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The Pandemic is a Mirror: Decolonizing Psychology and Racism in Times of COVID-19 Crisis

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I wrote this chapter for the keynote address I gave in May 2020 for the Psychology of Global Crisis conference at the American University of Paris (Bhatia, 2020). The pandemic since then has gone through several intense waves in the United States. In late October 2020, over 100,000 people were succumbing to COVID-19 per day in the United States. This pandemic is a moment that points to profound loss that is felt through thousands of deaths, social distancing, family suffering, financial insecurity, loneliness, deterioration of mental health, a rise of collective anxiety, fear, and rage. At the time of writing this chapter, WHO reports that over 46 million people across the world have contracted COVID-19, and approximately 1.2 million people have died. In the United States, CDC reports that are over 10 million cases and approximately 240,000

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deaths. So, this my modest and somewhat hurried attempt to comprehend this much sorrow and human suffering. The chapter is organized around three central themes. First, I speak about my positionality or where my body/self stands in relation to the COVID-19 crisis. Second, I draw on decolonizing and decolonial theory as a framework to helps us understand the psychology of the COVID-19 global crises. Third, I use the concept of coloniality to understand the psychology of racism that is revealed in the pandemic within the United States. Finally, I conclude by offering some brief thoughts about how the decolonial turn offers us an opportunity to reimagine the discipline of psychology.

Self, Positionality, and Theory

The Nigerian-American writer, Teju Cole, published an essay in the New York Times that is apt for this moment. He says, "We Can't Comprehend This Much Sorrow: History's first draft is almost always wrong—but we still have to try and write it." (Cole, 2020). The pandemic is an opportunity for thinking about the role of psychological theory in understanding the pandemic. Let me start generally with the role of theory in these times. The American poet Adrienne Rich (1986, p. 213) writes, "Theory—the seeing of patterns, showing the forest as well as the trees—theory can be a dew that rises from the earth and collects in the rain cloud and returns to the earth over and over. But if it doesn't smell of the earth, it isn't good for the earth."

One question that has preoccupied me during the pandemic is how do we make theory, the dew that rises from the earth and gives back to the earth? How can we make psychology dewy and muddy like the earth and, importantly, for the earth? Another way of asking this question is: How psychology as a discipline helps us understand this crisis that is unfolding across this earth? Having said that, the word crisis feels too abstract and generic in this moment. What I know for sure is that how we define the meaning of the crisis depends on who is succumbing to the crisis, whose lives are at risk, and who gets to tell the story of their suffering or risk?

The psychology of this crisis is the psychology of asymmetric suffering. I have the means of rowing my boat away from the COVID storm—I can keep my boat at bay while others have to pass through the raging storm every day. Having the space to write and think about the pandemic from the comfort of my home feels safe and yet distant. I have numbness. I have distant grief. But I have not cried or wept incessantly as one does in the throes of deep loss. But I know there is extraordinary grief and pain out there. I read about loss and death in papers every day. My maximum worry right now, in this moment, is I would not be with my elderly mother in India if she becomes COVID-19 positive. I imagine her lonely death. I will not be able to be there for her last rites.

I am living my lockdown life anticipating loss, death, and threats from the virus. I anticipate mourning. The crisis has locked me down, but it has not threatened my livelihood or my life. I know there are millions of low-wage essential workers who are disproportionately people of color and are paid minimum wages and who do not have healthcare themselves and yet are risking their lives to provide care for COVID-19 patients. If you live in the United States and are from Navajo Nation or Latino and African-American community, the virus is likely to hit you hard on every front.

In May 2020, a photograph of an Indian daily wage worker, Rampukar Pandit, went viral (The Hindu, 2020). The photo showed him in pain and anguish, sitting on the side of the road in Delhi speaking to his wife about their sick 11-month-old son. Given the lack of public transport, he told a reporter that he started walking toward his home in Bihar, a 745-mile trip. Exhausted and hungry, he stopped at a bridge until he could not go any further. He said, "All I want is to go home and see my son." His well-wishers intervened and arranged transportation, but several hours later, he learned his son had died." A few days later, when he reached his village, he said, "The rich will get all the help, getting rescued and brought home in planes from abroad. But we poor migrant laborers have been left to fend for ourselves. That is the worth of our lives," he said in Hindi, "Hum mazdooron ka koi desh nahin hota" (We laborers don't belong to any country). (The Hindu, May 2020).

The poor from around the world are dying from hunger, loneliness, exhaustion, and housing insecurity on top of other pre-COVID-19

diseases like malaria, typhoid, diarrhea. One common sentiment we hear from workers employed in the informal economy is that starvation will kill them before the Coronavirus. If the pandemic were a mirror, it would show us the worst cruelties of our socially unequal system: disregard and contempt for the lives of the poor, racism that kills, and an economy that is run on exploits the invisible labor of people from vulnerable communities.

