

## The Assignment with Audie Cornish

NOV 23, 2022

Trauma, Trauma Everywhere



Speakers

Audie Cornish, TikTok Video 1, TikTok Video 2, TikTok Video 3, TikTok Video 4, Archival Tape, Dr. Thema Bryant

00:00:00

**Audie Cornish**

Lately, it feels like I hear the word trauma all the time in all kinds of situations, including ones that honestly are not all that serious.

00:00:10

**TikTok Video 1**

Trrrauma. Childhood trauma. Okay.

00:00:12

**TikTok Video 2**

You're so traumatized as a child. You just have a sixth sense?

00:00:15

**TikTok Video 3**

Literally traumatizing.

00:00:16

**TikTok Video 4**

I'm so tired of people saying trauma makes it funny.

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**Audie Cornish**

Now for sure. Given the last couple of years, all of us are probably a little bit traumatized.

00:00:24

**Archival Tape**

Take to the streets.

00:00:25

**Audie Cornish**

The riots over police involved. Killings. Killings that run on a loop on your smartphone.

00:00:30

**Archival Tape**

The thing that I can tell is he couldn't breathe.

00:00:33

**Audie Cornish**

The national debates about race and a pandemic that revealed inequality in our health, education and economy. Like a low tide. But there is a difference between the shock of these events and the long term effects of trauma on whole communities. So what does that mean? What do people who know about trauma think about the way it's being kicked around in pop culture? How are they treating it differently? How is their work changing in the age when more and more people are seeking mental health? How is the field of psychology adapting to evidence that cultural context is just as important a data point as, say, substance abuse?

00:01:17

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Right. So here's the thing. Erasure is political, right? So to say, I want to treat you as a human being. So I have to pretend your race doesn't exist. Right, is basically what we're saying. If we if I can't ask you about how your identity has affected your life, then basically we're saying to value you as a human, I have to pretend that we're all having an identical experience.

00:01:47

**Audie Cornish**

I'm Audie Cornish. And this is The Assignment.

00:01:54

**Audie Cornish**

Here's some context for you. Last year, during the racial reckoning, the American Psychology Association apologized to black people. Okay. Not not officially. Officially. They issued a statement apologizing for the entire discipline of psychology that they say was, quote, complicit in contributing to systemic inequities and hurt many through racism, racial discrimination and denigration of people of color. And it didn't end there. They followed that up with a surprising choice for the group's next president, Thema Bryant, a minister, podcaster and director of a research lab that focuses explicitly on culture and trauma. But if you meet her on a plane, she's going to tell you all of those titles before she says her most important one.

00:02:42

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

When I say I'm a psychologist and I have learned that to say it on a plane, because then you're trapped for hours, as people say. Can you read my mind?

00:02:50

**Audie Cornish**

Wait, what? That's not where I thought that sentence was going to go. I thought you said that they would ask you questions and basically try and get free therapy.

00:02:58

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Yes.

00:02:59

**Audie Cornish**

Why would they think you're a mind reader?

00:03:01

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Because many people equate psychologists with psychic. They think you're reading them. Yeah, it's amazing.

00:03:09

**Audie Cornish**

I mean, you might be a little right. So this is from our first video chat a few months back when I was trying to wrap my head around the idea of not just trauma, but intergenerational trauma or what she calls the societal trauma of oppression. And when we next got together, it was in a studio in Los Angeles. She works out of Pepperdine University in Malibu. And I had like a million questions about what psychologists know about the effects of trauma on our lives and how she wanted to use her position to redefine ideas around treatment. But first I needed a definition. What exactly is intergenerational trauma?

00:03:49

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

So intergenerational transgenerational we can think of as the umbrella term. And then within that you could say, well, what was the type of trauma that your ancestors went through? So with intergenerational or transgenerational trauma, that can be that your parents or grandparents, anyone before you experienced it could be any form of interpersonal trauma.

