

Black Market Reads, Resmaa Menakem, author of In My Grandmother's Hands

[00:00:00] **Yo Derek:** For Black writers and all their readers and for audiences who are smart and free-thinking Black Market Reads is a series of conversations highlighting the Black literary voices of today. Black Market Reads is produced by the Givens Foundation for African-American Literature in partnership with iDream.tv.

[00:00:26] **Lissa Jones:** Healer, New York Times bestselling author and trauma specialist. Join me in this episode of Black Market Reads as we have a conversation with Resmaa Menakem about his book, My Grandmother's Hands and so much more. Resmaa welcome to Black Market Reads. I'm sitting here grinning and I'm smiling and I'm so happy you're here. I can't wait to hear you with the one person in the world who might not already know you.

I want to start out a little bit with a way that you described yourself. "Moving from race to culture to creation is important, transformative and takes work, and a lot of reps. I help people, communities and organizations find strength in healing that is holistic and resilient. Together let's set a course for healing, historical and racialized trauma carried in the body and the soul.

I am a healer. I help people rise through the sufferings edge. I am a cultural trauma navigator. I am a communal provocateur and coach. I'm a senior fellow with the Meadows Institute. I consider it my job in this moment to make the invisible, visible. Resmaa that is saying so much. Who are you Resmaa Menakem and how are you showing up?

[00:01:55] **Resmaa Menakem:** We live in a structured that's predicated on the white body deeming and has deemed itself the Supreme standard of humanness, structurally and philosophically. And so, for many of our people, black people, indigenous people, what happens is we walk around thinking just in, in the kind of like nether regions in the back of our brain, we walk around thinking something is wrong with us.

Why? Because we're picking up on something vibratorally. That is, that is vicious. That is. And, but everybody is gaslighting us and telling us that that's

not happening. And so, for me, the idea of making the invisible, visible really is a nod towards healing. Right? If you can tell people, Hey, What you're experiencing is actually happening when the people that you're talking to come from a people whose experience

of what's happening is not really happening is historic. It's intergenerational is persistent institutional and it is also personal. So what ends up happening is that idea of am I crazy? Is this really happening? That idea is reinforced all across time. And so for me, talking about making the invisible, visible, is about how do black bodies specifically began to reclaim pieces of ourselves that we had to kind of choke down and get rid of in order to survive this, these moments in time that we're in. And so my work really is about, number one, helping bodies of culture, understand that we're not defective. Something is happening, it continues to happen and you're not crazy.

[00:03:32] **Lissa Jones:** And so that's what I mean by making the invisible, visible that's transformative Resmaa, because you do spend a whole of your life practically speaking as a Black person, thinking to yourself, am I crazy? You know, did this really happen? Is it because I'm Black? You know, what is going on here? And the, the freedom that comes with your affirmation that yes, something

is indeed happening to us. And it is not the assumption that we are defective in that it's the assumption that something is happening to us. That's causing us to respond in a certain way.

[00:03:59] **Resmaa Menakem:** Absolutely. It has caused our people to respond in a certain way, right? That this is a pass down. This is not just something that pops up a new.

And one of the things that happens would white supremacy and white body supremacy is that, we begin to think that what is happening to us is only individual and not communal. Right. When we walk around and we become isolated to what's happening. Like we don't talk enough around, why is it that when I walk into a room and I'm the only African or only Black person in the room? or I think I am, I start to immediately scan for what others are in the room? And one of the things that happens is that when you're doing that scanning, there's also another voice that says, why are you doing that? Hmm. These good white people, these people ain't gonna hurt you,. Right.

And part of my work is to say, don't, don't beat yourself up about that. Begin to own that as a way of navigating this stuff. But you got to talk to other Black people about that too, because what has happened to our people didn't happen to our people individually. When they hung us from trees and hung us from bridges that wasn't to do anything to the people that were dead..

