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# Book Review: *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies.*

By Resmaa Menakem, Central Recovery Press (CRP) 2017

By Filippa Marullo Anzalone, Professor and Associate Dean of Library & Technology Services at Boston College Law School



I spent most of the summer and fall of 2020 reading over a dozen books about racism, anti-racism, and mindfulness and racism. One of the most riveting, eye-opening, and ultimately most hopeful was Resmaa Menakem's *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Menakem's lens into the issue of racism is fascinating and worthy of serious reflection. Instead of seeing the lack of racial harmony as a failure of will or moral inadequacy, Menakem explains that racism cannot be eradicated until we deal with a vexing underlying problem; namely, recovery from the body's held trauma.

For Menakem, racial struggles are part of a dynamic continuum of power struggles and cruelty that cannot be healed until we take the time to recognize and contend with the body's pernicious and unrecognized suffering. According to Menakem, white Europeans held historical trauma and cruelty in their bodies from as far back as the Middle Ages from their mistreatment by those more powerful. These white bodies, in turn, brought their unresolved trauma and harm with them to the New World where they wreaked that same horror and damage on those less powerful, namely black African slaves and their descendants, in a continuing saga of cruelty and domination.

Menakem's brilliant conceptualization of the cyclical process of the body holding and passing unresolved hurt is initiated by a bittersweet memory of his grandmother's physical evidence of trauma. As a sharecropper's daughter, Menakem's grandmother picked cotton out in the fields from the time she was a toddler, a four-year old child. Although Menakem remembered his maternal grandmother's spirit as strong and loving, her body carried and passed on the pain of her experiences of being repeatedly lacerated by the cotton plants' sharp burrs. Despite her resilience, Menakem's grandmother's body was deformed by the trauma of her history. This insight animates the entire book.

Evolutionarily, the human body is built to survive via the fight, flight, or freeze mechanism that is hard-wired into our body's complex hormonal and physiological architecture. Today, we are witnessing a resurgence of interest in trauma and its effects on human beings, their psychology, and their interpersonal interactions. In Menakem's own words, "trauma is the body's protective response to an event—or a series of events—that it perceives as potentially dangerous. This perception may be accurate, inaccurate, or entirely imaginary."

Menakem is very well-equipped to deal with the evidence-based studies and growing body of knowledge about intergenerational stress responses and unresolved distress. He is a well-known therapist, social worker, and consultant with deep training in behavioral health, cultural somatics, and trauma. In interviews and speaking engagements, Menakem has said that his understanding of racism begins with the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates that "...racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscles, extracts, organs, cracks bones, breaks backs. (*Between the World and Me* at 10).

As a black man and a therapist, Menakem brings a profound, lived understanding of both the psychology and the neuroscience of the somatic approach to the problems of racism. In an inimitable way, Menakem presents a body-centered perspective of why discrimination exists, why we have been unsuccessful at eradicating the racial divide, and how we can begin to heal the divisions of contemporary society. One of the beauties of Menakem's book is that he provides chapters targeted especially for whites, blacks, and law enforcement (Menakem's brother and niece are both police officers). This book is life-affirming and practical. Menakem provides thoughtful material and exercises for trauma awareness and somatic healing. I highly recommend this title on so many levels, from personal recovery from the trauma continuum to understanding the chaotic world around us. This is a book about racism that will open you up in ways that you might not have imagined before reading it.

