

Our Shared Future, Reckoning with Our Racial Past Forum:

Panel Mental Health Trauma

Interviewer: Sabrina Lynn Motley

Interviewees: Dr. Joi Lewis, Founder & President, Healing Justice Foundation & Joi Unlimited; Kyra Antone, Communications Associate, Center for Native American Youth; Monique Morris, ED.D., Author, President & CEO of Grantmakers for Girls of Color; Diana Chao, Mental Health Advocate, Director, Letters to Strangers

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Graphics on screen

Our Shared Future

Reckoning with Our Racial Past

Smithsonian Forum

Narrator

Our Shared Future, Reckoning With Our Racial Past Forum. Reckoning with Race, Wealth and Wellness. Hosted by Sabrina Lynn Motley. Discussing mental health and trauma, Kyra Antone, Diana Chao, Dr. Joi Lewis and Monique Morris.

Graphics on screen

Reckoning with Race, Wealth and Wellness

Graphics on screen

Sabrina Lynn Motley

Graphics on screen

Mental Health and Trauma

Kyra Antone

Diana Chao

Dr. Joi Lewis

Monique Morris

Visual

Sabrina, Kyra, Diana, Joi, and Monique on screen, seated

Sabrina

Our final panel includes Kyra Antone, who works on the communications team for the Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute. Diana Chao, founder of Letters To Strangers, the largest global youth for youth mental health non-profit. Dr. Joi Lewis, author of "Healing the Act of Radical Self Care" and CEO and founder of Joi Unlimited, and Monique Morris, an award winning author, social justice scholar, and CEO of Grantmakers for Girls of Color. It's complex to discuss American history seated in conversation on land that became American through the raiding of First Nation land and the ethnic cleansing of its people, people who identify as Cherokee, Navajo, Apache, Coeur d'Alene and other groups that far predate America. We rarely consider the trauma of this initial injustice towards the now term, Native American people and the generational wrongs that followed. I want to thank you all for being here with us. I'm going to start with you, Dr. Joi. Introduce us to this notion of emotional trauma and racism and what has that impact been on mental health?

Graphics on screen

Dr. Joi Lewis

Founder & President,

Healing Justice Foundation & Joi Unlimited

Joi

Oh, thank you for the question. You know, we are sitting in a nation that really was founded on stolen land to start with. Also in, you know, 400 years of slavery, internment camps, I mean, it all goes on. So it has been connected to, you know, emotional trauma that then has shown up in our bodies in a term that we call "epigenetics." It's like, wait a minute, you're still in this situation. And we're like, still stuck because they're really-- we call it post-traumatic stress syndrome. But for people of color, for Black folks, for Native folks--there hasn't been a post, right?

Sabrina

You raised so many questions. I'm going to follow up with you in just a moment, but I want to hear from Kyra for just a moment and talk about some of the things that Dr. Joi has laid out for us in terms of Native American communities. And Native communities, include native Hawaiians, you know, from coast to coast, sea to sea. What does that look like? What does that mean to you? This trauma.

Graphics on screen

Kyra Antone

Communications Associate,

Center for Native American Youth

Kyra

Yeah. So when she first explained that, it made me think of like, how our default setting is kind of like survival mode. So we're often, like, always alert. And that can be difficult to be in, like, settings where you want to learn, settings where you want to be open and communicative. It can be difficult in times like that because we were never--like, you look around at these pictures and we were never supposed to come this far. And so I think back on like genocide, when genocide didn't work, they tried relocating us and taking us from our lands and...Thank you. And when that didn't work, they tried-- Assimilating us. They tried-- You tried boarding schools. And when that didn't work, they tried dehumanizing us just in any way. We were never meant to be--to come as far as we have come. And so it's very difficult to step back and think, [exhales] just really reflect on how far we've gotten here and to--Sorry.

Sabrina

No. It's a lot and it's real, and I'm going to give you a second to collect your thoughts and come back to you, because I definitely want to hear more particularly about what this looks like for young people, for young Native American communities across the US and beyond. I'm going to turn to you, Monique. And you know, we're hearing about this concept of generational trauma. Does it affect all groups? And does it manifest or how does it manifest itself in the body? What does that feel like?

