



Faculty of Design

2023

Learnings from Black Liberation System Entanglements: A decolonial healing-centered approach

Udoewa, Victor

Suggested citation:

Udoewa, Victor (2023) Learnings from Black Liberation System Entanglements: A decolonial healing-centered approach. In: Proceedings of Relating Systems Thinking and Design Volume: RSD12, 06-20 Oct 2023. Available at <https://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/4931/>

Open Research is a publicly accessible, curated repository for the preservation and dissemination of scholarly and creative output of the OCAD University community. Material in Open Research is open access and made available via the consent of the author and/or rights holder on a non-exclusive basis.

The OCAD University Library is committed to accessibility as outlined in the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#) and the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#) and is working to improve accessibility of the Open Research Repository collection. If you require an accessible version of a repository item contact us at repository@ocadu.ca.



**Relating Systems Thinking and Design
(RSD12) Symposium | October 6–20, 2023**

Learnings from Black Liberation System Entanglements: A decolonial healing-centered approach

Victor Udoewa

Part 1

Donnella Meadow's groundbreaking work in systems theory and practice continues to remain relevant today. And yet, we must ask for whom? Most of the systems community's justice work has focused on the ecological crisis of climate, but not much has been shared about the learnings from other intersectional social justice movements such as racial, gender, disability, LGBTQIA+, Indigenous, and economic justice. This is partly because this systems practice work is being done outside of the "expert" systemic design communities. We explore an updated understanding of harmful system entanglements, or traps, contextualised to the lived experience and struggle for Black liberation in conversation with other parallel struggles (feminist, queer, womanist, *mujerista*, queer womanist, Latin American liberation, disability, and more). We furthermore explore these adverse system entanglements through the lens of relationality and trauma. As a result, this paper describes different decolonial types of trauma responses from a Black liberationist perspective and shares an understanding of system traps as trauma responses of the ego-preserving (un)conscious system. Our justice work is to be system stewards, or trauma stewards, walking alongside the system towards healing. These are learnings we, in the Indigenous and transgenerational Black liberation movements, already have, embody, carry, and through which we tell stories to the systemic design community to facilitate inter-ontological and inter-epistemic conversation. This is the first in a short series of papers to explore updated

Black liberation adverse system entanglements (or traps), movements (not interventions), and praxeology (instead of methodology).

KEYWORDS: Black liberation, system traps, trauma stewardship, social justice, system entanglements, healing-centered, system stewardship, African-American Indigeneity

RSD TOPIC(S): Cases & Practice, Society & Culture

Introduction

I occupy multiple spaces of privilege and a lack of privilege. I am a cisgender male, Christian, heterosexual person living in the U.S. Simultaneously, I am an invisibly disabled, Black, Nigerian from an immigrant family in the U.S. As a member of an African-Indigenous people group, my Ibibio name is *Anietie*, which is a shortened version of the question “Who is like God?” When I communicate from an Indigenous perspective, I primarily speak from an African-Indigenous perspective, which differs, on the other hand, from Indigeneity in North America or Australia. When I communicate about Black liberation, I share from the African American perspective in the U.S., the Nigerian perspective in Africa, and perspectives across the African diaspora due to places I have lived (e.g., South Africa, UK, etc.) or from experiences working in pan-African, Black, or African-diasporic groups. My experiences in these groups and in ally groups range from work on food security, education, affordable housing, Black home ownership, digital literacy, employment, citizen returning, health, transportation, organic agriculture, fair wages, pay equity, prison industrial complex, medical industrial complex, energy access, access to healthy food and nutrition, decolonial arts work, racial reconciliation, etc.

The term “I” refers to the author. The term “we” refers to the global diasporic community that has been called Black under colonisation. When I refer to a specific subset of the African diaspora, I will name the group, such as “we, Nigerian-Americans,” British Kenyans, or Afro-Peruvians.

This paper is the first in a short series of publications not to apply universal systemic design to social justice work communities in the U.S. but to share the learnings from the ways of being, knowing, and systems-doing of communities engaged in social justice

with a specific focus on Black liberation due to my social location. The learnings from this first paper relate to and affect the first three phases of the systemic design process: framing, listening, and understanding the system (Jones & Van Ael, 2022). The learnings come from other parallel and intersectional struggles as well, including Indigenous, womanist, queer womanist, feminist, queer, disability, Latin American liberation, LGBTQIA+, *mujerista* justice, and more. The first set of learnings, the focus of this paper, is the harmful system entanglements or system traps that impede our work for justice. From my Indigenous perspective, all creation is entangled because the world is fundamentally relational. The question is always about the quality or fruit of an entanglement. Harmful or negative system entanglements are what Meadows calls system traps. However, not all entanglements are traps. Across the community of Black people around the world, we have experienced a connection between traps and trauma.

There is no one globally accepted definition of trauma. Cultural somatic therapist Resmaa Menakem (2017) defines trauma as the body's response "when something happens to the body that is too much, too fast, or too soon," overwhelming the body (p. 7). And yet, outside of colonial event-based understandings of trauma, we know that people can experience trauma responses due to slow violence, violence that happens gradually and may be invisible, violence that does not happen too fast or too soon (Nixon, 2011).

