VIOLENCE IN AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE : A POST-SLAVERY TRAUMATIC EXPRESSION

Mamadou Malal SY
Université Iba Der Thiam de Thiès
Sénégal

Reçu : 28/08/2026 **Évalué** :07/09/2026 **Publié** : 02/11/2026

Abstract : This paper posits that the endemic violence observed within and against African American communities is not a cultural aberration but a profound, intergenerational traumatic expression rooted in the chattel slavery system and perpetuated by a globalized legacy of white supremacist violence. Through a socio-historical and psychoanalytic lens, it examines the transition from the physical violence of the plantation to the structural violence of Jim Crow, the carceral state, and economic disenfranchisement. By locating the African American experience within a broader framework of international colonial and post-colonial violence, this paper argues that contemporary manifestations, from police brutality to inner-city strife, represent a dialectical response to systemic oppression, functioning as both an internalized symptom and a resistance to an ongoing international logic of racialized subjugation.

Keywords: Traumatic Transmission, Structural Violence, Racial Capitalism, Post-Colonialism, Carceral State.

LA VIOLENCE DANS LA CULTURE AFRO-AMERICANE : UNE EXPRESSION TRAUMATIQUE POST-ESCLAVAGISTE

Résumé : Cet article postule que la violence endémique observée au sein des communautés afro-américaines et contre elles n'est pas une aberration culturelle mais une expression traumatique intergénérationnelle profonde, enracinée dans le système d'esclavage et perpétuée par un héritage mondialisé de violence suprémaciste blanche. À travers une approche socio-historique et psychanalytique, il examine la transition de la violence physique de la plantation à la violence structurelle de Jim Crow, de l'État carcéral et de la privation économique. En situant l'expérience afro-américaine dans un cadre plus large de violence coloniale et post-coloniale internationale, cet article soutient que les manifestations contemporaines, de la brutalité policière aux conflits dans les quartiers défavorisés, représentent une réponse dialectique à l'oppression systémique, fonctionnant à la fois comme un symptôme internalisé et une résistance à une logique internationale continue de subjugation racialisée.

Mots-clés : Transmission Traumatique, Violence Structurelle, Racisme Capitaliste, Post-Colonialisme, État Pénal.

Introduction

The image of the African American male, handcuffed or fallen, has become a recurring and haunting motif of the African American experience and cultural narrative. From the lynching postcards of the early 1900s to the smartphone videos of police shootings in the 2020s, the representation of Black bodies under duress is a persistent visual and sociological reality. Mainstream discourse often frames this violence as a pathology—a failure of the African American family, a consequence of a "culture of poverty" (Moynihan, 1965: 29), or a simple byproduct of urban decay. Such narratives, however, are profoundly ahistorical and serve to obscure the foundational violence upon which the United States was built. This paper contends that violence in African American experience must be understood not as an inherent cultural trait, but as a traumatic expression of international violence, a post-slavery symptom that manifests across psychological, structural, and physical domains.

To understand this premise, we must first dissect its constituent parts. The "violence" in question is twofold: it is the physical and psychological violence inflicted upon Black bodies by state and extra-state actors (vigilantes, systemic poverty), and it is the interpersonal or intra-communal violence that sometimes erupts within these communities as a maladaptive coping mechanism or a misdirection of agency. "African American culture," therefore, is not the source of the violence but the container, the vessel through which the trauma of centuries is processed and sometimes acted out. Finally, the link to "international violence" is crucial. The enslavement of Africans was not an American anomaly; it was the engine of global capitalism (E. E. Williams, 1944). The justifications for this enslavement—pseudo-scientific racism and the ideology of white supremacy—were exported globally, legitimizing colonial projects from the Congo to the Caribbean. Thus the fundamental questions are: how does the legacy of slavery and systemic racial violence really manifest as both internalized and global violence within and against African American communities, and to what extent can this be understood as a traumatic transmission rather than a cultural pathology?

The central thesis, therefore, is that the violence we witness today is a revenant of the plantation, a ghost that haunts the present through the mechanisms of intergenerational trauma (J. L. Degruy, 2005). The transition from the visible, overt violence of slavery to systemic, structural violence of the Jim Crow era and the modern carceral state represents not a linear progression toward justice, but a metamorphosis of oppression. Following the theoretical frameworks of F. Fanon (1963), who argued that colonial violence is met with either internalized self-destruction or outward revolutionary violence, we can interpret the complexities of Black life in America.