Now let me return to the question I posed before. How do we make sense of these crises? The Indian laborer Rampukar asks us to consider what is the worth of his life, what is the worth of his son's life. He asks us: "Whose lives are considered disposable in this crisis?" One way to answer Rampukar's question is, perhaps, to ask another question: whose lives did we consider worthy before the pandemic? Whose lives are given importance in our discipline?

The Crisis of the Pandemic and People: Understanding Coloniality in Decolonial Frameworks

Decolonizing psychology sheds light on how Euro-American scientific psychology has become the standard-bearer of psychology around the world, whose stories get told, what knowledge is considered as legitimate, whose idea of development is considered ideal, and whose lives are considered central to the future of psychology and the world (Adams et al., 2015; Bhatia, 2002, 2018; Bhatia & Priya, 2018a; Bulhan, 2015; Kessi, 2017; Misra & Gergen, 1993). There are 356 million Indian youths (United Nations Population Fund, 2014), who make up the world's largest youth population but remain so utterly invisible in the discipline of psychology. Like many other social science disciplines, modern psychology and human development emerged during the height of European colonization and were often complicit in advancing "scientific" knowledge that depicted natives as primitives, savages, backward, and inferior beings.

American psychology produces research findings about social, emotional, and cognitive functions based on 5% of the world population, but these American findings are posited as having universal applicability and relevance for 95% of the world (Bhatia, 2020). For example, the *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* devoted a special section to the theme of "Decolonizing Psychological Science." Writing in the introduction to this section, Adams et al. (2015) argued for the creation of a "decolonial psychology" (p. 230) that not only speaks to the lives and concerns of the privileged minority that reside in WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) societies (Henrich et al., 2010) but also to the lives of the global majority of the world—especially those who live in marginalized cultures of the global South (Bhatia, 2018). For example, U.S. psychology not only is overwhelmingly North American-centric, but U.S. psychologists remain unaware of how its history and culture shapes its theoretical and methodological frameworks and assumptions about individualism, stress, and trauma (Christopher et al., 2014).

The question of psychology and decolonization has been taken up extensively in the *South African Journal of Psychology*. Apart from various papers appearing in general issues, a special issue was devoted to examining the meaning of decolonizing Africa(n)-centered psychology (Ratele et al., 2018). Ratele et al. argue that "Whereas 'Blackening' African psychology might go some way towards decolonizing psychology in Africa, decolonization entails more than racial and linguistic representation. Numbers are attractive because they are easily quantifiable; however, decolonization must extend beyond counting to something more slippery" (p. 340). Central to their conception of a decolonized psychology is psychology that speaks to how African communities and people's lives are shaped by gendered, cultural, intellectual, economic, social, and psychological power. The abovementioned engagements with decolonization and psychology reveal the complexities and paradoxes contained in the praxis of decolonizing psychology (Macleod et al., 2020).

Decolonial and decolonizing theories emerge out of different and often incommensurable genealogies of native studies on settler colonialism, decolonial theory from Latin America, and postcolonial theory

that is rooted in European colonialism of Africa and Asia. A decolonizing perspective shows how contemporary psychological science and psychological theories are inextricably linked to the legacy of colonialism, coloniality, settler colonialism, and created through the Eurocentric nexus between power and knowledge (Bhatia, 2002, 2018, 2020; Bhatia & Priya, 2018b; Macleod et al., 2017). Decolonization means dismantling those structures of colonial violence and injustice that have shaped people's lives in the majority of the world. It means undoing the nexus of colonial power, Western modernity, racial capitalism, and Euro-American psychological knowledge that has created and contributed to multiple systems of oppression (Racial Capitalism, Poverty, Slavery, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy, Genocide, Extraction, Colonization of Land, Water, Air, Erasure, Exploitation, Patriarchy, Sexism, Racism, Debt, Neoliberal Order, Asymmetry of Rules in the Global North vs. the Global South, Ecology) (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000).

Decoloniality means intentionally naming the cultural values, ethics, motives, and assumptions embedded in WEIRD/American knowledge systems that have caused epistemic violence and epistimicide or "killing of knowledge" (Santos, 2014). It means decentering meanings of personhood that define bodies, psyche, soul, and selves through the ruthless language of neocolonial and neoliberal enterprise, rugged individualism, and credentialed autobiographies (Bhatia, 2020).