00:04:11

**Audie Cornish**

What does this look like in everyday life?

00:04:13

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

So, for example, if your parents or grandparents experienced severe collective trauma, right. The trauma of their entire community. Right. If they then were to say to their children, you can't trust people outside of our community, and they may not say it explicitly as you can't trust them, but they would say something like, Don't let them see you sweat, always be on. You have to be twice as good. We're going to be the last hired and the first fired. You represent us. They don't respect you.

00:04:50

**Audie Cornish**

Let's hit pause because now you're just in my childhood and it's freaking me out. Like, I don't want to think about that as trauma. I want to think about that as resilience.

00:04:58

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Hmm. I know.

00:04:59

**Audie Cornish**

Am I allowed to or are you telling me that actually it is reflecting...

00:05:03

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

A trauma, then preparing you for the world? So...

00:05:06

**Audie Cornish**

Or the worst. The worst of the worst.

00:05:08

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Right. Psychologists have been critiquing this term resilience because there's all this attention and funding to make more resilient children instead of creating environments where we don't have to bounce back.

00:05:23

**Audie Cornish**

Right.

00:05:23

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Right. So it is both. It is a strength. When we talk about racial socialization is how did your parents prepare you to face the world? Right. So those messages are in some ways necessary, but they also that's a weight.

00:05:39

**Audie Cornish**

But is that trauma? I guess that's the thing. I wonder if this is a term that's overused and especially as it's come up more and more in pop culture.

00:05:48

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Yes. So here's the thing about racism and is it traumatic? I would say two things. One, it's important to think of the cumulative effect, because if you just said, oh, you know, I work at a job and all the white people go play golf and they never invite me, so I'm excluded. You tell that story in isolation. It's like, get over it. Like, what's the big deal? Go golf with your friends or do what you want to do, right? Like that's not traumatic. But then when we enlarge that to say, what are the decisions that systematically and structurally get made on the golf course? What are the opportunities that you're going to be excluded from?

00:06:29

**Audie Cornish**

How far back is sort of valid, so to speak, to consider a trauma you're you're connected to?

00:06:37

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Yeah. There really is not a limit because it affects so much of our lives. It affects, for example, people's parenting style. And your parenting style can get passed down from generation to generation. So it can be many generations back. Or we could be saying something that your parents went through specifically.

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**Audie Cornish**

Is intergenerational trauma something you can, quote unquote, get over.

00:07:02

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

So you can break cycles intentionally? So, for example, when we talk about parenting, right, and the example I like to give is often in our community, we have been taught to mask our emotions. And you can think of that as a survival strategy. The phrase we often heard growing up, many of us, is Fix your face.

00:07:28

**Audie Cornish**

That is one version of it. Yes.

00:07:30

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

But I have to be intentional about what is actually protective that I want to pass down to my children. What do I want to modify and what do I absolutely just want to stop? Like, it ends with me. It happened to me and it doesn't go forward.

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**Audie Cornish**

Because I was always told, I'll give you something to cry about.

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**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Yes, definitely.

00:07:53

**Audie Cornish**

Yes. Can you describe a moment or a period in your childhood, like something that kind of puzzled you that you now better understand because of the work you do?

00:08:03

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Yes. When I came home from college or this may have been when I got my license, which then I would still maybe have been a senior in high school. But in that age range, I came home and my father looked at my license and one of the rare times in my life I saw a terror on his face. And he looked at me like outraged and said, Thema, why did you check you would be an organ donor? And he says. Thema, don't you realize if your life is hanging in the balance and a white person needs your organs, they're not going to do the most to save you. Had never occurred to me.

00:08:48

**Audie Cornish**

Something happens in your eyes when you just tell that story. Were you picturing him?

00:08:52

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Oh, I could see it. Yeah. You should picture like a fiery person because he's a preacher. Right. So he's on fire. He has taken me like, to protest marches...