The paper is structured as follows: First, it will provide a historical contextualization, tracing the arc of violence from the Middle Passage to the Civil Rights Movement. Second, it will define and analyze the concept of structural violence and the "New Jim Crow," demonstrating how systemic forces perpetuate trauma (M. Alexander, 2010). Third, it will examine the psycho-social impact, exploring how trauma manifests in communal dynamics, including interpersonal violence and cultural expression through art. Fourth, it will situate the American experience within the global context of post-colonial violence, drawing parallels with struggles in Africa and the Caribbean. Finally, it will conclude that recognizing this violence as an international traumatic expression is essential for any genuine project of healing and restorative

justice, moving beyond simplistic notions of punishment to address the root causes of a deeply embedded historical wound.

1. Historical Contextualization : the Transformation of Violence

The journey of Africans to the Americas was itself an act of supreme violence—the Middle Passage. It was a "holocaust" that destroyed social structures, languages, and spiritual beliefs, creating a "natal alienation" where individuals were stripped of their connection to ancestors and descendants (H. O. Patterson, 1982: 5). The plantation system that emerged formalized this violence into a legal and economic structure. Slave codes, such as those in Virginia (1705), codified the slave as property, subject to the absolute will of the master. The violence was not merely physical (whipping, branding, mutilation) but epistemological; it was an attempt to annihilate the very humanity of the enslaved.

1.1. The Afterlives of Slavery and the Architecture of Racial Terror

The violence perpetrated against African Americans after the emancipation did not represent a break with the slave system, but rather its reinvention in legal and extra-legal forms. The post-Reconstruction period (beginning in the 1870s) saw the emergence of systematic racial terror—lynchings, white riots, and legal segregation—aimed at restoring a white supremacy threatened by abolition. H. K. Muhammad demonstrates how this context produced a “statistical discourse” that essentialized Black criminality, used to justify the expansion of the prison system and racial profiling practices from the early 20th century onward (2010, p. 9). This process conferred upon African Americans a “provisional status”—the constant obligation to prove their belonging to the civic sphere (H. K. Muhammad, 2010, p. 11).

The violence of lynching, in particular, functioned as an instrument of social control aimed at "stabilizing Black subjectivity" by constantly reminding Black people of their potential equivalence with the "feared lynched body." As A. Gussow points out, Black fear of racial lynching is associated with the subject matter of Gothic writing—that which aims to horrify and disgust its reader (2010). The writer and activist I. B. Wells, in her investigations published in Southern Horrors (1892), demonstrated that the accusation of rape was "the excuse, not the cause" of lynching, which was in reality intended to punish Black economic success and maintain a racial order based on terror (I. B.,Wells, 1892, p. 4 - 6).

This architecture of violence has profoundly marked the African American collective psyche. The concept of the "Black Nightmare Imaginary," proposed by L. M. Bruce, designates a "shared psychic reservoir of scenes and scenarios of anti-Black violence" accessible to African Americans, constituted by the omnipresent awareness of violence that is foundational to Black life itself (L. M. Bruce, 2024, p. 70). This traumatic memory continues to resurface in the present: the specters of a repressed past finally emerge from their burial place to assert their power in the present, as harshly as the mainstream narratives tend to push them to the periphery or ignore them altogether.

Following the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil War, violence did not cease but transformed. The Reconstruction era (1865-1877) briefly offered a promise of integration, met with a ferocious backlash. The rise of the Ku Klux Klan and other terrorist organizations represented a guerrilla war to restore white supremacy. The

violence of this period was intensely public and ritualistic. The lynching of Black individuals, often accused of minor infractions or fabricated crimes, served as a form of social control designed to instill terror in the entire Black population. As Ida Bell Wells documented in her pamphlets, lynching was a tool of economic and political suppression, used to eliminate Black competition and re-establish a racial hierarchy (I. B., Wells, 1892, p. 13).

The failure of Reconstruction led to the establishment of Jim Crow laws, a legal system of segregation that enforced a second-class citizenship. This was the institutionalization of structural violence. While the physical violence of lynchings continued, a new form of violence emerged through disenfranchisement, sharecropping (which economically re-enslaved the Blacks), and the "separate but equal" doctrine that was anything but equal. This legalized discrimination created a system of pervasive inequality, denying African Americans access to quality education, healthcare, housing, and employment. This systemic denial of basic human needs is a form of violence that is slow, but devastating in its cumulative effects (J. Galtung, 1969).

The Great Migration (1916-1970), where millions of African Americans fled the South for Northern and Western cities, was a search for freedom from this violence. However, they encountered a new form of spatial and economic violence. "Redlining" practices by the Federal Housing Administration and discriminatory real estate covenants trapped Black families in overcrowded, underserved urban ghettos (R. Rothstein, 2017, p. 64). This geographic containment created the conditions for the "urban crisis" of the late 20th century, laying the groundwork for the drug epidemics and mass incarceration that would follow.