Menakem (2017) also describes trauma as "a wordless story our body tells itself about what is safe and what is a threat. Our rational brain can't stop it from occurring," He adds, "something in the here and now is rekindling old pain or discomfort, and the body tries to address it with the reflexive energy that's still stuck inside the nervous system" (p. 8). And yet, sometimes insidious trauma results from oppression that is "not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that [does] violence to the soul and spirit" (Root, 1992). Oppression and violence are not only committed by an individual against an individual but by groups, organisations, institutions, and systems against people groups, their spirits and souls, and even ecosystems. In other words, trauma can arise from events or processes like disasters, threat, violence, slow violence, and unjust social systems. Trauma is always social, always a social phenomenon, arising out of a particular or repeated particular context,

situation, and interaction. Thus there isn't one universalist trauma but a pluriverse—a world of many worlds, each with its own contextualised understandings of trauma, its manifestations, symptomatology, and ways of healing (Craps et al., 2015).

Pluriversal trauma work is hard to understand or amplify when dominant trauma discourse reinforces a colonial, universal understanding of trauma in the age and empire of trauma while racialised capitalism reinforces the trauma economy (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009; Million, 2009; Miller & Tougaw, 2002). However, we work to reclaim trauma from the colonial, Americo-Eurocentric, individualistic, psychopathological domain and clearly state that trauma is not only clinical. From an Indigenous, feminist, relational, and Black diasporic perspective, trauma is social, cultural, collective, cumulative, intergenerational, historical, transgenerational, and political (Sabnis et al., 2021; Menakem, 2020; Ginwright, 2018; Clark, 2016; Herman, 2015; Van Styvendale, 2008).

With this understanding, engaging in trauma work implies at least two things. First, we conduct systems practice. Because trauma is social, historical, and cultural and the result of violent systems and institutions, including colonialism, we work with a systems approach. Second, as opposed to dominant, deficit-based, colonially clinical trauma work, and from a womanist and *mujerista* perspective, we employ an asset-based approach focused on healing when working on social justice and Black liberation (Ginwright, 2018; Bryant-Davis & Comas-Díaz, 2016).

First, after the introduction, we discuss how the liberal mythology of system behaviour as only emergent and unattributable to individuals exposes a deep need for missing relationality in systems work. Next, we draw the connection between system stewardship, trauma stewardship and a healing-centered approach. Then, we review the twelve system traps outlined by Meadows, Kim, and Braun from our relational perspective, using social justice examples to illuminate them when applicable (Meadows, 2008; Braun, 2002; Kim, 1993). Finally, we share brief concluding thoughts and upcoming work in this series within the systems practice of underutilised communities.

Liberal Mythology about Systems

In liberal systems theory and education, there is a living colonial mythology that the function or purpose of a system emerges without it being the intention of any actor in the system. This privileged mythology is not true in the experience of underutilised people, who carry an epistemological advantage from the bottom of social hierarchies (Rolin, 2009; Foley, 2006; Phillips, 2006). Many, if not most, socio-human systems have powerful actors in the system whose intentions and goals are the system function or purpose (Marginalized Peoples, Generations). Power allows actors and groups to influence and control resource flows, relationships, practices, policies, and ultimately purpose-important levers within a system (Birney, 2021; Kania et al., 2018). The colonial mythology about system purposes allows powerful actors, groups, and institutions in systems to avoid responsibility or active care, blaming the “system infirmity” on the impersonal system itself when, from the perspective of those powerful people aligned with the system, the system is healthy.

In socio-human systems, there is a type of system (un)consciousness; an autonomy that rises from the social field of actors, groups, practices, relationships, and dynamics; a type of personhood (Pomeroy & Herrmann, 2023). However, the autonomous system function and purpose emerge from multiple such functions, purposes, intentions, powers, resource flows, and relationships of people and groups within the system. The very reason some underutilised people groups engage in system practice is because all human actors are not aligned in purpose, even when all non-human creation is aligned. If we humans were all aligned, there would be no need for a systems practice as we would all move in the same direction as part of healthy system stewardship. Instead, we engage in system practice directly because there are powerful interests (people) that shape the system purpose and are unaligned to system health.

What does a healing-centered approach mean regarding systems of oppression? Resmaa Menakem reminds us that both perpetrators and victims of violence experience trauma, both victims and architects of unjust social systems, as well as those who benefit from those social systems (Menakem, 2017). Most colonial trauma studies, theory, and work focuses on victims of violence, perhaps due to conflating trauma and victimhood and a desire not to identify psycho-emotionally with perpetrators, assign

victim status to perpetrators, or exonerate them (Craps et al., 2015). Because we take a systems healing approach, we seek healing for all, victims, beneficiaries, and perpetrators, without whose healing there is no system health.

In a social field and system that commits violence against plants, animals, landscapes, and ecosystems, in a system whose purpose is not aligned with system health, there are individual perpetrators who form and create perpetrating groups, organisations, institutions, and dynamics. In other words, the system itself, a type of system-person, can be seen as a perpetrator of injustice. Our systems healing work acts as a stressor against a system-person whose function is injustice. System reactions, which emerge from individual reactions, can be seen as the reflexive energy and trauma responses of the system-person as it tries to maintain its ego or identity.

