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Aaminah Norris
anorris3@usfca.edu

Babalwa Kwanele
babalwakwanele@gmail.com

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Notes From the Field

(Un)Hidden Grief and Loss Inform the Movement for Black Lives

Dr. Aaminah Norris* & Babalwa Kwanele, LMFT**

Abstract

We are Black women and lifelong friends committed to the movement for Black lives because it impacts us, our families, and our communities. After

* **Dr. Aaminah Norris** is Founder and CEO of UnHidden Voices LLC, a Black woman-owned educational consultancy with a mission of building empathy and disrupting the invisibility of Black children, students, and families. Norris has more than 25 years of experience supporting schools and not for profit organizations in addressing issues of educational equity for low-income students from historically marginalized communities. Her background in education includes teaching, administration, and culturally responsive curriculum-development for thousands of students in grades K-16. She researches, teaches, and advocates the digital literacies of Black girls and women, with a particular interest in their STEM practices, culturally responsive pedagogies particularly as they connect to maker education, and the pedagogies of Black women teachers. Dr. Norris authored curricula for the films "Miss Representation" and "The Mask You Live In." Currently, she is an Associate Professor in the Teaching Credentials Branch of the College of Education at Sacramento State University. anorris3@usfca.edu

** **Babalwa Kwanele** is a licensed mental health therapist (LMFT), with over 20 years of professional experience working with culturally diverse youth, children, and families in community mental health and school-based settings. Her work and research have a special focus on prevention and intervention, with the goal of improving academic outcomes and the social determinants of health. Ms. Kwanele holds a Master's of Science degree in counseling with a concentration in Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) and education. She has extensively studied the neurobiology of trauma and the effects of racism and poverty on communities, families, individuals, and complex systems since 1990. She is a well-seasoned professional trainer and consultant. babalwakwanele@gmail.com

the death of George Floyd, we began a purposeful and concerted effort to address the trauma of state-sanctioned murders, the Covid-19 pandemics, and the California wildfires on us and our community in our work. Our effort, grounded in sisterhood, is a quest for collective healing. During our search, we uncovered the complexity of grief over systemic racism and anti-Black hate. This essay is our effort to acknowledge, name, and frame complex grief and its impact on Black people, including ourselves. We detail an intertwined web of grief that has 11 components. We also share the initial upstream solutions we have uncovered in our efforts to collectively heal.

Babalwa Kwanele is a South African name that means someone who is blessed, has had enough and is ready to change things. My full name Aminah Muhammad Nomusa Norris is a mixture of Arabic, South African, and English. It means a praiseworthy and gracious woman you can believe in who hails to the north. Our sisterhood that began approximately 35 years ago connects us, our faith, families, and communities. It has led us to acknowledge the complexities of grief over racism and anti-Black hate and the importance of collective healing. As residents of the San Francisco Bay Area, we were sheltering in place when George Floyd was assassinated on May 25, 2020. Floyd, an African American man from Minneapolis, Minnesota, was suffocated to death as he repeatedly stated, "I can't breathe." During an interview on ABC News, Floyd's sister said, "We were told that a police officer had his knee kneeled into my brother's neck while he was handcuffed to the ground" (KABC, 2020). Floyd's utterance that he could not breathe harkens back to other Black victims of police violence including Eric Garner, who made the same statement before he died due to a police chokehold in 2014 (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015).

A week after George Floyd's assassination, Sister Aminah's four-year old grandson, Zachariah, asked his mother, her eldest daughter, Leilani, "we don't like the police right, Mommy?" Leilani tried to explain to her son that the police are there to protect them. He interrupted her as his voice quivered, "what will happen to me if the cops shoot me?" Moments after I (Aminah) learned of Zachariah's fears, my brother called to inform me that he and our cousins were tear gassed as they engaged in a peaceful protest in Oakland, California. At 7:15am on May 31, 2020, I sent a text message to Sister

Babalwa. It read, “Sis, it’s time. You and I need to write a joint statement. We need to address anti-Blackness.”

This essay is our statement. It includes excerpts from the conversation that we had on that last day of May 2020.¹ Our conversation launched Aaminah’s work with (Un)Hidden Voices, an educational consultancy with the mission of building empathy for and disrupting the invisibility of Black children, students, and families. When Sister Babalwa asked me (Aaminah) if I had a chance to grieve George Floyd’s death, I explained that in an article by Dayan (2015), he describes the terror that Black people experience over others’ nonchalance at our inability to breathe. The terror we suffer as a result of the nonchalance is exacerbated by Covid-19, a respiratory disease that limits its victims’ capacity to breathe. According to APM Research Labs, “The latest Covid-19 mortality rate for Black Americans is 2.3 times as high as the rate for Whites and Asians.” For us, the acknowledgment of our grief is a step toward collective healing because it results in clarity. We have come to recognize the manifestations of Black people’s grief over nonchalance, dehumanization, and anti-Black racism. Below is a poem that Aaminah wrote in an effort to explain the complexity of our grief.