1.2. The New Jim Crow and the Structure of Violence against African Americans

The history of violence against African Americans cannot be understood as a series of discrete episodes or historical periods—slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the present—but rather as a continuous, transhistorical structure that has adapted its forms while maintaining its essential function: the subjugation and dehumanization of Black bodies. From chattel slavery through the enactment of Black Codes and Jim Crow laws, peonage, convict leasing, domestic terrorism, and lynching, violence has been the instrument through which white supremacy has been enforced and reproduced. Contemporary manifestations, particularly mass incarceration and police violence, represent not a break from this history but its most recent and pernicious iteration.

M. Alexander's landmark work, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness (2010), fundamentally reframes the American criminal justice system as a new racial caste system—a "literal war" declared not on drugs but on communities of color. Alexander argues that mass incarceration represents "the most damaging manifestation of the backlash against the Civil Rights Movement" (M. Alexander, 2010, p. 11), effectively recreating the subordinate status of African Americans that had been legally dismantled by civil rights legislation.

The "war on drugs," initiated under President Nixon, did not arise organically from a public health crisis but was strategically constructed as a mechanism of racial control. As M. Alexander notes, "we declared a war, a literal war, an act of violence, in response to a public health problem" (2010, p. 11). This framing, defining drug use as a criminal matter rather than a public health concern, enabled the deployment of state violence against populations already constructed as "the enemy."

The statistical evidence of racial disparity is stark and reveals the intentional structure of this system. African Americans account for approximately 14% of nonviolent drug offenses but constitute about 35% of drug-related arrests, 55% of drug-related convictions and 75% of prison admissions for drug offenses according to V. Thompson (2006, p. 449 - 450). These disparities persist despite the fact that drug use rates among Black and White Americans are comparable. This is not the result of differential criminality but of targeted enforcement a system designed to criminalize Black communities through a "colorblind" discourse that masks its racial foundations. M. Alexander famously employs the metaphor of a birdcage to explain how mass incarceration operates as a system of structural violence: "The system of mass incarceration is like a birdcage... locking a racially distinct group into a subordinate political, social & economic position, effectively creating a second-class citizenship" (2010, p. 223).

No single bar of the cage (stop-and-frisk policies, mandatory minimum sentences, felony disenfranchisement, housing discrimination, the denial of employment opportunities) would be sufficient to confine the group. Together, however, they form an interlocking structure that makes escape virtually impossible. The system itself is structured to lock individuals into a subordinate position, and this position is inherited across generations.

The transition from Jim Crow to the modern era is often narrated as a triumph of civil rights. However, scholars like Michelle Alexander argue that the Civil Rights Movement's victories were effectively undermined by a new system of racial control: the War on Drugs and the mass incarceration complex (M. Alexander, 2010). The prison system has become the "New Jim Crow," a mechanism that denies rights, disenfranchises voters, and relegates a disproportionate number of African American men to a permanent second-class status.

This represents a profound shift in the manifestation of violence. While the violence of Jim Crow was overtly exclusionary (barring Black people from white spaces), the violence of the carceral state is inclusionary but punitive. It traps Black bodies within a system that defines them as criminals, thereby justifying state-sanctioned violence. The "stop and frisk" policies in New York City, for example, resulted in millions of stops, the vast majority of which involved Black and Latino individuals, often with no criminal finding. This represents a daily, psychological violence of suspicion and degradation (S. Bandes et al, 2019, p. 179).

The War on Drugs, in particular, has had a devastating impact on Black communities. Despite similar rates of drug use across racial lines, Black Americans are arrested and incarcerated at vastly higher rates for drug offenses. This is not coincidental. M. Alexander argues that the drug war was a political tool, used to appeal to white voters and to demonize a generation of Black youth, effectively re-criminalizing Blackness in the post-Civil Rights era (2010, p. 6). The consequences are catastrophic: the disruption of families, the stripping of voting rights, exclusion from employment, and the creation of a permanent underclass.

This structural violence is a direct line of transmission from the plantation. The prison has replaced the plantation as the primary site of Black subjugation. The "convict leasing" system of the post-Reconstruction South, where imprisoned Black men were forced into labor in mines and factories, often under conditions as brutal as slavery, serves as a precursor to the modern prison-industrial complex. D. Blackmon

documents how this system was a deliberate strategy to re-enslave African Americans, using the criminal justice system as a "legal" form of kidnapping and forced labor (2008, p. 88). The historical continuity is undeniable: the control of Black mobility and labor remains a central function of the American state.

Furthermore, the rise of police militarization has intensified this dynamic. The routine killings of unarmed Black individuals (Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, George Floyd) have become international symbols of this systemic violence. These are not isolated incidents but are symptomatic of a system that perceives Blackness itself as a threat. This perception is rooted in the colonial logic that Fanon described: the colonized is always "the quintessence of evil" (F. Fanon, 1963, p. 7). The police officer, in this sense, becomes the agent of the state, acting out a centuries-old drama of control and punishment.