Graphics on screen

Monique Morris, ED.D.,

Author, President & CEO of

Grantmakers for Girls of Color

Monique

So I would just say return to breath. And also, you know, transgenerational trauma is really about the unresolved collective grief that is, hasn't yet been processed and that has still maintained a space in how we interact with each other, with ourselves, with the institutions that may have been part of a tapestry of harm in our lives. And so when we come into contact with any of these scenarios, sometimes we may feel a rapid breath, or we may feel some anxiety or some tension in our bodies. And, you know, those looking from the outside might say, "Why are they reacting this way?" "Why are they running from the police?" "Why don't they feel comfortable in school?" All of these questions that have everything to do with the fact that these were institutions or agents that were part of a tapestry of structural oppression and harm in the lives of Black, Indigenous and other people of color. And so when descendants from that walk into these institutions, they instantly feel that energy. It speaks a lot to how many cultures--And your question around, "Are all of us impacted by it?" And the answer is yes. All of us are impacted by it because hurt people, hurt people. Hurt people build institutions that hurt people. And we are walking into this space and living in this environment where our bodies are still reacting to the energy that lives in that space. And you know, we often only think about the way we learn or how we know information or how we process information from our intellectual space. Or you know, from our, you know, emotional space. But there's also a spiritual space. There's an ancestral space. And that wisdom sits

in our bones. That wisdom sits in our bodies, and it recognizes the harm. And so that's why healing has been so important. And I know we're going to get to that later--

Sabrina

Definitely--

Monique

That's why that's been such a central question, because it is living in our bodies. It manifests through our predisposition for certain diseases. It manifests in our relationship with stress. It manifests in how we are even responding to institutions.

Sabrina

Thank you. You guys have been throwing so much information out here that I want to come back to, but I want to take what you've said and actually turn it to Diana, because you've said that, in essence, it's all around us. It's in us. It's before us. And so when it comes to Asian, Asian American communities, how do you encourage people to thrive, to live? I mean, again, what I'm hearing is that we can't escape it, and if you can't escape it, how do you deal with it?

Graphics on screen

Diana Chao,

Mental Health Advocate, Director

Letters to Strangers

Diana

I think the fact that we're here having this conversation to really talk about our history, our vulnerabilities, but also the resilience of our community, our backgrounds, et cetera, give us--That's really to the core of it, to reclaim the voice that so many have taught us we need to silence. And I think a big turning point for me is realizing not just that Asian American communities are so diverse and have very different needs and different

experiences. But also realizing that just because maybe I am a first generation immigrant, that that doesn't mean that intergenerational trauma, the impacts of American colonization and all sorts of other expeditions around the world, haven't left an impact on me and so many other Asian Americans. And just even descendants of those who were impacted by these wars in Southeast Asia during the Cold War and beyond. So I think at the core of it, learning to recognize that maybe I am a minority in this country, but Asians are the majority in the world. And the truth is that our voice is as loud as we want it to be. And so even if people try to silence me, because I know these facts now, because I've learned this story, I can confidently say it with an accent or not. And if they don't want to listen to me, I'm still going to listen to myself and my community.

Sabrina

Yeah, I hear you talking a lot about history, about knowing your history. And it's not old. It's not dead. It's not past. It's very much present. And you know, at the risk of sounding like an old person, I do want to ask both you and Kyra about, what does this look like to younger generations--And knowing that we can't lump everybody into one group--But are you and your peers looking and thinking about mental health differently, do you think, than somebody who may be older? What kinds of questions are you asking? And importantly, what kind of resources are you finding? I'm going to start with you, Kyra.

Kyra

Yeah, so I believe we are looking at mental health differently than the generations before us. And I think a lot of that has to do-- is just, they didn't have time to heal and process those things. They were too busy trying to survive in the places that they were in. And so, for example, like my grandparents went through boarding school and even, you know, they raised my parents and my parents raised us. So it's dealing with all of the things that they needed to in that moment. And like, their main focus was just ensuring that they'll have grandchildren, or a next generation to look forward to. And so I think I don't blame them for not being able to handle, like thinking about mental health because they didn't really have a choice in that time. And so, though youth now, we kind of have to heal because we have to not only experience the things that they did, we not have to only relive their traumas, but we have to heal their traumas. And just taking a step back and realizing that it's not a bad thing and that strength doesn't equate to like, being silent or like being silent doesn't equate to strength. That it's okay to go out and talk about these things. And it doesn't make you weak. I think that's really important.

