

How Trump Trauma Is Resurrecting the Jim Crow Era

An interview with Theopia Jackson, head of clinical psychology at Saybrook University.



Photo Credit: Sybrook University

While Donald Trump's behavior has inspired an endless amount of speculation about his mental health (or mental illness, depending on who's talking), there has been less discussion about the impact of his presidency on our collective mental states. Even as Trump has seemed to wage a sort of psychic war on black and brown communities, America's psychological organizations have largely remained silent about the potential mental consequences of those attacks.

Theopia Jackson, who heads up clinical psychology at Saybrook University in California, has spent more than three decades pushing the psychological field to recognize and address the ways our politics and mental health are intertwined. In late January, the *Association of Black Psychologists*, of which Jackson is president-elect, published an open letter titled "*We Can No Longer Be Silent: Psychological Damage By President Trump.*"

The missive presented a cursory review of recent Trump insults to black and brown populations the world over, from the infamous "*sh*t hole*" remark leveled against an entire continent to the implication that Puerto Rican *hurricane survivors are lazy* for requesting help, and arrived at the only reasonable conclusion.

"Not only do these statements denigrate the humanity of the citizens of these countries," the organization noted, "they are psychological assaults to our sense of wholeness and wellbeing...."

While we fully recognize that President Trump does not have the courage or character to apologize for these inflammatory remarks, which is a behavioral stance similar to a psychopath, our continued silence would be enabling and complicit in the psychological damage historically associated with African dehumanization and destruction."

Having worked in multiple areas of psychology, from private practice to pediatrics to academia, Theopia Jackson is an expert in trauma, how it impacts our lives and how we grapple with its long-term affects. I spoke with her about the trauma Trump creates, how people of color can push back and the role of cognitive dissonance in the last election.

Kali Holloway: Even before the election, during the campaign season, mental health workers and clinicians said they were seeing signs of politics-related trauma in clients. Did you witness how the election season took a toll on people, especially those in vulnerable communities?

► Theopia Jackson: First and foremost, I want to clarify how I understand **trauma, which is the thing that happens to us, not what's wrong with us**. The reality is, every human is exposed to trauma. We're just in various places in terms of how we cope with it, based on a number of different factors, such as accessibility to resources, self-awareness about what's happening, and more. When I think about how trauma played out during the campaign season, I would say many things were being activated in people. Some of [Trump's] languaging reminded people of past trauma events. And of course, many of those folks were members of communities or groups who have already been targeted—LGBT people, particular religious groups, certain races and ethnicities.

I want to say, too, that many communities—in particular communities of color—have always maintained that issues of racism were still happening.

Yet in our more dominant discourse, there was the idea that we were "post-racial" because of the election of President Barack Obama; that we were post all these issues, despite the fact that communities of color, particularly African Americans, along with our Hispanic brothers and sisters, kept saying, No, this still exists.

But we couldn't hear it. I think [Trump's] campaign brought all of that to light. The timing of his campaign came on the heels of recent acknowledgements of police violence in communities of color. And again, people did not want to believe that some of those who are charged with being peacekeepers were actually operating from a racist ideology.

Let me be very clear: this is not true for all law enforcement. But it's definitely true for too many. I think the heightened national and international awareness of police abuse, along with [Trump's] rhetoric actually accelerated and exacerbated people's discomfort. Folks could no longer ignore what was happening or pretend that things were cool.

KH: This makes me think of the discussion I've seen around Trump's gaslighting of Americans. How he says one thing, then says he never said it, even though we just watched him say it five minutes ago and it's on video. That's a sort of collective gaslighting. For me, it's very reminiscent of the gaslighting this country has been doing to folks of color and marginalized communities forever, essentially telling us that issues like racism are a mass delusion of some sort.

So an event like the election of Donald Trump definitively states: *No, this is real. We're not imagining it, or in some dream state. This is very real, and it's part of the fabric of our country.*

► TJ: Absolutely.

KH: Did you personally see election-related trauma among people you were in contact with?

▶ TJ: Absolutely. And it's still going on now. For example, the way it would show up in my practice as a clinical psychologist is that I had many clients, particularly children, who were completely scared. They would share that they were fearful, that they felt like they couldn't leave their homes anymore. Within the black community it's sort of resurrecting the time of Jim Crow....

