of his later years practicing psychiatry in North Africa, where he closely and critically observed the psychic violence and affective dimensions of colonization. Although Fanon was trained in France, he criticized French psychiatry for using the field to justify the horrors of colonialism by detailing the racist assaults, both physical and psychological, inflicted on blacks in France and the United States. Additionally, he implicated these racist injuries in exacerbating and prolonging the suffering and anxiety of black people: "Today, we know very well that it is not necessary to be wounded by a bullet in order to suffer from the fact of war in body as well as in mind."<sup>15</sup> His description of how Algerian people were stigmatized as slackers, liars, robbers, born criminals, and incapable of self-discipline is strikingly similar to the present-day racial stigma experienced by blacks in America. Fanon details his own racial objectification by whites in ways that called his very humanity into question: "I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: 'Sho good eatin.'"<sup>16</sup> In a more recent article exploring the undertheorizing of race in research on the educational experiences and outcomes of blacks, Carla O'Connor, Amanda Lewis, and Jennifer Mueller report that blackness is still given value and defined through objectified competencies and practices rather than through meaning making and the heterogeneity of the black experience.<sup>17</sup>

Fanon contends that people in positions of power have also suffered, but from an illness of moral consciousness. In addition, he discusses the anxiety experienced by the black middle class. W. E. B. Du Bois referred to this phenomenon as the psychological wage associated with being black — a sort of racial

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14. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

15. *Ibid.*, 290.

16. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 112.

17. Research on the achievement disparities known widely as the black–white achievement gap frequently positions blacks at the low end of the scale and whites (and Asians) at the top, and it often includes simplistic individual and group explanations for the gap. See, for example, Carla O'Connor, Amanda Lewis, and Jennifer Mueller, "Researching 'Black' Educational Experiences and Outcomes: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations," *Educational Researcher* 36, no. 9 (2007): 541–552. These authors argue that when gaps in achievement are addressed without a deliberate investigation of racial inequities, students, parents, teachers, and some environmental factors tend to be blamed for the poor educational outcomes of Black students, which in turn leads to "undertheorized, oversimplified, or inaccurate conceptualizations of race" (542).

tax.<sup>18</sup> One manifestation is when some black college students, while being socialized to work their way into the middle class by seeking white approval, concomitantly develop strategies to resist the internalization of inferiority.

In research conducted over a hundred years ago, Du Bois set forth the premise that African Americans' history of slavery, oppression, and deprivation produced a collective memory and frame of reference that has significantly influenced the development of their culture.<sup>19</sup> Du Bois also examined the identity confusion experienced by blacks in America, which arose when racism, classism, sexism, and so on forced them to conform to a dominant American identity, sometimes at the expense of their ethnic identity. He highlighted the quandary some blacks experienced when forced to sacrifice their ethnic identities in order to achieve academically and progress through the educational system. This process has been shown to be maladaptive and can lead to stress, isolation, and anxiety due to the constant pressure to choose between conforming to the dominant culture or remaining true to one's own ethnicity.<sup>20</sup> African American students who see a contradiction between their second-class status and their high academic achievement often suffer internal strife and may pay a high psychological price for their academic success. These students also may have difficulty with the third aspect of the Du Boisian "veil," where they struggle with the consequences of seeing and situating themselves outside of what the dominant group describes, defines, and prescribes for them.<sup>21</sup>

Many mental health studies in the early twentieth century concluded that blacks had higher rates of mental illness than whites, reporting that the black participants were considered severely mentally ill while the white participants were described as exhibiting varying degrees of mental illness.<sup>22</sup> These biased conclusions have been discredited by large-scale studies such as the National Institute of Mental Health's National Comorbidity Study, the largest study of mental illness ever conducted in the United States; however, none of this research has presented a holistic picture of African American mental health.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, these

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18. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899; repr. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970).

19. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (1903; repr. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

20. For example, see Veronica Navarrete and Sharon Rae Jenkins, "Cultural Homelessness, Multiminority Status, Ethnic Identity Development, and Self Esteem," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 35, no. 6 (2011): 791–804.

21. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

22. Dorothy Roberts, *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-create Race in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: The New Press, 2011).

23. Ronald C. Kessler et al., "Lifetime and 12-Month Prevalence of DSM-III-R Psychiatric Disorders in the United States," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 51, no. 1 (1994): 8–19; and Lee N. Robins and Darrel A. Regier, eds., *Psychiatric Disorders in America: The Epidemiologic Catchment Area Study* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

studies do address the fact that, although African Americans are disproportionately exposed to known risk factors for physical and mental illness, they do not have higher rates of suicide or mental illness than whites. Still, it should be noted that among high-achieving, high-socioeconomic status blacks, the stress and anxiety associated with racism routinely results in a high level of stress-related illnesses.<sup>24</sup>

