The Trauma of Black Bodies

Guest: Valerie Mason-John

Alex Howard: So welcome everyone to this interview where I'm really happy to be talking to Valerie Mason-John. Firstly, Valerie, welcome. Thank you so much for joining me today. I really appreciate it.

Valerie Mason-John: Thank you. A pleasure. Thank you.

Alex Howard: So I'm looking forward to getting into this interview. I think Valerie has a very powerful voice in this dialog that we're going to be coming into. I was just saying that I haven't had as much time as I would have liked to have read some of her work but I've read some. And it's powerful and I recommend it. And I'm looking forward to getting into this dialog.

Just to give people Valerie's background, Dr. Valerie Mason-John is one of the leading African descent voices in the field of mindfulness, for addiction.

She co-founded the accredited program Mindfulness Based Addiction Recovery and Eight Step Recovery Meetings, which is also an award winning book, *Eight Step Recovery*.

She's worked as a senior compassionate inquiry facilitator for addiction and trauma and works as a practitioner.

She is the author and co editor of nine books. Her most recent published this year; *I Am Still Your Negro, a Homage to James Baldwin*, which I've just been taking a bit of a look at this morning, it's a social justice poetics that is responding to all the killings and traumas of black and brown bodies.

President of the Buddhist Recovery Network, she is also a public speaker and is based between North America and Europe.

So, Valerie, I wanted to start just by putting some sort of frame and context around some of what we're going to come into today, which is sort of a two part question really, around what is trauma in the way that you understand it, and then also what is ancestral trauma?

I think one of the things that's been part of my own learning in recent weeks, which I would caveat to that I am at the beginning of the journey, but trying to get my head better around some of these issues. Things like slavery, things that happened in the past, which it's very easy, I think particularly easy for white people to go, well, that happened in the past, I didn't have anything to do with that, that's not my responsibility.

The past has an enormous impact and there's a whole body of trauma, which I'd love you to speak a bit to. But as I say, I think perhaps that you just start with what is trauma and then let's come into what is ancestral trauma.

Valerie Mason-John: Okay, well, that's a very big topic. What is trauma? What is ancestral trauma?

So let's begin with trauma. I'm going to speak of trauma from a mindfulness approach, even a Buddhist approach, because what we would say is, is that trauma is the disconnection from the body. You know, whenever something painful happens, we flee the body. We move away from the body and nobody's home, all feelings of being switched off. All lights have been switched off, all sense stores have been closed down. And what actually happens is, with trauma, it's the disconnection from our direct experience, which on a particular level, it's natural for us to move away from painful experience. And trauma happens after we move away from this painful experience, because what happens is that we don't come back to the direct experience. We don't come back to the body and we lose connection to the body. We lose connection to all feelings. And of course, as humans, we need connection.

And so what do we begin to connect with? Now as one of my teachers, Dr. Gabor Mate will often say is; 'Who did you speak to when something painful happened? Who did you speak to?' And this is the trauma because there was nobody to speak to. And I take that one step further, because it isn't that there was nobody we didn't speak to because we did actually end up speaking to somebody. We ended up speaking to ourselves. We ended up speaking to our dolls, or our action man or our pets. And we created the story and then what happens is we create this fixed self. I want to say that again, what happens is we disconnect from our direct experience. We disconnect because things are always changing and we connect to a story which becomes fixed. And we're still identifying with this story 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70 years later. And the story hasn't changed. And that's the trauma.

And what happens is, is that something will activate us and the past comes into the present and we're identifying with this story, the story that nobody loves me. The story that I don't belong. The story of I've been humiliated. The story I've been abandoned. OK, so this is the trauma. When we get stuck in this fixed story

Alex Howard: And that story effectively becomes identity. Right?

Valerie Mason-John: Yeah. Exactly. Exactly. This is as you say, it becomes our identity and the identity becomes fixed.

So part of the healing is to see through the illusion of the story, to see through the fabrication and the concoction of the story. And of course, we needed to fabricate and concoct this story so that we could survive.

When we talk about magical thinking, that's that's or what it's about. It's like, you know, for a child whose parents split up. Daddy leaves or mommy leaves and a child tells themselves, daddy left, mommy left because of me. It was my fault.