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**Audie Cornish**

But on license day.

00:09:06

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Yeah. Often times, if, you know, psychologically, people come in and were to say something like that, many mental health professionals would say, what, like an unreasonable fear? Like, why would he fear that? And that's if you have a historical perspective. Right. And so it has been documented medical bias and the taking of people's organs and the mistreatment of black people and other people of color in the medical industry. And so the the concern, the fear that he had was based on his knowledge of what is what is in the realm of possibility. And so here he was thinking in so many ways, he has prepared his daughter. She's 19 and has checked this box. Right.

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**Audie Cornish**

Have you learned nothing?

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**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Right. It's like, where have you been? What did like, how did I fail you for you to think you could press it? Well, yeah.

00:10:05

**Audie Cornish**

It's interesting that you should bring up that particular kind of story, because it makes me think of how during the pandemic, initially, it was thought that black and Latino communities were reluctant to take the COVID 19 vaccine and that that reluctance was rooted in skepticism of the medical community. No one ever at the time said the word trauma. I don't recall that. Even as a reporter, I don't remember ever being like, well, this is the result of collective trauma. Right. But is that how someone, from your perspective, would look?

00:10:41

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Absolutely. And that makes it make sense. It's like when we talk about this community just has a mistrust of the police, mistrust of doctors, a mistrust of social work, of psychologists. And we and we act like the root of that problem is within the community. So then it's like, how do we heal their trust as opposed to how do we make systems that are more trustworthy?

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**Audie Cornish**

Let's talk about this kind of moment, this tipping point moment, especially of the last two, three years where people are talking about trauma more. So, I'm sure you've noticed a lot of apologizing going on.

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**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Yes. Yes, I have.

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**Audie Cornish**

I think one of the more recent ones headlines around Pope Francis offering an apology, a personal apology, at least for the way that the Catholic Church abused indigenous communities. Right. And church run schools in Canada. What do you hear in those moments...

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**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Yeah.

00:11:48

**Audie Cornish**

...that relates to the work that you do?

00:11:50

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Or last year, APA issued an apology for the role of psychology on racism, both in silence and historically and in contemporary times, promoting negative stereotypes or pathologizing of communities of color or the erasure within our scholarship and within our research and within our practice. And so the council, which is the governing branch of the American Psychological Association, voted unanimously for this apology, and you get a range of responses. So I would say the overwhelming majority of people are like, it's about time, and they should have done that. You'll have some people who will say, Oh, these things were long ago, of course, like, why should we in the present be apologizing? And then you also have the critics who will say words are insufficient. So I say that acknowledgment is necessary, but insufficient. Meaning it is not enough to just apologize but I do think the acknowledgment and apology is important. But if that is the end of it, then it becomes just words. So then the implementation and the the changed behavior I'll give you by way of example, in South Africa, they had the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. And, you know, some of the critique of that was, okay, you had people told the truth about what they did and that was supposed to be reconciled. But what happened to accountability?

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**Audie Cornish**

Right, so just for the context for people, this is the idea that you could within a community, have moments where someone who would have committed a crime or harm to someone in the neighborhood, usually racial in this case because of apartheid, speaking that out loud and having that conversation. In a formal setting. Yes. Speaking the truth and then reconciling it was like an act of movement. But you're saying that it has to be hand in hand.

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**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Right, which...

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**Audie Cornish**

To be honest, most of these aren't.

00:14:01

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Right. No. And that's what you know, some people, of course, praised it because you had people finally confessing the terrible things they did. And but for a lot of community members and even when, you know, you were to look nationally at, you know, who the wealth and governmental roles and power and privilege, they would say it's not enough that they just confessed it. Right then there has to be right action. And you know the saying, you know that I like to use as justice, as therapeutic, right? Yeah. Truth is, is healing. But then there has to be some level of accountability of making things right. And that's an ongoing process. It's not like a one day workshop.