KH: For a whole new generation, right?

▶ TJ: Exactly. And with the verbiage that [Trump] was putting forth about our immigrant brothers and sisters—I saw people deeply afraid that loved ones could literally disappear one day, and no one would know. I've seen children unable to sleep. Parents completely dysregulated, and overprotective, never wanting to let their children out of their sight. You have folks who are also much more impulsive, in the sense that they are reading everything through a lens of heightened racial tension because of everything that has been stirred up.

There was also a lot of dysregulation within the field. I'm on a number of different professional listservs and it was amazing to see colleagues struggling with meaning-making around this. There were those clearly coming from a social justice stance, who were remembering all the work they'd done for civil rights, being fearful for their clients, and for the future of our country, and trying to articulate those feelings. And then of course, there were colleagues who endorsed or supported Donald Trump's candidacy, and watching the intensity of that discourse was unique. I've been practicing now for 30-plus years. I've gone through several different elections, and this type of debate has not shown up with such intensity within the field before.

I also find it quite striking that post-election, there were a number of different webinars in which my learned colleagues were trying to help parents talk to their children about the outcome of the election. The fact that clinicians felt they had to do that is unique to this campaign, for me at least.

KH: Did you feel there was a learning curve that had to be navigated by the psychological community because we hadn't seen anything quite like this in our lifetimes? Was it extraordinary in terms of the disturbance it created, and the way clinicians had to think about treatment and the trauma people were experiencing?

▶ TJ: In the psychological community, I would like to think there's more room for growth. We have grown in our awareness of the role of psychology in terms of social justice, and interrogating the role of psychology in supporting health and healing from a much more transformative social stance, getting beyond simple symptom reduction to improving people's quality of life.

I would submit that during this particular [presidential] campaign, my colleagues were drawing upon their newly acquired awareness about the global impact of these events on people's psychological health and well-being. There was an intentionality to asking, "How do we help families talk to children about this?" Because we're very clear that it has an impact on people's sense of safety, which of course impacts their mental health and their physical health. I want to applaud my colleagues for doing this. And as I said, the discourse that happened on the listserv is evidence of our increased awareness and knowledge, and a good use of technology. In the past, there may have been events that would have brought this level of dysregulation and critical discourse, but they probably would have been happening in pockets, in relative isolation. But with the use of the internet, it's a much more global, intense conversation, and a critical discourse.

My other theory is that following the election of President Barack Obama, and his reelection, people who were not happy may have felt silenced. There was such profound social acceptance, and a sense of hope, that if you really didn't care for Barack Obama, you may have kept your comments to yourself, or felt dissatisfaction in not knowing where to go with them, or what to do with that. I just want to expand this human experience. It's no surprise to me that the pendulum therefore swung in the complete opposite direction.

I think that with Barack Obama's election, there was **a false sense of hope**. There was this sense that we had somehow become post-racial through something as simple as the election of someone with brown skin. I think we didn't fully collectively appreciate the complexities which many communities of color have been trying to speak to for years.

KH: You were talking about how Trump brought up precise fears that created trauma; for example, in immigrant communities, the fear that a loved one could just disappear one day. That's a precise fear that breeds trauma. But I also wonder if some of the trauma came from simply recognizing what Trump's election said about this country. Trump is just the symptom of a larger problem.

TJ: Correct.

KH: His election was the country basically saying to women, We don't care about sexual assault, or the fact that we're putting an admitted 'pussy grabber' in office; we are down with voting for a president whose only real campaign promise was to make life harder for black folks and other people of color.

I wonder if some of this trauma comes from recognizing this overt hatred, from the top down, that has been rubber-stamped by 63 million people.

► TJ: I really appreciate that question, and it's very complex. First of all, I want to critically examine what we mean by "63 million people endorsed Trump." I'm not sure 63 million people supported Trump. I'm not clear on how many of those people were simply not voting for Hillary. Because again, history tells us that people's motivation for voting comes from several different places. It's not always about the full endorsement of the candidate

they're going for. It could be such deep dis-ease with the other choice. And to be clear, many communities of color have been voting like that for years. Whoever is the least racist person up for an office may drive the decision, right?

