

The SAGE Encyclopedia of African Cultural Heritage in North America

Cultural Resistance to Psychic Terrorism

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While the experience of economic exploitation, political domination, and cultural defamation of African people due to slavery and colonization has received some attention, the psychological effects of White supremacy, European colonialism, and the hegemony of the West have been little understood and seldom treated in the discourse on current human relations and cultural heritage. In regard to the African American experience, the continued psychological impact and effect of African enslavement should be thought of as “psychic terrorism.” The focus of this entry is to illuminate the process of psychic terrorism and the African American cultural resistance regarding it.

Enslaved Africans Arrived in North America With Intact Identities

Africans did not come to America by choice but as the victims of war, kidnapping, betrayal, theft, and international invasion. From the time Africans first arrived in America, the question of America’s development was tied to the harnessing of the continent’s natural resources and the development of the so-called New World. The invasion, domination, exploitation, and colonization of Africa were essential to this development of North America.

From colonial times until the 19th century, Africans were forcefully and forcibly brought to the New World. From the Gold Coast, Africans came into Jamaica, Virginia, and Maryland as Fante, Bron, Ayem, Akuapem, Kwahu, Assen, [p. 322 ↓] Wassa, Nzima, Ahanta, Afema, and Sefwi-Bahuri. From the Senegambia, Africans came into Georgia and South Carolina as Wolof, Malinke, Mande, Sereer, Fulbe, Soninke, Bambara, and Igbo. From the Bight of Benin, Africans came into Louisiana as Fon, Ewe, Yoruba, Bakongo, and Angolans. Colonial America, in fact, exploited African slave labor. African people built the ports of New Orleans, Savannah, and Charleston. African slave labor built the levees, drained the ditches, and cleared the forests. The ancestors of African Americans were the brickmakers, the joiners, the blacksmiths, locksmiths, wheelwrights, saddlers, masons, and carpenters who literally built the infrastructural foundation for early America.

Although in shackles, African people came to the shores of the Americas as members of human families and communities with intact identities, abilities, beliefs, values, traditions, and aspirations and with human beliefs about God, proper conduct, the meaning of being human, and life's rules and rewards. These people came with an authentic sense of personhood, an affirming sense of purpose, and an assured sense of destiny. Over a period of 3.5 centuries, all of this was damaged and distorted at the hands of American racism. Endemic to the American way of life, however, is a pathological belief that the African was less than human and as such could rightly be the subject of death and destruction in the service of human exploitation. As a consequence, the human dignity, indigenous languages, cultures, and religion of African people were disrespected, distorted, denied, damaged, and/or destroyed. The sense of human integrity was ruptured by the violation of the human psyche's relation to space, time, energy, mobility, bonding, and identity. Violence and terror, as instruments of oppression and exploitation, reinforced the depersonalization, desocialization, and deculturalization of the African spirit.

The Psychological Effects of Terrorism

The meaning of terror as a psychological phenomenon is any feeling or instance of intense fear that results in immobilization. Terrorism is the systematic creation of terror to create horror, anxiety, or fear that results in immobilization. Psychic terrorism, then, is the systematic use of terror to immobilize and/or destabilize a person's fundamental sense of security and safety by assaulting his or her consciousness and identity. In so doing, psychic terrorism targets and damages the meaning of being and diminishes the human will and belief in one's limitless possibility and potential.

For the African American, the very fabric of American society was woven with savagery, slavery, segregation, defamation, physical brutality, political domination, character assassination, economic exploitation, cultural denigration, and psychic terrorism. The most profound lingering psychological effect of slavery and colonization for African people has been a sense of *human alienation* resulting from being infected with or assaulted by long-standing, ongoing ideas of African dehumanization, negation, and nullification that required African American people to deny or morph their Africanity into

images, ideas, and identities more congruent with not being African. This, in effect, was and is psychic terrorism.

