

## CHAPTER 10.

# I AIN'T NO HORATIO ALGER STORY

It isn't hard to believe that I've made it, that my life and literacy narrative is a success story. I grew up a poor boy of color in a single-parent home, a remedial English student from North LV who made it, a near flunky with an attitude. Yet I graduated from college, went to graduate school twice, got a master's degree, then a Ph.D. in English, no less. I became a professor of English, directed writing programs, and now am an associate dean in one of the largest and most innovative universities in the US.<sup>1</sup> That's successful. I don't deny this at all.

But as I hope I've shown, I'm not the only hero in my story, and my story is only possible because I'm an exception to the rule for children of color who come from places like I did. My conditions allowed me to be successful, even as they hurt me in other ways. So I'm not a success in the way we often talk about successful people in the US. You know the kind, the rags to riches story, the story of a poor boy who, through his own hard work, determination, and persistence, struggles mightily to achieve great things despite having very little to work with and few helping hands along the way. I do not wish to be read as a Horatio Alger story.

So, as a way to close my literacy story and argument, as a way to ask again how we come to understand the White language supremacist conditions in our lives in order to remake those conditions, I discuss the idea of success and where we in the US seem to get our ideas about it in this closing chapter. This argument about our narratives of success is also an argument about me and how you might understand better what my literacy story means, what lessons you might take from it beyond the ones you likely have already.

## THE HORATIO ALGER MYTH OF SUCCESS

Today we all live under the strong and enticing myth of the Horatio Alger story of success, even if you don't know who Alger is. His stories inform much of our discourse about who we are as Americans, what success and hard work means.

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1 As of 2019, Arizona State University had been named the most innovative university in the US for five years running by *U.S. News and World Report*; see Mary Beth Faller, "ASU Named No. 1 in Innovation For Fifth Consecutive Year," *ASU Now*, September 8, 2019, <https://asunow.asu.edu/20190908-asu-news-number-one-innovation-us-news-fifth-consecutive-year>.

His myth of success certainly informed me and how I approached school, even as I slowly grew to criticize the myth. It's a difficult myth to escape.

In 1832, Horatio Alger Jr. was born to Augusta Fenno and her husband, the Unitarian minister Horatio Alger Sr., in Chelsea, Massachusetts.<sup>2</sup> The New England family had esteemed roots, coming from influential Pilgrims like Robert Cushman, who organized and led the Mayflower voyage to the New World in 1620. While his family was far from rich, they were well respected and had some means. Alger Jr. attended Harvard, then bounced around several jobs in the Boston area as an editor and a teacher at a boys boarding school. During this time, he wrote a few serialized books, then a poem, mostly for magazines.

Between 1857 and 1860, he went to Harvard Divinity School, graduated, and took a position as a pastor of the First Unitarian Church and Society in Brewster, Massachusetts, all the while continuing to write stories for magazines. It didn't last though. Just two years into his post in 1866, Alger resigned as pastor and moved to New York City amid controversy in his parish. He had been accused of being "familiar with boys." There was evidence that he had sexually abused several boys. He admitted to it and quit with apparent little remorse.<sup>3</sup>

Horatio Alger is probably best known for his Ragged Dick novels, of which he wrote twelve. Most of Alger's novels were rags to riches stories of boys who make it out of poverty and become successful in some way by their own wit, pluck, and persistence. In many ways, his novels epitomize important narratives of the day, "the Gilded Age."<sup>4</sup> These narratives said that one could do anything as long as one worked hard, was honest, abided by the rules, but mostly, worked hard. These narratives served well the super-rich industrialists and elite of the second half of the nineteenth century, that is, those White men who owned steel factories, oil companies, and railroads. It reassured the working classes that they, too, could be like John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, or Cornelius Vanderbilt.

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2 To read about Horatio Alger and the myth of success in the US, see chapter two of Richard Weiss, *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale* (New York: Illini Books, 1988). All of Horatio Alger's books are open access online at <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/author/168>.

