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Alton Sterling, My Dad, and Me: an Autoethnographic Exploration of Race Based Trauma

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Running head: ALTON STERLING, MY DAD, AND ME: AN AUTHETHNOGRAPHIC
EXPLORATION OF RACE BASED TRAUMA

Alton Sterling, My Dad, and Me: an Autoethnographic Exploration of Race Based Trauma

By

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An Alternate Plan Paper Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

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Title: Alton Sterling, My Dad, and Me: an Autoethnographic Exploration of Race Based Trauma

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Dr. Kristi Treinen, Advisor

Dr. Justin Rudnick, Committee

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Abstract

Trauma is often an undetectable and imperceptible agony experienced and re-experienced by individuals. Capable of transcending both; time and space, trauma(s) can trigger physical/psychological discomforts. Recognizing, individual (, or collective) trauma through the lens of persons of color is mostly disregarded. Therefore, a vital contribution found within this text is a shared intrapersonal account of race based trauma. Auto ethnography, as a method of exploring (*RBT*) is used as a tool of dialogue between author and reader – by which familiarity is established. This limited account of anecdotal recollections is meant to incite further dialogue centering the recognition of racialized traumatic experiences in persons of color.

Keywords

Race based trauma (*RBT*), racial trauma, vicarious trauma, second hand witnessing

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Introduction

This project, is intended to conceptualize race based traumatic (*RBT*) experience through autoethnographic approach. In doing so, two primary concepts are discussed prior to a conversation on future research. Initially, an explanation of race based trauma is offered in conjunction with existing research and its presumed effects, (or the lack there of) on persons of color within the context of the United States of America. Next, we will turn to current understandings of vicarious trauma and extend this investigation into the potential harm second hand witnessing has on persons of color due to the tendency of the human psyche to superimpose, or layer, past incidents on top of present incidents. Finally, I will conclude this write-up with a discussion illustrating, the potential avenues I hope to take race based trauma and vicarious trauma. Throughout the document readers are asked reflexive questions meant to engage the internal psyche and challenge current understandings of race, traumatic experiences, and the realities of persons of color. Conclusions drawn in this exploration are not generalized, or race specific. With the exception of my shared experiences, the assumptions represent hypothesized deductions. Further, conclusions presented throughout this manuscript are derived from the intersections of my (researcher's) identity. As human, and Black African American, each facet is simultaneously defined by society (ascribed identity) and myself (avowed identity). Moreover, defining these intersections often yield congruent and incongruent connotations. What is important here is the way in which I define myself based on these intersections in contrast to the way society collectively ascribes conflicting definitions to my personhood. Leaving nothing for interpretation the following explanation will partially clarify the aforementioned intersections and the way in which each is independently defined. Once done a justification of key themes is offered before evolving our understandings of race based trauma and vicarious trauma.

Researcher Awareness

Before I am anything, I am a human being. I have unique thoughts, feelings, and actions that make me unlike any other human being. In order for healing to occur, I feel that as a human being I must acknowledge first myself and those around me (known and unknown) as other human beings. Conceptualizing this part of my, and others identity first as human beings, is necessary for two reasons. The danger of doing so could create what we see often today in the media as the demonization of individuals. Essentially, if a person is no longer be recognized as a person, their actions, or reactions can be subjectively judged. These judgments unfortunately, can also lead to the generalization/stereotyping of persons that demonstrate the same traits as the initial individual. As a human, I have an obligation to acknowledge myself as such along with others outside of myself. Regardless of creed, ethnicity, race, gender, class, or socioeconomic status. Keeping with this acknowledgement, serves as a moral foundation flowing into my identity as Black, African American. Members of the antebellum south decided that after the American Civil War, my ancestors no longer slaves were to be called colored. Shortly thereafter they were deemed as Niggers (as), then called the American Negro, and now I am called Black, African American. All of these names carry negative undertones. Some are gender specific (i.e. The Angry Black woman, Welfare Queen), while others encompass group judgments (i.e. crack addicts, etc.) Simply put, I am neither of those things. I am and will always be a Black, African American. Black, is the way I self-acknowledgment those that came before me. I am a walking tribute to my Black ancestors, lest I forget the things they have done for myself and my family. I hold my head higher knowing the feats they accomplished allowing me the opportunities I have today. I am then African – American meaning, while I have not yet lived upon the continent of Africa I am aware of my origin in combination with my current habitation. I exist like many

others in a dual, (and in some cases – multi ethnic) reality. Having explored these intersections, I argue my identity is not limited to these two existences. Rather, they represent key elements relative to this discussion. Having done so, the following is a brief justification for this research project as a whole, and an outline major themes discussed.