00:14:45

**Audie Cornish**

More of my interview with Dr. Tema Bryant coming up.

00:14:58

**Audie Cornish**

Okay, we're back. And next, we're going to get into trauma in pop culture because I had a lot of questions about that. What does pop culture get wrong about intergenerational trauma? I mean, I'm asking because, you know, when I look at how intergenerational trauma is showing up in pop culture, I think of like a Netflix show, like "Russian doll" or the movie "Everything Everywhere All at Once" or "Encanto". It is actually it feels like it's kind of in the zeitgeist right now. Yeah. To acknowledge that the people before you were in a kind of pain that they passed down to you.

00:15:42

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Yeah. So I think people are often tuned into the wound, but not the wisdom. Right. Or the harm, but not the healing. So they'll say, oh, yes, this is trauma. This is trauma. This is trauma. And so what we can end up doing is going to a place of pity, dehumanizing and an assumption of powerlessness. So we have to be able to hold both things at the same time.

00:16:17

**Audie Cornish**

Right.

00:16:17

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

And like to recognize the structural, institutionalized, pervasive aspects of intergenerational trauma is to commit ourselves to the work in the long run. Like there isn't a, you know, one day of healing. We think about something that took generations to manifest as it is right now, is not going to be just like, oh, a six week workshop online. Right. Right.

00:16:45

**Audie Cornish**

It's an observation with a very thoughtful Thanksgiving dinner conversation.

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

00:16:49

Yeah. And this is actually a big one. I don't want to skip over, which is the need to address what has intergenerationally been passed down among white people? Because often we think about the wounds of racism and thinking about marginalized groups. But to hold these beliefs and pass down these beliefs and benefit from these beliefs, even if you don't hold on to them, also has costs and that collective shame, guilt, denial, dehumanization to engage in victim blaming in the ways that you were taught or to be ashamed for being silent when you heard your family or other members of your community speaking in racist ways. So I think it's an interesting thing and I appreciate the question because I think we often center and because we've been marginalized but center the victims or targets of intergenerational trauma, but no one wants to be the offender.

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**Audie Cornish**

So prior to this point, what I'll call the awakening, right. This influx of attention you mentioned. Yeah. How did people see your work?

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**Dr. Thema Bryant**

I think in the field, a lot of times it was seen as a specialty instead of something that everybody needed to know. So, you know, along those lines, it would be if you want to have a workshop on diversity or on discrimination. These are experts in that. And we have now, you know, really made the move of acknowledging this can't just be a few people's expertise.

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**Audie Cornish**

Right. Like somehow that work wasn't relevant to the broader...

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**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Mm hmm. And even, you know, I would say it was recognized in the sense of having, like, this mandated course, but in terms of integrating it in all the courses. That is something we continue to work on.

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**Audie Cornish**

So you've got this new role, incoming president of the American Psychological Association, which means you're now in a position to influence how people think about trauma, how clinicians and mental health professionals think about trauma. Can you give one or two examples of shifts in the business? You know, the way that you all talk among yourselves things you could be doing differently.

00:19:08

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

So I have five initiatives and one of them is looking at culturally informed ways of addressing trauma and grief. And that is, you know, where we are now of what everybody is facing, both visible and invisible, recognizing unrecognized losses.

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**Audie Cornish**

So step number one, acknowledge that there is a cultural component to both your pain and your healing.

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**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Yes.

00:19:34

**Audie Cornish**

Which some people may not want to do. Right. Because they don't want to be racist somehow. They may be like, well, my black or brown or, you know, client, maybe something's wrong with you and your people like that doesn't really fit for me either. I don't think that sounds good.

00:19:47

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Right.

00:19:47

**Audie Cornish**

But you're saying that there's some way that an acknowledgment has to happen.