Instead of colonial understandings of trauma, which view being stuck in the past as a negative existence, in Black liberation work, we view being in the past as neutral (Levine, 2015; Habermas et al., 2008). In other words, instead of progressivism being the opposite of conservatism, our progressivism is a type of conservation of our past, a reclaiming of or reversion to alternative pre-colonial stories, pasts, and histories (Hannah-Jones & Watson, 2021; Rodney, 2001). The question, in Black liberation, is not whether or not we are living in the past; the question is what kind of connection we have to the past. We understand trauma as a poor relationship with the past, as we are always deeply connected to the past and re-excavating it to live better in the present and build better futures bonded to our pasts.

The trauma responses of unjust systems have a negative relationship with the past. In reviewing the well-known adverse system entanglements or traps, what we call trauma responses, it is unclear what definition of trauma and trauma responses to use in describing system trauma. I choose to practice two-eyed seeing by using Western colonial understandings of trauma, which might make it more clear in dominant discourse how the system functions like an individual with trauma, as well as a decolonial understanding of trauma responses (Goodchild, 2021, 2022). Let us review the Western-centric understanding of high-level or primary trauma responses (Menakem, 2020; Schauer & Elbert, 2015).

- **Freeze**—temporary paralysis by fear with an inability to move, often as a temporary stage before action, with dilated pupils and attention focused on stimulus to better understand and assess threat.
- **Fight**—release of stress hormones with increased blood flow to the heart and muscles of the arms and legs, faster and deeper breathing, inhibited digestion, and skin growing colder, triggering a reaction to stay and fight apparent threat.
- **Flight**—release of same stress hormones and physical changes that create a signal to flee from danger or apparent threat.
- **(Annihilate)**—a hyperstimulated or amplified version of **Fight**.
- **Fawn/friend**—compliance with a person perceived as a threat or danger, usually when Freeze, Fight, and Flight have not worked; it may involve agreeing, befriending, placating, begging, negotiating, bribing, etc., to avoid conflict or further abuse.
- **Fright**—when there is no escape from the threat, and *Freeze*, *Fight*, and *Flight* have not worked, fright takes over in various forms—nausea, lightheadedness, tingling, numbness, panic, dizziness—with initial symptoms of dissociation as the body begins alternating disjointedly between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system actions.
- **Flag**—collapse, helplessness, and despair signalling parasympathetic shut-down when there is no resolution from threat; numbness dominates, speech becomes difficult, vision blurs, sounds become fainter, blood pressure drop.
- **Flop/faint**—entire physical and mental unresponsiveness, including fainting, nausea, loss of bowel control, and vomiting.

Colonialism is the ideologies, philosophies, policies, systems, and practices that “seek to impose the will of one people on another and to use the resources of the imposed people for the benefit of the imposer” (Asante, 2006). Colonisation is the specific act, process, or action of imposing that will on a people to use their resources for gain. Coloniality is the nature or quality of colonialism, a colonial way of being. Any resource can be colonised—knowledges, minerals, languages, lands, bodies, histories, stories, etc. Western clinical trauma work is colonial in that it has imposed a single, universalist understanding of trauma on everyone, taking the rich trauma wisdom resources of various communities and hiding or dismissing them. Thus, decolonial trauma work

seeks to delink trauma knowledge, knowledge production, and ways of being from a Western, clinical, colonial framework.

One decolonial understanding of trauma is the various “body” responses to perceived threats or actual danger, which reconstruct or reinforce individualism, create us/them oppositional and binary polarization, and break the relational identity of and between plants, people, animals, landscapes, and ecosystems. The body can be a person but usually refers to a group of people, community, organisation, institution, or (eco)system. Systems can traumatically react to justice movements in a multitude of ways beyond repression (Sørensen, 2015). Both from my observation and community knowledge synthesised and passed through conversation and learning circles, I list 11 trauma responses, though there are more (e.g., Marginalized Peoples, Generations). I use the term “system” instead of “body” to highlight what these trauma responses look like as system trauma, though they can be expressed by an individual body. These traumatic expressions are coming from places of power located in the system, including those with power aligned to and within the system purpose.

- **Watch/Monitor/Surveil**—when a system first becomes aware of a perceived threat to its structure, it first observes, watches, monitors, or surveils potential insurgent actors within the system; this usually precedes any possible action.
- **Ignore/Feign Ignorance**—ignoring the threat sometimes due to assessing it as weak or insufficient to change the system or due to expecting dissent and protest as a normal and natural part of any system; other times, the system pretends not to know or understand because knowing or understanding the concern or cause would require change, possibly to the validity of the claims of injustice.
- **Deride/Criticize**—publicly criticising or deriding movements against the system ego and purpose, often to prevent others from joining the movements which would accumulate more power and resources.
- **Dominat**e—the use of force to maintain system purpose; this can occur through occupation, apartheid, policing, brutality, torture, and other violence over time or even increased periods of dominance over shorter time periods like martial law.

