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A MAGAZINE IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

OUT OF THE HANDS OF OTHERS' FANTASIES: MINORITY MENTAL HEALTH IN THE EYE OF NEOLIBERALISM'S STORM

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"You are strong. You are built for this," a trusted colleague told me back in 2012 after we both became tenured professors. After years of repeated exposure to macro and micro-aggressions, from being mistaken for a "car thief" by neighbors residing in my condominium building, to simply living consciously-while-black in our age of civic unrest, I've come to realize that the silent strength I so often rely upon to keep upright is not sustainable. In fact, the very idea of silent strength is a potentially harmful illusion; it's a coping mechanism that can mask a dangerous level of cortisol production on any given day. From objects of gratuitous violence broadcasted in endless circulation on social media platforms to metaphors for untimely death, black bodies in particular are dangerously more public in twenty-first-century U.S. than in past eras. Though Stuart Hall reminded us that we are a "media-mediated" people and culture decades ago, critical thinking in relation to social difference is now more crucial than ever.

It's no secret: People of color suffer disproportionately more from untreated anxiety and mental health disorders than Non-Hispanic whites. In 2018, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), "Over 70% of Black/African American adolescents with a major depressive episode did not receive treatment for their condition." The SAMHSA also reported that "Asian American adults were less likely to use mental health services than any other racial/ethnic group." The "model minority" status of Asian Americans, as Anne Cheng notes, encourages them to "sing the praises of the American way" as they suffer the consequences of "embodying both delight and repugnance." The quest for social inclusion in a historically segregated society so easily catches one up in a web of mixed messages and unacknowledged yet pressing feelings.

This makes it difficult to isolate the roles that internalized racism and hidden, systematic racism play in the production of these mental health disparities. Indeed, garden variety forms of depression emerge out of social fictions that claim the individual in a host of

unclaimed ways.   However, this is not the classic chicken or the egg causality dilemma. Racism in its neoliberal guise traffics in blackness and, more broadly, social difference in ways that not only secure political, social and economic disenfranchisement adeptly, but also lay the groundwork for potential forms of psychological suffering and damage by way of seemingly benign forces of misrecognition and displacement. The myth of the "damaged black psyche" can take on material forms when the mechanisms of its cultural production—from the circulation of imagery that feeds the psyches of racial conservatives to the stigma related avoidance that plagues people of color—are unacknowledged and left unchecked (Scott).