Justification & Major Themes

Conceptualizing race based trauma, conceptualizing any form of trauma, is a difficult process, because interpreting subjective experiences across a group of individual (i.e. persons of color) lack variables that can be quantifiably measured. There is no meter of trauma to consult with this project. Yet, even with this limitation there is much to be done. Essentially, this research was motivated by an interest in understanding how I responded to the second hand witnessing (*vicarious*) of racial trauma. In doing so, this project employs auto ethnography as a method of qualitative research. As a novice instructor, student, and researcher I am uniquely situated in a position of reflecting on how I interact with the world around me, while occupying these and other roles in my own life. Reflecting on my lived experiences, allows for a chance to; examine impacts, as well as interpret interactions. Further, in doing so, these reflections, have the potential to shape future interactions. Auto ethnography as a method, drives self-reflection further, by merging personal connection, with theoretical analysis further, auto ethnography combines autobiography and ethnography. (Wall, 2008, p. 39, & Ellis, et al., 2011 p. 275) Personal accounts, then become the data used for analysis. By doing so, an author, “retroactively and selectively writes about past experiences” (Ellis, et al., 2011 p. 275). Traditionally, data for qualitative research originates from interviews, participation observation, field notes, etc. In the case of this manuscript however, data is derived from a mix of raw records and headnotes. Presented within is a combination of fragmented unprocessed notations and remembered details

of the specific incident between my family and police officers. Moreover, much of my account relies solely on my memory. As an added measure, an interview for an entirely different project detailing the account will be provided as a source of data. Having discussed the methodology used for this project, the following serves as a means to discussing key themes relevant to this report. Race based trauma, or racial trauma defined by Hardy, (2013), “Racial oppression is a traumatic form of interpersonal violence which can lacerate the spirit, scar the soul, and puncture the psyche” (p. 25). At its core, race based trauma is a complex form of trauma with the potential to affect the mental and physical states of persons of color. Racial trauma has the potential to invade the conscious and unconscious body of persons of color. Important here, is that while persons of color may experience racially charged incidents, those experiences do not automatically translate to trauma (racial trauma). It is, the development of “post trauma symptoms” stemming from racist incidents. (Bryant-Davis, 2005, p. 479) Similar to the formulations of other traumas, incidents alone do not always result in post-traumatic symptoms. Additionally, direct and indirect (second hand witnessing, via media/social media) occurrences, place persons of color at risk of internalizing associated emotional and mental scarring. Moreover, like other traumas, racial trauma is remembered within the physical body. Conceptualizing this bodily remembrance, Cates, (2014), laments in their discussion on phenomenological investigations of bodily emotion, “this form of trauma (insidious trauma), [is] one that stands out is the extent to which the sufferer is unaware of suffering” (p. 35-36). Due to this invisible consumption, race based trauma, poses a large threat to communities of color. Moreover, as a relatively *new* type of trauma, this research is aimed at discussing current analysis, and articulating the researcher’s position within the phenomenon.

However, important the aforementioned components may be, there a key elements not addressed within this exploration. Namely, rationalizing, or validating the existence of potential racialized traumas experienced by persons of color. Doing so, would further the dehumanization persons of color often experience within American society. Additionally, refuting the invalidation of racial trauma within the context of our racialized American society, is both exhausting and unnecessary. Researchers before and long after this proposition will continue the relentless battle against and for societal quarrels including but not limited to; validating racial trauma, postpartum depression in women of color, and countless other invisible traumas experienced by marginalized members of society. And as of 2017 – Carter & Muchow, 2017, believe in their study the phenomenon of race based trauma is well documented, and have begun to examine and construct, a measurement equivalence called Race-Based Traumatic Stress Symptom Scale (RBTSSS) (p. 688-695). Further, by defending the existence of racial trauma one inadvertently, acknowledges those claims of America as a post-racial society. This faux reality, is one that I do not accept. An extension of this position will be later discussed in the latter portions of this essay. Once complete, the next item to tackle is what Boulanger, (2016) defines as, “the potentially contagious nature of traumatic memory” (p. 60) Vicarious trauma is an unconscious association therapists potentially form while working with patient traumas. (Boulanger, 2016) Credited with the earliest explanation of vicarious trauma Shatan, (1973), used the term to describe the experiences of therapists felt after working with Vietnam veterans.

