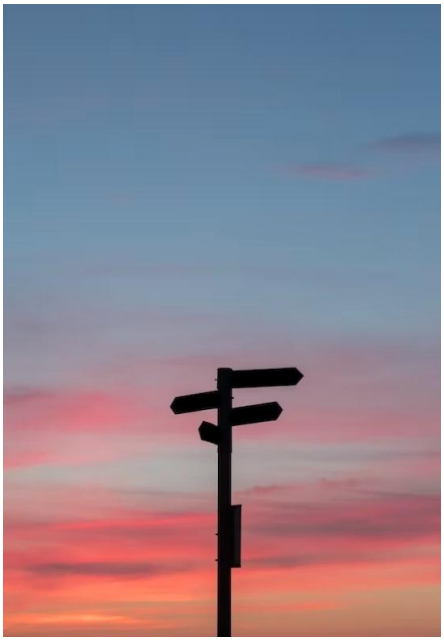
Kanye West Versus Epigenetics: Is Generational Slavery Trauma of Black Family a Matter of Choice



Of late, social awareness of the racism and inequality experienced by black people has surged in tangent with the pursuit of the Black Lives Matter movement. Since the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s led by Martin Luther King Jr, the social climate has evolved to integrate the rights of Black people [1]. But, the aspiration to wholly eliminate racism against Black people is far from complete.

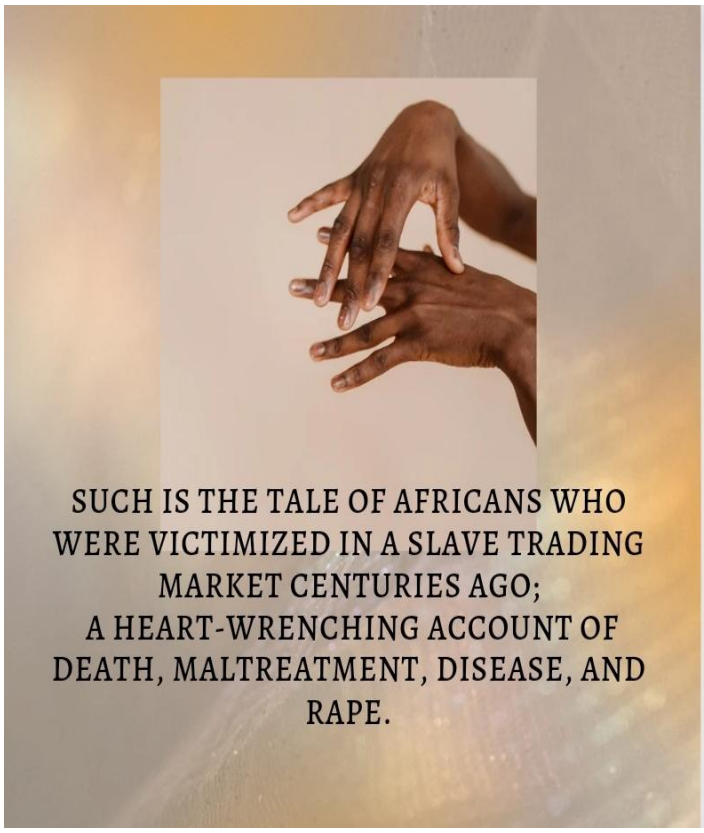
Kanye West, an American rapper, and fashion designer ignited a controversy by serving an off-handed remark about the issue. In his initial press statement before waves of disapproval hit, he referred to residual mental trauma after the slavery era as a choice.

“When you hear about slavery for 400 years … For 400 years? That sounds like a choice.” Kanye West said at an appearance at the TMZ headquarters.

Is modern-day generational trauma of Black families rooting from 400 years ago a matter of choice? Here is a take on the subject from an epigenetics point of view.

The Root of Intergenerational Trauma Among Black Americans

It turns out that the effect of a trauma; poverty, starvation, abuse, or war, can be passed down from a great-grandfather to his grandchildren down the line through an obscure mode of inheritance, epigenetics. In the case of many Black families, this relates to millions of individuals who were forcibly removed from Africa by European colonists to become slaves in the Americas.