- **Overthrow**—the use of violent revolution to force a powerful group of system change agents from changing a system or from maintaining a change to the system.
- **Surrender/Isolate/Withdraw**—relinquishing a position or object of power or withdrawing from the fight to maintain the system in such a way as to make any system change agents believe that the change agents have achieved their goals, without any structural change occurring to the system.
- **Exterminate/Eliminate**—killing those who attempt to change the system from its current unjust account.
- **Exile**—sending away, excommunicating, depatriating someone by force or forcing them to do so in the hopes that, with that person or those persons gone, it is much easier to maintain the system superego, state, and purpose.
- **Assimilate/Envelop**—superficially accept, take in, and adopt the movement, usually involving creating a new department or role in organisations to mark this new work; unfortunately the underlying system remains in tact.
- **Ventilate**— in contrast to dominate or exterminate, allow just enough sites of disobedience and resistance as to give system change agents a feeling of small success and freedom, avoiding a full system shift or revolution when people feel they have absolutely no freedom and nothing left to lose.
- **Victim Claiming**—divert attention, connection, and resources away from victims by claiming you, those with power, are the victims and in need of aid and help from the ongoing and growing dangers or even the threatening work of the victims.

In Black liberation work, we do not practice systemic design, but systems healing justice for a system that is experiencing trauma. When working with people experiencing trauma, like a dying system, we can experience secondary trauma and must practice healthy trauma stewardship (van Dernoot Lipsky, 2009).

Ultimately, we are system stewards, which means we are not using a deficit-based framework and enacting systemic design when something is wrong. We always care for the system. This is a type of post-activism activism (Akomolafe & Benavides, 2020). We are definitely doing activist work, but it is not from an activist orientation; we do not fight against the system. Instead, we are stewards, midwives, and hospice workers.

When there is need for transition, our job is to midwife the system transition to a new personhood with a new name, leaving the old ego behind; new names represent new identities in certain Indigenous communities. We are workers helping to hospice the old system to die peacefully (de Oliveira, 2021). Similar to clinical neuroscientific understandings of trauma work in which some therapists help to rewire the brain, we are helping to rewire the system connections, relationships, resource flows, and more to ease the transition to a new emergent self.

Traditional system traps

Many system traps in systems literature come from observation of corporate, governance, or policy situations (Meadows, 2008; Braun, 2002; Kim, 1993). Let us look at how they relate to healing justice movement building and community work and what system experts Meadows, Braun, and Kim suggest to address the traps. Because system traps or harmful system entanglements are trauma responses of an oppressive system, we work through different pathways to process a just transition without triggering system self-preservation embodied in the following traps.

Fixes that fail

Fixes that fail occur when people apply a quick fix to a symptom, and the fix, or solution, creates unintended consequences that exacerbate the problem symptom, returning it to previous or worse levels (Braun, 2002; Kim, 1993). This is a clinical, *Freeze*, system trauma response or a decolonial, traumatic *Watch/Monitor* story, as the fix may not need an action from the system. When the unintended consequence is resistance by other actors in the system who have different, competing goals for the amount of the symptom, the other actors take action to pull the amount of a symptom in a different direction—policy resistance corresponding to a *Fight* trauma response or the traumatic *Dominate* story (Meadows, 2008). Instead of viewing the trap as a loop, I often view it as an unconnected loop, a loss of relationality between the fix and the fundamental problem, between the system and those implementing the fix, and between competing actors. One example is the racial wealth gap between White and Black households; no matter what policies were enacted, policy resistance in the form of Jim Crow, redlining, school segregation, mass incarceration, and environmental racism have maintained the wealth gap (Hanks et al., 2018).

One recommended “solution” for the trap is to focus on fundamental causes; however, that is a recommendation of privilege when people are literally dying from symptoms (Alexander, 2020; Stevenson, 2015). So, we, in social justice movements, must take a multi-sided approach where we metaphorically pull drowning people out of the river while simultaneously going upstream to stop what is pushing them into the river (McKinlay, 1975; Zola, 1970). For policy resistance, Meadows recommends bringing all actors together to redefine joint goals or to find mutually beneficial ways to satisfy all goals (2008). Again, this implies the power to convene and redefine goals, which many groups do not have.

Shifting the burden

Similar to *Fixes that fail*, *Shifting the burden* occurs when someone chooses a quick fix to address a symptom. In the case of *Shifting the burden*, the quick fix diverts attention away from fundamental solutions and erodes the viability or strength of the fundamental solution, increasing the perceived need for the quick fix. This is a type of *Fawn* trauma response of the system, leading the world to believe the situation is being resolved while the system remains intact. Decolonially, this is the *Assimilate* trauma response story where the system acknowledges the issue and willingly adopts a “solution” enveloping the justice movement. Instead of a loop, I view this trap as a loss of relationality between the people taking action, the fundamental causes of the problem, and those experiencing the pain.

Fossil fuel companies have helped to create a system that disproportionately affects Black and Brown peoples and poorer countries globally. Instead of shifting away from fossil fuels, they have tried to address the climate crisis by hiding information, using carbon cap-and-trade markets, lobbying, misinformation, marketing fossil fuels as the solution to poverty, focusing on natural gas, fracking, and plastics, and more as a reason to increase oil production (Westervelt, 2017-2023). This has eroded the world’s ability to mitigate the climate crisis, as we now will most likely surpass the 1.5-degree increase in global climate. Now, in a further affront to Black liberation, Exxon is set to make Guyana its top oil producer (Westervelt, 2023).