To be of aid, we must become as emotionally connected with the veterans as if we were ourselves war survivors. But we should be forewarned: we, too, may have nightmares; we, too, may be unable to sleep, unable to talk normally to other people for days or weeks. Once we professionals admit the knowledge of the veterans into our awareness,

we are changed in fundamental ways. It becomes utter pretense to turn to our protective device of psychotherapy only, for this now represents a massive denial of the realities apprehended by our children. As we reactivate our imagination, the only genuine response is to share the ex-soldiers' anguish. (Shatan, 1973 p. 651)

Likewise, the term vicarious trauma has been used since the early 1990's by clinicians and therapists alike. Historically then, much of the discussions associated with vicarious trauma is from the experiences of a trained professional. Absent from the conversation, however, is the effects vicarious trauma has on people in everyday life. What happens to the individual psyche of someone that is not trained to engage with conversations, or depictions of trauma? More explicitly in the case of this research, is there a correlation between seeing racially charged incidents, such as police brutality against a person of color via face to face, media/social media (second hand witnessing)? If so, what role if any does watching interactions of racialized incidents have on individuals of color?

Realizing the feat ahead, I offer a layered theoretical – a personal anecdote as a means of answering the aforementioned questions. The overarching goal of this project is to articulate my point of view in a way that evokes conversation. In doing so, the goal is not to educate readers on the 'black experience.' I provide a personal, limited account, relevant to my research. This is not, nor should it be used as a framework for Black, African Americans, nor persons of color. This is a selfish act stemming from my need of personal progression. I, as a Black, African American woman, occupy spaces that trivialize my existence, while simultaneously appraise my body. Body in this context is not just the physical being, rather it encompasses; emotions, beliefs, morals, and thoughts. Both in and outside of academia, I exist in betwixt and between of a society that does not allocate many pleasantries to Black, African American women – persons of

color. Since our arrival in these United States of America – Black, African American women were made to cater to the needs of every living thing. Generations later, similar stigmas remain prevalent within national and international societies. Lastly, my intent is not to single handedly change the lives of women, men, and children that look like me, rather my intent is to begin, to conceptualize experiences beginning with myself.

Race Based Trauma

Boston College's Institute for the Study and Promotion of Race and Culture, described racial trauma as the physical and psychological symptoms people of color often experience after being exposed – directly or indirectly – to stressful experiences resulting from racism. Comparatively, racial traumatic symptoms, like other traumatic symptoms, (i.e. PTSD; physical, sexual, and psychological abuse), manifests within the body on physical and psychological levels. It is believed that race based trauma was first discussed in as early as the 60's. Since that time, has been studied under varying names including but not limited to “insidious trauma, and racist incident-based trauma” (Bryant-Davis, 2007, p. 135).

Unlike post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other clinical trauma based disorders, race based trauma is a marginalized experience. One that does not include America's dominant populous (white, heterosexual, male, cis persons). Understandably, we recognize that many of these individuals are not able to locate themselves within the phenomenon of racial trauma. In essence, the sufferers, suffer because of the actions/lack of acknowledgment by those in the dominant society. This is not to say that all dominant members of American society are perpetrators of racist incidents, rather this illuminates many of the injustices experienced by persons of color that are not shared experiences due to inherent privilege. *Racial*, is understood contextually as to be related to *race*. *Trauma*, is generally understood as a type of psychological,

and or physical diminishing that occurs as a result of distressful events. Combined, they speak to traumatic experiences that surround race. Essentially, the continuums of the *race - racism*, and trauma – *PTSD*, overlaid one on the other is what I assume as the basis race based trauma. It is important here to, remind ourselves of a few things involving race. Racism, (systematic, institutional), has been and is still a large part of the United States. It can be seen vividly within society today. Through; court decisions, litigation, and the continuation of police brutality across the nation. With that said, we 1) recognize race as a social construct, and 2) recognize our conversation is grounded within the context of the United States.

The phenomenon of racial trauma is a cumulative experience, in which, one event has the power to bring to mind other events. A memory belonging to an individual's past can impact the present physical body, superimposing one event on top of the other, bringing the past remembered event into the current (present) feelings, emotions, and actions of the reality. For mental health professionals, *trauma* is often hypothesized as *posttraumatic stress disorder*. Accordingly, posttraumatic stress disorder (ptsd) is defined by the American Psychiatric Association, as “exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence . . . by directly experiencing, or witnessing, (the) traumatic event” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 271). Carter and Muchow (2017) argue the aforementioned definition is restrictive because “it does not address the array of stressful experiences that can induce traumatic stress reactions apart from threats of death or serious physical injury (e.g., poverty, emotional abuse, neglect, racism) (p. 688). Situating myself within the discussion of race based trauma, I recognize my experience as one that has not been professionally diagnosed, and rather it is a self-defined recognition. By examining available research, and dialogue with admired *academics*, I consent and uphold my belief of having experienced race based trauma. One experience is

offered in the following pages of this manuscript. However, before doing so, I bring one additional unique trait to the aforementioned discussion of racial trauma. One that involves the additional context of social media. The director, in the 2016-2017 newsletter to participants of the sixteenth annual Diversity Challenge: Race, Culture, and Educating our Youths: Developing Whole People, Not Widgets, Dr. Janet E. Helms, posited,

