

Further praise for *The Burden of Heritage*

“Aileen Alleyne has written one of the most ground-breaking books on the vital subject of intergenerational trauma. This truly heartening and gripping contribution to modern psychology offers many bold and essential insights into the nature of global suffering and hatred. We all have much to learn from the author’s wisdom, regardless of the colour of our skin.”

Professor Brett Kahr, Senior Fellow, Tavistock Institute of Medical Psychology, London, and Visiting Professor of Psychoanalysis and Mental Health, Regent’s University London.

“Dr. Aileen Alleyne has created a powerful written narrative of the African Holocaust psychological experience that supports, enhances and is a scholarly gift to individuals engaged in doing the healing work of intergenerational and transgenerational trauma. *The Burden of Heritage* begins with the author’s own story of being six years old and psychologically experiencing what she later understands to be a collapse of her ego. This experience, that occurred when confronted with white Others and familial relations, contributes to the psychic groundwork for Dr. Alleyne’s consciousness as regards her own developing identity, and that of other members of her cultural group. This eventually leads her to become a psychoanalyst. The writing in *The Burden of Heritage* creates a unique and excellent foundation for clinicians, especially those of the African diaspora, to see into their own psychological wounding as well as those of their patients and clients. The book provides the reader with knowledge for self-examination as well as ways to see and move deeper into understanding the racial trauma caused by British government historical racism, exploitation, and economic greed. The root of this racial trauma shows its negative impact not only to those suffering in the 1600s as Britain spread her ‘empire’, but also the contemporary psychological suffering experienced by descendants of formerly enslaved Africanist people. Dr. Alleyne’s book should be required reading for every clinician seeking to better understand Black psychology and African diaspora intergenerational trauma. *The Burden of Heritage* is a creative work that lovingly explores, teaches, and psychologically deepens who we are, and who we can become in terms of healing individual and cultural group racial trauma.”

Fanny Brewster, Ph.D., MFA, author of *The Racial Complex: A Jungian Perspective on Culture and Race*

“The Burden of Heritage is a powerful reminder of the deep and prolonged impact of racial oppression on black communities, and of the importance for all of us – black and white, people of colour – to acknowledge this and find ways to deal with it. Full of new concepts, written with clarity and passion, this book will be invaluable for all those dedicated to racial justice.”

Professor Stephen Frosh, Birkbeck, University of London.

“This book helps to fill an important gap in the psychoanalytic psychotherapeutic theorizing of racial trauma. Focusing on the dual forms of relational transmission of such trauma—the transgenerational and the intergenerational, this book presents an experience-near, personal account of working with racial trauma in psychotherapy. Psychotherapy professionals of all stripes will find it abundantly clear: attending to the sequela of racism must be considered an essential, indeed foundational, aspect of psychotherapeutic work.”

Anton Hart, Ph.D., FABP, FIPA, Faculty, Training and Supervising Analyst, The William Alanson White Institute Private Practice, New York

THE Aileen Alleyne
BURDEN
Hauntings of
Generational Trauma **OF**
on Black Lives
HERITAGE



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living the mind

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About the author

Dr Aileen Alleyne is a UKCP-registered psychodynamic psychotherapist, clinical supervisor and organisational consultant in the UK. She lectures at several training institutions and is a consultant on issues of race and cultural diversity to private organisations and statutory bodies, such as the NHS, Social Services, Education and the Police Services. Her clinical research examining black workers' experiences in three institutional settings makes a significant contribution to the discourse on race. Highlighting the concept of '*the internal oppressor*', it offers ways of deepening understanding of black psychological reactions to the negative impact of racism. Aileen is the author of several book chapters and journal papers exploring themes on Black–White dynamics, shame and identity wounding, and working with issues of difference and diversity in the workplace.

Aileen presents her first published book, *The Burden of Heritage: Hauntings of Generational Trauma on Black Lives* (Karnac Books, 2022), which she hopes is the first of several to come.

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This book reflects my observations, reflections and sense-making of my personal, historical, societal and clinical experiences over time. Although all clients' names, characteristics and descriptions in clinical examples have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals, no characters have been invented and no events fabricated.



