

*Black Religion / Womanist Thought / Social Justice*

# RACE, RELIGION, AND RESILIENCE IN THE NEOLIBERAL AGE

CEDRIC C. JOHNSON



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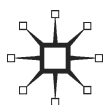
Cedric C. Johnson



# Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age

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To my wife,  
Veronica Diane Cohn Johnson,  
And my parents,  
Cornelius and Marjorie Ruth Johnson





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## Preface and Acknowledgments

The ideas in this book began to take shape during the years I worked as a mental health professional in New York City. My interests in mental health treatment centered on the challenges and needs of multicultural populations in urban settings. After completing my graduate studies at Hunter College School of Social Work, I was employed as a staff psychotherapist at an outpatient community mental health clinic in Harlem. It was there, under the clinical supervision of the inimitable Doris Dennard and her husband, Fred Dennard, that I was introduced to a holistic psycho-spiritual approach to mental health counseling. This orientation ran counter to the theories and approaches I was trained in that focused on interpersonal dynamics, while muting cultural factors, including the role of spirituality in assessment and treatment strategies. The seeds planted during the years serving in Harlem, in many ways, set the trajectory for much of my future work.

I advanced in the field through promotions to clinical supervisor and then to director of an outpatient mental health clinic in Brooklyn. Now responsible for the oversight of a staff of psychiatrists and clinicians, I was increasingly troubled by the amount of influence pharmaceutical companies exert in the field. I was also disturbed that the preponderance of research on African Americans and mental health, at that time, was deficit-oriented. Diagnostic protocols situated pathology within the patient, with little to no consideration given to how poverty and racism functioned in people's lives as precipitating factors. Scant attention was given to promoting prevention or wellness. However, my exposure to the seminal text *Black Families in*

*Therapy: A Multi-systems Approach* by the African American psychologist, Nancy Boyd-Franklin, confirmed my own conviction that a culturally sensitive, multi-systems approach was needed to care effectively for the well-being of black and brown populations.

The ideas presented in this study, however, have as much to do with my personal journey. I was born and raised in New York City. My parents, seeking a better life for their children, purchased a home and moved the family to the East New York section of Brooklyn. The neighborhood was racially mixed upon our arrival. An Italian medical doctor operated a private practice on the block. Without warning, though, the neighborhood drastically changed. Our white neighbors suddenly disappeared as if they were forewarned that the outbreak of a plague was imminent. And indeed it was. We were unaware, at the time, that they thought it was us. Devastating forces were, in fact, about to be unleashed upon our community and several others in the city. What was a stable area comprising working class and middle class families would soon resemble a war zone. I would grow up haunted by nightmarish scenes of decimated neighborhoods littered with endless blocks of abandoned apartment buildings. My parents, like so many others who had worked so hard to purchase a home here, continued to work to ensure their children weren't swallowed up by this voracious urban cesspool. Most of the media's "talking heads" were blaming the black and brown victims. But when your dad models a work ethic that had him leaving the house for work before dawn every day and your mother goes back to college after having three children, even as a kid, you instinctively knew something was amiss with the media's portrayal of the dominant narrative. Yet, as I sought to understand what had transpired in the inner city, the available meaning-making resources proved insufficient. The official interpreters for black America were predominantly former leaders in the Civil Rights movement. They saw the world and black America's challenges through an interpretive lens tethered to the 1960s. That heuristic lens, however, did not adequately address the dynamics of what, in the 1980s and 1990s, was a distinctively

different socio-historical moment. As a result, even before my experiences as a mental health professional heightened my sensitivity to the importance of family systems, spirituality and culture, my personal experiences made me acutely aware of the impact of economic policies and political systems on human development.

The subtext informing both my personal and professional development is derived from my experiences in the Black Church. My formative years were spent in an atypical Church of God in Christ (COGIC). The church was co-pastored by Ithiel Clemmons, one of the first black Pentecostals to receive his formal education from Union Theological Seminary in New York. For Dr. Clemmons, African American Pentecostalism contained the psychocultural and spiritual resources needed to live an effective and empowered life in the “here and now.” This was the overriding emphasis of his ministry. As a practitioner of soul care, I am likewise oriented to view black religious forms as complex and contested spaces capable of facilitating empowered living. African diasporic religious forms, from this perspective, are seen as rich potential resources for individual and communal healing.