Young people in society generally as well as on high school and college campuses witness, experience, and participate in overt and indirect racial and inter-ethics violence. The violence during the past year has varied along a continuum, ranging from macroaggressions (acts of incivility) to systematic killings of unarmed citizens. Development of the skills necessary for discussing or facilitating dialogues about racial and racialized ethnic-cultural issues among themselves or with the communities that they serve is rarely a focus of training educators, administrators, mental health workers, or police officers.

For the sake of this conversation, I will use Dr. Helms *indirect* to mean exposures from media – social media channels. Moreover, the indirect exposure can include, but is not limited to, witnessing another person of color being mistreated via videos, gifs, and images shared on Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube. Polanco-Roman et al (2016) argue, “In light of the recent media attention on aggressive and lethal policing in racial - and ethnic - minority communities..., there is a dire need to better understand the psychological effects of racism” (p. 609). These media portrayals of repeated exposure depicting the mistreatment of persons of color by white, (non-persons of color), opens a new channel of uncharted inquiry within race based trauma. How is it then that myself as a human, Black African American, woman of color can reconcile seeing other humans, Black, African American, women, men, children, and persons of

color – in communities that look similar to the places I inhabited– time and time again suffer (and in some cases be killed) due to racially charged incidents? Further, is there a correlation between my experiences and vicarious trauma? Vicarious trauma is only defined by the American Counseling Association (2011) from the vantage point of counselors, and defined briefly here as the emotional deposits from exposure that counselors have from the recurring work with patients sharing their accounts of trauma. By listening to these stories, they (therapists-counselors) become witnesses to the pain patients have endured (p. 10-11) Perhaps, it is an entirely different term altogether. However, something must be said for what I am referring to as vicarious associations, or similarities to victim shown within the contexts of shared media. As a marginalized member of society, authenticating my experiences and the experiences of other marginalized members is not my prerogative. That job is for the self-identifying allies, those persons that claim to fight for alongside myself for the advancement for all marginalized individuals. This, however, does not include those self-proclaiming hypocrites who use hashtags and other convenient devices meant to look good on a Facebook profile. To be an ally is to be an active participant echoing and not speaking over the marginalized. Non-marginalized members have a duty to speak to other non-marginalized members. Healing race based trauma is the primary focus of my inquiry. Through engaging with participants, I hope to uncover those imbedded coping strategies already practiced in individual's everyday life. In doing so I am consulting the writings from Hardy (2013) and discussions on healing the hidden wounds of race based trauma, and rechanneling those resulting rages, and misunderstanding. (Hardy, pp. 24-28) I believe that by mixing participant data along with research, I will define methods and coping strategies for dealing with race based trauma.

Anecdote

Months prior to observing the video documenting his death, several news outlets had shown many Black, African American men, women, and other persons of color being killed by police men and women. As a preventative measure, I elected to distance/avoid content, or conversations related to police brutality. However, one morning after logging onto Facebook an automated video began to play. It shown cell phone video displaying the details of his last moments here on earth. [However, on that day] for reasons unknown to myself, I continued listening and viewing every detail via my computer screen. I heard the cried of his son, and shot fired seemed to echo throughout my mind. I am still unable to recount every detail that occurred once the video concluded. What I do know for certain, is that I cried profusely. A while later the concept of racial trauma was introduced to me by a former forensics teammate. At the time, they were working on structuring what is known as an introduction, or argument for a speech. It was here that I also learned about Boston College and The Institute for the Promotion of Race and Culture (ISPRC).

Seeing the murder of Alton Sterling, registering the cries of his son in a later press conference evoked a personal sense of uneasiness within myself. Especially, when considering the similar standpoints he, Alton Sterling, and my father share. I want to make clear that my recognition of similarities between the two men is only a recognition. I have seen my father vulnerable and at the mercy of an officer of the law. I also was able to see my father live to tell the story after the incident occurred - a truth, that Mr. Sterling's' son, after April, 2016, does not share This exploration, is not meant to be used as an equation where variables can be interchanged i.e. my father dying in place of Mr. Sterling, and my attempt at understanding what I would do, or how I would act. Smith's (2006) *How Race is Made*, illustrates the effects historical race constitutions between white and Black or African Americans in the United States

permeates the understandings of what I and others may encounter while vicariously viewing the death of Alton Sterling. Acknowledging the “historically conditioned, visceral, emotional, aspect of racial construction and racism”, means that I not only see the death of Mr. Sterling, but also the beating of Rodney King, as well as the dozens of African American men and women protesters beaten and arrested during the early stages of the Civil Right Movement.