Sherman James studied the coping strategies of African Americans with prolonged exposure to social stresses related to racism and discrimination, and he developed the construct of John Henryism to define their experiences.<sup>25</sup> John Henryism is a pattern of behavior named for the folklore character John Henry, who epitomized the brutal effects of hard labor. Henry, an African American laborer, was tasked with hammering a steel drill into rock in order to make holes for explosives; his prowess as a steel-driver was measured in a race against a mechanical steam drill. Henry won the contest, then immediately collapsed and died. Various descriptions of John Henryism range from a disorder, disposition, personality trait, or perfectionism, to a coping strategy often adopted by high-achieving African Americans, who may unconsciously (and increasingly consciously) sacrifice their personal relationships and health to pursue their goals with a tenacity that can be medically and mentally deleterious.<sup>26</sup> In a recent study that followed 489 African American young people living in rural Georgia for over fifteen years, Gene Brody and colleagues documented that a subgroup of children in their study, despite being identified as resilient, suffered from tremendous internal pressure to succeed. For example, they felt pressure to be the first in their family to graduate from college or to be employed in a white-collar job.<sup>27</sup> They also endured daily blatant racism and discrimination. These pressures often caused the students to compromise on their sleep, exercise, and other aspects of self-care, which resulted in the wear and tear associated with disproportionately high rates of health problems, including obesity and high blood pressure. The high achievers also produced more stress hormones

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24. Gary G. Bennett et al., "Stress, Coping, and Health Outcomes Among African-Americans: A Review of the John Henryism Hypothesis," *Psychology and Health* 19, no. 3 (2004): 369–383.

25. John Henryism is a construct characterized by three major themes: efficacious mental and physical vigor, a strong commitment to hard work, and a single-minded determination to succeed. John Henryism has been used to explain poor physical health outcomes among individuals who must respond to chronic strains that overwhelm their coping skills. Blood pressure is the physical health outcome most often studied, and low socioeconomic status is most often used to capture chronic strains. Sherman A. James, "John Henryism and the Health of African-Americans," *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 18, no. 2 (1994): 163–182.

26. Harold W. Neighbors, Darrell L. Hudson, and Kai McKeever Bullard, "The Challenge of Understanding the Mental Health of African Americans: The Risks and Rewards of Segregation, Support, and John Henryism," in *Handbook of Race and Development in Mental Health*, ed. Edward C. Chang and Christina A. Downey (New York: Springer, 2012), 45–66; and Melissa R. Sanders and Ramaswami Mahalingam, "Social Dominance Orientation and John Henryism at the Intersection of Race and Class," *Political Psychology* 33, no. 4 (2012): 553–573.

27. Gene H. Brody et al., "Perceived Discrimination and the Adjustment of African American Youths: A Five-Year Longitudinal Analysis with Contextual Moderation Effects," *Child Development* 77, no. 5 (2006): 1170–1189.



(including cortisol, adrenaline, and noradrenaline) than the study participants who were not identified as resilient.

These studies and others have found that active ways of coping, such as confronting those who make racist remarks, alleviate the stress of racially motivated incidents more than being passive.<sup>28</sup> Other strategies include sharing experiences with same-race colleagues or friends,<sup>29</sup> seeking community support, feeling a sense of responsibility to serve the community, adhering to a religious or spiritual practice or ideology,<sup>30</sup> and having a critical understanding of how race and racism operate in American society, including in educational contexts.<sup>31</sup> Having a racial identity that strongly identifies with the collective black experience has been shown to buffer the stress and anxiety associated with racial discrimination and to help prevent racial stereotyping that can bring about a negative self-concept or poor self-esteem.<sup>32</sup> The assessment of African Americans' mental health is often fueled by differential interpretations of symptoms that arise from sociocultural factors such as prejudice and stereotyping.<sup>33</sup> Oseela Thomas and colleagues argue that many studies on black mental health do not emphasize the need to understand the cultural buffers and strengths African Americans develop to protect themselves from negative mental health outcomes.<sup>34</sup> Grit is presented as a racially neutral construct that does not impact all demographics equally. The emotional and psychological trauma that African Americans experience in navigating white spaces and their structural foundations is underacknowledged in grit research. There is little attribution of "grit" as an impact on structures that foster persistent insecurity and a sense of unworthiness in racialized bodies. Moreover, grit framings have yet to respond to racial stereotypes, insults, and assaults that are commonplace in this racially stratified society, which can hamper black students' options for working strenuously toward challenges and maintaining effort despite adversity. However, CRT takes into account the nuances of racism and racialized experiences through

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28. Passive coping strategies include avoidance, withdrawal, and silence. See T. Covic, B. Adamson, and M. Hough, "The Impact of Passive Coping on Rheumatoid Arthritis Pain," *Rheumatology* 39, no. 9 (2000): 1027–1030.

29. Tawanda M. Greer, "Coping Strategies as Moderators of the Relation Between Individual Race-Related Stress and Mental Health Symptoms for African American Women," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2011): 215–226.

30. V. L. Shavers, A. Bakos, and V. B. Sheppard, "Race, Ethnicity, and Pain Among the US Adult Population," *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 21, no. 1 (2010): 177–220.

31. Tamara L. Brown et al., "Dispositional Versus Situational Coping: Are the Coping Strategies African Americans Use Different for General Versus Racism-Related Stressors?," *Journal of Black Psychology* 37, no. 3 (2011): 311–335.

32. E. A. Pascoe and L. Smart Richman, "Perceived Discrimination and Health: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Psychological Bulletin* 135, no. 4 (2009): 531–554.