KH: Right.

► TJ: I just want to say that. And I want to be critical—I don't want to lump 63 million of my fellow Americans as all being for Trump. I also want to state that many of them may have been misled and thought they were voting for something else. Many may not have realized, and may not realize even now, that Trump really was not looking out for them.

Late last year the American Psychological Association put out a study that shows that for the first time in many years, Americans are worried about the psychological and emotional health of America; even more so than money. I believe those results are a residual of this campaign outcome.

Getting back to your question, this is a great example of cognitive dissonance. I think that played a role. I want to ask myself, What is happening for my fellow women, who are educated and knowledgeable? How could they make peace with voting for a man who clearly demonstrated the sexist immorality [Trump] did? I would say that's cognitive dissonance. Something got in the way, okay?

I would also say, part of the residual for me might be—and I say this all the time—when the KKK ended, they did not simply take off their robes and become different people. They took off their robes, and many of them put on suits and ties and golf shirts.

So that could be part of what was activated on that side of the street, if you will, as a residual effect of Barack Obama's successful election and reelection. Trump said out loud, and publicly, what many white Americans and others have always thought, and may have not felt like they could socially say anymore. This is how complex all of this really is.

KH: This, for me, is key. Before the election, there was an ongoing conversation, certainly within the media, that seemed to be an attempt to absolve Trump voters of their votes. I'm talking specifically about folks who voted for Trump, people who saw him as their candidate, which was absolutely a vote for racism and misogyny. I feel like there was a real attempt to absolve them of that vote by playing up their pain. So again and again, we read about how desperate they were because of the loss of manufacturing jobs, the closing of coal mines, the opioid epidemic, and on and on.

The reality is, we know that Trump voters make more than the American average, and that all socioeconomic levels of white folks cast ballots for Trump. But even if there were not an economic fabrication hidden in the theory, it would still be another example of the constant elevation of white pain over the pain of other folks.

► TJ: You're right. But even to get to that, even to have a conversation about white pain being privileged, is already too complex because those who are experiencing and operating from that dominant plane aren't even willing to accept that that's what they're doing. So it's sort of like we see something that they cannot see in themselves, which is the significant problem. It is the ultimate definition of oppression, because those who are most blind hold the most power.

This is also what gets triggered when I hear many good-intended white folks say, I don't have any white privilege, I don't know what that is. Because they don't truly understand the complexities of that.

Two thoughts come to me right now. One is, I'm reminded of a family that I worked with where the daughter was multiracial. Her father was black and her mother was white, but she grew up mostly with her white family. She came to me distraught after an interaction with her white aunt, who was her favorite. The aunt had stated clearly that there's no longer racism, and the child was trying to share her own experiences living in a predominantly white area, the ways in which she experienced racism. Her aunt couldn't hear it. So now this teenager was struggling with her love for her favorite aunt, and the way in which [her aunt] can't see her in this situation. That's what I mean by the depth of the blindness that informs power. They too are being manipulated and let down.

Another good example is the issue of health care. Folks were so hell-bent on voting against Obamacare, they didn't realize they were actually voting for someone who is going to compromise their own current health care. That's how uninformed folks are. The power of systems of oppression and racism is that people are manipulated without realizing it. That's what Trump and his phenomenally skilled folks did. There was a lot of smoke and mirrors, and speaking to people's fears. For those groups who have felt marginalized and disenfranchised by, say, reverse racism (which is, again, a myth), he benefited from speaking to their fears, and utilizing it for his own good, and for the good of a small group.

And now we're sitting here with a president who can send us all into war in two seconds—all because someone didn't say Hi to him!

KH: I want to talk a little bit about the future. I keep thinking about what it means to tell someone they're from a *shithole* country. Or to tell immigrant kids that they are innately criminal and basically incapable of becoming Americans. Or when Trump suggested he wants fewer black folks coming into the country, but wants to up the number of Norwegians. I was texting with a friend when the news came out, and I wrote, "This is being hated."