3 To read more about this period of Horatio Alger's life at the Brewster parish, see George C. Kohn, "Horatio Alger: Lover of Boys," *The New Encyclopedia of American Scandal* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2000), 6; see also, "Horatio Alger and the 100-Year-Old Secret," New England Historical Society, last updated 2019, <http://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/horatio-alger-hundred-year-old-secret/>.

4 The term "Gilded Age" comes from the satirical novel by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3178>; the term refers to a time when the US saw immense growth, prosperity, and corruption.

These three industrialists in this order, according to *Business Insider* in 2011, are the richest Americans ever to live, after adjusting for inflation.<sup>5</sup> This included Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos then (who is now considered the richest man alive<sup>6</sup>), and all the tech giants today. In today's terms, Rockefeller's wealth is estimated at \$336 billion, Carnegie's at \$309 billion, and Vanderbilt's at \$185 billion. Meanwhile, Bill Gates was fourth on this list, with a net worth of \$136 billion. Jeff Bezos, who recently announced he would step down as the CEO of Amazon.com, is currently estimated to be worth \$150 billion.<sup>7</sup>

If they were alive today and had their fortunes, Rockefeller or Carnegie could give away the equivalent of Bezos' wealth and still be richer than Bezos currently is.<sup>8</sup> So the narratives that Horatio Alger offered in his novels for young boys would be very enticing, especially if your world was limited and filled with hard labor that paid very little. If all you saw around you was poverty, hard luck, and even harder work for little pay, you needed to believe that you had access to the life of a Rockefeller or Carnegie or Vanderbilt. Even today, most want to believe that they can be the next Bezos, even though they cannot.

Most agree that Alger's stories of boys making it on their own by hard work and persistence have always been fantasies. They simply are not the way life really works most of the time. They aren't how our current capitalist systems and economies are built. To be successful, to have your hard work pay off in the right

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5 Gux Luban, "The 13 Richest Americans of All Time," *Business Insider*, April 17, 2011, <https://www.businessinsider.com/richest-americans-ever-2011-4/>.

6 Robert Frank, "Jeff Bezos Is Now the Richest Man in Modern History," CNBC, July 16, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/07/16/jeff-bezos-is-now-the-richest-man-in-modern-history.html>.

7 It should be noted that net worth and wealth are difficult to calculate, as often such super-rich families have many different kinds of holdings that are not easily tabulated unless they are sold, so total net worth is a slippery figure. However, three other lists of the richest men in the US to have ever lived list these three men in the top three places in the same order: John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, Cornelius Vanderbilt; see Christine Gibson, "The American Heritage," *American Heritage*, October 1998, <https://www.americanheritage.com/american-heritage>; Peter W. Bernstein and Annalyn Swan, *All the Money In The World* (New York: Knopf, 2007), 17.

8 It's worth noting that over the years, the Rockefeller fortune has been divided and trusted to numerous family members and descendants, and it is very difficult to estimate the family wealth today. The *Motley Fool*, a blog on nasdaq.com, estimates today's Rockefeller family fortune to be worth around \$10 billion; see, Sean O'Reilly, "How Rich Is the Rockefeller Family Today?" *The Motley Fool* (blog), September 1, 2016, <https://www.nasdaq.com/articles/how-rich-rockefeller-family-today-2016-09-01>. In his last years, Andrew Carnegie gave his vast wealth away to charities, doing things like establishing thousands of libraries. Carnegie famously said, "The man who dies rich, dies disgraced." See, Chloe Sorvino, "The Gilded Age Family That Gave It All Away: The Carnegies," *Forbes*, July 8, 2014, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chloesorvino/2014/07/08/whats-become-of-them-the-carnegie-family>.

ways, you have to have a lot of conditions in your favor along the way. No one person controls all or most of these conditions. They are networks and systems, structures in our society, schools, jobs, and languages.

But the myth that hard work always equates to success lets poor folks dream of a better tomorrow. It democratizes success. It gives everyone access to success, even if only in their dreams. It keeps the working poor, like my mom, working hard, and allows the rich, who own the places and companies in which the poor work, to get richer. And of course, paradoxically, to have any success, even a modest amount, does require hard work. But it's easy to believe the fallacy that if I want to be richer or more successful than I am today, all I gotta do is work harder. It's an ever-sliding scale that offers an ever-retreating success.