In my book, *Decolonizing Psychology: Globalization, Social Justice and Indian Youth Identities*, I draw on evidence based on an ethnography that I conducted in three class-based communities in Indiato show how the legacy of colonialism is still alive in psychology. I challenge the dominant theories of Western psychology and shed light on "absences" of psychological inquires and worldviews that have been deemed irrelevant, minimized, and written off as unscientific, qualitative, lacking power, indigenous, local, and non-Western. Through analysis of interviews, participant observation, and focus groups, I show how contemporary Euro-American psychology has once again taken on an imperial guise, a neocolonial turn in the developing world through new instruments and forms of knowledge production. Decolonizing psychology rests on the

claim that contemporary psychological science bears some resemblance to the structure and mechanisms of colonization (Bhatia, 2018).

The origins of American psychology are rooted in the teleological narrative of modernity and identity. For Walter Mignolo, modernity's point of origination is in Europe, and the western civilization is built on the edifice of coloniality, so there is "no modernity without coloniality" (p. 3). Decoloniality does not entirely reject the social and ethical "progress" of modernity but proposes delinking the process of knowledge production from universality and superiority of Western knowledge. Anibal Quijano (2000) and Walter Mignolo (2007) write that decoloniality shows us the darker side of modernity and gives us a glimpse of how knowledge and power were used to colonize, subjugate, and erase the lives of indigenous people and people of color through extraction, subordination, and slavery.

Kopano Ratele, Josephine Cornell, Sipho Dlamini, Rebecca Helman, Nick Malherbe, and Neziswa Titi (2018), for example, write that Eurocentric knowledge and Euro-American psychology overlooks the impact of imperialism, wars, politics, and local cultural values. They argue that we need to engage in a "productive debate as to how to decolonize African psychology and to work towards Africa(n)-centered psychology as situated decolonizing practice and knowledge" (p. 332, emphasis added). In this vein, Shose Kessi (2017) reminds us that psychology was born of a colonial and apartheid system. Academic psychologists, she notes, were complicit in producing knowledge that aided in the oppression of Black people. She argues that "Categories of race were salient and instrumental in producing various forms of oppression, often legitimized through academic work" (Kessi, 2017, p. 507). Thus, decolonizing psychology highlights the locatedness of knowledge production, (neo)colonialist assumptions that are embedded in 'mainstream' psychology, and the need for contextualized epistemologies, methodologies, and practice (Macleod et al., 2020).

One of the key ideas that is relevant for decolonizing psychology is to inquire into how coloniality shapes the core theoretical and methodological foundations of the discipline of psychology and how it shapes everyday cultural practices:

> Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. Coloniality is different from colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day. (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243)

The concept of coloniality is very instructive in understanding why COVID-19 has disproportionately caused intense and unequal suffering in communities of color in the United States. Since the onset of the pandemic, I have been thinking about how racial coloniality has caused such devastation in African-American communities in the United Sttaes. Racial coloniality refers to the racialized inequities, hierarchies, and systems that are based on the long-standing patterns and structures of power. These racialized systems shape colonial institutions, administrations, and practices, knowledge of the law, education. The current racial dominance of White supremacy generally is derived from the colonial system of racial oppression and continues to consolidate during the shaping of modern American under settler colonialism and through post-colonialism in Asia and Africa. COVID-19 is a reminder that we breathe racial coloniality. In a classic and much-cited article Anibal Quijano (2000) writes:

> In America, the idea of race was a way of granting legitimacy to the rela-tions of domination imposed by the conquest. After the colonization of America and the expansion of European colonialism to the rest of the world, the subsequent constitution of Europe as a new id-entity needed the elaboration of a Eurocentric perspective of knowledge, a theoretical perspective on the idea of race as a naturalization of colonial relations between Europeans … and non-Europeans. Historically, this meant a new way of legitimizing the already old ideas and practices of relations

of superiority/inferiority between dominant and dominated . . . So the conquered and dominated peoples were situated in a natural position of inferiority and, as a result, their phenotypic traits as well as their cultural features were considered inferior. In this way, race became the fundamental criterion for the distribution of the world population into ranks, places, and roles in the new society's structure of power. (pp. 534–535)

The racial toll of COVID-19 then can be connected to this age-old history of racial coloniality, capitalism, and White supremacy. South African scholar Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) recently articulated a decolonial interpretation of the COVID-19 crisis. He argues that to engage in a "decolonial reading" is to locate the COVID-19 crisis in the modern global order that is largely defined by colonialism and a singular Eurocentric conception of modernity, society, and well-being. This dominant knowledge system is part of our social, political, and mental systems and is expected to solve all the human inequities and problems across the globe.