Let me explain: In neoliberal political, social, and economic life, individual failures and vulnerabilities are often attributed to things inherent and unchanging in one's own character, rather than to social, cultural, and political influences and forces. Institutions and the people therein are thereby absolved of the structural application of the oppression they engineer. What is more, the increasingly privatized healthcare, education, and housing systems that characterize the neoliberal state also promote a culture of individualism and individual responsibility that buttresses the culture of racial indifference left over from the Obama era of supposed colorblindness. The image of a people caught "in the eye of the storm" is useful to understand how the fantasies of the dominant society put people of color in unacknowledged, systematically racist situations that lead to negative mental health outcomes, and suffering, in silent perpetuity.
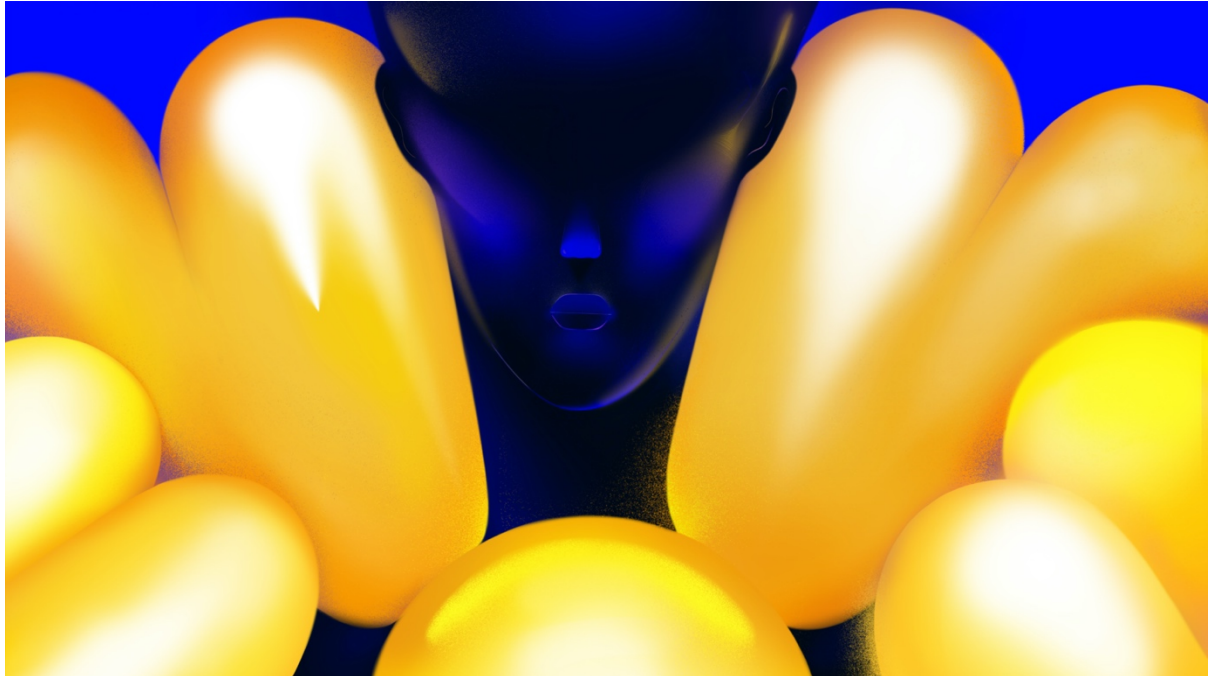
Pacific ~ Debora Cheyenne Cruchon

 "Look at you," my colleague requested, "you are a tenured, full professor. You've got this!" As she paused, I looked into her eyes and saw the uneven and contradictory scales of the social justice mindset that plague so many in our neoliberal times. Indeed, the myth of

my invincibility traffics in the same vein of thought that leaves others who are less privileged and insulated than myself more vulnerable to gratuitous violence and indifference. The persistence of mental health care disparities along racial and class lines despite major advances in institutional equity and inclusion and, moreover, health care advances is a paradox of the most systemic sort. More specifically, while some minorities are caught and entrapped at the hands of the prison industrial complex, others feel the racial wrath of globalization, deindustrialization and impending demographic changes in less acute, yet still formidable ways.

The hallmark of the neoliberal state is the false assumption of a "level playing field" while at the same time it secures upper-class power and the illusion of middle-class mobility at the expense of the common good, and at the expense of the wellbeing of marginalized populations. In recent years, class power and privilege have been co-opted by the nation's growing elite cohort of individuals from historically marginalized communities. "Model minorities" are often equated falsely with the class, power, and privilege symbolized by the Obamas and Oprah in ways that produce a range of procedural and tactical workplace aggressions. Racial and political tension in the U.S. is higher than it has been in recent decades. And the recent news of Robert F. Smith, a black billionaire, paying off the educational loan debt of the Morehouse College's graduating class of 2019—an outstanding act of charity—will only serve to quicken the impulses of white supremacist hate. Certainly, the recent uptick in domestic terrorism is the result of a mixed bag of racialized and class-based backlash from within the more socially conservative segments of the U.S. who are hemorrhaging in the face of the nation's changing demographics and, moreover, the augmented demographics of the power elite in institutions across the nation.

The myth of the strong, exceptional and indomitable person of color is a cultural production, a notion minorities themselves believe in the name of emotional fortitude as they work to preserve their wellbeing within racially indifferent, or racially hostile, professional and civic contexts. The nuances of the mannerisms and behaviors of people of color are all too often sites of endless surveillance, scrutiny, and commentary in supposedly professional settings. It's not uncommon for a professional of color to be labeled anything from "regal" (code for arrogant) to "deceptively hostile" within the span of 48 hours. All of this incessant characterization and naming is symptomatic of a people trying desperately to justify and nestle softly into the nation's moral hypocrisy in relation to social difference.