Richard Weiss, who researched Horatio Alger Jr., also examined this myth of American success, explaining that its roots can be found in “early American Puritanism,” that is, seventeenth-century New England, namely in the sermons of ministers like Robert Cushman and Alger’s family.<sup>9</sup> Even as early as 1879, Mark Twain criticized the Horatio Alger success story in his own short, satirical story, “Poor Little Stephen Girard.” In Twain’s version, Little Stephen is not saved by a rich banker despite his honesty and hard work. Instead, he is chastised and left worse off. Upon showing the banker the bounty of his silent toiling, of picking up pins from the front steps of the bank, the banker responds: “Those pins belong to the bank, and if I catch you hanging around here any more [sic] I’ll set the dog on you!”<sup>10</sup> The experience of Twain’s Little Stephen is more like that of most in the US then and now. But statistically, it’s even more so for people of color.

One way to see just how the Horatio Alger myth of success works against people of color is to consider the wage gap for Black women in the US. If everyone works hard and persists, then we should all be making about the same amount of money with the same qualifications. But that is not the case. In 1967, three years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Black women made 43 cents for every dollar made by White men.<sup>11</sup> Fifty years later in 2015, that gap was at 63 cents on every dollar made by White men. It didn’t even matter if Black women had college degrees. They still made \$1,000 less a year than their White male counterparts. Similarly, Black women with master’s degrees only got 64 cents for every dollar a White man with the same qualifications got.

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9 Weiss, *American Myth*, 4.

10 Mark Twain, “Poor Little Stephen Girard,” *Carleton’s Popular Readings*, ed. Anna Randall-Diehl, (New York, 1879, 183–84; repr., <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4935/>).

11 This and the following statistics come from Kayla Patrick, “For Black Women, Hard Work Doesn’t Always Pay Off,” National Women’s Law Center, July 27, 2017, <https://nwlc.org/blog/for-Black-women-hard-work-doesnt-always-pay-off/>.

Hard work, grit, and pluck have never paid off in the same ways for women of color. And if you've bought into the myth, then you likely blame yourself for not making it, not getting the promotion, not making enough money, not working hard enough. I mean, the Alger narrative of success says if you work hard and long enough, you'll be successful. And if you don't, well, then you only have yourself to blame. Now, if you are one of the lucky ones and have made it and are looking at all those who haven't, you might accuse them, those Black women for instance, for not being as hard working or diligent or smart as you. I mean, c'mon, you made it, right? Why can't they?

Both views are false conclusions that come from accepting the Alger myth, or not thinking it through carefully. And our judgements of other people and their language practices as well as our own are implicated in this myth of success. We often use language as a marker of how successful people are or will be. We substitute judgements about how someone writes or speaks with how smart or capable they are, as I discussed in chapter 5. Why else would teachers grade your languaging?

So when we accept the Alger myth completely, the victim is victimized thrice: first by the system that feeds all of us the Alger myth of success, assuming in the HOWLing that tells us we all have the same kind of access to the same things; second by each other, each of us blaming the other for the unfair conditions in which we all work and that benefit some more than others by systemic default, thinking in a hyperindividualized way that everything, including our own success, comes from within ourselves only; and third by ourselves, beating ourselves up for not being able to achieve success like those we think we see around us, thinking in fast-fashion that what we see is all there is, missing the systems and structures that afford some more than others, systems that are so present they are invisible and seem neutral and even fair.

Now, there is an alternative way to see things. We could accept the idea that working hard is good and preferable without believing that it will always result in success, security, or the rewards we initially seek. We could see success as a function of one's material conditions *and* labors, just like our literacy that we inherit and use. This is not as an attractive narrative, though. It suggests that if you don't like how things are working out, how little your labors and grit pay off, it's not simply a personal matter.

It ain't just about fixin' yourself. It's a systemic issue, a problem with the conditions and systems we work in that determine what your hard work and determination are worth. It's not about the signs of God's election, nor about the markers that show to everyone your supposed value in society. It's about understanding the value of the system itself and what it is capable of. This alternative way of seeing success suggests change, maybe revolution. It suggests that surely

different systems, ones that do not place so many boundaries and limitations on most people, are possible.

