

**My Grandmother's Hands:
Racialized Trauma And The Pathway To Mending Our Hearts And Bodies**
Resmaa Menakem

SYNOPSIS

My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies, is a 300-page book examining the damage caused by racism in the United States from the perspective of trauma and body-centered psychology. The author, Resmaa Menakem, is a therapist who specializes in trauma, body-centered psychotherapy, and violence prevention with a private practice in Minneapolis, MN. To Menakem, the body is where our instincts reside and where we fight, flee, or freeze, as it endures the trauma inflicted by the ills that plague our society. Menakem believes that the destruction of our bodies will continue until Americans learn to heal the generational anguish of white supremacy, which is deeply embedded in all our bodies. The author also begins each chapter in the book with a quote from famous historical figures to set the tone of the chapter and includes several stories and anecdotes of the wisdom of Menakem's grandmother, Addie Coleman, an amazing woman who helped make him the man he is today. *My Grandmother's Hands* is a call to action for Americans to recognize that racism is not about the head, but about the body. This book offers an alternative view of what we can do to grow beyond our entrenched racialized divide by paving the way for a new, body-centered understanding of white supremacy and by providing a step-by-step healing process, in addition to incisive social commentary.

ASSIGNMENT RECOMMENDATION

Menakem helps readers get inside the black experience to encounter everyday threats and the responses of fighting, fleeing, or freezing by offering an innovative body-centered approach to begin the healing process. However, assigning the entire book as reading may not be beneficial as the focus of some chapters are too narrow in the context of Race and Restorative Justice. Therefore, Professors should consider assigning all of Part I: Unarmed and Dismembered, select chapters of Part II: Remembering Ourselves, and select chapters from Part III: Mending Our Collective Body depending on time.

The author notes that the opening chapters of Part II are for everyone, while later chapters in Part II focus on specific groups, specifically African Americans, white Americans, and American police. The chapters for African American readers provide body-centered experiences meant to help Black Americans experience their bodies, begin to recognize, and release trauma, and bring some of that healing and room into the communal body. The chapters for white readers draws from conducting workshops for white allies, facilitators, conflict resolves, and healing practioners and focuses on the community aspects of mending white bodies. The chapters for law enforcement draw from the trainings the author has led for police officers on trauma, self-care, white-body supremacy, and creating some healing infrastructure in their departments and precincts. Nonetheless, professors should use their best judgment and discretion in assigning readings from the book.

PART BREAKDOWN

1. **Prologue** (Do Not Cross This Line, Watch Your Body, Acknowledging Our Ancestors, Our Bodies, Our Country)

My Grandmother's Hands dives into the complex effects of racism and white privilege in the United States. Menakem's sensitive but probing approach departs from traditional academic approaches by speaking from the wisdom of his grandmother and his own expertise in somatic therapy, a field that emphasizes the connection between mind and body. Trauma, both present-day and historical, forms the cornerstone of Menakem's analysis. Menekem writes that race is a "myth—something made up in the 17th century," with the concepts of whiteness and racial superiority nonetheless now "essential facts of life, like birth, death and gravity." The result of such beliefs is that both black and white people are traumatized with fear of the other and with the "dirty pain of avoidance, blame, and denial."

At the outset of the book, Menakem urges readers to "experience" his book in their bodies. To accomplish this, body centric activities, such as breath exercises, are described throughout the book. Similarly, Menakem emphasizes body mindfulness, helping the audience move from unhealthy reflexive responses to traumatic emotions to the conscious experience of "clean pain," which involves directly

addressing such traumatic emotions and thereby finding solutions to overcome them. Menakem is particularly specific when targeting his messages. He writes, "To all my white readers, welcome... let's get to work." To police officers and law-enforcement personnel he gives the same welcome. To African Americans, he offers counsel and highlights the value of their experiences.

2. **Part I: Unarmed and Dismembered** (Chapters 1–9)

In Part 1 of the book, Menakem suggests that racism is embedded in the hearts, souls, and reflexes of both blacks and whites in American society, and that the trauma is inflicted on many because of this fact is harmful to all. Menakem highlights the meaning of the body-centered psychology and understanding of white supremacy—how it is literally in our blood and nervous system. To this end, Menakem implores readers must begin to understand the depth of this toxicity within our bodies, go to the depth of where it is stored and heal within our collective bones and muscles. Part I demonstrates how “white-body supremacy” gets systemically (if often unconsciously or unwittingly) embedded in our American bodies *even before we are born*, creating ongoing trauma and a legacy of suffering for virtually all of us.

Specifically, Part I goes into detail regarding the experiences of Black Americans and the impact of their trauma as it relates to the bodies and blood of African slaves. Menakem explores the bodies of both Black and white Americans from generations past and how they differ in experience. Menakem’s analysis of Black bodies includes the assault of the Black heart and the violation of the Black body. He also explores the experience of “Blue” bodies—law enforcement officers—and the interplay of their bodies and blood with African Americans. Accordingly, white-body supremacy is a key concept in Part I of *My Grandmother’s Hands*, as the author describes how white supremacy is embedded into the bodies of white Americans resulting in an involuntary and subconscious racial bias.

Menakem concludes Part I with the chapter titled “Changing the World Begins with Your Body” which demonstrates how widespread racialized trauma and physical problems are the result of ongoing violations of the Black body and heart. Healing the underlying trauma is the essential first step in healing our bodies, and the place to begin that healing is in each of our bodies. He also recognizes that white

Americans and police officers have their own common health issues, which are also related to underlying historical, intergenerational, and personal trauma. Menakem urges white Americans and police officers to retrain their bodies to feel safe in the presence of African American bodies.

3. **Part II: Remembering Ourselves** (Chapters 10–17)

In Part II, the opening chapters are for all readers, while later chapters focus on specific groups: African Americans, white Americans, and American police. Menahem looks at how each of us can better settle and manage our body. The author offers guided exercises and social commentary to help to pave the way for understanding one another and building a stronger community that benefits everyone. Menakem also teaches readers how to activate healing of our bodies deliberately and mindfully in situations that require it. In Part II, readers experience and absorb dozens of activities designed to help you mend your own personal trauma around white-body supremacy and create more room and opportunities for growth in your own nervous system.

4. **Part III: Mending Our Collective Body** (Chapters 18–24)

In the final Part of the book, the author provides tools to take personal healing and newfound knowledge and awareness on the mind-body centered approach into the community. Menakem examines how healing can ripple outward from one body to another, and from groups of bodies into our systems and structures. Menakem emphasizes that this communal healing can help us steadily build respect, recognition, community, and eventually, culture. Part III also provides some simple, structured activities for helping other people you encounter release the trauma of white-body supremacy—in families, neighborhoods, workplaces, and elsewhere. Menahem begins Part III with tools and strategies that anyone can apply, and follows them with specific chapters for African American, white American, and police. These activities are meant to be practiced with others as Menakem notes that readers may discover that you are naturally helping *each other* heal.

Reviewed by Jesse Addo