The Kiskadee bird symbol will appear at the end of each chapter to signal a break or intermission from reading the text. This favourite native to my birth home, Guyana, is known as a bird with attitude because of its bright yellow breast, proud black and white head and incessant, cheerful, often raucous kiskadee calls. I would like to give special thanks to the artist Catherine Clark at Catherine Clark Studio and the Birdwatchers General Store website: www.birdwatchersgeneralstore.com for permission to use the kiskadee bird illustration in this book.

Preface

The subject of black intergenerational trauma has long occupied my mind. I may not have known it by this term then but, as a child, I remained forever curious as to why older members of my family and black people of a certain age and generation spoke always about 'the white man' with reverence, a certain deference and an observable servility. Why? I thought. What is it about these people that had such an effect on my people? Why did this other seem so big, so powerful, in their minds and in their thinking? Even in my innocent and naïve young years, I questioned this fawning behaviour, this apparent disavowal. I was a prolific reader as a child, and I knew from some of the story books I read that courtiers, and so-called lesser beings, fawned over kings and queens, stooping, bending, submitting and genuflecting in their presence. But I never quite understood why my proud black parents and that older generation gave over their identity pride in this way. It was curious a thing from my child's viewpoint, and it seemed stupefyingly wrong.

In trying to make things congruent in my young mind, I used to ask myself did our people do something wrong or commit a crime that made them humble themselves in the midst of white people? Were they showing gratitude for something that required them to behave in such a beholden way? Were we second class to this first-class, first-world people? These questions left me confused as a child and when, for the very first time, I found myself, aged 6, in very close contact with a white couple, I was almost mute. I remember the experience well. My parents and baby sister had left our home in Guyana in the Caribbean and gone travelling for a whole year to Europe and the UK as part of my father's sabbatical. He worked as a senior agriculturalist for the Guyanese Government in the Ministry of Lands, Mines and Forests. That year, my brother and I, who did not accompany our parents, were very well looked after by our aunt and uncle. I remember also that it was during this year my childhood dreams of becoming an astronaut were reshaped by what I now recognize as a deeply shaming put-down by my paternal grandmother. She dissuaded me from astronomy, as, in her words, black people could not be astronauts, as their nostrils were too large and they would use up far too much oxygen. Nursing, she said, was more suitable and respectable. This puerile and racially reductionist comment made such an impact that my first qualification as an adult was indeed in nursing.

My first contact with white people was on the day of my parent's arrival back in Guyana after my father's sabbatical. He had prearranged with this white couple with

a duck-egg blue and cream Volkswagen camper van to pick us up from our aunt and uncle's home to be finally reunited with them. Being in such close proximity with these two white alien beings, and grappling with what I had previously heard and witnessed as a child from my black folks about white people seemed to cause a strange kind of internal collapse. I remember being mute throughout the journey. My behaviour was labelled as shy, but I now know that the child does not only need love and safety for its healthy development, but two other ingredients, namely congruence and continuity. Congruence, in this context, is about things making sense to the child, and continuity, the steadiness and safety of the parent's presence, particularly at a very young age. Congruence lessens confusion and insecurity and, with safety provided by the continuous presence of the parents, the child is less likely to eventually turn its insecurities onto and into itself. Left unchecked, this scenario provides the perfect breeding ground for identity shame: *I am not as good as the other person, I am second best, I am inferior, I am not entitled.*

Sitting in the back seat of the camper van and being so close to these two white people was a powerfully confusing experience. As I quietly observed them, I felt they were ordinary and nothing particularly special. Yet, the woman's blonde hair, blue eyes and both of their very pale, Scandinavian skins and strange accents made them very different to me, the little black girl.

Looking back all those years, the paradox for my child's mind was seeing and experiencing ordinary and extraordinary at the same time. Madan Sarup (1996) says that 'we are not born with an identity; we begin the process of identity-construction with identification'. My internalized parental identifications, which were shaped by my black elders' reverential relationship towards and with the white Other, had collided at the age of 6 with my innocent, normal, curious and more natural child-like experience of noting racial difference. However, with my identifications strongly imprinted, there was internal confusion within my young self – one of feeling a lesser being in the presence of the two white people I had met – and herein lie the dynamics that lead to identity shame-based experiences.