Whether or not he's in office three or seven more years, I just wonder, in your vision, how will these traumas look for millions of people in the future?

► TJ: First of all, I want to make one shift here, which is in the use of language. For me, it's very important to say that I can be exposed to trauma, but I'm not going to let myself be traumatized to a point where my identity is compromised. Also, for communities of color, particularly those of African ancestry, the work we're doing in black psychology is trying to raise consciousness about the fact that we still have self-determination in the space of this trauma. We have to move out of the victim stance—where there's this idea that all of this is happening to us, and is therefore defining us—and move to the relational stance with the rest of America. We're always somebody's group to be saved. I don't want to perpetuate the savior stance or the victim stance.

What I see as one of the outcomes of this election is that people have to put up or shut up. It is a huge wakeup call for all. No longer can we have good white Americans sitting silently on the sidelines, saying, "Everything must be okay, because we fixed it all during the civil rights movement". They now must consciously decide to be either part of the problem or part of the solution. We have people of color, principally black folks, who have to clearly say, "Wait a minute. There's still this myth of black inferiority and white supremacy. I can no longer pretend there is equality here. How do I activate from that place to self-define?"

That's also speaking to the idea of intersectionality: who I am as a black person who may also happen to identify as LGBTQ, who may happen to identify as Muslim? All of those identities can be marginalized individually, and someone might accept me as each of those singular things. But who is looking at the collectiveness of who I am?

I say that because again, in our LGBT community, I think they have missed the implications of race and ethnicity within their own ranks.

I think that Black Lives Matter is a wonderful example of doing it right. **The women [who cofounded the movement] were phenomenal for getting it started,** particularly as they each come out of different ways of being. This is an opportunity for us to operate from a stronger social justice perspective, and a firmer sense of relationship and connectedness to one another, or we're going to fall further into the divisiveness this leadership brings. It is going to be America's demise.

I want to say this as many times as I possibly can. When I think about the comments that Ben Carson made about **people of African ancestry coming across the waters with their own hopes and dreams,** for me it was a clear example of what we mean by internalized oppression. Somehow this learned, educated brother bought into the hype, and forgot. Because as I see it, my people came here with nightmares. And they were nightmares they didn't even have a consciousness for, because they couldn't even conceive of what was about to happen to them.

This was also a wakeup call within our own black communities. Who the hell are we? Who's defining us? And who do we want to be? That should be a model for all our communities of color. How do we bridge the differences? How do we, as black folks, help out our immigrant brothers and sisters, who may have a Hispanic public face, but who include black immigrants and white refugees. They are also a target of this immigrant threat approach. When Trump talks all that negativity about people from Haiti, somehow black folks in America think that's not them. Make no mistake, he is targeting black people in general.

I truly hope an outcome of the insanity is that people reclaim their humanity and sanity and social justice. People have to arm themselves in multiple ways to do what's right by themselves and others, and no longer sit on the sidelines, or be somebody's spokesperson: "Oh, I'm for diversity because I have this one black person here, or this one LGBT person here". That doesn't work anymore. People have to critically examine what is going on.

Kali: What advice would you give to journalists who are completely fatigued by news about Trump at this point?

► TJ: [Laughing.] Well, first of all, I would validate your normal reaction. **You're having a normal reaction to an abnormal situation, which is the ultimate definition of being exposed to trauma.**

What you just said is a shared experience for all of us, from various walks of life and disciplines, who are trying to effect change, and realizing the depth and breadth of the insanity, as well as the traumatized context in which we're sitting.

I would say we need to continue to self-care, because none of us can be martyrs. There are a number of clinicians of color I've seen become more hopeless and helpless as a residual of our sociopolitical state of affairs. We have to find a way to sustain ourselves. What you're doing now—the conversation we're having now—is part of that.

How do we continue to not only reach out to others who get it, but also temper how much we're doing? Journalists have to turn it off for a minute and breathe. You have to pay attention to your own spiritual self-care and your own psychological and physical health, and step back for a minute, so someone else can take it up.

What I always say is, when you're working from a trauma-informed care perspective, as long as we're all not down at the same time, there's still hope. I can rest for a bit knowing someone else is at the forefront. We don't have to physically be in the same room. I just have to know they exist.