Physically, watching the death of Alton Sterling caused my senses to react in a number of ways. His death came after the killings of three other unarmed Black or African American individuals from Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia the day prior. I remember my body feeling heavy while sitting as if I had just finished a workout and was finally relaxing. The saliva in my mouth became salty, similar to the taste one receives right before vomiting. My hands felt dry. I know this for certain because when I am uncomfortable, typically, my palms are sweaty and to remedy this I wipe them on my shirt. However, that morning after watching the video wiping my hands on my shirt produced a dry heat, causing me to rinse my hands under cool water. Once I stopped crying and began to compartmentalize what I had seen, I began intentionally inhaling and exhaling. Initially, the air was thick. It felt as if I was inhaling the air from an indoor chlorine pool. At some point I had begun to cry, but I am not certain of when. What is clear in my memory is the color of the carpet in my room. I also remember my mother’s hand on my back, and a cup of tea on my nightstand. I know that I had cried because the front of my shirt was wet. My mother, seemed to have been trying to tell me something, but I cannot remember what it was. I know that I laid down, but I do not believe I did much anything else that day. I am sure, I did something, but I have no clue as to what it was. Since undergoing this process I have begun to wonder more and more about the events that occur after seeing a racially charged incident. I believe like many persons, (everyone including people of color) after

witnessing these occurrences we compartmentalize what we've seen, well enough to continue our day. Seemingly disassociating ourselves from the incident, in order to keep up with the demands of life. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR) defined dissociation as, 'a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception of the environment' (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. 519). Further, Lynn et al., (2012) explained, "When mild and intermittent, such symptoms are rarely of clinical concern. Nevertheless, in some cases, dissociation may take the form of grossly impairing dissociative disorders. These puzzling conditions include dissociative identity disorder (DID), formerly known as multiple personality disorder, dissociative fugue, and depersonalization disorder" (p. 48). Now, I am not attempting to diagnose dissociative patterns, rather the quotations prior are there to explore a related tenet of racial trauma (RBT). Essentially, I am curious as to know what effects, if any does disassociating oneself from exposure to racially charged incidents have on people of color? Further, is my lack of memory on the details after watching the murder of Alton Sterling, my mind's way of protecting myself? If so, is this practice sustainable, or will I incur greater damage due to the impending racist incidents that will inevitably occur. Or will my resiliency, defined in part by Huey et al. (2013), as innate personal and environmental traits meant to protect one's self (p. 296-297) wear off? Resiliency within this context is what is used to conceptualize an individual's personal strength.

Vicarious Trauma

Racism and racially charged incidents have become more visible within communities across the nation. The proliferation of images portraying incidents involving police brutality, and other mistreatments of persons of color, are without a doubt a direct result of news media increased coverage of these events. Additionally, as previously stated, these images have an

amplified ability to be shared within social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, etc. Consequently then, this ease of access yields greater volumes of secondary witnessing. Kaplan's (2008) research continues this discussion of second hand witnessing, or vicarious trauma. They introduce readers to the phenomenon of cultural trauma. Essentially, they contend the proliferation of photographs displaying devastating events including; lynching's, nuclear bombings, and the Holocaust, possibility in shaping cultural trauma. Kaplan defines three kinds of cultural trauma responses.

These are: a) secondary or vicarious trauma (VT), a response in which the viewer is shocked to the extent of being emotionally aroused; b) what I call "empty empathy," to indicate the fleeting nature of empathic emotions that viewers often experience; and finally c) witnessing – a response that transforms the viewer in a positive pro-social manner, and that, unlike the first sorts of response, involves ethics along with empathy.

(p.3)

Cultural trauma, is contingent in this context on the mass broadcasting, or sharing of traumatic images. Additionally, it is here that a working definition of trauma is also introduced to our investigation. Taken from the text, *Trauma: Explorations in memory*; trauma is, "a shocking event that overwhelms the victim's cognitive mechanism: the event by-passes the brain's meaning-making sites and is lodged in the body, dissociated from ordinary consciousness." (Caruth, 1995) Essentially, trauma is recognized by its symptoms such as; phobias, flashbacks, hallucinations and nightmares, rather than by memory per se.³ Further, "We remember trauma less in words and more with our feelings and our bodies". (van der Kolk and Fislser, 1995, p. 524) Kaplan's, (2008) research, focused extensively on the belief of worldwide traumas across cultures. Additionally, the inclusion of Kaplan's (2008), cultural trauma serves as a converging

path for race based trauma and vicarious trauma. By permitting an examination, specifically targeting an attempting to examine the effects of visceral trauma has on people of color that encounter face to face, or second-hand observations due to social and local-national media broadcasting.