Eurocentric conceptions of what it means to be human are predicated on racist and sexist social classifications, racial hierarchization, and capitalist approaches to ecology and the natural environment, particularly their reduction to natural resources that are causing worldwide ecological problems, as well as the condemnation of all other spiritualities, while universalizing Christianity, and modern heteronormativity, where gender is deployed to inferiorize and superiorize certain people for purposes of domination and exploitation. (p. 3)

Subsequently, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) writes:

A poignant point is emerging, which is that the knowledge that carried us over the past 500 years and has plunged us into the current civilizational crisis cannot be the same knowledge that is used to take us out of the present crisis and into the future. The way COVID -19, just like the global financial crisis before it, successfully took the world by surprise might be a sign of epistemic crisis—a crisis of knowledge which is no longer able to predict challenges and problems, as they come and let alone being able to successfully protect people. (p. 5)

Decolonizing psychology shows us that the COVID-19 crisis reveals a structural and epistemic crisis—the knowledge about the world we have is inadequate and insufficient in creating conditions of justice and equity for people across the globe. One aspect of decolonizing psychology is engaging in de-racialization. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) explains that the COVID-19 pandemic "has easily crossed the color-line, exposing all of us to danger. This means that racial discrimination along the line of the human must come to an end" (p. 17). The psychology of the COVID-19 crisis is inherently linked to what DuBois has called the "color-line." The project of deracializing psychology as part of a larger project of decolonizing psychology begins with documenting, mapping, and confronting how the field of psychology has contributed to the project of colonialism and advancing ideas of European racial superiority.

One dimension of the psychology of the current crisis is rooted in the long-standing racial crisis and the question of whose lives are considered worthy and whose lives have always mattered in psychology. Psychology as a discipline has been complicit in advancing the project of racial coloniality for over 100 years. Liberation psychologist Mary Watkins (2019) writes that given psychology's history of colonialism and coloniality and its complicity in advancing racism, capitalism, sexism, militarism, and homophobia, "psychology is itself in continuing need of liberation, of critical deconstruction (p. 206)." The history of colonialism, transnational connections, slavery, genocide, or heterogeneity are not fully accounted for in scientific psychology's concept of culture. When these concepts do appear, they are broadly classified as variables or their political and social "messiness" is stripped away.

Race, Coloniality, and Psychology

For more than 100 years, Euro-American psychology has essentially provided the raw material from which the psychological portraits of the non-Western "Other" have been drawn. Key pioneers of psychology, professionals, such as Darwin (1871/1888), Hall (1904), and Spencer (1851/1969), played an important role in implicitly providing philosophical and "scientific" evidence to demonstrate the innate mental

inferiority of non-Westerners and the essential mental superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race. Europe's political leaders used such evidence to justify and rationalize the colonial oppression of their non-Western subjects. For example, a large part of Darwin's (1871/1888) book, The Descent of Man focuses on this question, and at one point, he addresses the question by suggesting that with "savages, the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated; and those that survive commonly exhibit a vigorous state of health … We must therefore bear the undoubtedly bad effects of the weak surviving and propagating their kind" (pp. 205–206).

What is essential for us to know is that Darwin's work on evolution allowed many European intellectuals to establish a scientific link among culture, race, and psychology. Graham Richards (1997) notes that Darwin's evolutionary theory provides the "overarching" conceptual framework for all psychological inquiry. The founder of the American Psychological Association, G. Stanley Hall, wrote a chapter in his famous book on adolescence titled "Ethnic Psychology and Pedagogy, or Adolescent Races and Their Treatment." He writes that history has recorded that: "Each of the great races has developed upon a basis of a lower one, and our progress has been so amazing that in it we read our title clear to dominion. If they linger, they must take up our burden of culture and work. This sentiment has found several remarkable expressions in Europe within the last few years, both by *soldiers and thinkers*" [italics added] (Hall, 1904, p. 652).

The beginnings of psychology are linked to a time when many European and American intellectuals had conceptualized the non-Western "Other" as an inferior and "primitive" savage (Bhatia, 2002; Richards, 1997). South African psychologist, Kessi (2017, p. 507) writes that the Euro-American roots of psychology have "historically prioritized thinking and practices" that have supported apartheid and colonization through the body of knowledge referred to as scientific racism. Furthermore, she argues that Euro-American psychologists have "contributed to the legitimization of slavery, colonization, apartheid, and the genocide of millions of Africans and colonized people from the global south" (Kessi, 2017, p. 507). Such depictions about the "colonized others" are consistently found in the work of important pioneers of psychology, such as Darwin (1859/1958), Galton (1883), and Spencer

(1851, 1969). The critical thinkers who created modern psychology played a vital role in implicitly providing philosophical and "scientific" evidence to demonstrate the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race (Adams et al., 2015; Bhatia, 2002; Kessi, 2017; Owusu-Bempah & Howitt, 2000). Decolonization entails understanding the larger racialized history of the discipline and how the story of a particular concept is narrated.