An extensive DNA study piloted by a notable consumer genetics company, 23andMe revealed the genetic consequences of the African transatlantic slave trade [2]. The outcome of the study which recruited over 30 000 participants of African ancestry documented evidence of scarring life experiences in the former population of displaced African slaves.

Among the millions of Africans traded between 1515 and the mid-19th century, most are rooted in regions located in Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo in modern geography. The finding contradicts data from published historical documents that stated slaves were primarily deported from Senegal and The Gambia.

Researchers proposed a couple of theories on the regional discrepancies. Deported slaves from those regions experienced increased mortality rates because of a high prevalence of diseases in their workplace; rice plantations. Their lack of survival is also postulated to stem from juvenile slaves who did not get through the Transatlantic crossing.

The treatment of African female slaves was equally grim. The study revealed a bias toward the genetic contributions of European males and African females. In Latin America itself, it was estimated that 17 African women for every African man contributed to the gene pool. Researchers pinned this down to 2 explanations; an attempt of racial whitening to dilute African ancestry and a means to reproduce children to maintain an enslaved workforce.

Such is the tale of Africans who were victimized in a slave trading market centuries ago; a heart-wrenching account of death, maltreatment, disease, and rape.

Epigenetics and the Legacy of Trauma

On the scale of things, how would the historical trauma of oppression and prejudice paint the future of upcoming generations? Blooming discoveries in epigenetics converge to agree that potential offspring can be directly affected by parental trauma even before their conception. This idea evolves into a chain of claims that experiences of adverse events can be passed down to the next generation through epigenetic mechanisms.

A comprehensive paper published in the World Psychiatry journal brought attention to the pattern of intergenerational trauma in the offspring of Holocaust survivors [3]. Despite being born after the Holocaust time, the survivors' offspring exhibited a wide range of psychological phenomena; mood disorders, traumatic nightmares, impaired self-esteem, PTSD, and lack of interpersonal skills, among a few.

Initial research poses the possibility of social and environmental factors as contributory causes to the matter. However, relatively recent findings revealed a possibility for biological involvement. The primary neural circuitry pathway of the human body responsible for critical functioning called the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis is extremely sensitive to environmental alterations. It is hypothesized that parental experiences may alter the stress regulation pathways within the axis, resulting in chronic biological imprints across generations.

Several studies have advanced the effects of environmental adaptations on the physiological functioning of slavery victims years ago. A literary paper published in Sage journals cited two scenarios [4]. First of all, the authors referred to early theories that Black people inherit an

enhanced genetic-based ability to retain salt from their ancestors. It was suggested that African slaves adapted this ability to increase survival during the Middle Passage and preserve during harsh heat exposure while working. Until this very day, the biological trait appears to be inherited by contemporary Blacks which increases their risk of hypertension despite having similar consumption of sodium levels to White people.

Secondly, they approached Grazyna Jasienska's article *'Low birth weight of contemporary African Americans: An intergenerational effect of slavery*?', published in 2009. In the study, Jasienska attributed the contemporary differences in birth weights of Black and White children to alteration to the epigenome of Black children. Low birth weight among Black children is thought to be the generational outcome of persistent inadequate dietary intake and harsh environments from slavery that slave mothers pass down to their kids.

"There's plenty of strong epidemiological data for epigenetic effects in animals and humans — everything from Dutch Hunger Winter and Swedish Famines to Holocaust studies," says Tracy L. Bale, Ph.D., director of the Center for Epigenetic Research in Child Health & Brain Development at the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

The message science wishes to implicate on the matter of intergenerational trauma is clear. It is not a matter of choice. Trauma that echoes down the generations via epigenetics is embedded in genetic coding and leaves an imprint on future descendants. While the field of epigenetic inheritance of trauma is still young and open to controversies, it manages to open avenues toward cultural and historical understanding.

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