Combined, these channels make possible two things; an increased ease and availability of cases and an increase access of traumatic experiences into the minds of audiences everywhere. Polanco-Roman et al. (2016) argue, “In light of the recent media attention on aggressive and lethal policing in racial - and ethnic - minority communities..., there is a dire need to better understand the psychological effects of racism.” (p. 609) Because of this, I argue the combination of viewing racially charged incidents, via media news coverage and social media platforms - specifically those involving (in my case Black, African Americans), solicited and unsolicited take a toll on an individual’s psyche. Stovall (2015) lamented,

I have become conditioned to internalize tragic news of violence toward people of color; I no longer yell or scream. I respond by stare – I do not know exactly what I am looking at, but I stare for a long time. When I regain my senses, my first response is to curse. The cursing can be loud or a whisper. My immediate reaction leads me to say in my mind: I’m so fucking done with this. Every fucking second I am reminded what it means to live under a facade of progress, when I’m actually still living in a slave state. The starkness of mental reflection originate from my discussed with the normalizing of blacks’ deaths. The struggle in Ferguson, Missouri, is interconnected with all of the United States and any place on the planet where marginalized, isolated, and dispossessed people reside. (p. 67)

I believe what Stovall (2015), is describing as a source of vicarious trauma. Recalling the actions taken after viewing the death of Alton Sterling. I can remember eventually once I was finished crying, realizing that I was now in my bedroom staring at the carpet. It is not until after speaking with my mother that I learned that she had in fact, helped me up the stairs and after sitting with me for a while, briefly retired to the kitchen returning with a cup of chamomile tea. No longer crying, I sat – with a cup of tea now sitting on my nightstand. Unfortunately, I am not able to locate research detailing the impact viewing racially charged incidents have on persons of color. Nonetheless, I hold fast my position that these repeated events are, in fact, scarring the internal mind. Resulting in generations of evolved unaddressed afflictions.

Afflictions, such as the one involving five Black, African American youth ages 12-14 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. King (2017) explains the ordeal in great detail in the April (2017), New York Daily News. In March of 2017, while walking home, from a neighborhood park five children in Grand Rapids, Michigan were accosted by law enforcement officers. Believed to be the individuals involved in a fight earlier that day, officers swarmed the scene; with guns drawn, and demanded the children to keep their hands visible and lay face first on the ground. Five, 12-14 year-old unarmed Black, African American children were now sprawled about the sidewalk pleading to not be killed. Neither of the children were involved in the physical altercation, nor had they been anywhere near the fight. Yet, they were all viable suspects matching the vague description police had been given. Parents and guardians of the adolescents were thankfully reunited with their children. Unfortunately, however, this instance is engrained on the emotional conscious of individuals both directly and indirectly involved. Fortunately, no one was physically harmed in this incident, but after reading and viewing the article, I am interested to understand why the children and their parents acted in the way in which they did. Could it be,

due to prior observed interactions involving police officers and persons of color? Could it be their knowledge of other cases such as; Eric Garner, New York – July 2014, Michael Brown, Missouri – August 2014, Tamir Rice, Ohio – November 2014, Philando Castile, Minnesota – July 2016, Rekia Boyd, Illinois – March 2012, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Michigan – May 2010, Sandra Bland, Texas – July 2015. Is there a possibility, that these children and their parents and that community has taken past incidents and superimposed them onto the other? These questions, while rhetorical are meant to evoke thoughts. Bridging the links between race based trauma (RBT), and vicarious trauma absent my personal story. Matais,&Montoya, 2015 posited, “Every family, every single community, is reminded of the lack of value their lives as individuals of color hold” (p. 79). Understanding this reality, is necessary for the conversation of vicarious trauma. By doing so, we are extending the information in another direction that includes the marginal voices and experiences of many Black, African Americans and people of color.