Academic psychologists were complicit in producing knowledge that aided in the oppression of Black people. Kessi (2017) notes that "Categories of race were salient and instrumental in producing various forms of oppression, often legitimized through academic work," and she further highlights that "epistemic justice in our context cannot be divorced from an understanding of the Black condition." The structure of racial coloniality lives through policies and practices that have been institutionalized and objectified everyday life. Talking about this transformation from subject to object, Fanon (1952/1967, p. 418) writes, "I came to the world imbued with the will to find meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects." When psychology speak of a "global crisis," it is from a dominant local view in which racial erasure, colonialism, and racial coloniality have been an important part of the discipline and the U.S. history. Confronting psychology's legacy with colonialism and racism allows us to bring attention to the racial and ethnic disparities in physical and mental well-being that the pandemic has revealed. One question worth examining is how a psychology that positions itself as universal, ahistorical, apolitical, neutral, scientific provides insight into a pandemic's suffering that is deeply historical, political, and social. It is hard to make sense of Black suffering, the Black condition, or Black racial identity in the context of COVID-19 without connecting it to American structures and narratives of color-race and racism and colorblind ideology for the last 200 years.

Colorblind Ideology in Pandemic Times

The racial data is still emerging, and the picture is not complete, but reports are shining a light on racial disparities in the pandemic.

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor an African-American scholar, begins her recent essay titled, "The Black Plague" with the following word: "The African aphorism 'When white America catches a cold, black America gets pneumonia' has a new, morbid twist: when white America catches the novel coronavirus, black Americans die." (Taylor, 2020). Every death, whether it is Black or White, from poor or developing nations, is a tragedy that we must mourn, but what the mirror of the pandemic is revealing is that COVID-19 has a color line, and it is disproportionally ravaging Black and brown and working-class communities.

The psychology of the COVID-19 global crisis is deeply connected to the psychology of colorblind racism. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2020), a sociologist, explains that colorblind racism is an ideology in which racial inequality and discrimination are explained in nonracial terms. The four central frameworks of colorblind racism are, according to Bonilla-Silva (2020): (1) Abstract liberalism (explaining racial matters in abstract terms and decontextualized); (2) naturalization (naturalizing racial outcomes); (3) cultural racism (attributing racial differences to cultural differences); (4) Minimization of racism (undermining and underplaying the role of racism). The most common example of colorblind racism is reflected in the statement, "I don't see any color, just people." Such a statement assumes that a person's race or ethnic background does not play a role in their experiences with racism.

Writing in the context of the pandemic, Bonilla-Silva (2020) argues that the four dangerous tenets of colorblind racism presented above are used to frame the pandemic in the United States and thus prevent the dismantling of structural racism. Bonilla-Silva (2020) offers three instances or case studies of how the psychology of colorblind racism exacerbates the racial crisis of the pandemic rather than resolving it. I consider two cases in this chapter. The first case he cites is how multinational companies such as Kraft-Heinz, Budweiser, Amazon, and Walmart have all created commercials that celebrate "our heroes" in the pandemic. Corporations and community neighborhoods display signs about praising front-line, essential workers, and thanking them for their work and sacrifices. One cartoon, for example, shows a "Supernurse (a white woman dressed as Superman) flying a frail man away from the virus while other echoes the iconic image of two Iwo-Jima, featuring a

White-looking scientist, nurse, doctor, and first responder symbolically planting an American Flag" (p. 3).

Bonilla-Silva (2020) argues that undoubtedly all "essential workers" need to be praised for their sacrifices, but calling them "heroes" makes Americans not able to sympathize with these same heroes when they protest or demand better wages and protective gear for their safety. He argues that the American health care system in COVID-19 times cannot recruit low-wage essential "heroes" to save the system, especially when so many essential workers are people of color. The stories about celebrating "our front-line heroes" do not focus on the fact that many of these heroes are disproportionally people of color and are more likely to be exposed to the virus. He writes:

> Black and Brown workers represent 50 percent of janitors, the bulk of nurses in supportive positions (those more exposed to hazardous conditions and receiving less protection), 44 percent of construction workers, 50 percent of correctional officers, 52 percent of bus drivers, a whopping 70 percent of graders and sorters of agricultural products (these are the workers at Tyson, Smithfield, JBS, and other meat packing companies), and 30 percent of police and sheriff patrol officers. The abstract liberal way we discuss "our heroes" blinds us to the racial composition of the group preventing the deeper question from surfacing: why are workers of color overrepresented in these dangerous, low-paying jobs in the first place." (p. 4)

When corporations, politicians, and celebrities praise these theories, it naturalizes and minimizes their racial condition and provides a nice and polite cover for denying these essential workers of color fair wages, sick leave, and other government benefits.