Much too often, I find myself consoling family and friends after they've encountered one of the countless racially motivated forces of protection, redemption, or projection. I always draw upon the chilling insight from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to provide clarity and solace: "Nothing can be counted on in a world where even when you were a solution you were a problem." I know these words will only get one through the current moment and into the next challenge. Nevertheless, I find that simply naming the paradox helps to build the necessary emotional detachment one will need over time to continue professional and civic service under these constraints.

One's bandwidth of resistance must be just as layered as the forces that harm. Paid lip-service but left unpracticed, the values of equity and inclusion can be a false-bottomed

basket of interracial embrace into which one can fall through mercilessly. Recent years have seen increasing hostility toward the very identity politics within which aggrieved individuals seek refuge, clarity of existence, affective resolve, and collective resistance. Simply naming institutional racism or, even more threatening, being a living reminder of its procedural application within institutional history, puts one in the crosshairs of the racial indifference and hostility that emerge from the shattered fantasies of innocence and moral authority that your mere endurance puts into focus.

This problem is rooted in the politics of diversity and inclusion that rely so heavily on what Shelby Steele calls a "freedom-focused liberalism." The unspoken goal of the new politics of diversity and inclusion is "not to free oppressed groups so much as to free individuals within these groups—to prevent society from using the groups to oppress the individual." How do we promote the mental wellbeing of historically oppressed communities living in a neoliberal era premised on hostility toward the same identity politics that it promotes systematically?

I don't think Steele fully understands the price freedom-focused liberalism in America exacts on marginalized and minoritized lives. In the neoliberal state, individualism is an embodied commodity of the social and political elite that morphs into a weapon waged against low income families and people of color. Our culture of freedom-focused liberalism is dangerous because its logic of oppression—that is, the ways institutions evade responsibility for the forces of inequity and discrimination, while attributing individual responsibility for the lived consequences—so often goes unidentified and unexamined because its application is procedural and tactical, and so obscured. The procedural and tactical ways our judicial system continues to "serve and protect" at the expense of black lives is much harder to deny these days. Social institutions like the War on Drugs and the prison industrial complex keep the visible Other in perpetual circulation for the establishment and maintenance of normative and suburban America's illusion of domestic safety and security.

The fact that the mental healthcare profession carries a 5.7 to 100 ratio of minority practitioners is also not without significance (Stallings). These are symptoms of a nation that "leaves its disenfranchised hanging." Helping people of color ward off the internalization of this contradictory cultural work is something mental health professionals should take up more rigorously. Moreover, the profession should also take up the work of helping all U.S. citizens, to borrow the words of Audre Lorde and "touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives [within]."

Minority mental health in our neoliberal times is an ongoing exercise of applying complex affective and perceptive filters for discerning terms of engagement in a changing, restless, and diverse world. My mind's eye often turns to the Freedom Fighters of the 1960s to reinforce the fact that minority psychic life is much more than an ideological response to the forces of inequity. It is a discipline, a daily practice of erudite knowing and being, beyond the litany of seemingly anodyne observations. It's an integrity of purpose that stares down the dominant gaze of minority surveillance and objectification and its attendant psychic threats. It is important to remember that there is no preservation of self in the face of the constant deluge of racism's nervous energy and evolving tactics. Racism's neoliberal guises are

manifold and adaptive. As such, intermittent retreat, boundary-policing, and professional counseling are essential forms of self-care.

However, there is also no reconstitution of self or community in complete social and political retreat. If the U.S. is on its way to becoming a non-white majority by 2045, bringing critical thinking to our social and civic lives is an act of patriotism (Knight). The value of living in the world in ways that identify and police the psychic imprint of racism is highly underestimated in these times. Dialogue is where we might begin the crucial work of mitigating the silent impact of racism on the mental health of people of color, creating the emotional buffers we need to see ourselves more clearly as we bridge community with both social justice allies and those who live by a different set of principles and convictions. Understanding, learning, and unlearning more rigorously across difference is, to invoke Lorde again, "personal and political."

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The image shown here is a portion of the full accompanying artwork originally featured on stillpointmag.org.

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