Sabrina

Thank you for that. I want to ask you the same question. How are your peers thinking about mental health and where are they finding resources?

Diana

Yeah, I mean, you can probably imagine the Internet plays a huge role. And for all its faults, and it has a lot of faults, it has been really powerful in getting these resources and knowledge out to people who otherwise might not have known about it. So, for example, I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder when I was 13 and an eye disease that made me blind when I was 14. And these two things, at first glance, don't necessarily seem to be related to each other. But it wasn't until I was able to connect with other Asian-Americans, especially Asian-American doctors, those who specialized in trauma, in eye diseases, things like that, that I began to learn about psychosomatic symptoms. Or like Monique had mentioned, you know, these physical manifestations of psychological distress. And so that's just one example of how even though social media can be a pretty negative breeding ground, it can also be a really powerful way for people to find their community for the first time in a very long time.

Sabrina

Mm-hm. Monique, does any of this resonate with you, given the young girls, women, that you work with?

Monique

Absolutely. You know, at Grantmakers for Girls of Color, we resource more than 180 organizations around the country that are working with girls and fems of color. And absolutely, they are seeking community and finding community where they are able to connect with other survivors of trauma. So I want to say that the centrality of trauma is an important part of the conversation. And the centrality of healing is equally important when we're talking about movement building to address some of these structural violence or these manifestations of structural violence that have been so pervasive in our communities. And young people are finding themselves in organization and they're finding themselves in the communities they build using a host of networks, you know, opportunities for exploring. But it's also that they're finding other modalities for healing

that have not necessarily been recognized by many in the Western, you know, sort of healing community. Right. That they are--or medical community--That they are finding healing through dance, and they're finding healing through connection with some of their own ancestral practices that were erased from or intentionally disrupted through some of these violent acts in our communities. And so I really appreciate what both of you are offering in terms of how young people are thinking through some of these issues. And you especially see that, where girls of color are leading organizations and they're doing it through braiding or they're doing it through dance and they're doing it through letter writing. And connecting with other survivors of, not just some of these grand transgenerational traumas, but also through the physical traumas that they experienced through sexual violence, that they experienced through exposure to other forms of violence that typically are left out of our narratives around safety and harm.

Sabrina

So you've talked a lot about healing as being really important. But even when you find healing, there's still often stigma attached to, you know, you were talking about, you know, the things that you felt in your body. Diana, can you talk about ways that you and people that you know in the community are thinking about stigma and dealing with stigma? And I'm going to ask you the same question.

Diana

Yeah. So I think one prominent example that comes to my mind about the issue of stigma is, you know, a lack of education, research, understanding about how mental illnesses in general can affect people of color. If you look at the diagnostic manual, the DSM, that's used by mental health professionals in a Western educative setting to diagnose mental illnesses: The DSM has been adopted as a sort of golden standard for diagnosing mental illnesses by people around the world, in countries far away as they approach Western psychiatry. But the problem is that the DSM was made for and by white people. And so they have these culture bound syndromes, which are symptoms of mental illness that you find predominantly within one cultural group, typically a minority ethnicity group in the US. And these symptoms are relegated to only the appendix of that DSM, which is this huge, huge book that's being used by people around the world trying to get into mental health treatment and yet not finding the symptoms of their people in these pages. And so that's just one example of how stigma becomes an issue because we can't even have the conversation when the conversation doesn't even recognize that we exist.

Sabrina

Exactly. Can you follow up with that?

Joi

Yeah, I mean, I think that it's really about--I think she really explained it very well and it's about who is doing the diagnosing. Right. And that I am finding within our communities that introducing cultural healers, folks who are in the community who look like us, that folks don't have a problem when there are healers who are in the community, who are offering, you know, ancestral healing services. To say, you know, let me listen to you, let me create space and do healing circles and come--Then folks are like, you know, lining up, looking for opportunities to be able to do that because that stigma is then taken away. It's about whenever there are folks who don't look like us, who are white folks, who are saying something is wrong with you, then therein lies the problem. Because, historically it has always been like that. And it's like, first of all, we're going to, you know, create this past trauma that we have talked about. Right. That we have, you know, locked you up, stolen your land, enslaved you, and then said, "Oh, you know, now something is wrong with you." No, you've created this trauma. Something happened to us. However, whenever you have folks who I know love me, who care about me, who are going to sit, and you know, use things from the land, come and, you know, sew with me, use things, use medicine, bring things back to me. I'm here for that. And people are ready and willing and looking for opportunities to come and wail and get it out and you know, be together. And you don't find people running away from that. As a matter of fact, you find people going towards that and looking for more opportunities to get that kind of healing. And the work that we are doing at the Healing Justice Foundation and across the land and the things that folks here on this panel are doing, people are standing in line trying to get more and more of those opportunities with community healing.