2. Psycho-Social Impact : Trauma and its Expression

Violence within and against African American communities must be understood as a post-slavery traumatic expression of intergenerational violence, a concept that integrates Michelle Alexander's framework of the New Jim Crow, J. L. DeGruy's theory of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), and an understanding of how racialized structural violence is transmitted across generations (2005). The violence observed today, whether perpetrated by the state or manifested within communities, is not merely a product of contemporary social conditions but the psychological and structural inheritance of centuries of racialized trauma.

2.1. Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: The Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma

To understand how this systemic violence translates into interpersonal or intra-communal violence, we must turn to theories of trauma. J. L. DeGruy coined the term "Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome" (PTSS) to describe the adaptive behaviors and beliefs that have been passed down through generations as a result of the enslavement and oppression of African Americans (2005, p. 11 – 15). She argues that the trauma of being property, of witnessing the systematic rape of family members, of having children sold away, did not simply end with emancipation. This trauma was so pervasive and profound that it altered the neurobiology and psychology of the enslaved, and these coping mechanisms were transmitted culturally to their descendants (J. L. DeGruy, 2005, p. 27).

This theory aligns with the broader psychiatric concept of intergenerational or transgenerational trauma. Research on the descendants of Holocaust survivors and other traumatized populations demonstrates that trauma can be passed down through epigenetic changes, parenting styles, and narrative transmission (R. Yehuda et al., 2016). For African Americans, the trauma is not an event in the past; it is a continuous experience. The collective memory of violence, constantly reinforced by present-day incidents of police brutality and systemic inequality, re-activates the historical trauma.

The psychoanalytic concept of "identification with the aggressor" developed by A. Freud (1937: p. 113 – 117), provides another lens. When a group is subjected to chronic, overwhelming violence, it may internalize the aggressor's beliefs and even adopt the aggressor's behaviors. Within the context of the "post-slavery" milieu, some sociologists have argued that some forms of intra-communal violence—the so-called

"Black-on-Black crime" often highlighted in media—can be seen as a tragic misdirection of the rage and despair born of oppression. It is an acting out of violence that cannot be safely directed against the true source of injury (the system), so it is turned inward upon the community itself (R. D. G. Kelley, 1997). This does not excuse the violence but situates it within a context of powerlessness and historical injury.

However, it is equally important to see culture as a site of resistance to this trauma. Faced with the persistence of racial violence, African American culture has developed forms of aesthetic expression that, beyond mere representation, constitute modes of "trauma work" and existential resistance. The blues tradition, analyzed by A. Gussow (2002) and J. Bryant (2003), emerges precisely as a "social response to the 'painful spiritual pressures' caused by white disciplinary violence" (2002, p. 3). J. Bryant, in Born in a Mighty Bad Land (2003, p. 15 – 35), traces the figure of the "badman" (the violent "villain") in African American folklore and literature, interpreting it as a response to "displaced rage"— a rage displaced from the human experience — in a post-slavery culture that denies any recognition to Black people.

African American art, from the spirituals sung in the fields to the blues, jazz, and hip-hop of the 20th and 21st centuries, has consistently functioned as a narrative of survival. These art forms articulate the pain of violence while simultaneously asserting humanity and dignity. Hip-hop, in particular, emerges from the post-industrial ghettos and serves as a raw, unfiltered expression of life in the carceral state (T. Rose, 1994). While it often depicts violence, it also critiques the structural forces that produce it, turning the "witnessing" of violence into a form of testimony.

In literature and music, this foundational violence is both repeated and transformed. In Jazz (1992), T. Morrison explores the mechanism of "acting out trauma"—the compulsive repetition of past violence—and "working through trauma"—the work of mourning and reconstruction through collective storytelling. Hip-hop culture, as A. Ellis demonstrates in If We Must Die (2011), perpetuates this tradition by transforming the threat of death into a "defiant identity": from Bigger Thomas (Richard Wright) to Tupac Shakur, embracing violence appears as a "way of confronting and negotiating with late 20th-century culture." (A. Ellis, 2011, p. 12)

The Black body has historically been the site upon which white American identity and power have been constructed. Carlyle Van Thompson, in Eating the Black Body, examines the "racialized sexual desire that reduces Black people to commodities for consumption," (2006, back-cover overview) analyzing how sexual violence—both during slavery and in its aftermath—operates as form of dehumanization and control. The "often-sadistic forms of sexual violence" documented during slavery find their echoes in contemporary police brutality, such as the case of Abner Louima, sodomized by New York police officers—a direct continuation of the colonial and slave-era project of penetrating, probing, and playing in the Black man's body.