The recommended approach to *Shifting the burden* trauma response is to focus on long-term goals, addressing fundamental causes or problems. Again, the focus on

long-term goals and fundamental causes is a capability of privilege. Oppressed people must use a dual approach due to harm and death from the symptoms. However, we must take care to address symptoms in a way that does not affect the viability of the fundamentally systemic and structural work.

Eroding goals

Due to the gap between a goal and performance, groups often lower their expectations and goals, creating a smaller gap that motivates less corrective action and so on. As opposed to a vicious loop, erosion is a lack of embodiment of pain and of connection to the communal goal. *Eroding goals* represent a *Friend/Fawn* trauma response, or, decolonially speaking, a *Ventilate* system trauma story in which sites of resistance through justice-based goals are allowed, though they will never achieve their vision. They will slowly erode.

In Black liberation work, one area of focus is education, in which it is documented that teachers' lower expectations of Black and Brown students affect teacher behaviour toward those students, affecting their achievement and lowering the teachers' expectations (Milner, 2012; Hauser-Cram, 2003; Solórzano, 1998). In liberatory work, the gap between liberation and now is painful, and we do not lower the goal due to the gap. The gap means our work is not complete.

Setting absolute standards or using an external reference frame are often recommended solutions for this system trap. From multiple Indigenous points of view, there is no external referent outside the system: we are all a part of the system. Additionally, absolute standards, when applied to underutilised people, perpetuate disparities by applying equality where equity is needed instead. For example, in education, an equitable approach would not use a single standard of excellence for all students. Measuring growth each year, in recognition of the different starting points of children, is one possible equitable approach. Other recommendations are to set up goals to create a drift to higher performance, determine if there is a conflict between stated and implicit goals, or build a clear transition plan from today's state to the envisioned future, including a realistic timeline. However, those options require power, which a group may or may not have.

Escalation

Escalation occurs when a competing group's actions are interpreted as a threat to another group. The second competing group responds similarly, increasing the threat to the first group who then responds even more. This cycle continues. *Escalation* is a shift from a philosophy of "enough" to an ontology of competition and the zero-sum game, and embodies the *Freeze* and *Fight* trauma responses, possibly escalating further. Decolonially, escalation is the *Monitor* and *Dominate* system trauma response stories, possibly escalating further. Abortion politics demonstrates this where any move to further criminalise is seen as a threat to those who further seek to legalise it. Unfortunately, the options do not affect Black and Brown women equally, who are disproportionately affected by bans on abortion that increase their maternal mistreatment, morbidity, and mortality (Trader et al., 2023).

In this trauma response, system experts recommend identifying the measure of competition and changing it or negotiating a mutually beneficial larger goal. Both of those routes require power various groups may not have. Meadows suggests another option of refusing to play the game, unilaterally disarming (Meadows, 2008).

Accidental Adversaries

Similar to *Escalation*, *Accidental Adversaries* only differ in intent in which multiple parties initially start out as partners, and one party takes an action that offends the second party or that the second party interprets as giving an unfair advantage to the first party. The second party reacts, and the first party sees this action as unfairly advantageous or offensive. Hence, they become adversaries through the same *Freeze and Fight* trauma responses and can escalate beyond. Decolonially, in addition to *Monitor* and *Dominate*, the system trap of *Accidental Adversaries* also represents the *Victim-claiming* system trauma response and can escalate beyond.

White body supremacy is a type of trauma response against Black liberation (Menakem, 2017). In the U.S., White-centered and White supremacist communities always thought they had a partnership with the government that has historically and currently supported affirmative action for Whites but not for others (Rothstein, 2017). However, they have interpreted actions by the government, like electing Obama the first Black president or using race as a factor in university admissions, as offences and have

retaliated with the election of Trump or Supreme Court rulings barring race as an admission factor, even up to the January 2020 insurrection, a traumatic annihilate response or overthrow system trauma response story (McGhee, 2022; Wilkerson, 2020). The insurrection challenged and offended conservative Republican lawmakers in the government whose policies supported the identities of those revolting.

For the *Accidental Adversaries* trauma response, system experts recommend (re)creating a shared vision, commitment to co-learning, frequent communications, or aligned overarching goals and monitoring metrics. Again, the ability to do this requires power which certain underutilised groups may not have.

Tragedy of the commons

Tragedy of the commons is the depletion of the quality and quantity of a commonly shared, erodable resource due to growth or escalation of individual use for individual benefit. Rather than viewing this trap as a loop, I view it as a loss of relationality in the common good, not just in the individual lack of care for the whole, but in the lack of communal care for the individual who does not exist apart from the community. The *Tragedy of the commons* is a *Fright* trauma response and represents a decolonial *Withdraw* system trauma story. The system does not act to its immediate benefit.

In the U.S., democratic cultural discourse is a limited resource, often dominated by White-centered, biased views. These views leave little space for other views, erode the democratic quality of the discourse. The resulting eroded discourse then shapes legal frameworks and White supremacist visions of law and order to the detriment of social justice (Eriksen, 2019).