Another example that Bonilla-Silva illustrates as reflecting a color-blind ideology when media pundits and political leaders speak about the racial disparities of COVID-19 but do not fully explain why those racial disparities exist. President Trump's COVID-19 Taskforce, for example, tends to reinforce a deficit narrative of people of color, and this narrative opens the door for racist discourses of "culture of poverty." Bonilla-Silva gives an example of Dr. Anthony Fauci's response during a conference:

As Dr [Deoborah] Birx said correctly, it's not that they are getting infected more often, it's that when they do get infected, their underlying medical conditions—the diabetes, hypertension, the obesity, the asthma—those are the things that wind them up in the [intensive care unit] and ultimately given them a higher death rate.

Thus by not getting to the root of why Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans have high rates of obesity or hypertension, deficit narratives usually find their meaning in the cultural racism framework, where explanations of racial inequality are made through cultural arguments such as "They are eating the wrong kind of food," "People of color are last and don't exercise," and "drink excess liquor, smoke, use drugs and drink more than white people." The psychology of colorblind racism prevents us from confronting the crisis of enduring racial inequality that is rooted in slavery and in racial coloniality that is manifested in institutions that were borne out of White supremacy and Jim Crow laws. Coloniality refers to the racialized inequities, hierarchies, and systems based on long-standing patterns and structures of power rooted in colonialism and slavery. Racism is the child of colonialism. Racial coloniality lives on after colonialism. These racialized systems and structures shaped colonial institutions, administrations, practices, knowledge of law, education, science, property and citizenship, and concepts of self, other, and community. The current racial dominance of White supremacy is derived from colonial systems and structures. This system created Black slavery, Indigenous oppression and genocide, and xenophobic exclusion of migrants. Racism, indigenous killing, racial coloniality, along with capitalism, extraction, land appropriation, education, law, becomes the principal systems through which colonialism/coloniality is maintained in Asia and Africa and Latin America.

Bonilla-Silva (2020) explains that his three cases studies of colorblind ideology during COVID-19 shed light on how "feel-good stories of equality" reinforce the American cultural myths of rugged individualism and the psychology of self-help literature:

Specifically, the three subjects analyzed promote believing that workers should work at all costs, that hunger can be solved by the actions of good

> Samaritans, and that Black and Brown people are dying at a higher rate than Whites because of underlying health conditions and problematic behaviors. Instead of addressing the poor working conditions of essential workers (particularly of workers of color), America's limited welfare state, and systemic racism and its manifestations, the discussions we are having are providing flowery rhetoric to make us feel good. A "feeling good" story works precisely because we are in the middle of a horrid pandemic that has taken the lives of more than 100,000 people. It works because Americans, perhaps more than most people in the world, have been conditioned to both "a rugged individualism" foundational myth and, lately, to a self-help cultural logic. (p. 7)

It is not just African Americans but also other underrepresented groups such as Asian Americans facing a wave of intense racism, verbal abuse, and physical attacks since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On May 26, 2020 (Pilkington, 2020), over a hundred writers, many of Asian and Asian American descent, wrote a letter calling for an end to the rise in anti-Asian racism. The letter describes the rise in hate crimes, violence, and verbal assaults against Asians, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders and how racism, bigotry, and xenophobia continue to be displayed in American society. The letter highlights Trump's racist language use in framing COVID-19 as a foreign "China Virus" and the subsequent rise of xenophobic incidents against Asians and Asian Americans. Since March, the nonprofit Stop AAPI hate has recorded over 2000 reports of anti-Asian American racist acts that included spitting, stabbing, and shunning. Historians have pointed out that similar racial attacks have been launched against Asian Americans during economic downturns and other public health crises.

Structural Racism, Racial Coloniality, and Black Communities

Writing in the *Du Bois Review*, Gee and Ford (2011) state that it was W. E. B. Du Bois, who, almost a hundred years ago, wrote about the relationship between structural inequities and health disparities in Black

communities. He wrote, "The Negro death rate and sickness are largely matters of [social and economic] condition and not due to racial traits and tendencies" (Du Bois, 2003, p. 276). Structural racism is fundamentally founded on the coloniality of racial power created through 400 hundred years of slavery and indigenous genocide (Quijano, 2000). One way the coloniality of racial hierarchy is maintained and reproduced is through structural and institutional racism within the context of health disparities. Gee and Ford state (2011):

> Structural racism is defined as the macrolevel systems, social forces, institutions, ideologies, and processes that interact with one another to generate and reinforce inequities among racial and ethnic groups … The term structural racism emphasizes the most influential socioecologic levels at which racism may affect racial and ethnic health inequities. Structural mechanisms do not require the actions or intent of individuals … As fundamental causes, they are constantly reconstituting the conditions necessary to ensure their perpetuation …Even if interpersonal discrimination were completely eliminated, racial inequities would likely remain unchanged due to the persistence of structural racism … (emphasis in original, pp. 115–116)