If. Then. Grief.

*If we do things that other people take for granted
Then we could die
If we are in our own damn apartment with our doors closed
Then we can be shot and killed
If we watch television
Then we got to see our brother laid down like an animal
If you as a human being have resolved this
Then you cannot identify the evil
If you have learned that it is okay that Black folks can’t breathe
Then your humanity is gone
If you cannot tell the difference between Black and blue*

¹ A podcast episode of a conversation between Aaminah and Babalwa about “Becoming AntiRacist” can be accessed here: <https://anchor.fm/aaminah-norris/episodes/Episode-4-Becoming-AntiRacist-eglte8>

*Then you do not care about our breath
If Our grief is Angry
Then you call us defiant and kneel on our necks
If Our Grief is
Enraged
Then you tell us to regulate ourselves
If Our Grief shouts, "this is outrageous!"
Then you silently watch us at meetings
If you are a sponge soaking up all of our energy
Then you calmly say, "thank you for sharing."
If Our grief is
Numbness
Then you congratulate us, "You are such a strong Black woman. So resilient."
If you disregard our votes
Then you see them as an endorsement of systemic racism
If Our grief is
Desperate
Then you ask us, "can you please center others?"
If you are asked to wear a mask
Then you complain, "Why are you always talking about Black people?"
If you carry guns instead
Then Our grief is Unapologetic*

Our contribution to this special issue on human rights education and Black liberation is a definition of the complex grief we as Black Americans experience as a result of anti-Black hate and racism including the impact of multigenerational trauma on our grief. We then suggest a means of collective healing through upstream solutions. In our efforts to support others' healing, we have come to recognize and acknowledge our own grief and the grief of our communities.

Complex Grief as an Interconnected Web

We now see grief for what it is; grief is complicated and complex. Sister Babalwa drew on the work of Degruy (2005), Lipscomb and Ashley (2018), and the World Health Organization (2014) to

create a framework for complex grief as an interconnected web with 11 subsets that impact one another and manifest without regard to chronology. The subsets and their explanations are below:

1. Systemic racism: A system that is designed with the sole purpose of maintaining power, control, and dominance over a race of people and their progress. This form of discrimination has erected laws that allows the White² dominant class unearned privileges and powers. Such benefits and advancements are exploited and hoarded from those that are oppressed. One clear example of systemic racism is in the tenure and promotion process in higher education because policies and procedures advantage White faculty and disadvantage Black faculty. Eighty percent of full professors are White. Only 2% of full professors are Black faculty (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020). In 2019, I (Aaminah) earned an early tenure and promotion to associate professor. I grieve the process because I saw the systematicity of racism meted out by my colleagues. I was forced to name and frame the anti-Blackness within the institution for my colleagues by quoting statistics and proving my worth to earn the tenure and promotion that I received. It was brutal.

2. Overt racism, oppression, fear of violence and death: Racism and oppression intertwined with the threat of loss of life due to state-sanctioned violence is a part of the daily experience in Black life. This daily burden causes a profound sense of sadness and loss that lays dormant in our minds as an ever-present reality. This is crystalized for us by the assassination of Breonna Taylor who was murdered while she slept. In an interview on

² Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups for articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see [here](#)): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.

MSNBC, Brittany Packnett Cunningham's (2020) analysis of the verdict clarifies the pain we experience by the fact that 99% of the time when our lives are taken by state-sanctioned terror, the police are found not guilty.

3. Family stress, loss, and disruption of coping strategies: Racism, trauma, discrimination, poverty, and restricted access to health and mental health care has had an impact on the quality of interfamilial relationships because the family system is extremely taxed and overwhelmed. These compounded factors, combined with a lack of support due to inequities, create family stress and challenges the family's ability to effectively cope with grief and loss. We have seen the racially disproportionate loss of life and health from Covid-19. According to the Centers for Disease Control (2020), 34% of all Covid-19 deaths were among Black people, a group that is only 12% of the total United States' population. Within this death count, there were many losses from the same family, further exacerbating the pain of loss.

4. Intergenerational stress and multigenerational transmission of historical trauma: Trauma is a physical and psychological distress response to an overwhelming and unbearable experience that is potentially life-threatening either personally witnessed and/or learned about. Such stress and adverse experiences are handed down from parent to child (Intergenerational) and from generation to generation (multigenerational) orally, experientially, and genetically. These distress responses can have a negative physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, neurological, and/or cognitive impact on the individual, resulting in reduced daily life functioning and abilities to cope with grief and loss. Further complicating grief, is the historical trauma of the United States' chattel slavery, which has created what Dr. Joy DeGruy calls Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome, which contributes to toxic stress. The intergenerational transmission of adversity and toxic stress is well documented in California Surgeon General Nadine Burke Harris' (2020) report.