Sabrina

So I wish that I could take you all home with me and we can have this conversation forever. But the fact of the matter is that we need to close soon. But I have a question. I'm going to start with you, Dr. Joi, to sort of set us up. And then I'm going to ask each of you to share one thing that really does epitomize your sense of self care and your sense of self care as a radical act of joy, and of healing. So you talked about, a lot in your work

is about healing, joy, this notion of radical self care. What does that mean? How do we get past the touchy feely parts of all of that?

Joi

Well, you know, I'd like to start with a quote from sister, Audre Lorde, who says, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgent, it is self-preservation. And that is an act of political warfare." And you know, that right there is, that's it. This is not about touchy feely. This is about political warfare. Right. And that the fact of, there is nothing more important in this world than taking care of ourselves, and that we really have to think about it as you know, putting in deposits, right into like, our energy bank. Right. Because if we don't have enough that is going into our energy bank, it's like walking around and writing bad checks. Right. Because, there are going to be things that are happening in the world every day that are taking our deposits--Taking out withdrawals. And so every time I take, you know, I do meditation or, you know, I do mindfulness, that is putting something into my energy bank to make sure that I am not writing bad checks. And as a matter of fact, you know, that is political warfare. And we are here for it every day.

Sabrina

Thank you. Kyra, tell me, how do you practice radical healing, radical joy, radical self-care?

Kyra

I think simply just existing. I think that is part of it. Just really speaking up in spaces that weren't meant for you, being able to be joyful, and... I think for like Native youth, it's really important to see people who like, look like you in those spaces, and that has really helped us. And especially when you look for--'Cause it's kind of tiring having to go and explain yourself like in therapy or something, and have to explain where you're coming from and kind of like educate them. And it should really be their job to go and like, go into those communities and really see where you're coming from rather than you having to constantly explain it. And so just showing up in those spaces and getting those types of-- Giving back to your community in those ways, but also just taking care of yourself and not falling to like, the trendy self care of like wearing a mask or doing this type of thing. But really leaning on your community and leaning on your culture. I think just like I said, simply existing is self care.

Sabrina

Love that, leaning on your community. Diana, how about you?

Diana

You know, Monique had mentioned earlier the quote, "Hurt people, hurt people." And for me, when I first heard that quote, I had always thought that there's got to be some follow up to it. This chain can't just keep on breaking itself. And so I personally subscribe to the idea that healed people, heal people. And that means that sometimes I have to take these steps that I don't necessarily want to do, like go see a therapist or make sure that I'm taking my medication every day, things that feel just like, too much sometimes. But I'm doing it because I want my community to heal. I want to break the cycle of pain. And more importantly, as I'm doing my work with Letters To Strangers and working with our 35,000 plus young people from over 20 countries--every single day, as I talk to them, I'm hearing stories of very different individuals that share the same undertones: this human desire and need for a connection, for empathy, for feeling like you can be true to yourself, like you have agency.

Sabrina

Thank you. Last word, Monique.

Monique

I listen to Prince. Seriously, I made a promise about a decade ago that I would not willingly participate in the oppression of any people or my own self in any way. And it's important for me to sort of situate my own acts of self care in the context of, willingly participate in the oppression of myself. Right. And so that looks different depending on where I am and in what situation I am. But I always try to-- I'm lucky enough to lead an organization that is trying to shift how philanthropy even engages in some of these questions, particularly as it impacts girls and fems of color. So that in and of itself brings me joy to be able to be a part of the solution in that way.

Sabrina

Thank you all so much. I feel like I have four new friends. I have learned from you. And this has been a wonderful conversation. And the thing that I love about it is that you've

made the connection between the self and community. It is not being selfish to take care of yourself, to heal yourself, to be kind to yourself. And these conversations, I'm sure, will resonate with so many who are listening to us and standing with us. More from this conversation can be found on the Our Shared Future website.

Graphics on screen

Watch the entire forum and view additional resources at oursharedfuture.si.edu/race