33. Neighbors, Hudson, and Bullard, "Understanding the Mental Health of African Americans."

34. Oseela N. Thomas et al., "Promoting Academic Achievement: The Role of Racial Identity in Buffering Perceptions of Teacher Discrimination on Academic Achievement Among African American and Caribbean Black Adolescents," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 101, no. 2 (2009): 420–31.

its educational tenet that calls for “a commitment to social justice.” Although this idea is underdeveloped in current CRT research, the navigation of white spaces includes another component, one that calls for developing a space that directly addresses the healing of those who have experienced trauma. Because the commitment to justice must extend beyond the immediate trauma, a holistic account of the justice condition must include a commitment to healing those who have experienced the infraction. CRT, while getting us closer to these conditions, in theory, must still push itself to develop a grounded analysis of what this healing looks like.

#### CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

Critical race theorists recognize that racism and discrimination adversely affect the mental health of black students and faculty by diminishing their academic self-concept, confidence, and mental efficacy. Brought to the forefront by William Smith and his colleagues, this line of research introduces the concept of racial battle fatigue as a theoretical framework for examining the response to trauma and the experience of stress symptoms often manifested as anger, escapism, withdrawal, frustration, and avoidance.<sup>35</sup> These stressors can occur at the macro level (society, institution, neighborhood) and on an interpersonal level (with an individual, in a classroom). The concept of racial battle fatigue maintains that race-related stressors, such as exposure to racism and discrimination on campuses and the time and energy African American students expend to battle these stereotypes, can lead to detrimental psychological and physiological stress.<sup>36</sup>

Recent work in sociology and public health has sparked a growing interest in the distinct role racism plays in black people’s mental health.<sup>37</sup> Public health researchers have concluded that racial and ethnic discrimination is a psychosocial stressor that can adversely affect mental health.<sup>38</sup> Thus, we agree with Tony

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35. Smith, “Black Faculty Coping with Racial Battle Fatigue”; and William A. Smith, Tara J. Yosso, and Daniel G. Solórzano, “Challenging Racial Battle Fatigue on Historically White Campuses: A Critical Race Examination of Race-Related Stress,” in *Faculty of Color Teaching in Predominantly White Colleges and Universities*, ed. Christine A. Stanley (Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing, 2006), 299–327.

36. Smith, “Black Faculty Coping with Racial Battle Fatigue”; and Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano, “Challenging Racial Battle Fatigue on Historically White Campuses.”

37. For example, sociologist Tony Brown has long been an advocate of using CRT to investigate and explain the mental and psychological health consequences that racism and racial discrimination have for black students and faculty. Tony N. Brown, “Critical Race Theory Speaks to the Sociology of Mental Health: Mental Health Problems Produced by Racial Stratification,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* (2003): 292–301; and Tony N. Brown, “Race, Racism, and Mental Health: Elaboration of Critical Race Theory’s Contribution to the Sociology of Mental Health,” *Contemporary Justice Review* 11, no. 1 (2008): 53–62. Additionally, Tyrone Forman has examined how the racial organization of the workplace, such as the tendency for some jobs to be assigned to certain racial groups, can influence the psychological well-being of African Americans. Tyrone A. Forman, “The Social Psychological Costs of Racial Segmentation in the Workplace: A Study of African Americans’ Well-Being,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 44, no. 3 (2003): 332–352.

38. Carol D. Ryff, Corey L. Keyes, and Diane L. Hughes, “Status Inequalities, Perceived Discrimination, and Eudaimonic Well-Being: Do the Challenges of Minority Life Hone Purpose and Growth?,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* (2003): 275–291.

Brown that the consequences of racial discrimination cannot be fully mitigated by well-established coping strategies, and that only the eradication of racism will alleviate race-related stress for African Americans and other historically racialized populations.<sup>39</sup>

Since racially discriminatory experiences are multidimensional in nature, CRT's multidimensional framework can help in identifying and highlighting the relationship between race and mental health. For example, the impact that racial stratification has on health outcomes could be further elucidated by using the select concepts and transdisciplinary methodologies provided by CRT.<sup>40</sup> Some in the public health community have adopted the concepts of CRT to investigate structural racism in health care with the goal of using their findings to develop a health care praxis that expands community-based participatory research and thus results in the development of practices that benefit communities.<sup>41</sup> The work of these scholars has influenced our call to use CRT to address the mental and psychological stress and dysfunction that racism exacerbates in African American college students when they experience heightened levels of racial stereotyping, discrimination, and other forms of bias.<sup>42</sup>

#### NEW BEGINNINGS: CRT'S INVESTIGATION OF MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

Many critical race scholars acknowledge that African Americans and other historically marginalized students endure often subtle but constant forms of discrimination and bias.<sup>43</sup> Counternarratives of everyday experiences at traditionally white institutions often expose these institutions' denial that covert bias exists on their campuses. Marginalized students endure a plethora of racial assaults, which

39. Brown, "Critical Race Theory Speaks to the Sociology of Mental Health."

40. Chandra L. Ford and O. Collins Airhihenbuwa, "The Public Health Critical Race Methodology: Praxis for Antiracism Research," *Social Science and Medicine* 71, no. 8 (2010): 1390–1398.