Alex Howard: And that is something about the kind of, in the less technical term, the egocentric nature of being a child, right? That the world revolves around us. So if one of our parents leaves. It must be our fault.

Valerie Mason-John: Yeah. Exactly. Exactly. Blame ourselves. And another really important thing that I want to say, something that really changed my mind is Dr. Gabor talks about attachment and authenticity. And often the trauma is that we will go for the attachment rather than the authenticity.

So what happens is that actually we attach to our stories; we attach to our stories, make them about ourselves, which stops us from actually talking to the people we need to talk to. Why did daddy leave? Why did mommy leave?

We don't do that because we don't want to hurt them. We want the attachment because if we go wit the authenticity, we're often told, be quiet, you'll get over it, don't talk about it. I mean, it's amazing there are clients I've worked with where they've had a parent die and they were sent to school during the funeral. They didn't even get to go to the funeral. So what message are you giving this young person? Don't talk to us about it.

And so if you want that attachment, you don't talk about it. And then you can't be authentic and you're attached to these stories that become this fixed self, this identity. And we know things change. I mean, what happened 50 years ago is very different to what is going on in our lives now. So that's the biggest trauma.

Alex Howard: And of course, that story we have about what happened is often the story created from our perspective, taking resample childhood trauma from the perspective of us as let's say, a four year old, which may be a fully accurate reflection of what happened or it may be our individual experience of what happened.

I'm thinking, for example, that if a parent was not nurturing and holding around our feelings and emotions, we learnt that I'm not loved, but actually from the parent's perspective, they

were going through a difficult personal time. And it wasn't about them not loving us, it is about them not being able to love, just demonstrate love. So it's often these stories are not always based upon the entire reflective truth of that instance, though, what we take from that instance.

Valerie Mason-John: Exactly. And we often believe the story that harms us more. And that's the work of actually really what did happen, what could be the possible reasons why something happened.

But we want to hold on to the story because it means we have to change and we don't want to change. We don't like change. I mean, we've seen that during Covid 19, we don't want change.

But I want to kind of begin to move towards this ancestral trauma.

But before we move into this ancestral trauma, let's look at implicit trauma and explicit trauma, because there is trauma, of course, which is which is held in the body. Okay. It's definitely held in the body.

And I'll give you an example from my own experience. I grew up in orphanages and I never knew anything about my background at all. One thing that I would have told you when I was in my early 20s or late teens is that, 'oh, my birthday, it's a difficult time and I'll get through it in January, the beginning of January'. And I would always, New Year's resolutions, January the 5th, January 6th. That's when I would make a New Year's resolution. Also, when I started having relationships, they would end after six weeks.

I got to read my records in my mid 20s. And when I read my records, I was separated from my biological mother at six weeks and I was separated on January the 5th, January 6th, as said in my records. So that's the implicit memory, somewhere I had this knowing it was in the body, and what a relief it was to be able to see that it completely transformed my life.

Alex Howard: It's almost like. And forgive me if this isn't quite right. But what I'm sort of hearing you say is you took an implicit trauma and you made it explicit that somehow you could make sense of something that was that was a trauma that was hard to conceptualize and make sense of it somehow. It sounds like that somewhat validated your experience. But it perhaps also helped you process and digest some of that experience.

Valerie Mason-John: Exactly. And that's what we need to do to be able to heal from true trauma. It is possible to heal from trauma. It is. But we have to, we have to come home to the body. And that's a very painful place to be. Who wants to come home to the body?

Just to let people know I might say something which is a bit activating for people because I was somebody who was sexually abused, physically abused.

What did I do to cope with it? I split from the body, there was nobody home. So I didn't have to feel anything. The amount of physical pain which was subjected to my body, you know, I would put it in the realm of both torture and sado masochism.

Alex Howard: One of the things that struck me reading some of your book, *Detox Your Heart*, particularly where you speak very honestly and very bravely about some of your struggles with addiction in the past.

And one of the things that touched me, and Dr. Gabor Mate as you mentioned, he speaks well to this, something about the kind of human story of it that you wrote about, is that addiction effectively becomes a way of self medicating those emotions.

A lot of what addiction is, is not people that want to be using alcohol or drugs or whatever actually, it's a way of trying to medicate the intensity of that pain that's held in the body.