Similarly, "Eating the Black Body" by C. V. Thompson discusses the "often-sadistic forms of sexual violence during the period of slavery and its aftermath" (2006, p. 145), documenting the "sadistic sodomizing of Abner Louima" by White police officers, a direct continuation of the racialized sexual violence that marked slave society.

The most insidious aspect of the New Jim Crow system is its symbolic production of race, how it defines the meaning and significance of Blackness in America through the institutional category of the criminal: Under Slavery, to be Black meant to be a slave. Under Jim Crow, to be Black meant to be a second-class citizen. Under Mass

Incarceration, to be Black means to be a potential criminal, a thug, a "superpredator"—categories that legitimize state violence. For this system to function, "black youth have to be labeled as criminals, and children as criminals-in-the-making" (C. V. Thompson, 2006, p. 145). This criminalization of Black childhood ensures that the violence of the system is self-perpetuating: individuals labeled as threats are more likely to be policed, arrested, and incarcerated, fulfilling the prophecy of their labeling.

The intergenerational transmission of trauma also helps explain patterns of intra-community violence. When communities are systematically deprived of resources (jobs, education, healthcare, and opportunities) and simultaneously saturated with punitive state violence, the result is not simply crime but the erosion of social cohesion and the emergence of maladaptive survival strategies.

M. Alexander argues that "what makes a neighborhood safe is the number of jobs, good schools; good opportunities for one's life" (2010, p. 110), not the number of guns or police. The withdrawal of economic opportunity from Black communities, particularly the disappearance of blue-collar jobs, created a vacuum filled by the drug trade and the violence that accompanies it. The response was not to provide resources but to wage war, treating the symptoms of structural violence as though they were pathologies of the communities themselves.

2.2. The Perpetuation of Cultural Memory

F. Marcin has conducted intercultural studies, employing the concept of "*legs culturels racialisés*" (racialized cultural legacies), to understand how the violence of slavery and Jim Crow continues to condition contemporary racial interactions (2022, p. 9 – 11). This concept, as articulated in an analysis of the Black Lives Matter movement, takes into account the mechanisms of perpetuation of stereotypes and racial prejudices that allow the violence of the past to "actualize itself" in the present as « *Les legs culturels racialisés permetytent de saisir la dimention perpetuelle et transhistorique de la volonté systemique d'annihilation du Noir, de plus en plus pernitieuse* » (F. Marcin, 2022, p. 12).

The encounter between a White police officer (Individual A) and a Black citizen (Individual B) is not, in this framework, simply a momentary interaction between two individuals. It is the meeting of cultural histories—a "*violent shock interculturel*" (F. Marcin, 2022, p. 10) in which centuries of racial subjugation are reenacted. The cultural and racial demarcation of Blacks inherent in the slave system has a continuous character, meaning that violence against Blacks results from a cultural and racialized demarcation dating from the slave period.

The Black Lives Matter movement, therefore, must be understood in light of the perpetuation of the racialized cultural legacies that permeate legal and institutional structures as well as social relations. It is not a new form of Black activism but a continuous struggle, (re)actualized, against a racial dialectic that prevents mutual understanding and the possibility of building society together.

One of the critical mechanisms enabling the reproduction of violence is historical amnesia the collective forgetting of the severity and persistence of racial trauma. This willful ignorance has been institutionalized in the discourse of "colorblindness", the claim that racism is a thing of the past and that contemporary racial disparities must therefore be explained by individual failings rather than systemic inequality. Alexander demonstrates how this national cognitive dissonance on racial issues "leads us to search

for any explanation other than race to explain this mass incarceration of young African American men" (M. Alexander, 2010, p. 113).

This "colorblindness" serves a crucial function: it allows the criminal justice system's racially disparate outcomes to be normalized as the result of "individual bad choices" rather than recognized as the product of structural racism. If 80% of those incarcerated for drug offenses are Black and Latino, it appears "normal" and not the result of discrimination, a perception that would be impossible if the percentage were 100% (M. Alexander, 2010, p. 198 – 199).

The argument advanced in this chapter establishes that violence against and within African American communities is not a departure from the American project but its foundational logic made manifest. The structures of slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration are not discrete historical periods but episodes in a continuous system of racialized social control. The trauma generated by this system is transmitted across generations through psychological, economic, and institutional mechanisms, perpetuating cycles of violence that serve to maintain white supremacy.

Michelle Alexander's conceptualization of the New Jim Crow reveals how mass incarceration has reproduced the social position of African Americans as a subordinate caste, while J. L. DeGruy's Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome explains how this structural position becomes internalized and embodied—manifested in the psychological, behavioral, and community-level outcomes of intergenerational trauma (2005, p. 109). The concept of racialized cultural legacies demonstrates how the violence of the past continues to condition present-day interactions through unconscious stereotypes and institutional practices.