41. W. Michael Byrd and Linda A. Clayton, *An American Health Dilemma: Race, Medicine, and Health Care in the United States, 1900–2000* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Derek M. Griffith et al., "Dismantling Institutional Racism: Theory and Action," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 39, nos. 3–4 (2007): 381–392; Camara Phyllis Jones et al., "Using 'Socially Assigned Race' to Probe White Advantages in Health Status," *Ethnic Disparities* 18, no. 4 (2008): 496–504; and Amy J. Schulz and Leith Mullings, *Gender, Race, Class, and Health: Intersectional Approaches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

42. James, "John Henryism and the Health of African Americans"; and Derrick D. Matthews et al., "Racial Discrimination and Depressive Symptoms Among African-American Men: The Mediating and Moderating Roles of Masculine Self-Reliance and John Henryism," *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* 14, no. 1 (2013): 35–46.

43. Dorinda J. Carter Andrews and Franklin Tuitt, "Racism as the Environmental Hazard in Educational Spaces: An Overview and Introduction," in *Contesting the Myth of a "Post Racial" Era: The Continued Significance of Race in US Education*, ed. Carter Andrews and Tuitt (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 1–12; Richard H. Milner, "Analyzing Poverty, Learning, and Teaching Through a Critical Race Theory Lens," *Review of Research in Education* 37, no. 1 (2013): 1–53; and Tara Yosso, William Smith, Miguel Ceja, and Daniel Solórzano, "Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate for Latina/o Undergraduates," *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 4 (2009): 659–691.

contribute to mental fatigue and psychological distress. While CRT has made a formidable effort to address racial battle fatigue in the racialized experiences of African American faculty and students, there is a desperate need for critical race scholars to include mental health when examining the life experiences and academic and social outcomes of black students as well as those from other marginalized groups. The survivors of racial battle fatigue tell their stories, detailing the stress and strain they have experienced, and explain how they have often assumed that resilience, perseverance, and grit are the most tangible solutions.

Just as Fanon argued more than fifty years ago,<sup>44</sup> recent research challenges the premises and assumptions of Western psychology, situating it as an outgrowth of a cultural pathology reflecting white supremacy. Derek Summerfield, a prominent psychiatrist who works with victims of torture, has powerfully cautioned against perpetuating colonial behaviors and ideologies as pathways for curing and healing the non-Western mind, claiming that to do so would have pathological effects on the identities of both the colonized and the colonizer.<sup>45</sup> The notion that black people have a “natural” resistance to pain and an “inherent” mental toughness has antecedents that are deeply rooted in racist colonial slave ideology. This interpretation of blackness defines and confines it in a way that imposes the oppression and the values of brutality and inhumanity that upheld slavery. Slave owners (both historically and today in the form of correctional facilities) and doctors often withhold pain medications or medical care due to the fallacy that blacks are mentally and physically hardy.<sup>46</sup> As educational researchers embrace identities that encompass resilience, grit, and perseverance, we should ask ourselves and others to what degree are these traits actually healthy and nurturing. This inquiry should continue with the following questions: Should we ask historically marginalized students to become grittier and more resilient? Or should our fight be directed toward achieving greater racial justice so that black students do not have to compromise their mental and physical well-being by being resilient, where the cumulative burden of lifetime adversities actually predicts mental health symptoms?<sup>47</sup>

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44. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

45. Derek Summerfield, “Childhood, War, Refugeedom, and ‘Trauma’: Three Core Questions for Mental Health Professionals,” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 37, no. 3 (2000): 417–433.

46. Roberts, *Fatal Invention*, 98. Here, Roberts details a historical, deeply ingrained legacy of inhumane treatment of blacks in medicine dating back to the slave trade: “Enslaved Africans were treated by a separate and awful so-called ‘slave health subsystem’ that either neglected their health, treated them so as to benefit their masters, or subjected them to barbaric medical experimentation. The medical profession was intimately involved in perpetuating slavery” (98). Roberts interviews Michael Byrd and Linda Clayton, authors of *An American Health Dilemma*, on this topic, and Byrd emphasizes the importance of understanding the slave health subsystem to understanding the present-day American health system with regard to the misdiagnosis and ill-treatment of African Americans.

47. A group of researchers interviewed 500 low-income African Americans and Hispanics about their life experiences and screened them for depression and other mental health disorders. The study found a direct correlation between mental health disorders and high-level exposure to five factors, the first of which is experiences of discrimination due to racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual orientation. See Hector

In his thought-provoking article “The Case for Reparations,” Ta-Nehisi Coates argues that some members of the African American community believe these same cultural pathologies explain the poverty and disadvantage plaguing so many black lives, but also ardently believe that these outcomes can be altered through “individual grit and exceptionally good behavior.” He argues further that this strategy is not only wrong, but it is dangerous: “The kind of trenchant racism to which black people have persistently been subjected can never be defeated by making its victims more respectable. The essence of American racism is disrespect. And in the wake of the grim numbers, we see the grim inheritance.”<sup>48</sup> Coates claims that grit ignores the brutality that white slaveholders and politicians (often synonymous) inflicted on black individuals and families, and further states that the devastation surely did not end with the end of slavery.