In the context of psychic terrorism, the striving for human equality becomes psychologically immobilized and destabilized and is transformed into the desire for integration, acculturation, and assimilation as key to security and safety. Being equally and fairly treated and respected as African people was exchanged for acceptance contingent on the degree to which African American people disassociated themselves from their intrinsic Africanity (blackness) and sought to be more like Europeans.

The Invention of the “Nigger” as a Concept

African people have been the victims of both private and government-sanctioned “terrorism” from the very first moment that Africa was invaded. One of the major acts of psychic terrorism was the ever-present attack on the “identity” of African people. This was attempted via the invention of the concept of the “Nigger.” It was, in fact, an act of psychic terrorism to disallow Africans to hold on [p. 323 ↓] to their own identity as Nago or Temne or Jola or Ibo and so on and to redefine the African as “a Nigger.” As an instrument of psychic terrorism, the idea of Nigger became all pervasive and everpresent. The Nigger was the epitome of negation, nullification, and the absolute worst type of being. It was the classification of those who were less than human. As the target of psychic terrorism, Africans found themselves in a cultural environment and ideational atmosphere where an African symbolized the absolute negation of “the Good.” Psychologically, the Nigger represented the absence of value and the evidence of inferiority or “the Bad.” The total life space of the captive African was terrorized with the idea of being a Nigger. “Niggerdom” was everywhere. In the mind-set and consciousness of America, one could find evidence of this all-pervasive instrument of psychic terrorism.

In common language, one finds terms such as *Niggerish*: acting in a lazy and irresponsible manner; *Niggerlipping*: wetting the end of a cigarette while smoking it; *Niggerlover*: a derogatory term aimed at Whites lacking in the necessary loathing of Blacks; *Nigger luck*: exceptionally good luck, emphasis on undeserved; *Nigger-flicker*: a small knife or razor with one side heavily taped to preserve the user’s fingers; *Nigger*

heaven: designated places, usually the balcony, where Blacks were forced to sit, for example, in an integrated movie theater or church; *Nigger knocker*: an axe handle or weapon made from an axe handle; *Nigger rich*: deeply in debt but flamboyant; *Nigger shooter*: a slingshot; *Nigger steak*: a slice of liver or a cheap piece of meat; *Nigger stick*: police officer's baton; *Nigger tip*: leaving a small tip or no tip in a restaurant; *Nigger in the woodpile*: a concealed motive or unknown factor affecting a situation in an adverse way; *Nigger work*: demeaning, menial tasks.

This litany of terms to provide ammunition for psychic assault seems inexhaustible *Nigger-brown*, *nigger-black*: a dark shade of color; *Niggerbreaker*, *Nigger-dealer*, *Nigger-driver*, *Niggerkiller*, *Nigger-stealer*, *Nigger-worshipper*, and *Nigger-looking*: the status of Whites who mix together with Blacks; *Nigger-baby*, *Nigger-boy*, *Nigger-girl*, *Nigger-mouth*, *Nigger-feet*, *Nigger-preacher*, *Nigger-job*, *Nigger-love*, *Nigger-culture*, *Nigger-college*, *Nigger-music*.

The fauna and flora in the natural world where we lived were made to be agents of psychic terrorism. For instance, there is the Nigger-head cactus, found in Arizona. Then, there is "Kansas Nigger-head" or "wild niggerhead," which are colloquial names for *Echinacea* or coneflower. The "Nigger-head termite" (*Nasutitermes graveolus*) is native to Australia. Even the food eaten unknowingly became ammunition for psychic terrorists. Brazil nuts became "Nigger toes." Irish prunes were called Nigger Knackers. Belgium chocolates were known as *Negerinnetetten* and sold in Holland as *Negerzoenen* (Negro kisses).

Through the invention of the Nigger, the African was permanently associated with the dark, the ugly, the crude, and the difficult. As an act of psychic terrorism, "niggerizing" guaranteed the inferiorization of Africans. Further, even the designation of human status was called into question as Africans were viewed as uncivilized or as sources of comic relief. Throughout the world, the defining of African identity as "Nigger" served to guarantee that the African would find no sanctuary from the psychic assault. Hence, for the African in America, collective self-knowledge and knowledge about one's self was (and is) under threat by psychic terrorism. Yet in spite of this assault, African people continued to create their own history and to preserve the sense of humanity through cultural resistance.