That was, about instilling in horror and terror in the people that had to walk across that bridge. To people that had to walk past those trees. Right. That was, the white body supremacy in and of itself is trauma. And it is a terrorizing trauma. Right. But we haven't spoken about it and over time it becomes decontextualized. So we walk around with notions of dread and notions of terror. And we think that we're the only ones. And so part of my work is to broaden that understanding of white body supremacy, broadened the understanding, meaning of trauma, like, to be born in a society that is predicated on the white body, deemed and deeming itself, the standard of humanness.

The race question in this country is really a species question. We think race is only about people hating each other. Right? We think that whenever there's something that comes up are about race, we think about it as something like somebody burned across on night or somebody called me the N word or somebody did something to me.

What we forget is that the, the architecture of race, from a European perspective, when they started the idea of race was actually a species idea, a race of dog, a race of bird, a race of cat, right? That's the way they used to talk about race, right. It was a species. So the development of race as it applies to humans was done in that, in that context with the species notion. Are Africans actually human, right? That has always been the question. Are indigenous people actually human? Or are they Savage? Can you kill the Indian and save the man? That is the species question.

The idea of three-fifths human is, a species question that's built around mathematics. Right? Think about this in order to get to the three-fifths compromise. People had to sit around the table and talk mathematically around who we were. That's a species question. And, and this is why I believe when we talk about, DEI , diversity, equity and inclusion.

This is why I believe we will ever get at creating a living embodying anti-racist culture. If we keep talking about diversity, equity and inclusion. Because it can't get there. You can't get to talking about species. If you're talking only about

diversity without any context, the most of the diversity work right now is really decontextualized work.

It doesn't set it in anything. So it can mean anything like diversity can mean collard green, Tuesday, Quinciera Thursday fried bread Wednesday. Well, it can mean anything aesthetic, one of the things that I say to people. If you say you believe in diversity, but you don't define what that means, it can mean absolutely anything.

And so everybody will say, we all believe in diversity and everybody will nod their head like chickens. Right. They'll just nod. Yes. But, but every one of those people that are nodding. They are, there is no synergy in or agreement in terms of what diversity is and my definition of the white body being the Supreme standard by which all bodies, humanity shall be measured structurally and philosophically that's why I start with that because when you say diversity for me, when I say diversity, what I am saying is is that when you say diverse, you're saying you start with something first and you're diversifying from it. So, when you ask people in DEI trainings, what are you diversifying from? People scratch their heads, right.

If you don't say you're diversifying from the notion that the white body is the standard of humanness, then diversity can mean anything. If you don't define inclusion, meaning that you start with something first and you're trying to include things. And if you don't start with the premise that the white body is deemed and has deemed itself, the Supreme standard by which all bodies, humanity shall be measured structurally philosophically, if you don't start with that, then inclusion can mean anything.

Right. And I believe that a lot of the DEI work is really about helping white people be comfortable with race without actually helping them transform what it means and create culture around race.

[00:09:33] **Lissa Jones:** Yes, I'm in conversation with Resmah Menakem. Healer, New York Times bestselling author and trauma specialist.

He's teaching us about white body supremacy and the way that it really contorts our thinking. The way that it really constricts Black life and the real time consequences of this, long-term thinking decontextualize over time. After we come back from this break, I'd like to talk to you about trauma decontextualized.

This is Black Market Reads. I'm your host Lissa Jones. We'll be right back.

[00:10:11] **Yo Derek:** You're listening to Black Market Reads a series of conversations, highlighting the Black literary voices of today. Join the conversation for more great content about authors you love. Visit us@blackmarketreads.com. Your opinion counts.

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[00:10:36] **Lissa Jones:** Welcome back to Black Market Reads. I'm your host Lissa Jones. I'm in studio with Resmaa Menakem New York times bestselling author trauma specialist and healer. Welcome back Resmaa. Before we went to break, we started talking about trauma decontextualized.

Now you have taught me many, many things, and I must say. I think every one of them has stuck with me, but I think the one I use most often, particularly lately is trauma decontextualize in an individual, in a family and a people. Teach Resmaa.

[00:11:06] **Resmaa Menakem:** So we've been friends a long time. We've cultivated a friendship, your family loves me.