Our students agree with Coates that relying on grit is a problematic solution. For example, in answering the question of why so few black males matriculated through college, one high-achieving black male college student responded, painfully,

We are tough! We are hard, or whatever! But how tough do we have to be just to be seen as human? Kunta Kinte [the Gambian-born American slave in Alex Haley's novel *Roots*] was strong, the strongest man on the plantation but he [the slave master] beat him down to submission. This is what happens to us [black men] all the time. Now they call us failures, but we were once Kunta Kintes and this society just broke us down.

The student admitted that he too has been broken down and was self-medicating with his roommate's prescription antidepressants. As victims of verbal abuse, physical assaults by police officers, and racial hate crimes, this racialized and gendered group is especially vulnerable to mental health issues. Coupled with traditional notions of black masculinity that subscribe to “cool pose,” verbal or physical aggression, and risky pleasures, this student's response indicates how close he is to being marginalized.<sup>49</sup> While his attributes can be considered negative, they do not necessarily represent the underlying problem, which is the negative impact on black male college students of being stereotyped and judged only in terms of negative attributes.

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F. Myers et al., “Cumulative Burden of Lifetime Adversities: Trauma and Mental Health in Low-SES African Americans and Latino/as,” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 7, no. 3 (2015): 243–251.

48. Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *Atlantic* 313, no. 5 (2014): 54–71.

49. For example, suicide rates for African American males are increasing and have been for the past fifty years. Research conducted by Earlise Ward and Jared Collins reveals that during the past fifty years, suicide rates have increased by nearly 30 percent among African American males. Risk factors for black males can look different than traditional markers of mental health concerns, particularly because racial oppression is a factor in exacerbating emotional trauma in black males. Earlise C. Ward and Jared Collins, “Depression in African American Males,” *African American Research Perspectives* 11 (2010): 6–21. See also Frank Harris III, Robert T. Palmer, and Laura E. Struve, “‘Cool Posing’ on Campus: A Qualitative Study of Masculinities and Gender Expression Among Black Men at Private Research Institutions,” *Journal of Negro Education* 80, no. 1 (2011): 47–62.

COUNTERNARRATIVES IN ACTION: THE REALITY OF  
BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS AND THEIR MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

Our motivation to understand mental health more fully from a CRT perspective is ironically inspired in part by the narratives of high-achieving black college students in the STEM fields. Through the following two counternarratives, we provide a window onto the detrimental psychosocial effects of racism in two contexts. One occurs as part of a research project, while the other centers on an experience at an academic conference for people of color and women in the biomedical sciences.

COUNTERNARRATIVE I, BY EBONY MCGEE

While investigating black students' experiences via the intersections of their racial and STEM identities, I have discovered that they manage various forms of racial abuse in ways that do not appear to interfere with high academic achievement and traditional forms of academic success. Throughout the course of my research, I have developed various interview protocols to use with high-achieving black students from as young as 14 to those in their early 40s. While conducting interviews earlier in my career, the answer to a particular question would occasionally expose a student's fragile state of mental health, revealing the devastation and even despair they felt as a result of being berated, negatively stereotyped, ridiculed, and racially assaulted by a peer, teacher, employer, stranger, or police officer, and by the rules of a society that often strangles the academic and life opportunities of young blacks.

During one particular interview, I realized that many of these high-achieving, seemingly resilient black students were suffering from chronic or acute forms of stress, most often due to structural and everyday racism.<sup>50</sup> This revelation came in the spring of 2010, when I interviewed Janet,<sup>51</sup> an attractive, high-achieving biochemistry junior, who at the time of the interview was attending a historically black college — not your typical setting for unearthing racial and gender discrimination. Janet was describing a summer engineering internship where she had felt trapped in a pool of covertly sanitized but nevertheless nasty racialized and sexist practices. For example, she said that a principal investigator (PI) frequently patted her on the head when she made a "minor accomplishment," that she was the designated person to make coffee runs, and that she was always assigned the lab

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50. This counternarrative came from my research introducing the construct of fragile and robust mathematical identities for the purpose of exploring the experiences that have influenced the mathematical and racial identities of high-achieving black college students in mathematics and engineering. These students maintained high levels of academic achievement in these fields while enduring marginalization, stereotyping, and other forms of racialization. Their fragile mathematical identities were manifested in the way they were motivated to achieve in order to prove false the negative expectations of others. Their robust mathematical identities were characterized by an evolving sense of self-efficacy and discovery, a growing affinity and passion for mathematics, and a desire to be a mathematically inspiring role model. Ebony O. McGee, "Robust and Fragile Mathematics Identities: A Framework for Exploring Racialized Experiences and High Achievement among Black College Students," *Journal of Research in Mathematics Education* (forthcoming).

51. I have used a pseudonym here to protect the student's confidentiality.

cleanup and other menial tasks. After two weeks of bearing this behavior and hoping it would change, Janet asked the lab manager for more substantive duties. He replied, "Well, coming from a third-tier college, and a black one for that matter, we realize you are woefully unprepared. However, being the first black girl in the lab should be seen as a major accomplishment." The PI negatively defined and stereotyped Janet's race and gender. Almost forty years ago, Shirley Malcom, Paula Hall, and Janet Brown called for a change of academic culture regarding gender and race and noted the "double bind" of sexism and racism for women of color (students and faculty) in STEM fields.<sup>52</sup> Issues related to intersectionality have often led to STEM attrition at all levels of the pipeline, and these issues further explain the exponential increase in discrimination experienced by persons fighting minoritized status in more than one area of their lives.