00:19:51

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

So, for example, when we do an intake, we ask about the things we've decided are important. And based on your answers, we decide on one your case conceptualization, which is how do we understand you based on how we understand you, we create a treatment plan. So in those first couple of sessions, as a rule, all of us are going to ask you about your current symptoms. We're going to ask you about substance use. We're going to ask you about your family history. Generally, we do not systematically ask if you've had experiences of discrimination. So if I don't ask you and I'm a white psychologist, so you don't just volunteer it. Now, I have worked with you for two years and we have never talked about how racism has affected your mental health. That's problematic.

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**Audie Cornish**

How do you fix that?

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**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Changing the intake process so telling. And just as you were concerned, some white clinicians may be afraid of like, oh, but if I asked that, what if people feel bad? But if you say I'm asking all of my clients because if it's not based on race, some people have expressed discrimination based on sexual orientation or based on their age and that also based on their gender. Right. Can also affect their mental health. So then it's not just I'm I'm selecting you, although it would be not a leap to think that a Native American client has been affected by the discrimination against their community. Right. So you ask the question and just like any other question we ask, if people say, no, it hasn't fazed me. You haven't disrupted therapy. If I ask you, you know, how often do you get high? You say, I don't get high. Okay, next question. Right. So it is to put it on the table to integrate it into people's process, because that's a part of seeing somebody.

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**Audie Cornish**

Does it bring identity politics into this very private space?

00:21:56

**Dr. Thema Bryant**

Right. So here's the thing. Erasure is political, right? So to say, I want to treat you as a human being. So I have to pretend your race doesn't exist. Right, is basically what we're saying. If we if I can't ask you about your how your identity has affected your life, then basically we're saying to value you as a human, I have to pretend that we're all having an identical experience. Right? It's like when I was working with a woman who uses a wheelchair and this was at a training clinic. So every year she would get a different therapist. And I was seeing her for the first time and I asked her, how was it navigating in our building with our chair? And she let out a big sigh and said, Do you know, after all the years I've been in therapy, you're the only therapist to ever mention my chair. Right. So for her, what were the other therapists thinking? I want to pretend the chair doesn't exist because I'm treating you like a human being. Which assumes to be human. You must not have a chair. Right. So we have to release this idea that identity is political and therefore the respectful thing is to not speak about it. It's just false.

00:23:16

**Audie Cornish**

Is there some little bit of wisdom, so to speak, that you've picked up not just from doing this work, but doing this work in this moment that can help us understand what it's like from from inside your world.

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**Dr. Thema Bryant**

One is to know that that the phrase I like to use as trauma affects us, but it doesn't define us. Meaning racism is real. It has very... Intergenerational trauma is real. And that's not my whole story. And then the second thing, I just want to say that for people who have committed themselves to doing this work, whether in psychology or in any field in their personal lives, something that's called racial battle fatigue, which is just that this is exhausting. And so to give yourself grace and compassion for the moments, you don't have it. Like sometimes you see something and you're shocked or just exhausted and to say rest, but don't quit.

00:24:21

**Audie Cornish**

That was Dr. Thema Bryant, incoming president of the American Psychological Association. That's it for this episode of The Assignment. New episodes drop every Thursday. So please listen and follow wherever you get your podcasts. And if you like the show, leave us a rating and definitely leave us a review. One more thing. If you have an assignment for us, a story you want to hear more about or one that is affecting your community, you can give us a call. You can leave us a voicemail at 202-854-8802 or you can record a voicemail on your phone. Email that to us at [theassignmentcnn@gmail.com](mailto:theassignmentcnn@gmail.com). The assignment is a production of CNN audio. Our producers are Madeleine Thompson, Jennifer Lai, Isoke Samuel, Alison Park, Lori Galarreta, and Sonia Htoon. Our senior producer is Haley Thomas and our supervising producer is Steve Lickteig. Mixing and Sound Design by David Schulman. Our technical director is Dan Dzula. Abbie Swanson is our executive producer. Special thanks to Katie Hinman. I'm Audie Cornish, and thank you for listening.