Considering the aforementioned incident in Grand Rapids, I am unable to determine whether or not, those involved had, prior to that incident, encountered law enforcement. However, it is their reactions to officers’ actions that drive my investigation. How then, do/should these children and their families continue living after this occurrence? How is, that people of color live day in and day out after witnessing via electronically, or face to face these heinous acts? What is the implicit understanding that prompts Black, African Americans to in this faux ‘post-racial American society’ to not give up? “When will blacks see their Civil Rights upheld?” (Jackson, & Green, 2015 p. 57) Further, “one can’t yell, “Don’t shoot” or “I can’t breathe” loudly enough to save one’s life in the heat of the moment, and even the quickest feet cannot out run a bullet. (Jackson, & Green, 2015, p. 57) These and other rhetorical questions are the primary concerns of my overarching investigation. Investigations, thus far, generates

conversations centering the notion of experiencing vicarious trauma. For the sake of cohesion, I offer the following related occurrence involving my mother, father and myself. In it, readers are granted access to an incident that happened while traveling back to campus.

Anecdote

My father is the sole provider for my mother, my three siblings, and myself. He works most times three to five days at a time as a Longshoreman for the port of Houston. My siblings and I are often reminded by him and my mother, that he does not punch a clock, and has to work while the work is there. Dead tired, he and my mother set out to drop me off at school. After stopping at more Wal-Marts than I am willing to acknowledge, we were pulled over. The plan prior to being do so, was for him to drive an hour more and then swap out with my Mother. Yet, he insisted that since we were close to crossing into Mississippi, he finish the drive. After pulling to the side of the road, he let down both front windows, and he and I automatically extended our hands before us. An officer approached the side of the driver's door with one hand on their gun. After inquiring our reasoning for being on the road, another officer (I believe they were there all along, but I did not dare look) appeared on my side of the car and asked about my studies. This is about when I believe I had begun to shake. I cannot remember if it was obvious, or not – but I do remember my hands shaking. Replaying the incident now, I have come to the conclusion that my reactions were due to the realization that my father was out numbered. If anything were to go wrong, he could be killed. And even with my mother and me witnessing the act, run a greater risk of not being believed. The argument that could be made, is the same argument that has been made before – he appeared dangerous. Even with notifying officers of his possession of gun, and after being trapped face up beneath two officers Alton Sterling was shot repeatedly in his chest. Even with my father's hands extended before him, and while narrating his every move – I could

not stop myself from thinking that he could be next. Somehow, my parents instinctively began to reassure me that this was routine. We were fine. Then my father said, 'I am cooperating with the authorities, we'll be on our way'.

It was not until after processing this incident sometime later, that I realized the similarities between my father and the late Alton Sterling. They were both Black, African American men, complying with the instructions of officers. Two, presumably capable fathers doing something on behalf of their families. And yet, instead of taking comfort in these similarities, I cried. Many Black, African American men, women, and children have been killed even with complying with the instructions of police. I can see no difference between Mr. Sterling and my father – other than one is deceased and the other alive. My father is not special, perhaps if while reaching for his wallet he would have startled one of the officers. Perhaps, they might have thought he had a gun. Perhaps, then they removed him from the car and while subdued open fire on him. How is it now, that I superimposed one situation onto another? Moreover, is this what occurred with the aforementioned families in Grand Rapids, MI? Unfortunately, I am still unable to answer these questions, but I argue there is a connection between race based trauma and vicarious trauma. Due to the repeated exposure via news and social media of vicariously witnessed – (second hand) witnessing of racially charged incidents, I believe there is an increased invisible toll on the lives of persons of color throughout American society.

Future Research

Before his passing, I had an opportunity to sit down with my late grandfather (F.J. Baptiste III) and discuss race relations in America; a familiar conversation for us. This particular occasion I shared with him my apprehensiveness with doing this project. In all honestly, I am still afraid. There is a sense of vulnerability the researcher encounters when constructing auto

ethnographic work. In addition, this also serves as the final capstone project for my degree requirements. Meaning, my margin for error is even slimmer. The mounting challenges, seem to outweigh all else at times. And while, I am closing one chapter in my life a new one begins, and at its center is race based trauma. Specifically, the way in which people of color communicate before, during, and after experiencing race based trauma. A thing that will require further enlightenment in at least two additional areas of study; sociology, and ethnic studies. Sociology, or the study of the study of social problems (abbreviated definition), will help to garner an understanding of social structures. This includes, race and ethnicity relations as well as gender and sexuality. I am not only concerned with working with Black, African Americans, rather I want to be able to focus on other persons of color. By not doing so, is to limit the global experience that is the United States of America. There are persons from many nations in this country, and while I will not have all of the information about every racial/ethnic group, I will through sociology be aware of variances. These learned tools will then help me in relation to race based trauma, by providing an understanding of societal processes. Additionally, research within ethnic studies will helps in a similar fashion to sociology. Essentially, ethnic studies is study of difference; race, gender, class, sex etc. When considering race based trauma, I need to be able to think in intersections. Parallel to my earlier exploration of my identity, I need to think in terms of intersectionality. By not doing so, I run the risk of isolating one facet of an individual's identity. Separating one aspect is limiting. I believe there would be more interest in research if everyday people had access, and were able to metaphorically see themselves in a non-exploitive way. In keeping with this assertion, I have chosen to intentionally construct this manuscript in this way for two reasons. First, this exploration is meant for an audience outside of academia. This research is grounded in personal lived experiences. It takes on a different meaning that cannot be

quantified, or measured. Moreover, the text as a whole is written to employ external research and conceptualized explanations and examples. By doing so, I keep with the first tenet and allow access to the average America.

