



# Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*

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## Introduction

*My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathways to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* by Resmaa Menakem is a body-focused text that combines somatic theory and practical tools within its pages. Menakem's approach integrates his lived experience as a Black man and somatic therapist to focus on the embodied healing process that needs to occur to aid in the healing of historical harms at the hands of racial injustice in America. Menakem brings his audience in by setting the direction of how the white body, Black or dark body, and the bodies of public safety professionals can attune to experience the intention of the book.

Menakem highlights the dangers that language and assumptions can hold and defines the terms Black body, White body, and bodies of public safety professionals. For further clarification, the author states, when discussing "...the Black body: the bodies of the people of African descent who live in America, who have largely shaped its culture, and have adapted to it" (p. 16). He goes on to say "...the White body: the bodies of people of European descent who live in America, who have largely shaped and adapted to its culture, and who don't have dark skin" (p. 16). He refers to the public safety professional/ police body: "the bodies of law enforcement professionals, regardless of skin color" (p. 16).

To set the foundation of body exploration through noticing sensation, Menakem states that if read by a White body, there may be a reflexive response to constrict and to protect from some truths encountered in the book; if read by a Black or dark body, the experience may resemble the shock of recognition or understanding. If read by a public safety professional, the experience may resemble both sets of sensations.

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Menakem encourages that whatever profession or skin color the reader identifies with, that they thoroughly let themselves experience these sensations as they arise and let them go as well. To aid in this process, embodied exercises are throughout the book and supported with reflective prompts to support the reader's experience.

The book has been structured in three parts. Part one emphasizes offering the foundational historical perspective of racial discord in America and its effects from generation to generation, body to body. Part two offers a deepening to go into the body through concepts and theories applicable to race and identity along with the support of body practices and lived experiences. Part two is also a call to tap into the clean pain needed in the healing process of White body supremacy's collective trauma. Menakem describes clean pain as the pain that can build capacity for growth, while dirty pain is the pain of avoidance, blame, and denial. Part three is a call to body-centered activism, integrating the individual body's self-awareness, to the collective body of culture, to the structural White-body supremacy in America. To further reiterate what the author is intentionally communicating, each chapter is summarized with "re-memberings" highlighting notable points from the chapter. Menakem notes that as the reader moves through the embodied self-reflective process to examine White-body supremacy, one may experience pain.

Throughout the book, the author offers body-centered practices to aid the reader in making the invisible visible by calling upon the wisdom of the body by way of trauma-informed, body-centered practical tools to assist the body to become settled, anchored, and present within clean pain, so that the reader can slowly metabolize their trauma to move through and beyond it. Menakem calls attention to previous efforts that have focused on cognitive teachings to understand race in America rather than focus on where it lives and breathes, which is in the body, a process that leaves little space for the reader to think their way out of White-body supremacy and racialized trauma. Throughout the book, the reader is called to realize that one must physically move through this process.

A significant gesture in the book was the acknowledgment of ancestors. With readers experiencing this book from various social locations, the ancestral acknowledgment and ancestral work that needs to happen for this healing progression will look different depending on one's lineage. While ancestral work may look different depending on the individual, Menakem states that to the thinking brain, there is a past, present, and future, but to the traumatized body, there is only now. As somatic practitioners, dance/movement therapists must reflect on their ancestral lineage. This includes personal ancestral dance and the ancestral dance of those who came before us in the field.

### **Body-Centered Prompt**

What does your ancestral dance look like?

## Part I

The opening quote to part one reads, “No one ever talks about the moment you found that you were white. Or the moment you found out you were black. That’s a profound revelation. The minute you find that out, something happens. You have to negotiate everything”—Toni Morrison (p. 3). In what ways does this negotiation happen on a body-to-body level? According to Menekem, the attempt to address white-body supremacy in America has for the most part been with reason, principles, ideas, using dialogue, forums, discussions, education, and mental training. Race in America is a manufactured social and political construct to justify Whites’ own rights and freedoms while enslaving, excluding, and dehumanizing people who had been placed in different man-made racial categories.

Menekem states that “it is only relatively recently that most Black Americans have had some dominion over their own bodies. The white body often feels uncomfortable with this Black self-management and self-agency. The Black body sees the white body as privileged, controlling, and dangerous” (p. 28). Racialized trauma lives in the bodies of White Americans, African Americans, and the bodies of police officers and people who hold positions of authority. Each body has its unique trauma response and needs. Menekem invites the reader to look at their needs and the needs of their communities to acknowledge the discomfort that comes with healing but also to tap into clean pain. The importance of this work to upend the status quo of White-body supremacy must begin with the body.