The question that remains is whether the United States can confront this legacy. Alexander's work emphasizes that "ending racism is essential to ending systems that are built out of it" and that this requires the capacity "to see and value the humanity in one another" (M. Alexander, 2010: p. 198). J. L. DeGruy similarly insists that healing requires African Americans to "view their attitudes, assumptions, and behaviors through the lens of history" (2005, p. 110) a process that cannot occur without widespread acknowledgment of the continuity of racial violence.

The Black Lives Matter movement, as the most recent iteration of this struggle, must be understood not as a demand for new rights but as a demand for the recognition of an old reality: that the violence against Black bodies in America has never ended, but has only transformed, adapting to the demands of each historical moment while maintaining its essential function of maintaining white supremacy.

This cultural dynamic has a transnational dimension that recent studies have brought to light. The edited volume Swift to Wrath: Lynching in Global Historical Perspective, by W. Carrigan and C. Waldrep (2013), invites us to completely rethink the history of collective violence by placing American lynching in a global context, deconstructing American exceptionalism.

3. The International Dimension: Colonialism and Global Legacies

The violence inflicted upon African Americans cannot be understood as a solely domestic phenomenon. Rather, it forms an integral part of a global history of anti-Black racism shaped primarily, but not exclusively, by European colonialism and imperialism. This chapter examines how the international dimension of violence against African Americans operates through two interconnected frameworks: first, as

a colonial legacy that reproduces patterns of domination across borders; and second, as a traumatic expression whose roots lie in the post-slavery "afterlife" that continues to structure Black existence globally.

The parallels between American racial violence and international atrocities have also been analyzed within the framework of international relations, highlighting the failure of international and domestic legal systems to protect African Americans. The "gothic-blues voice"—a voice blending gothic aesthetics and blues expression—constitutes an improvised and ritualized response to the economy of slavery, used continually to explicate the Black experience of loss and disconnection, offering a comparative perspective on post-slavery violence on a global scale.

3.1. The Colonial Foundations of Anti-Black Violence

To fully appreciate the nature of violence in African American culture, we must view it as a node in a global network of racialized violence. The United States' history of slavery is inseparable from the broader history of European colonialism. The justifications for African enslavement—the creation of a "racial hierarchy" with Blackness at the bottom—were the same justifications used to colonize Africa, Asia, and the Americas. This ideology was an international project, disseminated by Western intellectuals and enshrined in international law (S. N. Grovoqui, 1996).

Critical Race Theory illuminates how law defines the "spectrum of domination and subordination that constitutes race relations" (I. H. López, 2006, p. 18). Colonial law, in particular, translated ideas about race into material societal conditions that confirmed and entrenched racial hierarchies. The legal construction of the enslaved person as property, as "outlawed cargo", constituted what Giorgio Agamben terms a "state of exception": positioned outside the law yet subjected to its violent disciplining power.

F. Fanon's work is paramount here. In The Wretched of the Earth, he analyzes the violence of the colonial system and the psychological toll it takes on the colonized. He posits that colonial violence is a "constellation" that systematically destroys the culture and psyche of the colonized people, forcing them into a state of inferiority (F. Fanon, 1963, p. 17). The violence of the colonizer leads to either the internalization of that violence (depression, suicide, intra-communal violence) or a violent liberation struggle. This framework applies directly to the African American experience. The "internalized" violence that Fanon described manifests as the health disparities, the drug epidemics, and the interpersonal strife that plague marginalized communities.

Conversely, the African American struggle for civil rights has historically been connected to decolonization movements worldwide. Figures like Malcolm X drew explicit parallels between the plight of African Americans and the struggles of colonized people in Algeria, Ghana, and the Congo (M. Marable, 2011, p. 390 – 450). The Black Power movement of the late 1960s was deeply influenced by global anti-colonial thought. The violence of the state against Black Panthers, often led by COINTELPRO, was mirrored by the violence of colonial regimes against independence movements (W. Churchill and J. V. Wall, 2002, p. 101 – 158). This shared experience of oppression and resistance links the Black American community to the international Black diaspora.

3.2. Psychological Legacies of Slavery Across the Hemisphere

The psychological consequences of slavery have been documented across the Western Hemisphere, demonstrating the international scope of post-slavery trauma. A comprehensive collection of essays examining these legacies found common patterns in Brazil, the United States, Belize, Jamaica, Colombia, Haiti, and Martinique.These shared psychological legacies include: Color prejudice and self/community disdain, Denial of trauma, Black-on-Black violence, Survival crime, Child beating, Underlying African spirituality and use of music/dance as community psychotherapy.

Crucially, the effects on descendants of slave owners include a belief in white supremacy, dehumanization of self and others, and gun violence. This finding reveals that the traumatic expression of violence operates on both sides of the racial divide, perpetuating cycles of harm across generations and national boundaries.