Second, ethnic studies as a potential field of study is one that examines difference in race, gender, and sex. As my preferred research inquiry, qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews, and ethnography are two primary tools I will inevitably use for future research surrounding race based trauma. Both of which involve the lived experiences of other individuals than myself. Combining the awareness ethnic studies provides along with these research methods, are necessary in ensuring I do not exploit the lives and experiences of potential participants. I know that each individual has a unique makeup of identity intersections, some of which I will not have studied, or encountered. That being said, by studying sociology and ethnic studies I hope to articulate a comprehensive investigations. Basically, I do not plan to leave the classroom for a very long time. Moreover, I know the classroom will not provide a chance to understand everything. I do not believe that my investigations will ever uncover everything. I would be a fool to think I have the ability to unearth all things related to race based trauma. However, I do hope to illuminate social scripts used after race based incidents - discrimination has occurred. This research will hopefully, provide seminal information for communication studies, sociology, and ethnic studies.

The completion of this project, marks the beginning of what I will do within academia. While constructing the project as a whole was challenging for me. But, necessary for the lives of my God children; Jaidon, Jaharrie, Justice, and other children of color. I do not believe we will ever live in a society that will be absent race, sex, gender, religious discrimination. However, the work I, and others do now can help to make it better. Goeke-Morey, et al. (2009) insists

adolescents, or children ages 13 – 17 years of age are the most vulnerable population in society. (Goeke-Morey et al. 2009) Further, “communities where violence is chronic, persistent and ongoing, often acquiring war-like dimensions and living conditions, they [, adolescents] are exposed to traumatic events which can have long-term implications for their future development” (Yazadani, et al., 2015 p. 28). It is the parents and guardians of adolescents, in these communities that set the tone for the world around them. The next reasonable step in my research, is to examine the ways in which adolescent’s process racially charged incidents. Incidents that occur in person, or through second hand witnessing (*viscerally - visceral trauma*).

Considering the prominence of police brutality, within communities of color, and its impacts on said people of color, I intentionally elect to work with children of color. This is not to exclude youth that do not identify as a person of color, but to justify my choice. Vernberg & Varela, (2001) suggested, a persistent exposure of violence due to the perceived intent to harm others (in this case people of color) damages, an individual’s belief that the world is safe. It is this perception that a person of color may develop after witnessing the otherwise well intended individuals (police women and men) involvement in violent acts towards marginalized communities that help to formulate the overarching trauma cause by visceral exposure. I have an ethical obligation to the lives of all children. Especially my God children, hence my actions and choice of study is centered on their inevitable experience as Black, African American, children of color. This is not to say that I want to teach them fear, rather, I want to be prepared to discuss the daily fear many people of color experience. Dubow et al., (2009) posited in their research, individuals living in a perpetual state of fear will normalize trauma experienced in life and consequently, pass on those understandings to developing adolescents and children. Racially charged incidents and discrimination, should not be a normal thing, but it is. Perhaps, it is not a

direct experience everyone will encounter, but with mediums such as news media and social media further coagulate these incidents into the psyche of children. Essentially, this normalization of observation and visceral trauma via news and social media mediums also, can lead to the formulation of functioning adaptation to “the violence ... in physical, emotional, verbal, or sexual abuse; and adolescents may develop PTSD as a vicarious repercussion of hearing or witnessing news and information about a traumatic event”. Further, “They face great risk of developing symptoms of distress and a range of psychological problems with the most extreme being PTSD” (Yazdani et al., 2015 p. 28). Civil Rights Activist Ruby Ridges, is noted having said, “racism is a grown-up disease and we must stop using our children to spread it”. A notion I agree with entirely. However, my approach to addressing racism and race based trauma centers around children and adolescents. As mentioned in the earlier portions of this manuscript, I do not and will not spend time justifying the reality some persons of color experience. Scholars before and after will continue to justify and validate race based trauma. Similarly, I do not spend energies discussing the faux post-racial society many believe to be true. Instead, I turn my attentions to developing tools children of color can use to conceptualize and articulate themselves with.

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