'Identity shame leads to identity disavowal', my own description of the infantilisation the black self experiences in the presence of whiteness, is also expressed by Fanon (1986, p. 154):

When the negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing actions takes place. If his psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego. The black man stops behaving as an actional person. The goal of his behaviour will be The Other (in the guise of the white man), for The Other alone can give him worth.

Something devastatingly awful happens intrapsychically to cause this collapse,

this infantilization, this belittling of the black person's entitled human status. Sixty plus years on, the confused little Guyanese girl has found clarity through her anthropological curiosity, dedication and persistence in making sense of her world. These qualities saw me through my adolescent, teenage and young adult life. It perhaps was no surprise that I would leave my country of origin at barely 19 to travel on my own to the UK. My grandmother's words culminated in my becoming a psychiatric and general trained nurse, and subsequently moving away to train as a psychotherapist.

As a more knowing adult, and someone who enjoys her work in private practice, I can now articulate my adult voice to coin my own phrase about the intergenerational burden: what ceases to be a coincidence must be a phenomenon. This phrase, that many of my clients fondly tease me of using frequently, is one that speaks to the ubiquitous and unique nature of black historical trauma – which no black person seems able to escape, and which leads to the challenging work of healing from identity shame and identity disavowal. This affliction, and Fanon's concept of the collapse of the ego, both speak profoundly to the burden still carried (in varying degrees), and the ever-present 'ruptures' caused by the familiar presence of racial hauntings.

This book is a crucial and timely addition to the library of diverse psychological texts covering the far-reaching impact of trauma. Trauma, as the main tenet of black ancestral or historical baggage, is a subject that has long preoccupied my interest as a psychotherapist. I have been a keen observer and facilitator of our ability as human beings to heal and transcend psychological pain, and the subject of black intergenerational trauma presents a particular challenge in mediating our lives at the intersection of our history, the present and the future. In the context of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, a major part of this challenge of healing from intergenerational wounds is facilitating work that teaches the art of both remembering and forgetting.

From the perspective of a psychotherapist, and through my Caribbean and British lenses, I have much to say and share about black historical and psychological trauma. I have already investigated this topic at great length for my master's and doctorate degrees. This book further highlights the impact of this unheeded dimension of trauma, where the historical, social, political and spiritual coalesce, with significant psychological and emotional impact. In the immersive process, clarity emerged in both the nature and the understanding of the burden of black heritage and racial hauntings. From my work as a psychotherapist, I am particularly aware of the effects of this trauma on clients' core sense of self, their private and public identities, and their individual capacity for growth and individuation.

What I will try to articulate in this book is the profound and continuing trauma

impact on Caribbean and African people by Britain, ‘the mother country’, a dominant patriarchal force that held rule over her ‘subjects’ from the sixteenth century, settling in St Kitts in 1624, Barbados, Montserrat and Antigua in 1627, and Nevis in 1628. The mother country, as it was fondly referred to by Caribbean elders, was one of the chief colonizers among other equally notorious European and American colonial powers. They all played their part in engineering the slave trade from as far back as the fifteenth century, with each nation growing their empires from slave-based industries. The justification for the slave trade and slavery itself to be able to flourish for an astonishing 400 years, was, without doubt, the fact of greed – that it was lucrative and easy to invade and exploit so-called third world peoples with impunity. Additionally, within the collective white psyches of the oppressors, shame and guilt found no place, as they were dealing with subhumans: black lives did not matter. The harsh and inhumane treatment of black humans could only be justified by the idea that they were part of an inferior ‘race’ – and therefore lesser beings. This assuaging of collective guilt placed ‘white’ people at the top, ‘black’ people at the bottom and different ‘mixed’ groups somewhere in between. Invented by white people, this stratification was a way of trying to excuse the brutality of slavery.