Indeed, the United States' history of violence against Black people, as the American Historical Association notes, is part of the global history of anti-Black racism and violence shaped primarily, but not exclusively, by European colonialism and imperialism (F. Fanon, 1963, p. 17). This global dimension means that the violence experienced in one location reverberates across borders, creating what scholar S. Hartman term a transnational "afterlife of slavery." (2007, p. 6).

Furthermore, the "war on terror" has added a new dimension to this international dynamic. The globalized narrative of the "dangerous Black or Brown body" transcends borders. The same logic that justified the killing of Trayvon Martin justified the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. The racialized perception of the "other" as threatening is a global currency of power, allowing state and private violence to be sanctioned. This reinforces the idea that the violence in African American culture is not a domestic issue but a manifestation of a global system of white supremacy, a "racial contract" that subjugates non-white populations worldwide (C. W. Mills, 1997, p. 11).

The comparative analysis of racial authoritarian violence in the United States and Brazil reveals the transnational character of anti-Black state violence. Drawing on Hartman's afterlife of slavery and Michael Dawson's concept of "linked fate," (M. C. Dawson, 2001) scholars have examined how "the processes of racialization and the racial logics of subordination have and continue to shape the contours of Black life in the United States and in Brazil" (J. C. Swift, 2024, p. 1)

The concept of "linked fate" captures the diasporic understanding that Black communities across the Americas share a common experience of racial authoritarian violence. The death of George Floyd, for instance, had "political, transnational, and symbolic impacts" (J. C. Swift, 2024, p. 2) that resonated across borders, creating what the study terms "Diasporic understandings of linked fate" (J. C. Swift, 2024, p. 2).

Anti-colonial activists have long recognized the international dimension of violence against African Americans and have sought to leverage international human rights frameworks to challenge it. The Civil Rights Congress, founded by William Patterson, delivered a UN petition in 1951—led by Paul Robeson—to "investigate the U.S. government for violating the human rights of Black citizens who 'suffer from genocide" (H. O. Patterson, 1982, p. 5).

This petition was never taken up by the UN due to pressure from U.S. officials, but it "did receive international attention, especially among Cold War rivals of the U.S.

and anti-colonialists around the world" (K. G. Muhammad, 2024, p. 2). This episode reveals both the potential and the limits of international human rights mechanisms for addressing racial violence—a pattern that continues today.

The Organization of African Unity issued a historic Resolution on Racial Discrimination in the United States at its first assembly meeting in 1964. More recently, the African Union Commission rejected the "continuing discriminatory practices against Black citizens" (M. F. Mahamat, 2020, p. 17) of the United States in response to the police killing of George Floyd. These international condemnations demonstrate that the violence against African Americans has long been recognized globally as a human rights violation requiring international response.

This connection between domestic and foreign violence is not coincidental but structural (S. Booker, 2020, p. 2). The same racial logics that justify police violence against African Americans inform U.S. policy toward African nations.

Conclusion

The violence that permeates African American culture is a complex, painful, and deeply misunderstood phenomenon. This paper has argued that to interpret it as a cultural pathology is to fundamentally misread history. Rather, it is a traumatic expression, a visible symptom of an invisible wound that has been festering since the first slave ships arrived. It is the echo of the whip, the ghost of the lynch mob, and the shadow of the prison cell. We have traced this trajectory, examining how the overt violence of slavery and Jim Crow transformed into the structural violence of the modern carceral state and the psychological violence of intergenerational trauma.

The focus on an international framework is crucial for contextualizing this suffering. The American experience is not exceptional but a specific iteration of a global logic of racial capitalism and colonialism. The violence inflicted upon George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer was not just a failure of American policing; it was a reenactment of the violence that sustained the British Empire, the French colonial system, and the apartheid regime in South Africa. Recognizing this interconnectedness demands a response that is equally global and radical.

Healing from this trauma requires more than just policy reform; it requires a reckoning with history on a massive scale. Reparations, as T. Coates (2014) has powerfully argued, are not just about money but about the acknowledgment of a debt, a theft that continues to yield interest in the form of suffering. It requires the decolonization of the mind, as Fanon prescribed, and the active dismantling of the systems that perpetuate racial injustice.

This paper does not claim to offer a simple solution to a centuries-old problem. But it does insist that the solution must begin with a diagnosis. Until we understand violence in African American culture as a post-slavery, traumatic expression of international violence, we will continue to treat the symptoms while the disease rages on. The path forward lies in truth-telling, in restorative justice, and in building a world where the logic of racial hierarchy is finally and completely annihilated. The culture of survival that has sustained Black Americans for over four hundred years contains within it the seeds of this new world, a world grounded not in violence, but in a just peace.