Valerie Mason-John: Yeah, it's an adaptation. And as a child, we don't have access to the alcohol or the drugs when we're really young. And so we find different ways to adapt, to cope.

But as we get older, it's like, oh, the alcohol means that we can switch off or the drugs that means we can switch off. And it is definitely, I see as self medication that we're really trying to medicate the pain to split from the pain, which I always say is a bit of an oxymoron, because in mindfulness, when we're working with addiction, we're talking about coming home to the body. But yet, if you're somebody who's got these addictive behaviors, you want to split from the body a lot.

It's all about having altered experiences and you say come home to the body. But let's get back to this implicit trauma and ancestral trauma.

So I want to go to the foetus and also let's bring the male into this as well, male sperm. Now, we know there is evidence that if men are completely dysregulated, are in a difficult situation or have had a trauma, perhaps somebody has died or perhaps they've been arrested, all those kinds of things, and they had sexual intercourse, that sperm, the DNA of that sperm is going to be impacted. It's going to change the DNA of that sperm.

We know that if a woman is carrying a foetus, if she's in a violent relationship or perhaps one of her parents have died or perhaps is in poverty and can't feed her children, for all sorts of reasons, the foetus is going to be impacted. There's going to be an overload of cortisone and the baby is going to come out dysregulated.

So already, even before even before this child has entered the world, this baby is dysregulated and could come out hungry. And so, again, it's really important actually, I would say for some people who don't really understand what's going on, for the why, why are they activated in certain ways, is to find out your parents history of when you were conceived. Find out because this might tell you something.

Imagine a couple, the woman is pregnant, three or four months and a parent dies. Imagine what impact that's going to have on her as a parent. And on the foetus. It may mean that the parents might not even be able to be there for the child when a child is born. So this is really important to find out about the history of our conception.

Alex Howard: And sometimes that can be quite challenging. For example, knowing a little bit about some of your history, that although your birth mother was around, and at one point you did go back and live with her for a period of time.

But for some people, I'm thinking of a good friend of mine who was adopted and actually knows nothing about his birth parents, that sometimes that's a piece of someone's history.

If I speak from my own experiences, the whole story I talk about in my section of the conference about my father leaving soon after I was born and not having that peace. And it took me until I was in my early 30s before I finally tracked him down and met him. And although that experience wasn't a very easy experience, it was a very important experience of having some processing and closure on that history.

So I think it's a very important point you make, and it can be quite challenging sometimes for people even to get that insight.

Valerie Mason-John: And for somebody who is adopted and I will quote Dr. Gabor Mate again when he talks about the stamp of abandonment. So for somebody who was adopted, one of their early traumas, I wouldn't necessarily say it was the first trauma because actually in the the foetus, if the mother knows that she's not going to be able to keep this child already, the child is going to come out into the world dysregulated.

So they could have been traumas even before this stamp of abandonment. But we know that one of the extreme traumas would have been when that child was given up for adoption. And that will be held in the body. And I've actually worked with people who have been adopted and have had real issues of separation. And this is, again, even for myself, separation issues.

I really had to go into inquiry with this because why did I get so activated when my partner would leave the house without not telling me? I would get so activated, it was like, you need

to tell me when you leave the house. And after doing some work, I thought, bingo, it's because at one point I was given up and my biological mother never came back.

So I didn't know whether this person was going to come back, and often a lot of people who have been adopted have the same separation anxiety. Again, It's held in the body.

Alex Howard: And actually, in many ways, what it speaks to is the wisdom of the body that the body is trying to protect itself from that pain being repeated.

Valerie Mason-John: Yes, yes, yes. So let's talk about this ancestral trauma. Firstly, I want to quote from Resmaa Menakem. And if you haven't read his book, *Grandmother's Hands,* please do. And I'm a bit dyslexic, so I'm not sure that I pronounce Resmaa Menakem's name correctly. So apologies if I haven't. But he talks about white supremacy in our blood, literally in our nervous systems. However light or dark our skins, we Americans must all contend with these elemental forces. Call it white body supremacy.

And I would say that definitely that white supremacy lives in the blood of white British people, white European people.

So ancestral trauma. This brings me to the recent uprisings that have been happening.

I just, um, I, I need to pause.