I love you. We love each other, all that different type of stuff, and if you saw something happened to me., Like we were sitting out talking to somebody that came up and did something to me. And then a week later you saw me walking down the street and, and I was acting strange. You would immediately walk up to me.

You say, Resmaa, come here. I saw you. We need to get you some help. No matter how much I say no, I'm good. I'm good. You'd be like, this is off. Right. And I know what happened to you. Right. And, that would bring context. You were bringing context to the situation when you do that, you understand what happened to me.

And you're saying that that has affected my friend. Right. But what if you see me walking down the street, 15 years later, the likelihood that you would have that same context. It's not set in stone that you're going to have that same context. You just you'd be like, dude, do tripping. What's you know, why he out there with his ass?

I mean, why did he

got his ass on like that?

And so, and so, and, and, and then maybe when you go home, you go, oh, shoot. That happened. I forgot about that. Right. That's context. Well, what happens if it's 30 years and you're my daughter and you don't know what happened to me 30 years before. Now is just that's who daddy is. That's who my that's, who my brother is.

And so time decontextualizes trauma. Whether that trauma is historical intergenerational, persistent institutional or personal. Time decontextualizes it. If you don't remember it, if you don't find ways to remember it and work with it and excavate it and metabolize it, over time, just time makes it so there's no there, there. The there is there, but you don't give any credence to it being there. So for instance, trauma in a person decontextualize over time can look like personality. Trauma in a family decontextualized over time can look like family traits, trauma in a people over time can look like culture. I'll just give you a quick example.

So in my work in my office, before we went into COVID, one of the cases that were coming through my office in terms of trauma, a lot of the cases were African American women with vaginal fibroids. And, and it just so happened that I had got like four or five cases like that in a row.

So I'm sitting here thinking, and I always go back to what I call hip the hip method to hip theory. And the hip theory is H I P P. And hip theory is historical. When you're talking about trauma, you're always working with energy, right? Like trauma is energy thwarted .

Trauma is creation energy that is thwarted, right? Creation is primary. Trauma is not, but the energy of it, if it's thwarted, can keep resonance in your body and you don't know why you're reacting to things the way that you're reacting. So the hip for me, the hip theory hip is really about helping people understand context.

If I have these black women that are coming into my office with vaginal fibroids, the lens that I push it through is like, okay, what's the historical pieces. Right. I don't just go. What's the personal pieces. I got this black woman

walking through my door and if I just say, okay, we're just dealing with the personal energy, right.

What I'm going to do is miss all of the dream stuff that's popping up for her, all of the image stuff that's popping up for her, all of the vibratory stuff that's popping up for all the demeaning making stuff desk popping up for her. All of the urges that's popping up for her, all of the sensation that's popping up for her, I'm a miss all that because I just want to do the personal stuff. So, if a black woman is coming into my office, she's talking about vaginal fibroids and I push it through a historical lens. I start to begin to ask questions in, in my mind and in my body about, what are the connections between things.

And so if I'm working with a woman and I asked a question, okay, What is the impact of 250 years of legal rape? On our bodies, legal rape, not, not illegal rape legal rape, what might be the impact of how people organize themselves in order to survive it? What might be the impact of dissociation? What might be the impact of cortisol coursing through the nervous system?

See what I mean? And so when I'm talking with those women, I'm putting context into things. So they don't think that something is wrong with them. Or they're defective because they have vaginal fibroids. Right. And when I'm working with that body, what happens when I say things like, you know, you're like the fourth black woman that I've dealt with that has come through here and said that.

And when I say that you can, you can watch the settling in the face. And when I say, one of the things that happens is that stuff can get passed down. Like if your mom was mama's mama's mama was raped, right and the average age of rape started at 10 years old, when we were enslavement, if that happened, your mom was mom, your mom's mom was mama's.

Mama had to organize in a way in order to survive that. Right. And so that survival becomes primary. And so now what happens when she has a child? When that child is born, what gets passed down to that child based on what that child knows, what mama recoils from and what mama leans into. Do you understand what I mean?