In his novels, Alger is thinking in Puritanical terms. As the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German sociologist, philosopher, and political economist Max Weber (pronounced MAUX VAY-BER) explains it, according to Puritanism, the best way to see one's election into heaven, or know that you are predestined by God, is through the material markers of his grace,<sup>12</sup> that is, things like money, expensive clothes, nice homes, and big families. This isn't foolproof, of course. The signs of election are not always clear. But according to most Calvinist doctrine, no one earns their way into Heaven, and the "elect" who go to Heaven are already predetermined. Weber offered a useful theory to explain not only how Puritanism agrees with the values of capitalism but how the two systems produce something else.

Weber explains that the "spirit of Capitalism" favors profit for profit's sake. When you insert Calvinist doctrine into a capitalist society, you get values that promote making profits as the highest good, both for the individual and society. It's surely a perversion of Calvinism, but that's partly Weber's point. The two systems, Calvinism and capitalism, make something new in the US, make a new spirit or set of guiding values. Profit is a divine calling. It proves you are good and valuable to society. Part of the logic is: God has given you this, so it must be good. Money, then, is the sign of election and success. In one sense, it is "trickle-down" economic theory.<sup>13</sup>

Data scientist Cathy O'Neil offers lots of contemporary evidence for the phenomenon Weber describes, from finance to college rankings. In banking and the places where big data is used to manipulate people, which turns out to be every field and industry these days, she explains:

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12 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 19–21.

13 Trickle-down economic theory has roots dating from the turn of the twentieth century in U.S. politics, but it was made popular by President Reagan and was called "Reaganomics." In the mid-1980s, Reagan's economic policies focused on the supply-side of the economy, lowering a variety of taxes for corporations and the super-rich with the assumption that the money saved there in the system would trickle down to everyone else. That trickling down never happened, but this kind of economic policy has been a staple of the Republican party. In the early 2000s, President George W. Bush had similar economic policies. The language then was around providing money to "job creators" so those savings would trickle down to everyone else. Again, there was no evidence that money would actually trickle down. To read about trickle-down economics and Reaganomics, see, William A. Niskanen, "Reaganomics," *The Concise Encyclopedia of Economics*, 2002, <https://www.econlib.org/library/Enc1/Reaganomics.html>. To read criticisms of Bush-era "job-creator" tax cuts, see, Rick Ungar, "The Truth about the Bush Tax Cuts and Job Growth," *Forbes*, July 17, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rickungar/2012/07/17/the-truth-about-the-bush-tax-cuts-and-job-growth/#1e1bba507463>.

Whether in finance or tech, the message they've [college graduates from elite universities] received is that they will be rich, that they will run the world. Their productivity indicates that they're on the right track, and it translates to dollars. This leads to the fallacious conclusion that whatever they're doing to bring in money is good. It "adds value." Otherwise, why would the market reward it?

In both cultures, wealth is no longer a means to get by. It becomes directly tied to personal worth.<sup>14</sup>

These are not old-fashioned, archaic ideas that we see only in movies. They aren't ideas relegated to antiheroes, like Gordon Gekko, telling us that "greed is good."<sup>15</sup> Weber's "spirit of Capitalism" infects us all in tacit ways. And what is one of its central logics? Hierarchy. People are ranked and graded. Colleges are ranked and graded. Stocks and mortgages are ranked and graded. The rankings and grades end up being used to determine the value of people and decisions in systems. The ranks and grades become a surrogate for merit.

Just a few years before Weber published his ideas, Thorstein Veblen, an American economist and sociologist, offered a similar theory of the leisure classes in the US. Veblen explained that those who can afford to engage in "conspicuous consumption" do so because it shows their alleged value. They buy expensive food, clothing, houses, jewelry, and other things not because they need them, but because those obvious material things are signs of wealth and success.<sup>16</sup> In effect, conspicuously consuming expensive things means you are good and successful. Veblen was criticizing the practice, of course. You have value to society, even if your good to society has not been proven. The theory of conspicuous consumption says that we all peacock around because, well, we think it is important to show everyone our value and worth, even though "worth" is understood in this system only in monetary terms.