References

ALEXANDER Michelle, 2010, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, New York, The New Press.

BANDES Susan, PRYOR Marie, KERRISON Erin, and GOFF Phillip Atiba, March 25, 2019, "The Mismeasure of Terry Stops: Assessing the Psychological and Emotional Harms of Stop and Frisk to Individuals and Communities", *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, vol. 37, Issue 2, p. 176 – 194.

BLACKMON Douglas, 2008, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*, New York, Anchor Books.

BOOKER Salih, June 12, 2020, "America's Disdain for Black Lives Extends to Africa", a Washington, D.C.-based publication. Atlantic Council/*https://www.atlanticcouncil.org › uploads › 2020/11.Pdf* Accessed on June 20, 2026.

BRIANT Jerry, 2003, The book *Born in a Mighty Bad Land: The Violent Man in African American Folklore and Fiction* was written, Indiana, Indiana University Press**.**

BRUCE La Marr Jurelle, 2024, *Black Nightmare Imaginary: Popular Music, Collective Trauma, and the Intransigence of Antiblack Violence*, Maryland, University of Maryland.

CARRIGAN William and WALDREP Christopher, 2013, *Swift to Wrath: Lynching in Global Historical Perspective*, Virginia, University of Virginia Press.

CHURCHILL Ward and WALL Jim Vander, 2002, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement*, Boston, South End Press.

COATES Ta-Nehisi Paul, 2014, "The Case for Reparations", *The Atlantic*, Volume 313, Issue Number 5, p. 54 – 71.

DAWSON Michael Carl, 2001, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

.

DEGRUY Joy Leary, 2005, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*, Oregon, Uptone Press.

ELLIS Aimé, 2011, *If We Must Die: From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls*, Michigan**,** Wayne State University Press.

FANON Frantz Omar, 1963, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York, Grove Press.

FREUD Anna, 1937, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, London**,** Hogarth Press.

GUSSOW, Adam, 2002, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

GALTUNG Johan, 1969, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research" *Journal of Peace Research*, Volume 6, Issue 3, p. 167-191.

GROVOQUI Siba N'Zatioula, 1996, *Sovereigns, Quasi Sovereigns, and Africans: Race and Self-Determination*, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press.

HARTMAN Saidiya, 2007, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, New York, Straus and Giroux.

LOPEZ Ian Haney, 2006, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*, New York, New York University Press.

KELLEY Robin Darnell Givens, 1997, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*, Boston, Beacon Press.

MAHAMAT Moussa Faki, May 29, 2020, "Statement of the Chairperson following the murder of George Floyd in the USA", the headquarters of the African Union, Addis Ababa. Chatham House/https://www.chathamhouse.org › default › files.pdf. Accesssed on June 14, 2026.

MARABLE Manning, 2011, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, New York, Viking Press.

MARCIN Freddy, 2022, *Black Lives Matter* ou le combat face aux legs culturels racialisés in *Archipélies*, Issue 13, p. 1 – 14.

MILLS Charles Wade, 1997, *The Racial Contract*, New York, Cornell University Press.

MOYNIHAN Daniel Patrick, 1965, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, Washington D. C. Office of Policy Planning and Research.

MORRISON Toni, 1992, *Jazz*, New York**,** Alfred A. Knopf.

MUHAMMAD Khalil Gibran, March 4, 2024, "Making a Movement: Global D, ecolonization and the Resurgence of White Nationalism." Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, *Institutional Antiracism and Accountability Project*, Harvard Kennedy School/https://www.hks.harvard.edu › carr

MUHAMMAD Khalil Gibran, 2010, *the Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*, Massachussetts, Harvard University Press.

PATTERSON Horace Orlando, 1982, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Massachussetts, Harvard University Press.

ROSE Tricia, 1994, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Hanover, Wesleyan University Press.

ROTHSTEIN Richard, 2017, *the Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, New York, Liveright Publishing.

SWIFT Jaimee Carl, May 31, 2024, "I Thought I Was Going to Die like Him, Racial Authoritarianism and the Afterlife of George Floyd in the United States and Brazil", *Social Sciences*, Volume 13, Issue 6, p 1 – 13.

THOMPSON Carlyle Van, 2006, *Eating the Black Body: Miscegenation as Sexual Consumption in African American Literature and Culture*, New York, NY Peter Lang. WELLS Ida Bell, 1892, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*, New York, the New York Public, [Self-published pamphlet].

WILLIAMS Eric Eustace, 1944, *Capitalism and Slavery*, North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.

YEHUDA, Rachelle et *al*., 2016, "Holocaust Exposure Induced Intergenerational Effects on FKBP5 Méthylation", *Biological Psychiatry*, Volume 80, Issue 5, p. 372-380.