Britain’s sizeable share of and substantial benefits from colonizing much of the Caribbean, Africa and India puts her front and centre of black and brown people’s ongoing difficult relationship with their colonial past. Despite this fact, there remains a knee-jerk tendency in British society to point out the role of African middlemen who were complicit in the human trafficking industry. This reminder seems to act as a rationale, albeit a poor one, for the dehumanizing atrocity of slavery. Such deflection and lack of full ownership of this history quietly contribute to keeping open the deep psychological historical wound. The resultant generational impact on black lives makes black and white people strange bedfellows, who are both dependent on and separate from each other. Each has had their lives shaped and impacted by the other.

Bowlby’s Attachment Theory (1969; 1973) tells us that the key attachment figures in any family or group system wield the power to influence attachment patterns of relating, being and growing. In the context of the abused child, it would be the abusive parent, the opportunistic abusive paedophile and the narcissistic and coercive abusive family member. In the context of the colonized and colonizer, Britain’s relationship with the many islands of the Caribbean, the vast continents of Africa and India, highlights a parallel history of abuse and infantilisation that has shaped attachment patterns and relationships between these nations and peoples. Behavioural attitudes, relatedness to each other and capacities for growth are key areas where the impact can be studied. In summary, it could be concluded that Britain and her empire have engineered one of the most effective forms of abusive attachment, one that has bred a history of transgenerational dependency,

indebtedness, impoverishment and psychological emasculation among her subjects. The concomitant effects of these impactful relationship dynamics are scrutinized within this book.

Since Ghana gained freedom from British rule in 1957, many black (and brown) colonized countries have become independent nations in their own right. Most recently, Barbados became a republic in November 2021, ending the island's nearly 400-year relationship with the British monarchy. However, in the eyes and experiences of the colonized, Britain as 'the mother country' and colonizer has failed in her duty to atone for the atrocities of human trading and the inhumane treatment of these subjects. In this loud silence and collective forgetting, which hide the cruelty of the past, the indelible wounds remain untreated and unhealed. An increasingly nationalistic climate, which justifies the British Empire's dominant slave-trading power as bringing economic development and benefits to so-called 'third world' peoples, means that the transgenerational wound cannot be healed. When Britain's former prime minister, David Cameron (in 2013 on a visit to India), remarked that the Empire should be 'celebrated', transgenerational wounds were reopened and left the painful presence of racial hauntings. Historical wounds will not be given the chance to heal when a YouGov survey finds that 44 per cent of British people were proud of Britain's history of colonialism and thought it was a good thing, whereas only 21 per cent regretted that it happened, and 23 per cent held neither view. This empirical evidence shows that people are not aware of Britain's crimes against black humanity, while many choose to remain silent. Many still hold the view that imperialism was benign and that its overriding purpose was not land-grabbing, greed and exploitation, but 'to humanize the natives'. This airbrushing and total disregard of the past make the work of transgenerational healing even more painful for the wronged. There is a need for a day dedicated to the recognition of those black lives that suffered and were lost, lest we forget. In my view, a national day of commemoration would be fitting, and this would also be a gesture of atonement for Britain's significant and atrocious 400-year past.

At the time of writing, we have all been witness to history and its vicissitudes surfacing in more challenging and even dangerous ways. At a global level, the barbaric actions of a megalomaniac despot are reminiscent of how powerful nations wield their might in the pursuit of empire building and ethnic superiority. At a level closer to home, the shocking incident of a 15-year-old black girl on her period, being strip-searched by Metropolitan police officers at a London school, is highly evocative of intimate body searches of black bodies during slavery times. These present-day happenings activate powerful hauntings and reopen deep wounds for black people globally. Our clinical work is shaped overtly or covertly by these reverberations, as clients battle to create safer and quieter mental spaces amid a divided and increasingly hateful world. In this silent tyranny, other recent events such as the spark that gave life to the Black Lives Matter movement,

re-trigger hauntings and reopen historical wounds. We are made more aware of our histories and, for black people, a deeper, more painful connection with the legacies of generational trauma is inescapable.

In this journey I am both the observer and the observed; in other words, I have not escaped the impact of what I write about. There is potential for vicarious traumatisation, where my own historical and generational wounds are reopened. I therefore see the writing of this book as an act of sublimation: it is my way of redirecting those energies that stem from a place of wounding towards creativity and healing.