Central to decolonial projects is understanding how race and racism were used in the United States since the sixteenthcentury as an organizing principle to create a hierarchy of people, a system of slavery, and subjugating and exploiting Black people to extract their labor for profit. I use a brief article written by scholars Cornell Gordon, Walter Johnson, Jason Purnell, and Jamala Rogers (2020) to show how the crisis of COVID-19 is shaped by the slow violence of racial coloniality manifested in the legacy of structural racism. To understand the psychology of the global crisis, we have to come to terms with the underlying, preexisting condition of racial inequity and racial disparities. One of the arguments made by Gordon et al. is that the COVID-19 deaths of African Americans are "tragedies, but they are not accidents." Furthermore, they write that African-American communities, especially in the city of St. Louis, Missouri, "have been delivered to disease by their history—by U.S. history" (Gordon et al., 2020). When I read this article, the phrase being

delivered to disease by history and through slow violence stayed with me. The authors write:

> In St. Louis, as in the country at large, the deadly disparities of the pandemic are as unsurprising as they are unsettling. It is not simply that African Americans in St. Louis, as in the rest of the United States, have been left behind, and thus set in the way of the virus. They have been offered up by a history of racist privilege and profiteering—from prisons to poor neighborhoods, from persistent segregation to willful policy failure. (Gordon et al., 2020)

Notice the difference between "have been left behind" and "being offered up." Offered means sacrificed with implicit and explicit intention. The emphasis is on "willful policy" failure. This is where the concept of racial coloniality becomes vital in understanding how COVID-19 has become an autopsy report on American racism. The authors (Gordon et al., 2020) begin by noting some figures: Milwaukee county accounts for 27 of the overall population but represent over 50% of the COVID-19 cases. Another example they cite is from the state of Illinois, where African Americans make up 15% of the populations but represent 33% of the COVID cases and 40% of COVID-19 deaths. In Georgia, African Americans make up 37% of the population but 62% of COVID-19 deaths. The most glaring statistic emerges from the city of St. Louis, where Americans are 47% of the population but consist of almost three-quarters of COVID-19 cases.

Behind the statistics, there are stories that personalize the suffering of people who have died due to COVID-19. The *New York Times* reported a story of an African-American employee named Annie Grant, 55, who worked at a poultry plant in Georgia for over 15 years. She had a fever for two nights in a row, and her children pleaded her to stay home. Annie's children received a text from their mother that she had reported to work. Her text said, "They told me I had to come back to work" (Jordan & Dickerson, 2020). Annie became progressively ill and died in hospital while fighting for her life on a ventilator. These were the same essential workers whose lives were never considered critical, vital, or essential were now being told how important their work and bodies were in the

time of the pandemic. This is an example of colorblind racism, where the feel-good stories about our heroes could not care to provide care for Annie. Cornell Gordon and his co-authors give us specific details that show how the disproportionate number of COVID-19 deaths are connected to American history, practices, and policies. They note:

> The slow violence that we see unfolding in St. Louis has been structured into the fabric of the city, built brick-by-brick by those who have sought profit in segregation and comfort in social distance. Its racialized patterns of disadvantage are the result of decades of conscious choices by actors at every level of government, aided and abetted by private industries like banking, insurance, and real estate, to name but a few. St. Louis's history of imposed black deprivation is both unique to it and reflective of the broader patterns that have made COVID-19 a charnel house for black Americans nationwide. (Gordon et al., 2020)

White citizens in St. Louis have practiced residential and social segregation for over a century. A racial zoning law was passed by a popular vote in 1916, which was overturned on equal protections ground. Nevertheless, the cities realtors, developers, and homeowners found other ways to impose racial restrictions into property deeds and convents that created new, White-only neighborhoods. The "uniform restriction agreement" by 1930 had a specific language that mentioned that White people have the right to "preserve the character of said neighborhood as a desirable place of residence for persons of the Caucasian Race," and further stating that homeowners could not "erect, maintain, operate, or permit to be erected, maintained or operated any slaughterhouse, junk shop or rag-picking establishment" or "sell, convey, lease, or rent to a negro or negroes" (Gordon et al., 2020).