After this incident, Janet contacted the only person she believed understood how to contest racism and sexism — her advisor, a black female engineering professor — to explain the situation and ask for guidance. She recalled her professor's response word for word:

I don't care if they ask you to act like a monkey or bark like a dog. [The company where Janet had the internship] is the best biomedical company in [the area]. I wrote a letter of recommendation on your behalf and my reputation is on the line, so you are going to just grin and bear it. Try to learn something that could help you in your future. Or use this experience as a resume builder, but don't you dare do anything to rock the boat.

So, for the next six weeks, Janet suffered relentless forms of discrimination, bias, and racism. The closer she got to the office each day, the more her hands would tremble, impairing her driving. Janet concluded that her trembling was a physical symptom of the stress she was anticipating. I witnessed Janet's emotion and pain as she relived this horrid experience. And alas, when I asked, "How did this entire experience make you feel and how did you cope with this ordeal?" Janet replied, "I actually considered killing myself." Then she went on to describe in great detail how she contemplated hanging herself in a bathroom shower. Only a real fear of not executing her suicide properly and thoughts of her mother's anguish kept her from attempting to kill herself.

A flurry of questions and emotions rushed through my mind, with one insistent question coming to the forefront: "Why do I feel so unprepared to help this young woman?" From a CRT perspective as well as my own personal experience, I was well aware that racism can harm someone's mental health; however, I felt incapable of handling Janet's trauma. Previous students I interviewed had displayed strong emotions as they discussed their experiences: some cried, shouted, shivered, and even curled up in pain when telling their stories. Might they also have contemplated suicide? Was the pain and suffering they were still experiencing a result of racial battle fatigue? If so, could additional processes be at play? Black

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52. Shirley M. Malcom, Paula Quick Hall, and Janet Welsh Brown, *The Double Bind: The Price of Being a Minority Woman in Science* (Washington, DC: American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1976).

feminism, which unpacks the societal position (that is, the ways in which people are categorized in a Western hierarchical society) of African American women, unhesitatingly portrays black women as self-defined, self-reliant individuals.<sup>53</sup> But what happens when these self-defined, self-reliant black women either ignore or are complicit in the marginalization of other (read: more subordinate) black women? While considering these questions, I walked my fragile young participant over to the counseling center, canceled the rest of my interviews for that day, and stayed with her late into the evening. Janet told me that her friends or teachers would never have understood the agony she suffered. As a result of living with untreated depression (verified later by medical professionals), she had developed a public mask that protected her true feelings and emotions. Janet also explained that "No one ever asked about my feelings, so there was no cause for me to express them." That day Janet had the privilege of talking with an African American male psychologist who understood that high-achieving black college students can feel incredible pressure to succeed.<sup>54</sup> He also recognized that those who are racially marginalized have additional stress caused by their deficit position in society. Janet was in awe of her advisor, a black female full professor in the biomedical field, who ultimately was insensitive to Janet's racially oppressive summer internship environment and continued to send her messages of the need for toughness and grit. Since that interview, Janet has learned healthy strategies for coping and managing her feelings.

#### COUNTERNARRATIVE 2, BY DAVID STOVALL

My experience took place in a context starkly different from the traditional research environment: it was at a conference for people of color and women in the biomedical sciences. In a field that still leans toward "objective" science, I was kind of a fish out of water as a keynote presenter on race and the biomedical sciences. The full lecture hall was occupied primarily by people of color, largely African American, Latino/a, and Southeast Asian students. Many of the conference participants were at different stages in their graduate studies.

Interestingly, my talk on the resurgence of biological race in the pharmaceutical industry was greeted with nods of approval. Even the discussion of Henrietta Lacks was well-received by the audience, as some were already familiar with her story while others were flabbergasted that the Lacks family never received any compensation for her foundational contribution to cancer research. Lacks, an African American female whose cervical cancer led to her death in 1951, is arguably one of the most important persons in medical and scientific research. During radium treatments that Lacks received for her cancer, doctors took samples of the healthy portion of her cervix, as well as the cancerous portion, without her

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53. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

54. Many students are hampered by college counseling centers that do not have any or enough black counselors. See Matthew S. Boone et al., "Let's Talk: Getting Out of the Counseling Center to Serve Hard to Reach Students," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 39, no. 4 (2011): 194–205.



permission. Amazingly, Lacks's cancer cells survived and replicated themselves every twenty-four hours. These cells, which became famously known as HeLa cells, have aided research into cures and treatments for such diseases as polio, acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), and some forms of cancer. Unfortunately, Lacks still has not received the proper acknowledgment for her contribution to medical research. Her descendants have never received any compensation or royalties and did not even know that the cells existed until decades after her death.<sup>55</sup>

The talk ended with strategies faculty members can use to survive racial oppression in higher education. I couched this discussion in the concept of the "only," as people of color are often the only persons of their race/ethnicity in their classes as graduate students or in their departments when they join a faculty. My comments got a good laugh, but I also reminded the group how important it is to find like-minded people in your particular discipline. As a professor once reminded me, "You will need those like you to affirm your sanity." The majority of the audience seemed to agree.