Recommended solutions include privatising, regulating, renewing, or substituting the resource. These “solutions” require power, which many groups do not have, and using a different resource does not change behaviour. Another is educating individuals, which doesn’t make sense when the resource is literally life-saving, like asylum. Another solution is to manage the resource using a holistic view, possibly with an arbitrating manager. Certain Indigenous and non-capitalistic communities who avoid this trap bring relationality into the process of management of shared resources.

Limits to Growth

Nothing can grow unrestrained forever; there will always be a limit or a balancing feedback loop that limits growth. *Limits to growth* is a loss of relationality and philosophy of “enough” due to a capitalist mindset. It is a *Fright, Flag*, and possibly *Faint* trauma response of the system and the decolonial *Ventilate* system trauma story in which the growth is managed but is limited.

Pay equity between women of colour and White men has struggled with *Limits of growth*; the lower the average gap is in various fields, the harder it is to reduce it further (George et al., 2022). This limit is not a real limit out of the control of the system but a decision, a trauma response in opposition to liberation and justice. System experts recommend planning for balancing processes before they affect growth, focusing on links between growth and limits, or removing limits. Again, these require power and resources within the system.

Attractiveness Principle

When *Limits to growth* are multiple and interdependent, movement builders must choose which limits to focus resources on, which creates the *Attractiveness principle*, a version of the *Limits to growth* trauma response. In the example of women of colour pay equity, movement builders must decide to focus on intersectional diversity of company executives, promotion inequity, harmful stereotypes and implicit bias, negotiating inequity, discrimination, lack of equity for carers, societal undervaluing the work of women of colour, inequity in bonuses and benefit packages, lack of flexibility for different situations, lack of pay transparency, etc. System experts give the same recommendations as *Limits to growth*. Additionally, they recommend establishing priorities and matching available resources with slowing actions.

Growth and Divestment

Growth and divestment is a type of *Limits to growth* trauma response in which growth reaches a certain limit that can be overcome if certain investments are made. Unfortunately, the limiting performance or growth is used as a reason not to make investments. Certain employers blame “limits” of gender pay equity on educational attainment, work experience, and occupational segregation instead of investing in those areas for women of colour and deciding to pay them more (Aragão, 2023). This

represents a flag trauma response and a decolonial *Withdraw* trauma story. System experts recommend the same advice as *Limits to growth*, plus setting investment decisions based on external signals, finding the link between performance and investment, and shortening the delay between declining growth and investment help. All these recommendations require power in the system.

Success to the Successful

When the winners of a competition are systematically rewarded with resources that help them to continue winning, the winners can eventually take all resources. *Success to the successful* is a *Fight* system trauma response tending towards *Annihilate*, and a *Dominate* system trauma story tending towards *Eliminate*. It is a loss of relationality to the forces of competition where the communal does not care for the individual.

In the U.S., when legislatures win electoral seats, they use their power to gerrymander the maps so they win more seats, or they set rules that suppress the vote of people of colour, increasing the chances of winning again (Anderson, 2018). System experts recommend policies to limit rewards, reduce advantage, increase diversification, reduce the dependence of new rounds of competition on past rewards, redefine success in broader terms, and create collaborative, cooperative environments. These all require power.

Rule beating

Rule beating is an evasive action to get around the intent of a rule. It follows the *Fawn* and *Surrender* system trauma responses. It represents a disconnection between the hearts of rule beaters and the rules, rule makers, beneficiaries, or advocates.

When the 15th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution passed in 1870, no state or federal government could deny the right to vote based on race or colour. However, after Reconstruction ended in 1877, southern states set up various barriers, including poll taxes, literacy tests, intimidation, and more effectively keeping poor Whites and people of colour from voting while keeping the letter of the law. System experts recommend redesigning rules to focus creativity on achieving the purpose of the rules, which requires power in the system.

Seeking the wrong goal

Seeking the wrong goal is setting a goal-and-system direction that does not align or lead to the desired result. It is an example of the \pm *Fawn* and *Assimilate* system trauma response and story.

In the early 1970s, U.S. block grants established the goal of increasing incarceration (Hinton, 2016). That is exactly what happened with 2 million people, 20% of the global incarcerated population, located in the U.S. today. A better goal would have been to focus on root goals, needs, or causes like the amount of community flourishing, disproportionate targeting of Black and Brown people, etc. System experts recommend focusing goals on the real welfare of the system, which only those in power can do.

Conclusion

In this paper, I shared a decolonial understanding of trauma. In contrast to the Western, clinical, colonial understanding of trauma, our experience of trauma is historical, cumulative, intergenerational, cultural, transgenerational, collective, political, and social. For that reason, in the work of social justice broadly and Black liberation, specifically, trauma work is systems work, and we use a systems approach.

Resmaa Menakem defines White body supremacy as a trauma response (2018). Because of the connections between the intentions and purposes of powerful individuals and the system purpose, these individual trauma responses result in a system trauma response. Social justice system traps or adverse entanglements are trauma responses of a system whose purpose or function is injustice. System traps are the result of an (un)conscious system-entity trying to maintain its unjust system identity or ego. This is because justice work is the leading of an unjust system, often through trauma responses, towards health, social justice, and Black liberation work is system stewardship where the goal is system healing. Justice doulas must practice healthy trauma stewardship.