In fact, let's track back to 2016, because I would say that the my most recent book, *I'm Still Your Negro: An Homage to James Baldwin* was in response to what was happening in 2016, to Eric Garner's death, to Trayvon Martin's death.

And it just seemed every day I was waking up to another black body being killed by the police or by white supremacy. And I just… it really had a visceral impact on my body.

Let's track forward. I went to see Harriet and I went to see Harriet with my white friend. And as soon as Harriet came on, five minutes in, my whole body went into a crisis. I shivered, my teeth chattered throughout the whole film. It was as if somewhere in my DNA, you know we talk about it, my epigenetic trauma cells were switched on and there was a memory. There was a memory in this body. And I was completely distressed.

Let's come back a little bit, rewind.

Alex Howard: And if I can just say, I think one of the things that is very important about what I think you're saying here is there's not just a socially constructed narrative and trauma that's here. There's actually and I agree, I think Resmaa writes very beautifully about it. That there's something which is actually held in the body, in the DNA, in the blood,

which is beyond just - although they're still very important - those socially constructed narratives.

Valerie Mason-John: I mean, in my book, I channeled Thomas Peters, who was one of the first black freedom fighters in the seventeen hundreds. OK. And I just channeled him, you know, where does that come from?

So fast forward to George Floyd. I remember my partner. It was my partner who said - and my partner is white - and she had watched the George Floyd video and said, I've just watched the George Floyd video and I'm in tears. I just thought, well, maybe I need to watch this because I'd thought 'I'm not gonna watch this'.

And on one level, I'm glad that I watched it. And I watched that and I went into a dark night. I went into a dark night, period.

I watched it, and it was as if, now as I talk about it, I can see our black bodies being buried up to our neck and those white horse riders who wanted to play polo, they would bury us up to our neck and then with their horses, try to kick our heads off.

And as I talk about it, it's there. I can see our black and brown bodies being tied to the back of a car and the white people just driving.

In fact, I don't know whether it's true, but it's said that the picnic, the word picnic came from pick nigger. White people would go out and grab a black person, tie them to the back of the car and just drive off, pick a nigger. Whether picnic comes from that, there was this display of pick a nigger.

And so this ancestral trauma, yeah, it's myself being completely activated, completely activated, it was it it was lynching all over again. And it's as if my body had a memory of lynching, and then, not just, coupled with this ancestral trauma for many of us, it's also trauma in the here and now, because many of us in black and brown bodies have been traumatized by the police.

We have been brutalized by the police. But we got to live. I myself as a teenager at fifteen, you know, fourteen, fifteen on an anti Nazi march, one of the few black people on that march and the police singled me out but carrying a banner. And I was a bit stroppy. I was stroppy. It's like, why are you picking on me? The only black person on the march. Why are you picking on me? All these white people? I got grabbed, thrown into a police van, taken into police station and a woman rammed a hand up my crotch to see if there was dangerous weapons there. So we know it. Many of those black people on the streets know that police brutality. But we just didn't have the cameras. We know it. So it's not just this ancestral trauma that's activated us and got us on the streets. It's the knowing. We have that memory.

Alex Howard: There was something also that struck me in the, I think I read it in the foreword of *I'm still your Negro* that resonated and that I'd read some other place, that the effectively mass incarceration of particularly black men in in the United States is its own modern form of slavery.

Valerie Mason-John: Exactly. You have to watch *13th*. It's a really important documentary, called *13th*. And it just widens the lens of that, that black men are the most incarcerated all over the world, even in Canada where I live, where we are in the minority. And OK, we know that there is the mass incarceration of indigenous people, but yet percentage wise, black men are more heavily incarcerated than indigenous people.

If we look at percentage wise of how many, you know, indigenous people there are, how many black people there are. It's a modern form of slavery. So, again, when we're talking about trauma, there is the trauma of so many black and brown bodies not growing up with their fathers. And again, this goes back to slavery because we were separated from our fathers. And also, we know in the United States of America, there is also encouragement not to grow up with your fathers, they will give you more money if you're a single parent. So there's some memory of this is a normality of not growing up with your father and this comes from slavery.