KH: Communities of color have traditionally been less on board with psychotherapy than whites—for a long list of reasons. Do you think the trauma of these last two years may change the conversation around therapy and mental health treatment in communities of color?

► TJ: First and foremost, as a licensed clinical psychologist, I want to be absolutely clear in noting that I'm part of a profession that played an active role in the marginalization of black communities and many other communities of color. I need to be very clear about that. It's what we call institutionalized oppression, and we have to examine that history. But I'm also taking an active role in trying to shape and change things so we do right by the people we need to do right by.

Western therapy was not designed or intended for people of color. That's not a slight so much as it is a realization. If we look at the lives of Sigmund Freud or Carl Jung—that was not in their consciousness. They were preoccupied with, "So what's going on in your mind right now, and how is that affecting you?" That's a luxury.

This is clear if you look at the civil rights era. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. commended the American Psychological Association for documenting the trauma caused by Jim Crow on black Americans. But to my knowledge, there was no broad effort to establish interventions that fostered psychological liberation grounded in the culturally affirming nature of what it means to be black. In other words, however well-intentioned it might have been, that approach defined the black experience [solely] as a reaction to racism, perpetuating a victim stance, with someone else being the savior. That fails to interrogate the psychological impact of Jim Crow on white Americans who actively participated in or benefitted from those laws—or going further back, who benefitted from the enslavement of blacks.

From a multigenerational perspective, what are the residuals for white America's psyche and impact on today's race relations? From a social justice perspective, we have not seen a national or global focus on the role of therapy in addressing those complexities, only small pockets of work. These are critical discourses that are only now emerging.

I'll be more explicit: the Association of Black Psychologists will be celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. It was born because a group of black psychologists and graduate students were at an American Psychological Association convention here in San Francisco, and they asked the American Psychological Association, "How do we pay attention to issues of cultural differences?" The way that we're being trained, and the way that we're being taught, leaves out a whole group of folks' experiences. More importantly, we're making them look sick when they're not sick.

These scholars were pushing back on what's known as the deficit mode, which compares blacks to whites and makes whites a standard of normalcy, and attributes differences to

some limitation or fault in blacks. For many reasons beyond my comprehension, APA could not hear that and did not respond favorably. So that group walked away from APA and said, "Wait a minute, now. How can we better understand what it means to be healthy and whole from a culturally centered perspective if we recognize that our psychological tools are literally driving black people crazy?"

That's how the Association of Black Psychology was born, and the inspiration for developing the field of black psychology.

I would also say, in partnership with our cultural allies who are still within APA and other black scholars, we have changed the field by increasing conversations around multiculturalism, increasing conversations around what it means to be human from a culturally centered perspective, and a person-centered perspective, as opposed to having someone define it externally. So we're forcing our field to look at multiple realities instead of putting everybody in the same box.

We're now being challenged to further integrate a social activist stance into the way we teach psychology, the way we train psychologists, and the way we do research. We're looking at how our research studies can be more about the psychological liberation of the people we're working with, versus simply being example of our expertise and our theory.

I would also add that not everything that's therapeutic is therapy, and not every therapy is therapeutic. Many of us would admit that in some of our mental health systems, we are inadvertently socializing people to remain patients. But coming from a social justice perspective, we have a more critical eye to examine the blinders we've had in our field about the ways we have inadvertently added to the problem, or missed opportunities. Seeing the huge response of psychologists wanting to put together webinars about how to talk about these issues, the growing critical discourse around trauma being something contextual versus some problem inside a person, and seeing APA embracing more of that discourse can bring about some hope.

But it's still not enough, because we are not doing this on a global level. I think that's why the Association of Black Psychologists exists, and other ethnic psychological associations, because we must always keep trying to push health and healing from a culturally centered place, and learn how that may line up with what is talked about in APA, or the ways in which it doesn't, and consider how to position ourselves in relationship to that. It's a critical discourse that does not have a simple answer. The field of therapy should continue to change as we change, and be part of the societies in which we're coming out of.

□ Kali Holloway is a senior writer and the associate editor of media and culture at AlterNet.