My desire to develop a framework for pastoral care that integrates all of these strands—culturally sensitive forms of communal care, the healing capacity of black religious forms, a multi-systems approach, and critical analyses of structures of power and oppression—led me to pursue doctoral studies. In light of these stated interests, I became intrigued by the therapeutic value of a congregation-based ritual known as the Maafa Commemoration. I had previously attended the commemoration at St. Paul Community Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York, and was powerfully impacted by the presentation. The commemoration is understood as being responsive to the vestiges of historical trauma in the lives of black Americans. However, my research suddenly took on new meaning when I realized that the Maafa Commemoration had its inception during the period when policies informed by neoliberalism were having a devastating effect on the community in which St. Paul Community Baptist Church is located. The project



thus shifted to exploring whether the Maafa Commemoration might be, in fact, as much a response to these contemporary traumas.

The dynamics of African American development are undeniably connected to the experience of trauma. Whether it is the physical violence of race-based domestic terrorism, the economic violence engendered by capitalist exploitation, or the epistemic violence caused by white supremacist discourses and images, African American development cannot be fully understood apart from an engagement with the ongoing reenactment of trauma in the lives of black Americans. This includes the effects of three cultural traumas: (1) the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery, (2) the enactment of Jim Crowism, and (3) the emergence of the neoliberal age in the aftermath of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.

Interestingly, the discipline of pastoral theology, care, and counseling is in the process of navigating its own “transitional space” between the field’s traditional understandings of care as individual counseling and a conception of care that necessarily engages broader social, cultural, economic, and political contexts. While various schools of psychology continue to undergird the parameters of the field, practitioners are just as likely to draw upon cultural studies, discourse theory, and feminist/womanist studies as bodies of knowledge that inform our understanding and action. Even so, pastoral theology, care, and counseling have not attended sufficiently to the increasingly global nature of the forces impinging upon African Americans and other populations. The dimensions of African American development in the twenty-first century cannot be fully understood without reference to a complex and shifting matrix that includes the modern idea of white supremacy, the emergence of the neoliberal age, and the changing labor needs of transnational corporations. This project represents an inquiry into the dynamics and challenges of African American development for the purpose of articulating a framework for soul care that gives consideration to how specific economic, political, and socio-cultural configurations shape and are shaped by expressions of black identity.

Although this text is by no means exhaustive and there is much more room for clarification and expansion, it aims at no less than pointing towards a new framework for soul care in the United States and, given the global nature of the forces being addressed, a model of care for indigenous populations throughout the world. To this end, this approach is influenced by diverse areas of inquiry. Most prominent are neoliberalism, globalization, postcolonialism, trauma theories, systems theories, narrative counseling and African diasporic religious studies. This book, in essence, represents the early stages in a constructive project that builds a multidisciplinary frame for a new mode of care in the neoliberal age.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the central components of this study. American neoliberalism is identified as an essential interpretive lens for practitioners of pastoral theology, counseling, and care. While chattel slavery and the Jim Crow era are identified as the core trauma scenes, the neoliberal age is seen as having a traumatic impact on the material and symbolic worlds of African Americans. Prophetic soul care is introduced as an integrative approach that is attentive to both human persons and human systems. Black religious practices are posited as promoting resilience and resistance for black Americans impacted the neoliberal age. African American Pentecostalism and Rastafarianism are presented as two black religious forms that serve as precedents for this assertion. Finally, helpful insights from postcolonial theory are highlighted.

A historical analysis of the rise of the neoliberal age in the United States is provided in chapter 2. American neoliberalism is explored within the context of the modes of economic exploitation and nation state repression directed at African Americans in the aftermath of the modern Civil Rights and Black Power movements. The chapter contends that the emergence of the neoliberal age between the 1960s and 1990s represents a historic shift in the United States from a system of racial domination to a neoliberal hegemony. Of particular import to this study is the fact that the neoliberal system that emerged in the United States is deeply racialized and continues to reflect the legacies of North America's racial history.

Chapter 3 examines the impact of the neoliberal age on the development of African American identities. African American identities are understood as being constituted in the context of specific social formations. By studying particular periods of stabilization and intervals of change, such as the neoliberal age, one is able to comprehend the shifting relations that shape particular conceptions of black identity. While forms of black identity may be impacted by the psychocultural traces of previous historical phases, African American identities are nonetheless enunciated in particular ways during different historical moments. In the neoliberal age, African American identities are seen as developing in a dialogical transaction between black subjects shaped by a matrix of market-driven structures and discourses, even as these structures and discourses are transformed by resisting black subjects.