Beyond clinical trauma responses such as fight, flight, freeze, fawn, fright, flag, flop, and annihilate, we described decolonial system trauma responses including *Watch*, *Ignore*, *Deride*, *Dominate*, *Overthrow*, *Withdraw*, *Exterminate*, *Exile*, *Assimilate*, *Ventilate*, and *Victim-claim*. We explored the standard systems traps, showing how these trauma

responses show up in transgenerational Black liberation work. However, these standard traps are not contextualised to the experience of Black liberation centred on disability, transformative, environmental, reproductive, and holistic justice.

The goal of the paper is to begin a dialogue at conferences, in conversations, and in private communications about what the systemic design community could learn and methods that could be helpful as the community addresses other systemic challenges. This paper introduces Black liberation system approaches but creates more questions that cannot be addressed in this initial short paper. Those questions will be addressed in later papers in this series, which will be submitted to systemic design journals. In Part II of this work, I share “system traps” or system trauma responses contextualised and specific to Black and Indigenous peoples in the work of healing justice. Then, in Part III, I share our understanding of levers and the way the Black liberation movement practices system stewardship. In contrast to systemic design approaches, due to the link between the conscious intentions of powerful individuals in the system and the system purpose, Part III will show how the Black liberation systems approach is grounded in relationality.

References

1. Anderson, C. (2018). *One person, no vote: How voter suppression is destroying our democracy*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
2. Akomolafe, B., & Benavides, M. (2020). The Times are Urgent: Let's Slow Down. *Open Letter to CONCORD-DEEEP, CIVICUS, GCAP, Civic Society Organizations and Activists Working for a 'Better'World*. Accessed, 2.
3. Alexander, M. (2020). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. The New Press.
4. Aragão, C. (2023). *Gender pay gap in US hasn't changed much in two decades*. Pew Research Center.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/03/01/gender-pay-gap-facts/>
5. Asante, M. (2006). Forward. In Dei, G. J. S., & Kempf, A. *Anti-colonialism and education: The politics of resistance*. Brill.
6. Birney, A. (2021). How do we know where there is potential to intervene and leverage impact in a changing system? The practitioner's perspective. *Sustainability Science*, 16(3), 749–765.

7. Braun, W. (2002). The system archetypes.
8. Bryant-Davis, T., & Comas-Díaz, L. (2016). Introduction: Womanist and mujerista psychologies.
9. Clark, N. (2016). Shock and awe: Trauma as the new colonial frontier. *Humanities*, 5(1), 14.
10. Craps, S., Cheyette, B., Gibbs, A., Andermahr, S., & Allwork, L. (2015). Decolonizing trauma studies round-table discussion.
11. de Oliveira, V. M. (2021). *Hospicing modernity: Facing humanity's wrongs and the implications for social activism*. North Atlantic Books.
12. Eriksen, T. H. (2019). The Tragedy of the Cultural Commons: Cultural Crossroads and the Paradoxes of Identity. *The Handbook of Diasporas, Media, and Culture*, 49-61.
13. Fassin, D., & Rechtman, R. (2009). *The empire of trauma: An inquiry into the condition of victimhood*. Princeton University Press.
14. Foley, D. (2006). Indigenous Standpoint Theory. *International Journal of the Humanities*, 3(8).
15. George, E. E., Milli, J., & Tripp, S. (2022). Worse than a double whammy: The intersectional causes of wage inequality between women of colour and White men over time. *Labour*, 36(3), 302-341.
16. Ginwright, S. (2018). The future of healing: Shifting from trauma informed care to healing centered engagement. *Occasional Paper*, 25, 25-32.
17. Goodchild, M. (2022). Relational Systems Thinking: The Dibaajimowin (Story) of Re-Theorizing "Systems Thinking" and "Complexity Science". *Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change*, 2(1), 53-76.
18. Goodchild, M. (2021). Relational systems thinking: That's how change is going to come, from our earth mother. *Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change*, 1(1), 75-103.
19. Habermas, T., Ott, L. M., Schubert, M., Schneider, B., & Pate, A. (2008). Stuck in the past: Negative bias, explanatory style, temporal order, and evaluative perspectives in life narratives of clinically depressed individuals. *Depression and Anxiety*, 25(11), E121-E132.
20. Hanks, A., Solomon, D., & Weller, C. E. (2018). Systematic inequality: How America's structural racism helped create the black-white wealth gap. *Center for American Progress*, 21, 3-12.