And so now the child doesn't necessarily pick it up from instruction. The child picks it up by mama always avoid this, or mama always leans into that, whatever it is. Right. And the child does it doesn't have a context for it. It just knows that's how mama is. And that's mama's personality, but mama got,

actually got organized around trauma around rape now, put that in the context of a people.

And so we're really talking about how do we begin to put context into things for our people. So we stop thinking that my high blood pressure is only because I eat some pig feet. And not maybe it's because of 400 years of terror and horror, um, might have some impact on the cortisol adrenaline and nor epinephrin levels in my bloodstream.

And those things are, are, are operating and developing the nervous systems of babies inside. Right. So for me, that's why I say the trauma is in the blood it's in the body. And then when you say something about it, most white folks don't have a collective way of understanding race because they haven't had to.

And so when you say it, white people, white bodies collectively are always surprised as shit. They surprised at everything, every EV everything surprises. But, but if you think about it from a trauma place, you get it right. Most white people that are listening to this to us talk right now, most white people came, are descended from white people that were fleeing something that never got dealt with.

And, by the time it got to a place to where elite white bodies said, Hey, um, we got something new for y'all. Y'all want to be white. You might, your children's children might not have to deal with what your butt is dealing with right now. And so by that, but because of the thousand years of the middle ages and the dark ages, I believe that.

That tilled the soil for white bodies for white folks to actually accept the idea of whiteness when it was presented to them, poor white bodies accepted that concept because, because he had been beat and raped and pillaged for a thousand years after the fall of the Roman empire. And so by the time they got a chance, poor white bodies got a chance to be offered whiteness.

They took it. That is a trauma response. That in the idea of setting up the idea of whiteness, they created a conduit in a conduit was the black body. So, so all of that rage, all of that terror, all of that horror is now moved through the Black body. That's the acceptable conduit. . . Right, uh, to, to deal with that.

And so, that's why context matters is because if, if you don't put it into context, people think that it's just about people calling you the N word or, or, or, is just

about, you know, Trump or somebody like that. This thing is in the body, literally in the body.

[00:20:26] **Lissa Jones:** Resmaa, i don't care how long we've been friends or how many times we've been across the table from each other. Every single time you do something to me. Understanding high blood pressure and its correlation to what happens to us. And what's happened is so profound to me. I know so many black people with high blood pressure.

I mean, and I mean, think about this. Our healer has high blood pressure and how is the healer supposed to heal when he can't, you know, I'm in studio with Resmaa Menakem New York times bestselling author, healer, psychologist, and so much more. Let's take a music break to cleanse for just a moment. We'll come back and find out what compelled Resmaa to write this down for us. I'm your host Lisa Jones. This is Black Market Reads. We'll be right back.

welcome back to Black Market Reads. I'm in studio with Resmaa Menakem New York times bestselling author, psychologist, healer, and just so much more. Welcome back. Resmaa.

[00:21:59] **Resmaa Menakem:** Thanks, Sis.,.

[00:21:59] **Lissa Jones:** Okay. When did whites show up in the discourse?

[00:22:02] **Resmaa Menakem:** So one of the things that you see in about the late 16 hundreds in Virginia is the first time you start to see in, in law, the term white persons, not merchant, not landowner, not blacksmith, right?

Uh, white persons, right? At that moment at that moment, which you have is the white body being shorthand for human. Because it was in juxtapose to indigenous and black bodies. Right. And so when you see the term white persons, it's a term that comes after the bacon rebellion. What a lot of people don't understand about the Bacon Rebellion is that the Bacon Rebellion, almost succeeded in overthrowing, Virginia.

Remember it was a colony at the time. So the British couldn't get here in time in order to save it. He took enslaved, Africans and poor whites and they attacked Virginia. They almost won. The only thing that stopped the Bacon Rebellion from completing was he caught dysentery and died.