5. Disregard and disruption of faith-based systems: The disregard of faith-based natural support systems from mental health treatment and education may have a negative impact on expected treatment and learning outcomes. Disruptions to the opportunity to worship or practice faith rituals denies access to an essential practice of Black cultural collective healing. One way that faith-based systems are disregarded is that they have been described as “non-essential” during the global pandemic. For many of us, our faith affords us with the capacity to persevere despite the impact of our grief and loss on our lives.

6. Dehumanization and marginalization of culture: Cultural appropriation that extracts humanity from Black culture; rebrands and exploits our culture and our bodies for corporate profit. Ominira Mars (2020) examines an open letter written by Jessica Krug, a White African American Studies professor who pretended to be a Black woman. Mars writes that Krug’s appropriation of Blackness is haunting because it provides a concrete example of how White people move through Black spaces taking on aesthetics that are pleasing and palatable to the White gaze.

7. Microaggressions and macroaggression: Living while Black connotes the endurance of stereotypes, racial profiles, insults cloaked in compliments, racism, and verbal and non-verbal messages that communicate rejection from mainstream society. Too often we shift the focus from the aggrieved person while the individual who inflicts harm is allowed to deflect responsibilities with claims that the aggressions were unintended. Either this or the person inflicting micro-aggressive or macro-aggressive behaviors denies that they caused any harm. Thus, we are forced to relive the trauma; detail the harm. This is grief inducing and retraumatizing.

8. The social determinants of health and mental health: World Health Organization (2014), describes a social determinant of good mental health as critical to the health and well-being of an individual. Risk factors such as

inequalities in economic, social, and physical environments have a profound impact on mental wellness. “Mental health disorders are a leading cause of disability in the United States. Lack of access to mental health care further reduces quality of life for millions of people [...]. African Americans continue to be hospitalized for mental health disorders at much higher rates than other racial/ethnic groups.” (City of Berkeley, 2020, pp. 80 & 83).

9. Black economic disempowerment: Black people in America have continually been placed back at the starting line of economic growth and development; this problem continues to be a reality. The suffering of Black economic disempowerment is substantial. Disempowerment happens as a result of “institutional practices like redlining, the undervaluation of homes in majority-Black neighborhoods and predatory lending continue to exacerbate racial wealth disparities. The failure to fully address these inequities further sustains the wealth gap from generation to generation” (Joint Economic Committee Democrats, 2020).

10. Absence of opportunities to heal and grieve: DeGruy (2005) explains the absence of opportunities to heal from the pains of enslavement. Such pains, coupled with ongoing life stressors, makes grief an almost unrecognizable element in daily life, thereby limiting the opportunity to focus on healing. When Bablawa and I first began addressing anti-Blackness, it was through the lens of complex trauma. We did not realize the complexity and enormity of our grief because it was hidden from us. Therefore, we could not begin the healing process.

11. Environmental disasters natural and man-made: Black people, among other people of color, have been America’s canary in the coal mine. The disparate rates of health and mental health problems and economic collapse resulting in disasters points to systemic environmental injustice. Covid-19 is a manifestation of the ways that health disparities have caused disproportionate death in Black families and communities. Our deaths have been exacerbated by the ineptitude on the federal level. Our Blackness is a pre-existing condition.

Towards Upstream Solutions

Once on a hike near a river in Yosemite National Park, Babalwa photographed a sign that read, “victims swept downstream seldom survive.” She shared with me and others in our community that we need for our solutions to be upstream so that we can survive the events that seek to snatch our breath and end our lives. We began to search for upstream solutions to address the complex trauma we experience from the Covid-19 pandemic, fires in California (Hutchinson, 2020), anti-Black violence, and systemic racism. It was through ongoing discussion, reflection, writing, and revisiting the site of our grief that it became unhidden for us. We came to a collective realization that we were indeed grieving.

We uncovered that the trauma was indeed encapsulated in a web of complex grief. The first upstream solution we developed was the process of naming and framing the grief we experience. Aminah describes this as “healing out loud” and Babalwa names the uncanny ability to cope by “forecasting danger” that may result in a grief-producing situation. To name and frame our own grief allows others to heal with us because they come to recognize their own grief. For example, after Babalwa and I discussed our grief over George Floyd’s death on the (Un)Hidden Voices podcast, listeners shared with me that it was cathartic for them. As we share our grief, others grieve with us. Thus, we commit to acknowledging our grief as we continue to work in the movement for Black lives. Naming grief is a contribution to the movement because it is a humanizing practice. It affords us with the opportunity to acknowledge the pain we experience by the loss of life and anti-Blackness. It is only by acknowledgement of our grief that we can process and heal. Lastly, we invite you to join forces in our effort to make it upstream and heal out loud because the time for collective healing is now. We have begun our swim upstream and our plan is to continue to seek sustainable solutions.

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