Directly after the talk, a group of students approached me and thanked me for the frank discussion of the ways race permeates their current university environments and may permeate their soon-to-be professional lives. They expressed the desire to keep in touch and asked for names of other people they could contact for more information. The last conversation I had with a student has stayed with me, as it revealed the need to pay attention to mental health concerns.

This last student, an African American female, thanked me for the presentation and then shared her story of extreme isolation. She began to talk about her experience being the "only" for the majority of her time in her program. As we spoke, she kept repeating, "It doesn't matter what you do — it doesn't matter, they just keep on doing it." When I asked her if anybody at her school had offered her support for her work, she returned a blank stare. I also tried to talk about the importance of creating community as a person of color in a hostile environment, but she shook her head, smiled, and said, "No — it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter." Although I did not probe more deeply into the issues she was facing, her stark response remained with me as one example of a common experience that is rarely brought to the fore.

The young woman's response hit me even harder when the students decided to schedule a discussion on creating community after my keynote address. I agreed to attend, as I hoped to interact with the woman in question, but she unfortunately decided not to come. Her response to my suggestions and other comments have remained with me ever since.

This is by no means an attempt to psychoanalyze or pathologize the woman I was talking with, but it did make me wonder how many people have similar experiences that go unnoticed. I remain concerned for the young woman's mental, physical, and spiritual well-being, and about those who share her feelings.

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55. Rebecca Skloot and Bahni Turpin, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (New York: Crown, 2010).

### A CALL FOR USING CRT IN STUDYING THE MENTAL HEALTH OF BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS

This article, particularly our use of black college students' narratives, represents our pragmatic call for the importance of attending to the mental health needs of students of color. Because these students are victims of stereotyping, racism, traumatizing practices, and discriminatory policies and ideologies, their mental health needs should be of the utmost importance to scholars who study the systemic functions and consequences of racism and white supremacy at the individual and collective level. Those who are struggling with the multiple burdens associated with being a black student must be protected against daily discrimination. As there is increased awareness that racial insults, assaults, and discrimination can lead to or complicate mental suffering and humiliation, we aim to move beyond that acknowledgment to devise and execute a plan of action. In contrast to research that concludes with messages of the need for grit and a tougher mental attitude, a more holistic perspective focuses on gaining a thorough understanding of the psychological, emotional, and mental harm these students endure.

We argue against the idea that those who have been historically marginalized merely need to get tough and endure the oppression and subordination. We believe that CRT provides an opportunity to understand and implement racially appropriate healing systems for black college students and other groups that are chronically underserved and understudied (for example, historically marginalized racial groups, international students of color, LGBTQ students, first-generation students, returning military students, and second-career students). In our exploration of the clinically and racially relevant factors that affect black college students' mental health outcomes, we have addressed some questions that could be explored when CRT is applied to postcolonial theory, public health, the sociology of race, psychology, and philosophy. One key question is this: What collaborative and multidisciplinary perspectives on black college students' mental health can we gain by blending theories across various disciplines in order to help fashion higher education institutions that have a deep and meaningful sense of community? Furthermore, what current examples of social and mental health support show concrete results for black students? Despite state and federal governments' disinvestment in historically black colleges and universities over the last twenty years, these institutions should be given further consideration as a potential model for student support, as many of them have recognized that students' mental and social health is key to their ability to graduate and live a productive life beyond the university.

An examination of treatment modalities using CRT, including group treatment practices, may help provide more holistic solutions to pervasive problems in black college student communities. CRT leads investigations into certain moderators for increased mental health, including the role of social support, strong ethnic identity, and personality variables. For example, Krysia Mossakowski found that among people confronted with discrimination, those with a higher level of ethnic

or racial identification experienced lower levels of depression.<sup>56</sup> Borrowing from the work of Amanda Lewis and Antwi Akom,<sup>57</sup> we argue for the need to understand the experiences of black and brown students who navigate, negotiate, resist, accommodate, and transform themselves as racial beings, and the impact that this transformation has on their mental health. The different ways black female and male college students cope with, adapt to, and heal from race-related stress deserve additional research attention.

Further exploration is also needed on ecological factors such as the racial environment and the lack of resources associated with demanding coping responses that result in racial battle fatigue. The research suggestions we offer here represents a minute sampling of the questions that could be developed by CRT scholars. We suggest the construction of research questions that are substantively richer, more nuanced, and better contextualized to center on race, so that CRT will be positioned to make meaningful contributions to mental health research and praxis.

However, when trying to convince policymakers and educators of the need to fully understand the mental health issues these students face, we have encountered a general lack of empathy, and they often shift blame to the students and their families.<sup>58</sup> Thus, the life experiences of African American college students often are marginalized, minimized, or ignored. We argue that researchers who study race and racism — CRT scholars, in particular — should also address mental health and wellness as they fight for political, economic, educational, and social change. In light of these realities, we call on universities to create mechanisms that will allow black students to temporarily remove their racial battle armor and, further, to pledge to provide protected spaces where these students can engage in collective and individual healing.