That's the only thing that took the energy out. Right, but they were getting ready to win. And after that is when you get the elite, uh, white bodies getting it, gathering, saying, look, if we look y'all, if we don't do something, these poor white folks coming over here, or these Africans going to slit our throats.

[00:23:34] **Lissa Jones:** We got it. We got to come up with something. And after that, shortly after that is when you start seeing laws around, um, miscegenation and, and no white shall marry this and no, right. And I think it's, I could be wrong, but I think it says no Savage or indian or enslaved shall ever raise a hand to white persons at that moment, it was not about merchants. Right. And, and when that came in the past, when that came. At that moment, people became white, white folks became white and they in that whiteness had advantage to it. Right.

It's currency.

[00:24:16] **Resmaa Menakem:** That's exactly right. Yeah. And so, this is why I'm saying the trauma of white folks, they got to deal with that. Right. And they got to heal. This is why when we talk about race, this is why when I do my trainings, I don't slam white bodies and black bodies and bodies of culture into a room together and say, okay, let's just talk.

Race has a four to 500 year old charge to it. There is a charge to it and we disrespect that all the time. Right. And we wonder why when you bring these bodies in a room and you say, let's just talk about race, why it blows up? What, why it changes people's relationships, is because there has been no conditioning done.

There has been no tempering done. There has been no reps being done. Right? One of the things that I say, is if you're going to endeavor to accomplish something. You're not going to be good at it when you first do it, when you first try it. But something in, you says I'm going to get through the kind of, clumsiness of it, because this is important to me.

Right. And so when it comes to racism in white body supremacy, white bodies collectively have an out, not to practice, understanding race, right? Because they have, their survival is not dependent. Right. So, so when you slam somebody who is, who has had to learn to vibratory navigate race and somebody collectively who has not, you're not speaking the same languages, you're literally in two different worlds.

And so one of the things that I say is that if, if you're not doing work, help people, uh, get their reps in having white bodies get reps in with white bodies because the black body is where America has been trained to do it's dirt. The indigenous bodies, where America has been trained to do is dirt.

So the moment that you begin and our bodies Black bodies have also ingested that ethos also indigenous bodies have also ingested that ethos. And so what ends up happening is is that that charge then moves into the room faster than any type of intellect. And so what we have to begin to do is that white bodies have to get into a room with each other and begin to do this work with each other so they can get their reps in and not blow that crap through me.

Right. And so I was watching this thing On Instagram the other day. And this there's this guy named, Eric to hip hop preacher. Right. And Eric is, uh, he's a motivational speaker, so you can do it, you have a blah, blah, blah. Right. You know, and I like watching that stuff because, it's some of it

you know, a little hokey, but, he, really tries to help people. Right. And so one of the things that he did was is he had this video that was playing and he was voicing over it. Right. It's about a minute long and it shows Jordan Michael Jordan going up for a layup or something. And then, Isaiah Thomas from the Detroit Pistons just grabbed the ball and ripped it from his and throws him down to the ground. And then Eric, the hip hop preacher, and then the next one is, uh, Jordan has, has done something and then he's running down the court and then Bill Laimbeer from the Detroit pistons is running past them or just shoots him in elbow and then Eric, the hip hop preacher, Eric is saying. The Detroit pistons made the man, you know, today they made Michael Jordan and then the next clip, you see Michael Jordan hitting the weights, um, being in a gym by himself shooting. And what is, what he's saying is. Is that if he said, if Michael Jordan had a won the championship in his first two years, when he was in the league, he would not be the Michael Jordan, you know, today he could never get past the Detroit pistons.

They beat him up and that beating, beating him up, made him go. I need to put some weight on. I need to get a better jumper. I need to know how to play defense I need. Right. And so the turmoil that he experienced, he used the energy and metabolize the energy as fuel for his freedom as opposed to fuel for his failure.

Right. And so race is the same way, many times white bodies, collectively and white bodies. Don't want to go through what it's going to take to, to usher in a

living embodied anti-racist culture. Not insight. Culture and practices, right? For white bodies to commit to each other and say, I am not doing this for black people.