Introduction

This book is essentially a text for therapy practitioners and general readers, about an unheeded dimension of trauma that is, paradoxically, omnipresent. It is everywhere in our midst but, like a virus, is unseen yet impactful. My aim is to reveal its presence and shine a light on its complex workings, offering an in-depth understanding of a historical phenomenon that produces deep psychological wounding to a collective of people.

Race and ethnicity terminology

Racial terminology is daunting, confusing, sensitive and ever-changing. For these reasons, I wish to offer at the outset a definition of some regularly used terms to indicate clearly how I will be using them throughout the book. A full glossary of additional terms is also offered at the end of the book.

I have used the term **'black'** to include people with known African heritage, who can be discriminated against because of the colour of their skin. Black is also used as a political term, rooted in racial oppression that pervaded directly from the trans-Atlantic slave trade, giving birth to the civil rights movement and all subsequent organized political and social justice campaigns for change. Alongside the description of black, I use the inclusive term **'people of colour'**, (also in current use as BIPOC – an acronym meaning, black, indigenous, and people of colour), to embrace a wide range of people who are not white or of full European heritage, that is racial groups whose geographical origins are from south Asia, or the Indian subcontinent, including China, Japan, Malaysia, Mauritius, Pakistan, to name a few. It is important to note that, in some current discourses, the term 'people of colour' is seen as sitting in opposition to or set against white as not being a colour. **Mixed-race** or **mixed-heritage people** of any mix of ethnic origin or background are included in the people of colour category, and the term is also used for diverse minority ethnic groups aggregating in social solidarity, (including those who see themselves as 'white-passing'). Again, some find the term 'mixed', in mixed-race, problematic, as it carries a connotation of impurity or a state of incompleteness. These movements in current discourses, although confusing, are healthy, as they highlight the nature of culture being fluid, dynamic and complex. **'Minority ethnic'** is an umbrella term that is used interchangeably in the book to embrace all of the aforementioned groups, including those from hidden white minorities, such

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as travellers, Gypsies, Irish and Jewish groups, the last who are often mistakenly seen in narrow terms of being a cultural or religious minority only. The term '**race**' will cover nationality, national origin and ethnicity or ethnic origin, and I also use the term 'race' to highlight and explain social constructs that pathologize skin colour and racial attributes that are not biological fact. '**Ethnic origin**' or '**ethnicity**' is used to define shared history/ancestry, language or distinct shared culture. '**Culture**' incorporates broader aspects of ethnicity, religion/belief, values, behaviours, practices, preferences, styles. I also include my new term '**aggregate collective**' to mean a same race group comprising its own distinct differences. '**White** and **white people**' are used in the book as a racialized classification for Caucasian people, for example of European origin, and as a skin colour specifier for people with white skin.

Because the aetiology of generational trauma does not fall easily into the more well-known categories and classifications of trauma, the overlooked dimension of psychological damage to black lives will be fully explained, contextualized and illuminated. The subject will not be distilled down to addressing intergenerational trauma only by what can be observed to be happening with therapists and clients in the consulting room – the reader will also be given a holistic understanding of a phenomenon that embraces all that is going on for the client at three important meeting places: the past, the present and the future. This is where the burden of heritage and racial hauntings meet and will be fully explored.

Standing at the coalface of this intersection with black clients will mean that we will also be hit vicariously by the invisible historical particles and inevitable obstacles of the past – a past that is both the black client and the practitioner's history. There is no way of dodging this. Black intergenerational trauma is essentially about the psychological impact of unprocessed and reactivated pain, suffering and damage caused by man's inhumanity to man. The perpetuation of this historical malady down the generations has meant that the impact of generational trauma has fundamentally left the colonizer and colonized and the oppressor and oppressed, locked in the position of needing the other, yet ambivalent and watchful of them at the same time.

It feels important at this juncture to include a brief summary of my doctoral research (Alleyne, 2006), which is the forerunner and biggest influence for my developed thinking in writing this book. I refer to the findings in subsequent chapters in the book. The doctorate further developed the race theme focus from my master's degree, and the book is the consummate project that brings together my developed ideas, understanding and practice knowledge in the thorny subject of race trauma.