The concept of the wandering nerve or vagus nerve is also discussed. It is also known as our soul nerve, that is directly connected to the lizard brain, the part solely responsible for survival and protection. The lizard brain offers survival commands such as rest, fight, flee or freeze. Over time this reflexive trauma response to danger may cause one to react in a way out of proportion to what is going on. As years and decades pass, reflexive trauma responses can lose context. Internalized and passed down over generations within a particular group, trauma can begin to look like culture, what therapists call a trauma retention. From generation to generation, person to person, body to body, Menekem calls this type of trauma a soul wound. Soul wounds can occur in multiple ways, through families, through unsafe, abusive systems, structures, institutions, and cultural norms, and through genes. These traumatic experiences are collective experiences. As such, the healing and mending that needs to take place must also be collective and communal.

The history of harm inflicted on people of African descent has created a blood-line of trauma. Within that experience also resides resilience. Although resilience can be a controversial word for some, Menekem describes resilience as a skill that is passed down from one generation to the next not due to an inherent defect, but the opposite; “something happened to us, something we can heal from” (p. 11). For many Black bodies, this resilience passed down through generations can be explored through body-centered responses to help settle the bodies and harsh effects of racialized trauma. These include the individual and collective processes of humming, rocking, rhythmic clapping, drumming, singing, grounding, touch, wailin circles, and call and response.

## Part II

As Menekem sets the foundation for the readers to explore the practice of healing in the second section of the book, he also offers the reader insight into his lived experience with his grandmother and her innate use of her body and voice to soothe. Menekem describes it not in the contemporary theoretical frameworks used today in dance/movement therapy and other somatic-based practices, but one that has been organically practiced in ancient healing systems. Some come to understand the processes of humming, swaying, and rocking and their connection to the body and the vagus nerve or soul nerve to emotionally regulate. Many of these processes can be observed historically at black churches and other African Diasporic traditional sacred gatherings. While it is possible that the technical aspects of these techniques were not translated in the community, in the way they are discussed currently in academia, Menekem explains that what was understood were their own bodies. It is through that understanding, families, and neighbors learned how to settle their bodies, not just as individuals but also as a communal practice.

Settling and grounding is one aspect that can be experienced through the soul nerve. Menekem clarifies that it is also where there is a sense of belonging. Hence, it can be considered a bodily organ and a communal one and a contributor to what makes White-body supremacy so pervasive, as it creates a false sense of brotherhood and sisterhood. Many organizations have been able to thrive on this, in a systematic structure that Menekem describes as “quasi-community, manufactured history, respected elders, cohesive symbolism, rules of admonishment, and an internally coherent (though toxic) world view” (p. 147). Throughout this section of the book, Menekem calls on the reader to focus on settling in their bodies as they work through the material and states, “a settled body also enables you to harmonize and connect with other bodies around you, while encouraging them to settle as well” (p. 164).

Humans are social beings who thrive when in community and connection; it is a basic need to belong. White supremacy creates a manufactured sense of belonging where tapping into one’s soul nerve offers individuals the opportunity to cultivate genuine belonging. Thus, settling the body is an essential skill to not only be present, but to shift from surviving to thriving. When one is settled and anchored in the body, it encourages authentic connection and invites others to settle into their body as well. Therefore, shifting away from theorizing and cognitive processing and returning to the body to heal, acknowledging, and moving through clean pain is essential.

Menekem cautions that naming your trauma is never a valid excuse for harming others and avoiding your own healing. He also highlights how White bodies have had the privilege of avoiding metabolizing grief and pain for human existence but rather projected that pain onto dark-skinned bodies. White bodies have an urgent choice to decide whether they can work through the clean pain and stop trauma in its tracks or deepen into the dirty pain, perpetuate racial trauma and continue to spread White-body supremacy. Above all, Menekem reminds the reader the body has the power to heal, but it is up to the individual to make that choice.

The book references law enforcement bodies, which can also translate as a body in a position of power. Menakem offers best practices for a regular growth routine that allows one to step into the role of a justice leader rather than continue to enforce White-body supremacy. In addition to the responsibility of taking care of one's own wellbeing and metabolizing trauma, using the five anchors (p. 218), working with a therapist/healer to process the daily stressors of the role is important, and attending regular trainings to re-enforce these best practices. Menakem also highlights the importance of remembering to treat everyone as a human. Being in a position of power is not an excuse to harm another human being.

### **Part III**

The call to body-centered activism in part three requests that the reader engages in action from a settled body and then do what can be done to settle as many bodies as possible. As a step forward in action, this individual to collective settling can create a new culture as “culture is how our bodies retain and reenact history” (p. 245). Healing must begin with your body, and one powerful act of activism and dismantling White-body supremacy is through settling and healing your own body. Menakem invites the reader to explore and understand what is culture and what is intergenerational trauma. Leaning into the rituals and wisdom of elders helps understand shared history and deepen a sense of belonging. For the individual and collective body to heal, creating a shared culture that dismantles and calls out White supremacy is imperative. First, start within your own body and your community. What parts of culture need to shift? “If America is to grow out of White-body supremacy, the transformation must be held largely by White Americans” (p. 273).