And I also, again, want to talk about *12 Years a Slave,* when I watched that film of *12 Years a Slave* again, to me, I just thought 'oh, my God, this is the legacy of ancestral trauma'. This is the legacy. There are two things I want to talk about in that film. Again, when we come back to George Floyd and we watch this black man saying, I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I can't breathe and the police do nothing. It brings me back to, when we look at, not even *12 Years a Slave*, it's in Kunta's *Roots* where they're whipping the black guy. He is being held up. What's your name? Kunta Kinte. What's your name? Kunta Kinte. What's your name? Kunta Kinte. And every time he's been whipped, Kunta Kinte, whipped. And finally, he keeps an English name and they let him go. They don't even let George Floyd go. They don't even let him go.

And then again, coming back to *12 Years a Slave*, the legacy of the beating. Where did we learn to beat our children? And it's not just black people who beat their children. Let's look up where did white people learn to beat their children? Slavery, whipping slaves. This which has been passed down. Get the belt out, which is being passed down.

There was so much of this ancestral trauma that has been passed down to us. So what this means is, when I come into the world, when black and brown bodies come to the world, we're already dysregulated. So if I come into the world as black, as I am, some parents will be freaked out because it's like, 'oh my God, this black child is going to have a harder life than the lighter skinned child'.

I had the trauma of being so dark, because the blacker you are in certain communities, the uglier you are, the lighter you are the the prettier you are, and we know even in biracial relationships, I can remember as a young person, it was like, have a biracial relationship because you will produce a pretty child.

Alex Howard: One of things that I was struck by in the introduction to your book *I'm still your Negro* is you talked about that, as a child that you tried to whiten your skin.

Valerie Mason-John: Yes. And again, this implicit memory, I must've been about seven or eight and I heard on the radio about a child trying to bleach their skin and I remember being completely activated. I just remember being so disturbed by this story. And then in my mid 20s, I read my records and bingo, that's what I had done. So I had no memory, explicit memory of it.

So I want to come back; again we have so much to talk about, this trauma, because, as I said, I have a white partner and I after George, I actually said to my partner "I'm really glad that you're away working at the moment". Because I lost faith in humanity, complete faith. But fortunately, I didn't get stuck in that trauma because I had people to speak to.

Because I really lost faith in humanity, it was like, how could I have slept beside my white partner? And also, it wasn't just white people. I was completely disturbed when I was watching that video. And in front of me, it was an Asian policeman who stood by. I remember thinking, but they're Asian, what's going on? They're Asian. And I lost faith for a moment. I disconnected. I had lost faith in humanity, which is why I went into this dark night period.

But because I have people to talk to, I didn't have to talk to myself because I could process it because there were things that I could do and I didn't get stuck in a trauma. Many people on the streets got stuck in the trauma.

Alex Howard: And that's why having support and community and sharing where someone is, is so important, right?

Valerie Mason-John: Exactly. It's so important. And you know, just coming to the uprisings, as you say, sharing, it's so important. What we see is trauma bonding, on the street was trauma bonding and it's helpful. That's what was happening. People completely disconnected from themself, connected to the anger and the rage, the rage of five hundred years.

And also, you know white people having a rage. Because we live in a time when many white people have black and brown children. This is what was different and this is, for me, one of the great shifts was the ally work, the ally work of black, brown and white bodies being on the streets. And what we see is in that anger and rage, because I talk about the codepend-

ency of racism. And part of that codependency is that we've just gone along with the Confederate flag where we've gone along, we haven't said much. We've gone along with some of these statues that have glorified racism.

But what we saw was the destruction of the mythos, the destruction of the mythos, seeing some of these statues tumbling. No more are we going to go for the attachment of being a good black person. I was gonna say the good nigger. Ok? And I will say that. It's like, born a nigger, always a nigger. It's like no matter what we do, we get the education, we get the education, we don't go into the life of crime, and yet we're still always a nigger on the streets when we're on the streets, people see us as black.

Alex Howard: I am mindful of time, but I think it's a really, really if you've got the time, I've got the time, I think it's a really important piece I wanted to come to as well, which is, again, one of the things that I think is very powerful about what you're saying here and also about what you're speaking to in *I'm still your Negro,* is there is so much also to be proud of. That as much as ancestral trauma is enormous in its impact, it doesn't mean that one has to discard their heritage. And there's so much that there is to be proud of. And I'd love you to speak to that as well.