Trauma theory is drawn upon in chapter 4 as a heuristic lens to elucidate the impact of the neoliberal age on African American development. Strategies utilized to secure the containment, cooperation, and contributions of black Americans subsequent to the emergence of American neoliberalism constitute a cultural trauma which has and continues to impinge upon the well-being of black Americans. Trauma theory makes it clear that in the neoliberal age many of the behavioral strategies and identity commitments black Americans make might be considered as responsive to a racially driven neoliberal society.

Healing from the traumatic impact of the neoliberal age includes the process of remembrance. When trauma is remembered in a safe environment, it enables the trauma survivor to integrate the traumatic experience and form a new understanding of what has happened. The process of healing can thus be facilitated by public acts of commemoration. Chapter 5 examines a black religious practice known as the Maafa Commemoration which can be understood as a mode of soul care in the neoliberal age. In this study, the Maafa Commemoration is characterized as a “memory performance” that helps African Americans reframe and “make meaning” out of their traumatic experiences in the United States. The commemoration enables African Americans to reframe past traumas and heal from their effects.

Chapter 6 concludes the book with a framework for an integrative approach that promotes resilience and resistance in the neoliberal age, namely, prophetic soul care. Prophetic soul care is posited as a transformative practice that promotes healing and challenges neoliberalism's hegemonic hold. This chapter sets forth some of the foundations of a prophetic soul care praxis in which counter-hegemonic action is understood as therapeutic. Several assessment and interventive strategies are offered. This includes the introduction of two "images of care" that "metaphorically structure" prophetic soul care with African Americans and other groups traumatized or threatened by the neoliberal age.

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## Bearing Witness

In 2008, the American financial system teetered precariously on the brink of a total collapse. This financial crisis signified the monumental failure of a hegemonic configuration in economic, political, and sociocultural relations that coalesced in the second half of the twentieth century. The time period between the late 1960s and mid-1980s witnessed a radical shift characterized by the emergence of a new social formation, delineated in this study as the *neoliberal age*. Unbeknownst to many, this pernicious neoliberal ideology, which has now been exported globally, was given its initial “test drive” domestically on the backs of countless black Americans. While attention has been given to the traumatic impact of chattel slavery and the Jim Crow era on African Americans,<sup>1</sup> insufficient consideration has been given to the traumas black Americans incurred subsequent to the emergence of the neoliberal age in the aftermath of the modern Civil Rights and Black Power movements.<sup>2</sup> This chapter introduces the core components of this study. American neoliberalism is identified as an essential interpretive lens for practitioners of pastoral theology, counseling, and care. The neoliberal age is seen as having a traumatic impact on the material and symbolic worlds of African Americans. Consideration is given to expressions of black religiosity that function as modes of soul care in this context.<sup>3</sup> I then introduce an integrative approach to soul care that promotes resilience in black Americans and other populations traumatized or threatened by the neoliberal age.

This book gives particular attention to an African American religious practice known as the Maafa Commemoration that had its inception during the rise of American neoliberalism. The term *Maafa* is Ki-Swahili. It means the great disaster, calamity, or catastrophe. The term references the atrocities endured by black Americans during the hundreds of years black people were forcibly captured, transported, and enslaved in the Western hemisphere and the horrific exploitation of African Americans during the Jim Crow era. The term also signifies the politics of abandonment, containment, and control perpetuated against black Americans during the emergence of the neoliberal age. This study contends that the Maafa Commemoration promotes resilience and resistance in African Americans whose lived realities and identities have been traumatically impacted by policies and practices informed by neoliberal ideology.

The Maafa Commemoration had its inception at St. Paul Community Baptist Church in New York City. At the time, a host of problems engendered by the neoliberal age were ravaging urban centers throughout the United States. The commemoration is a two-week experience that includes dramatic reenactments of chattel slavery, the Jim Crow era, and the neoliberal age, as well as rituals of remembrance, educational workshops, lectures, worship services, and prayer. These commemorative rites have since spread to other congregations throughout the United States. For black Americans traumatically impacted by the neoliberal age, the Maafa Commemoration might be understood as an alternative mode of soul care than those paradigms constructed for individuals or families.

Neoliberalism, most strongly articulated by Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, asserts that an unfettered market is the most effective means for encouraging individual freedom.<sup>4</sup> Neoliberalism, at first glance, is a theory of economic principles that purports that human well-being can best be achieved by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms within a framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. Neoliberal ideology holds that “the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into