21. Hannah-Jones, N., & Watson, R. (2021). *The 1619 Project: Born on the water*. Penguin.
22. Hauser-Cram, P., Sirin, S. R., & Stipek, D. (2003). When teachers' and parents' values differ: Teachers' ratings of academic competence in children from low-income families. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 95(4), 813.
23. Herman, J. L. (2015). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence--from domestic abuse to political terror*. Hachette UK.
24. Hinton, E. (2016). *From the war on poverty to the war on crime: The making of mass incarceration in America*. Harvard University Press.
25. Jones, P. H., & Van Ael, K. (2022). *Design journeys through complex systems: Practice tools for systemic design*. Amsterdam: Bis Publishers, 2022..
26. Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, M. (2018). *The water of systems change*. https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change
27. Kim, D. H. (1993). System Archetypes I: Diagnosing Systemic Issues and Designing High-Leverage Interventions. Toolbox Reprint Series. Cambridge, MA: Pegasus Communications.
28. Levine, P. A. (2015). *Trauma and memory: Brain and body in a search for the living past: A practical guide for understanding and working with traumatic memory*. North Atlantic Books.
29. Marginalized Peoples. (Generations). Lived experiential knowledge.
30. McGhee, H. (2022). *The sum of us: What racism costs everyone and how we can prosper together*. One World.
31. McKinlay John, B. (1975). A Case for Refocusing Upstream: The Political Economy of Illness. In *Applying Behavioral Science to Cardiovascular Risk: Proceedings of a Conference*. Seattle, WA: American Heart Association (pp. 7-17).
32. Meadows, D. H. (2008). *Thinking in systems: A primer*. chelsea green publishing.
33. Resmaa Menakem. (2018, April 14). White Supremacy as a Trauma Response. *Resmaa Menakem | Embodied Anti-Racist Education*. October 1, 2023, <https://www.resmaa.com/somatic-learnings/white-supremacy-as-a-trauma-response>
34. Menakem, R. (2017). *My grandmother's hands: Racialized trauma and the pathway to mending our hearts and bodies*. Central Recovery Press.
35. Miller, N. K., & Tougaw, J. D. (Eds.). (2002). *Extremities: Trauma, testimony, and community*. University of Illinois Press.

36. Million, D. (2009). Felt theory: An Indigenous feminist approach to affect and history. *Wicazo Sa Review*, 24(2), 53-76.
37. Milner IV, H. R. (2012). Beyond a test score: Explaining opportunity gaps in educational practice. *Journal of Black Studies*, 43(6), 693-718.
38. Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press.
39. Phillips, L. (2006). *The womanist reader: The first quarter century of womanist thought*. Routledge.
40. Pomeroy, E., & Herrmann, L. (2023). Social Fields: Knowing the water we swim in. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 00218863231174957.
41. Rodney, W. (2001). African History in the Service of the Black liberation. *Small Axe* 5(2), 66-80.
42. Rolin, K. (2009). Standpoint theory as a methodology for the study of power relations. *Hypatia*, 24(4), 218-226.
43. Root, M. P. (1992). *Reconstructing the impact of trauma on personality*.
44. Rothstein, R. (2017). *The color of law: A forgotten history of how our government segregated America*. Liveright Publishing.
45. Sabnis, S. V., Sullivan, A. L., Yohannan, J., Karner, K., & Gutierrez, S. (2021). Trauma as a Social Justice Issue: Foundational Knowledge. *Communique*, 50(3).
46. Schauer, M., & Elbert, T. (2015). Dissociation following traumatic stress. *Zeitschrift für Psychologie/Journal of Psychology*.
47. Sørensen, M. J. (2015). *Responses to Nonviolent Campaigns*. Lulu. com.
48. Solórzano, D. G. (1998). Critical race theory, race and gender microaggressions, and the experience of Chicana and Chicano scholars. *International journal of qualitative studies in education*, 11(1), 121-136.
49. Stevenson, B. (2015). *Just mercy: A story of justice and redemption*. Spiegel & Grau.
50. Treder, K. M., Amutah-Onukagha, N., & White, K. O. (2023). Abortion bans will exacerbate already severe racial inequities in maternal mortality. *Women's Health Issues*.
51. van Dernoot Lipsky, L. (2009). *Trauma stewardship: An everyday guide to caring for self while caring for others*. Berrett-Koehler.

52. Van Styvendale, N. (2008). THE TRANS/HISTORICITY OF TRAUMA IN JEANNETTE ARMSTRONG'S "SLASH" AND SHERMAN ALEXIE'S "INDIAN KILLER". *Studies in the Novel*, 40(1/2), 203-223.
53. Westervelt, A. (Host). (2017-2023). Drilled (Seasons 1-8) [Audio podcast]. In Drilled. Drilled. <https://www.drilled.media/drilled-podcast/>
54. Westervelt, A. (Host). (2023). Light, Sweet Crude (Season 8) [Audio podcast season]. In Drilled. Drilled. <https://www.drilled.media/s8-light-sweet-crude/>
55. Wilkerson, I. (2020). *Caste: The origins of our discontents*. Random House.
56. Wright, A. L., Gabel, C., Ballantyne, M., Jack, S. M., & Wahoush, O. (2019). Using two-eyed seeing in research with Indigenous people: an integrative review. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, 1609406919869695.
57. Zola, I. K. (1970). *Helping Does It Matter: The Problems and Prospects of Mutual Aid Groups*. Addressed to the United Ostomy Association.

Author

Victor Udoewa is a Service Design Lead in the Office of Public Health Data, Surveillance, and Technology (OPHDST) at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). He also works on community projects, often as a community member and regularly uses service design, futures design, radical participatory design, and systems practice in community. He can be contacted at mns5@cdc.gov.