For this transformation to occur, a new definition and culture that includes self-love and the collective good are needed for White Americans. Menakem reminds the reader that there are already many proven and widely used models that can aid and assist in this process, but it is time for White bodies to get to work. The work, as Menakem states, is about extending the “White Americans’ rights, privileges, and opportunities to people of all colors, so that all Americans get to enjoy them in equal measure” (p. 272). As White Americans learn to manage their own bodies, it will diminish the urge and need to try to control others. Most importantly, Meneken reiterates that the healing is in one's own hands. To close, he offers five opportunities for healing and making room for growth (p. 305–306).

### **Our Experience with the Book**

As readers, we experienced this book from our own lived experience, social locations, and as dance/movement therapists. One as a Black African American woman with a similar family history to that of Menakem, with a grandmother who was a daughter of sharecroppers and from the Southern United States, experienced this book as being seen and with a resonate connection not often experienced in somatic healing practice. The words in the text felt culturally affirming and a validation of

lived experience that held significant value and contribution to her somatic and dance/movement therapy practice.

The other reader, as a White, Italian American whose great grandparents came to America in the late 1800's early 1900's to "find a better life" due to economic hardships. Her grandmother's close relationship and caretaker role, whose words "hurt people hurt people," resonate deeper after reflecting on the importance of healing self and understanding one's intergenerational wounds and history. As a dance/movement therapist, understanding the body is crucial to healing and cultivating change, and how the discomfort of White-body supremacy can encourage avoidance from exploring one's ancestry. It is not others' actions or what they said, but rather the individual owning their own triggers and what those interactions bring to the surface that needs tending.

### **Closing, Action, and Dance/Movement Therapy Connection**

As a profession, the dance/movement therapy (DMT) has not been immune to the trauma of White-body supremacy and racial hostility. The field of DMT is in a unique position to do something to progress the embodied racial healing that has been maintained cognitively for many. As embodied practitioners, dance/movement therapists can tap into the collective healing to heal the collective body. As a community, dance/movement therapists have the power to heal individual and communal trauma, reduce harm and shift the culture within the profession to keep White-body supremacy from spreading to more bodies.

This book highlights the importance of exploring and understanding the origin of White on White trauma while being mindful not to use that knowledge as a basis to bypass the work or trauma bond. All of which is necessary self work for therapists to heal and to be mindful of bias.

This book also highlights the danger of not knowing or being unwilling to explore family/cultural heritage, specifically as it relates White on White trauma and the historical violence that White people have inflicted on other White people over time. There is a need to settle our own bodies as practitioners before entering communal spaces, taking responsibility for our own body, and removing oneself when becoming over-activated. This act of pause and self-reflection to focus inward to resettle the body is a practice participants can bring to clinical practice, relationships, workshops, meetings, and social media interactions. A radical act of resistance and dismantling White-body supremacy is by healing your own body, "your body—all of our bodies—are where changing the status quo must begin" (p. 29).

It is important to note that examining one's own trauma is a call to action to heal rather than an excuse or defense for harming others. Healing one's own historical trauma around race and noticing what your body does in the presence of unfamiliar Black bodies and learning how to settle your body in the midst of activation is the beginning of dismantling White-body supremacy. This practice requires repeated individual and communal action to build embodied resilience and develop tolerance to sit with the discomfort that emerges when challenging White-body supremacy and reflecting on one's own internal process and history.

White progressives remain committed to interventions and supporting the concept of universality and the power dynamics of being the expert in the room. Eurocentric movement patterns have been the focus of DMT and have been the default movement when engaging participants, unaware of continued movement bias brought to the space. This book offers theory combined with action by inviting readers to press into their bias and then reflect, digest, and process past practices, heal and move through White-body supremacy that can be brought to clinical practice, and supporting change within dance/movement therapy.

Self-reflection as a profession begs the question, how do we envision dance/movement therapy without White supremacy? A decolonizing movement that Meenaken reminds us must be largely held by White identifying membership to transform from race to culture and culture to community (p. 273). Working through clean pain is imperative, with an emphasis on shared leadership and collaboration, to focus on what is best for the collective good while also honoring and empowering each individual's uniqueness and voice. Menekem constructs *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathways to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* as a text that highlights the need for mending the collective body in groups, neighborhoods, and communities, but the collective healing that is needed to take place begins with each individual body—your body.

#### Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical approval** This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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