#### CONCLUSION: BEYOND COPING ... THE NEED FOR HEALING

Constructs like grit and perseverance demonstrate how students of color often cope with marginalization. The ability to embrace these concepts can allow students to function academically within a sea of racist practices, policies, and ideologies but not without psychological turmoil. Thus, we are encouraged by

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56. Krysia N. Mossakowski, "Coping with Perceived Discrimination: Does Ethnic Identity Protect Mental Health?," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 44, no. 3 (2003): 318–331.

57. Amanda E. Lewis, *Race in the Schoolyard: Negotiating the Color Line in Classrooms and Communities* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003); and A. A. Akom, "Black Metropolis and Mental Life: Beyond the 'Burden of "Acting White"' Toward a Third Wave of Critical Racial Studies," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2008): 247–265.

58. See, for example, Jennifer N. Gutsell and Michael Inzlicht, "Empathy Constrained: Prejudice Predicts Reduced Mental Simulation of Actions During Observation of Outgroups," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 46, no. 5 (2010): 841–845; Lisa Wade, "The Racial Empathy Gap," *Sociological Images* (blog), August 27, 2013, <http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2013/08/27/the-racial-empathy-gap/>; and Jason Silverstein, "I Don't Feel Your Pain: A Failure of Empathy Perpetuates Racial Disparities," *Slate*, June 27, 2013, [http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/science/2013/06/racial\\_empathy\\_gap\\_people\\_don\\_t\\_perceive\\_pain\\_in\\_other\\_races.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2013/06/racial_empathy_gap_people_don_t_perceive_pain_in_other_races.html).

Shawn Ginwright's work in this arena, which presents healing as the goal for optimal well-being.<sup>59</sup>

Ginwright argues for radical healing, or healing as a process for restoring the health and well-being of students who have been exposed to chronic poverty, racism, and violence. His definition of healing includes developing a critical consciousness of social oppression, which gives one the ability to counter hopelessness and nihilism and to aid in the preparation required for confronting racism and similar forms of oppression.<sup>60</sup> We believe that Ginwright's concept of radical healing should be at the center of critical race theorists' investigations of black college students' mental health issues in order to help protect their self-concept and healthy development. The radical healing process should also include community organizations, which provide important opportunities for college students to connect with surrounding neighborhoods and engage in civic activities that address community problems.<sup>61</sup> Being connected to the larger community can give students a greater sense of purpose, provide them with opportunities to forge important relationships, and help them develop the skills to bring about social change. Radical healing could give black college students better control over the mental health challenges that result from racial oppression by fostering hope and a greater sense of purpose and agency, which are essential traits required for building and protecting mental health. Lastly, the process of healing requires an authentic, tactile connection to these students' lives, as well as a better understanding of the practices of healing, if it is to improve the praxis of teaching and learning.

The concepts proposed in this article should only be considered a precursor to future research and praxis. Due to the trauma that many black college students experience, our foray into this realm of study should include (but not be limited to) the practices used by mental health professionals, community organizers, and holistic health centers. The process of healing from racial battle fatigue and institutional racism requires significant internal commitment and external support. Instead of relying on traditional notions of human will and resilience, our work needs to be centered on strategies that prevent burnout and that reject the adoption of traditional ways of coping. Both authors of this article are familiar with teacher burnout, and we contend that more attention should be given to the burnout problem among individuals currently working in student support services and academic advising.

An approach similar to Kerry Ann Rockquemore's faculty diversity program could be implemented with students, faculty, and staff on college campuses in

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59. Shawn A. Ginwright, *Black Youth Rising: Activism and Radical Healing in Urban America* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010).

60. *Ibid.*, 148.

61. Shawn A. Ginwright, "Black Youth Activism and the Role of Critical Social Capital in Black Community Organizations," *American Behavioral Scientist* 51, no. 3 (2007): 403–418.

order to address the intersectionality of race and mental fatigue.<sup>62</sup> Her program, which seeks to assist faculty with the process of attaining tenure without compromising their integrity, could serve as a model for collective efforts to engage in radical healing. Through its inclusion of circles led by a trained facilitator, Rockquemore's approach allows participants to share their struggles and thus acknowledges that their experiences are not isolated incidents. This approach could be adjusted to meet the needs specific to college students; for example, small groups of students could meet to engage in practices that, although they may appear mundane, are actually critical to long-term health. The social nature of these gatherings could help group members open up, as they would offer a less stressful environment in which to discuss specific concerns. Beyond assigning mentors to facilitate their academic productivity, a holistic approach would include practices that support faculty well-being. Those in oppressive situations should seek such support aggressively.

Stating that the educational system in the United States is rooted in a history of racial bias and racialized practices is nothing new. However, it is important to remember that racial inequities are structured to restrict black students' academic opportunities and continue to devalue their intellect. And, most important, pursuing higher education should not make black college students sick. Although this article showcases the negative impact racism has on black college students' mental health, we consider our contribution only as an entry point for further investigation of these issues through the lens of CRT. Black college students are brilliant, talented, and creative, and they dream as big as other students. The complicated path these students must travel to achieve their dreams is centrally challenged by bias and racism. The fact that African American college students are done immeasurable harm by being perceived as less capable than whites, and by striving to achieve while being assaulted by stereotypes of intellectual and social inferiority, makes their mental health one of the most urgent concerns in education today.

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62. For information about Rockquemore's program, see [www.facultydiversity.org](http://www.facultydiversity.org).