I am doing this because I do not want to pass white body supremacy down to my children's children's children's children.

[00:29:00] **Lissa Jones:** Right.

[00:29:00] **Resmaa Menakem:** And so, for me, this whole idea of reps is really important. Michael Jordan knew he had, in order for him to get past the Detroit pistons, he was gonna, I have to do more than what he was doing.

He was already a great player, but he knew he was going to have to take it up another level. And the only way he could take it up, another level is to condition and temper himself to be able to contend what was in front of him. And then superseded. He had to get in a thousand shots a day before he could leave the gym.

He had to work out, he had to stretch. He had to do things at another level. He had to actually. Usher in a new Jordan that did not exist.

[00:29:35] **Lissa Jones:** Wow.

[00:29:37] **Resmaa Menakem:** That's the same thing that has to happen. If we're talking about what are we going to do about race and what are we going to do about white body supremacy? White bodies are going to have to get together and begin to work through this stuff in an embodied way.

Not in an intellectual way. Not in, not because they read White Fragility or My Grandmother's Hands or Nice Racism or can be, or not. That's not enough. There has to be skin in the game and it has to be uncomfortableness and you have to get to your sufferings edge so you can transform. There's no way to transform.

If you don't get to your sufferings to edge about something, anybody who has learned how to play piano or musical instrument, achieved anything in sports or business or anything, you know, you have to get to your suffering stands and things have to push you to a degree that makes you say what you're going to do now.

And then you make a choice about what you do. That's where the reps come in at

[00:30:33] **Lissa Jones:** Resmaa Menakem teaching us what we can do. White people who believe you are white. Do your reps. Resmaa I hate that our time is short. I always hate when our time is short. Why write it down? Resmaa why the books?.

[00:30:50] **Resmaa Menakem:** Yeah, I don't just write it down. I'll also speak it. So like we're doing right now with the, with clips, with classes and quotes and stuff like that. The reason why I believe that it is our job. One of the things that, Dubois said it wasn't his job to get to the finish line. It was his job to get as far as he could.

And didn't hand the Baton to the next person that's going to go. I believe that that the work that I'm doing in terms of trying to usher in somatic abolitionism and somatic abolitionism is really about abolishing, starting with the body first two, in terms of trying to get rid of, or abolish or metabolize white body supremacy.

Right. And so for me, it's about now just getting it out, getting it done. So the next people can say, oh, He said the same way we do the same way we do with elder Mahmoud , the same way we do. And you know what I mean? Like, like, Ooh, oh, that, and maybe that one thing that I went Ooh, about starts to germinate something.

Right. And so for me writing it down, speaking in, speaking it out, it is really. , tilling the soil. So I may not see it, but I know that it's impacting people in a way. And maybe these other bodies that come behind me can be like, oh, that's the answer to that? Or that's helpful or that, and combine it with other things.

[00:32:16] **Lissa Jones:** I just want to say thank you, the freedom that you've given to our people, to be able to start at a road that doesn't start with our defective. With us being defective is like a freedom it's like, starting ahead of the starting line, you know, like you're halfway through the race. So whether or not you hear it for the next 20 years, whether or not, you know, it you're already changing us, resmaa and we thank you.

[00:32:43] **Resmaa Menakem:** Thank you for that Sis, that's nurturing to me.

[00:32:48] **Lissa Jones:** I love you Resmaa Menakem. This is Black Market Reads. He's my friend, but he's also a healer, a psychologist. Somatic abolitionist and author, and so much more. Resmah thank you for being my guest on Black Market Reads,

[00:33:02] **Resmaa Menakem:** Happy to be here

thank you.

[00:33:04] **Lissa Jones:** I'm your host, Lissa Jones. We'll see you again. Next time

[00:33:12] **Yo Derek:** Black Market Reads is produced by the Givens Foundation for African-American Literature and partnership with I dream.tv. Black Market Reads is made possible through the generous support of our individual donors, that Target Foundation and the voters of Minnesota through the Minnesota State Arts Board with support from the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.

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