Veblen's work reveals that we don't have to think in terms of Calvinist or Puritanical doctrine that interprets markers of wealth as God's favor. We justify our ideas about wealth and spending through other means too. And, this kind of behavior implicitly reinforces the social, economic, and racial places we all are born into in society since it ignores the way the system sets up some groups to succeed more easily and more often than other groups.

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14 O'Neil, *Weapons*, 47.

15 Gordon Gekko was played by Michael Douglas in the movie *Wall Street* (1987) in which he spoke the famous line: "Greed is good."

16 Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1973), 64.



Some of us are born into families that conspicuously consume, while others are born into ones who cannot. As O’Neil shows in her book, the cycle feeds itself. This means that worth in such systems is inherited, like our languages and names. These conditions allow us to blame people too easily for who they are, where they come from, and how they use language under the guise of promoting personal responsibility, hard work, and persistence. It uses the Horatio Alger myth against people of color, working class folks, and the poor.

## ALGER AIN’T TALKIN’ BOUT BLACK BOYS

Of course, the success narrative isn’t just about careers and jobs. It’s also predicated on living a life free from harassment, living a safe life, one that affords everyone the chance to work hard and persist. It’s about having equitable chances to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that we say we all get in the US. But you do not have such chances when your risk of police violence upon you is statistically much higher than your White peers. Success and persistence requires the freedom to exercise such things in your life.

These inequitable life chances can be read in Twain’s Little Stephen story, and in George Floyd’s death in Minneapolis in May of 2020. It can be seen in the apparent murder by hangings of Robert Fuller and Malcolm Harsch, two Black men in California just 50 miles apart.<sup>17</sup> We can also see it in the hundreds of other Black citizens killed by police every year in the US, which have become more and more difficult for local governments and police agencies to justify recently.<sup>18</sup>

A recent study by researchers at Rutgers University using federal data found that Black men were 2.5 times more likely to die at the hands of police than their White peers.<sup>19</sup> It is a leading cause of death for Black males. This means that “1 in 1,000 Black men and boys in America can expect to die at the hands of police.” Since 2015, police in the US have killed on average 1,000 people a year. The death rate of Blacks killed by police are three times what they are for Latine, and four times the rates for Whites.<sup>20</sup> In the US, Black men and boys do

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17 Sandra E. Garcia, “Families Challenge Suicide in Deaths of Black Men Found Hanging From Trees,” *New York Times*, June 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/14/us/robert-fuller-malcolm-harsch-deaths.html>.

18 “Controversial Police Encounters Fast Facts,” CNN, June 4, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/04/05/us/controversial-police-encounters-fast-facts/index.html>.

19 Amina Khan, “Getting Killed by Police Is a Leading Cause of Death for Young Black Men in America,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2019-08-15/police-shootings-are-a-leading-cause-of-death-for-Black-men>.

20 Mark Berman, John Sullivan, Julie Tate, and Jennifer Jenkins, “Protests Spread Over Police



not have equitable chances for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. They usually do not even get the chance to be a Ragged Dick.

Consider De'Von Bailey, a 19-year old young, Black man who was shot in the back by a White police officer in Colorado Springs, Colorado, as he ran away on August 3, 2019.<sup>21</sup> The same officer, Sergeant Alan Van't Land, shot and killed another man in 2012.<sup>22</sup> Colorado Springs has a population of 472,688, and just 6.2 percent of that number are Black residents. The overall poverty rate in the city is 12.6 percent, but that same rate for Black residents is 20.17 percent, and it's 22.02 percent for Latine residents. Meanwhile, White residents' poverty rate in the same city is at 9.35 percent.<sup>23</sup>

Why tell you this? These statistics matter to the narratives we tell ourselves about those around us or those over there, in the "bad part of town." They make up a part of our material conditions that we all use, including the police, to make decisions, especially quick ones, ones we don't have time to ruminate over, the kind of fast thinking that Daniel Kahneman researched.<sup>24</sup> The narratives associated with Black men and boys are not like Ragged Dick. They are of a different sort that we often set against Ragged Dicks. They are an even crueler, more fatal version of Twain's Little Stephen Girard.