Cornell Gordon and his co-authors further highlight in their essay that White developers in St Louis could demand more money by promising White renters and new homeowners that Black people will not be in their neighborhoods. On the other side of the tracks, where a majority of Black people lived, developers and landlords could extract premium rents because the African-American population was expanding through the great migration. Even after the courts deemed restricting racial covenants as illegal, segregation continued. Racial inequality as a form of social

distancing had been going for centuries and has been instituted through federal preference:

> Increasingly, it took the form of federal, state, and local subsidies that were in reality available almost exclusively to whites—for example, G.I. Bill housing benefits available only to white veterans and Federal Housing Association loan guarantees distributed according to racist protocols in a pattern that has come to be known as "redlining." (Gordon et al., 2020)

Even today, the authors note that the city is largely segregated by White and Black neighborhoods. They point out that the combination of federal partiality and municipal collusion was state-sanctioned by Missouri's different governments. As a confederate and slaveholding state, Missouri resisted taxes on property, and the result was the state's inability to provide viable public goods and services to its vulnerable citizens. Moreover, as a result, Gordon et al. (2020) argue that Missouri has a bare-bones social safety net that has underfunded education, reduced unemployment and federal benefits such as cash assistance programs, and recently refused to expand Medicaid coverage under the Affordable Care Act.

I have summarized the key terms and phrases that reveal the narrative and language of structural racism. This is the language that tells us why the crisis of COVID-19 has been so devastating on Black communities. Paying attention to this language helps us in understanding how the psychology of the COVID-19 Crisis is connected to colorblind racism, structural racism, and any understanding of the psychology of the COVID crisis is connected to the psychology of racism. Without an awareness of this language of racism, we cannot engage in deracializing and decolonizing the field of psychology and the structures that create these conditions of inequality:

- Foundations of Structural Racism
- Four Centuries of Racist Policies and Practice
- Whiteness as a creed and domination
- State subsidies of Whiteness
- Federalized subsidies of White flight

- African Americans as 12 times more likely than Whites to live in concentrated poverty
- Slavery, Jim crow, and continued Black vulnerability
- Tax policy skewed toward White gain
- Living with environmental toxins in Black communities
- Crumbling sanitary infrastructure and redlining in Black residential neighborhoods
- Racial disparities and higher incarceration rates for Black men
- A Climate of abuse and impunity as expressed through police brutality
- Laws posed a mortal danger to young Black men
- Lack of social services, decent schools, and nutritious food for Black communities
- African Americans having low wages, long commutes, and fewer benefits
- Zipcodes and crushed dreams and social mobility
- Large racial disparities in any index of social well-being
- Delivered to the COVID-19 disease by the U.S. history.

Cornell Gordon and his co-authors conclude that structural racism during times of the COVID-19 pandemic means that people of color have been offered up by history to this disease. Rewriting the racial contract means abolishing White supremacy and creating equality in the social, economic, and political spheres. Decolonizing psychology means engaging in a productive and poetic recreating of psychological knowledge. It means recentering Black, Brown, and Indigenous bodies, communities, ecologies, knowledge, and voices of other marginalized people who have been silenced and erased. It means reimagining the discipline through redistribution of power, and material resources, reclaiming historical memory, practicing epistemic freedom, revitalizing alternative indigenous methods, epistemologies, ontologies, positionality, practicing democratic solidarity, and enacting a praxis of agency, radical care, justice, and love.

Concluding Thoughts

I believe that for a very long time, an unbridgeable cleavage has existed between psychology and principles of social justice because of psychology's embrace of a colorblind ideology. Psychology has not yet developed a meaningful theoretical vocabulary or a willingness to explore questions of social justice that are wrapped around internalized racism and racial dominance. One way of understanding the psychology of this global crisis is to find ways to imagine alternative psychologies. We can begin to form an alternative, decolonized psychology by delinking/decentering from the knowledge that gave rise to structures of colonialism, including decentering modes of inquiry, storytelling, thinking, feeling that have shaped questions of who is a human being and what it means to be a human being and whose psychology is considered as universal.

Over the last century, psychology has played a pivotal role in creating and validating Orientalist ideas about racial and cultural "Others" as primitive, lazy, and backward (Bhatia, 2002). The calls from postcolonial and decolonial theorists to decolonize Eurocentric knowledge do not involve a rejection of the so-called advances of modernity but draw attention to how modernity and Western concepts of progress and development emerged out of colonialism, coloniality, slavery, genocide and are reinforced in contemporary times through control of knowledge, globalization, and neoliberalism. Psychology—focused on individualism—is borne out of modernity's preoccupation with progress and the unfolding of self as contained, atomic, and separate from community and history. The physical period of colonialism may be over, but coloniality is still alive in the knowledge production process and the asymmetrical living conditions of the global north and south (Bulhan, 2015). There may be epistemological differences in indigenous, decolonial, and postcolonial approaches. However, there are some threads common to all three frameworks, and they provide us with radical possibilities in unsettling and undoing the effects of colonization and specifically undoing the coloniality of psychological sciences. Decolonizing psychology connects the COVID-19 crisis to history and modernity's emphasis on colonialism

and Western ideas of progress and development that have failed much of our humanity.

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