Cultural Resistance

“Cultural resistance” is any act or experience designed to resist, retard, counter, or eliminate the attack on one’s design for living and patterns for interpreting reality—that is, culture that supports one’s understanding of the meaning of being human and the thoughts, behaviors, beliefs, and values supportive of that meaning. The question of cultural resistance, however, must be understood in the “context” of geopolitical and sociocultural psychic terrorism. African American cultural resistance has, [p. 324 ↓] in almost every way, been in response to this terrorism. The African American cultural resistance to dehumanization, savagery, injustice, and oppression began literally from the moment of Africa’s invasion and capture. The African American response to these aberrant and toxic societal conditions has never been passive or accepting. From the moment of the savage kidnapping in Africa, African captivity and enslavement has been met with constant and continuous resistance, revolt, and rebellion. This tradition of nonacceptance of dehumanization and exploitation and the African’s intrinsic sense of humanity, equality, and fairness were, in actuality, the root and kernel of the African American radical protest movement known as the civil rights and Black nationalist movements. Revolt, rebellion, resistance, protest, and even masked collaboration have all served as cultural resistance in the form of survival strategies in the African American struggle.

One strategy of cultural resistance deserving particular attention is revealed in African American aesthetics. The ability to overcome and outsmart powerful adversaries and to achieve one’s goals in life is critical to those found at the bottom of the power continuum. The teaching of this strategy is found as a direct cultural expression in the Eshu mythology of the Yoruba and the Ananse folktales of the Asante. The continuation of this dramatic form is reflected, as cultural retention/invention, in African American aesthetics as, for example, the “Signifying Monkey” and “Brer Rabbit” tricksters. While framed and formed as metaphor, folktale, and creative story, these cultural retentions and inventions were, in actuality, acts of cultural resistance. The trickster function was cultural resistance. Tricksters are animals or characters who, while ostensibly disadvantaged and weak in a contest of wills, power, and/or resources, succeed in defeating or overcoming their larger, more powerful adversaries. The social situation

of the trickster is generally located as or pictured in the contest of wills and interest. Tricksters achieve their objectives through indirection, misdirection, and mask wearing, by playing on the gullibility of their opponents and outsmarting or outthinking their opponents. African Americans have repeatedly used their native intelligence and wit (most often unrecognized or disrespected by their powerful adversary) to get out of trouble or to achieve their goals. When analyzed, these African American tales are literally study guides for cultural resistance.

The contemporary lived experience of African American people and communities relative to dealing with White privilege and mainstream program services and politics, in many respects, satisfies the contest of differential wills, goals, interest, and survival instinct—ergo, cultural resistance. One has to go behind the mask, illuminate the misdirection, and uncover the true native intelligence and cultural intent of African American people.

African American cultural resistance goes beyond the aesthetic. The self-affirming act of naming ourselves, such as the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, or the African Lodge, or Africana Studies, or even referring to people of African descent collectively as African American are all acts of cultural resistance designed to counter and give the lie to the idea of the Nigger. African American cultural resistance is seen in almost every aspect of African American life and living. For an African American corporate executive, a school superintendent, an elected official, a member of the military, or mothers and fathers raising their children, success in America requires constant and continual vigilance and psychic defense against the agents and systems designed to support African American people's dehumanization and inferiorization. Cultural resistance, in the final analysis, has been essential to the psychological protection and well-being of African American people and should be recognized and, more importantly, formalized as an ongoing quest and instrument for being African, being family, and being awesome in a hostile, toxic, and anti-African reality.

See also [Acculturation](#); [African American Images and Stereotypes](#); [African-Centered Psychology](#); [Cultural Identity](#); [Cultural Misorientation](#); [Cultural Imperialism](#); [Dislocation](#); [Mentacide](#); [Optimal Psychology](#)

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