Valerie Mason-John: Yeah. Thank you for raising that, because I'm actually editing a book on African Wisdom and I'm just in the process of that. And for me, I do talk about this ancestral wisdom. Let's call in our ancestors. When I think of England, you know, I live between Europe and North America and I think of Mary Seacole, the wisdom she had.

When I think of here in Canada, I think of Thomas Peters. When I think of the U.S., I think of Ida Bell Wells, Ida B. Wells, who wrote about the dimensions but who had this wisdom. And then the wisdom we had before we were enslaved.

You know, slavery was 500, 600 years ago, but we existed on the planet thousands and thousands of years ago. We talk about the first human being who was found in Africa, I can't remember her name at the moment. What's her name? It will come to me.
She was found in Africa.

So we have been around a long time and those thousands of thousands of years outweigh this 500, 600 years of slavery and we can recover from this. This is how we can recover. But part of that recovery has to be through white allyship.

I went to Spring Washam, and she's doing, she calls it the Church of Harriet Tubman. And one of the things she did last week was to remind white people of the white abolitionists. And in a way, we got some of our freedom, not all of our freedom but we got some of our freedom because of white abolition.

And that was allies. That was allyship.

So, again, white people can call on their ancestral wisdom for us to work together to change the systemic racism, to change this systemic trauma. Because I, as a black person, I'm not completely free. I belong to a Buddhist community. I won't 'out' my Buddhist community, but I belong to a Buddhist community and one of my friends, one of my dear friends who's Asian-American on one of our Web sites, had this picture of her being in a Black Lives Matter demonstration. If you knew the furore that was created by having this on the website because it was political, wow.

Every day, for those of us in black and brown bodies, it is political. Every day I walk on the streets, it's political. You cannot separate the personal from the political. You cannot separate trauma from black and brown bodies. It's in our DNA and coming back to Resmaa Menakem who says white supremacy is in our blood, whether you're black, brown or white. It's in our blood. But you know what? Black wisdom is in our blood. White wisdom is in our blood, it's in our DNA. And those are the cells that we need to begin switching back on.

Alex Howard: I think that's beautiful and I think very powerful. I have so many questions that hopefully I will get to ask you in future interviews but I am mindful of time and that's a really good end point.

People that want to find out more about you and your work, what's the best way to do that? And maybe say a bit about what they can find.

Valerie Mason-John: My website would be the easiest place to find me, which is valeriemason-john.com. But if you Google me, I will come up and you will get to see what I have to offer. Yeah, that's what I would say.

You can find me on, I'm not a big Twitter person actually. I need a secretary. I'm just a process of actually getting myself a secretary. I am on Twitter, @vmasonjohn or @8steprecovery.

I'm also on Instagram on @eightsteprecovery.

But the best place to find me is on my website or Facebook.

Actually, Facebook is somewhere where you can find me. And the best way to find me would be under Valerie Mason John or Vimalasara. My Buddhist name is Vimalasara Mason John.

Alex Howard: Yeah, but there's so much of your work we haven't got in to today. Your work around addictions, I would love to have more time.

For a book to recommend, we have mentioned a bit *I'm still your Negro*. I think there's some beautiful poems in there that I would recommend as well.

I think it's a great way of giving some voice and bringing alive some of these themes and also just I've got it here, *Detox your heart,* which I think is what I've really been enjoying as well. So, Valerie, thank you.

Valerie Mason-John: Can we end with one of my poems.

Alex Howard: I would love you to read one of the poems, yes.

Valerie Mason-John: . Okay, I will. I will choose the poem of my father's prayer for all of those who have experienced the trauma of not knowing their father. So I'll dedicate the poem to you Alex.

My father's prayer.

My father, who art in the universe.
What on earth is your name?
Will you ever come?
Thy will be home. Dead or alive?
Give me day or night your daily name, and I will forgive your sons
Forgiving all those who have colluded with your sins and lead me not into more unhappiness, but deliver me from this pain.
For thou have the power and the knowledge.
Forever and ever.
Of all men.

Alex Howard: That is beautiful.

And that's a great place to finish. I wish we had more time to talk. Valerie Mason-John, thank you so much for today. I love the way that you break things down to very simple ways but you also bring a lot of passion and heart to it. It was really great. Thank you.

Valerie Mason-John: Thank you.