The title of the *USA Today* story on August 13, 2019, about the shooting of De'Von Bailey reveals these narratives of young, Black men in the US. The title of the article is: "De'Von Bailey Was Shot in the Back and Killed by Police, his Family Says. They're Rallying for 'Justice.'" By ending the first sentence with the qualifier, "his family says," it appears as if the police may not have shot and killed him. It would appear this detail is in question, but it is not at all. The police body camera footage clearly shows Sergeant Van't Land shooting an unarmed Bailey. So we know exactly who killed whom. But you might not know this from the *USA Today* coverage, as it doesn't even name the officer.

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Shootings. Police Promised Reforms. Every Year, They Still Shoot and Kill Nearly 1,000 People," *Washington Post*, June 8, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/protests-spread-over-police-shootings-police-promised-reforms-every-year-they-still-shoot-nearly-1000-people/2020/06/08/5c204f0c-a67c-11ea-b473-04905b1af82b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/protests-spread-over-police-shootings-police-promised-reforms-every-year-they-still-shoot-nearly-1000-people/2020/06/08/5c204f0c-a67c-11ea-b473-04905b1af82b_story.html).

21 Vandana Ravikumar, "De'Von Bailey Was Shot in the Back and Killed by Police, His Family Says. They're Rallying for 'Justice,'" *USA Today*, August 13, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/>.

22 Karu F. Daniels, "Colorado Cop Who Killed Unarmed De'Von Bailey Has Past of Brutality, Still Honored," *The Root*, September 8, 2019, <https://www.theroot.com/colorado-cop-who-killed-unarmed-de-von-bailey-has-past-1837967840>.

23 "Colorado Springs, Colorado Population 2019," World Population Review, accessed October 29, 2019, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/colorado-springs-co-population>.

24 Kahneman, *Thinking*; also, I provide more details about fast thinking in the section called "Our Fast Thinking and Mindbugs" in the appendix essay found in this book.

In the news article, there is no racialized body of a White police officer shooting yet another young Black man in the back. Here's the article's second and third paragraphs:

The family of a Black Colorado man who was fatally shot by police this month in Colorado Springs are rallying to demand an independent investigation into his death.

Surveillance video obtained last week by The Gazette newspaper in Colorado Springs appears to show 19-year-old De'Von Bailey running away from two officers before being shot in the back and falling to the ground.<sup>25</sup>

In this account, no agent, no police officer, pulls a trigger—not grammatically. The first paragraph uses the passive construction to erase the subject doing the shooting: “a Black Colorado man who *was fatally shot* by police.” Who fatally shot him? The police? Who in that organization did it? Do bullets just come out of “the police”? No, a police officer has to make a judgement, draw a gun, and pull a trigger. Furthermore, a police system has to train such an officer to make those kinds of decisions. Laws and policies of local governments and agencies have to be made in order to protect all those police officers when they make a judgement, pull a gun, and shoot. Instead, this sentence and paragraph makes De'Von into only a “Black Colorado man” whose primary characteristic is being “fatally shot by police.”

The sentence that makes up the second paragraph uses another passive construction that erases Sergeant Van't Land. He's not even at the scene, apparently. De'Von is just shot in the back. It's almost as if it doesn't matter who did it, only that it was done. But it does matter when the one who did it is supposed to protect the citizens of Colorado Springs, all of them, not kill some more than others for running away unarmed. That's no reason to draw a gun, no reason to pull a trigger, no reason to kill anyone. No one is in danger, except the young, Black man—that's probably why he ran.

Furthermore, putting “justice” in quotation marks in the article's title can create a sarcastic tone. Who doesn't want justice? Do the parents have some perverted notion of justice? No, we all want justice. Justice is supposed to be the rule of law. Justice is what everyone expects here. So why quote “justice” in the headline if not to call it into question? The reason is: When justice is what a Black family wants, it is suspect. A Ragged Dick De'Von is not imagined to be in this story, at least not to the *USA Today* writers and editors, and perhaps not to many of their readers.

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25 Ravikumar, “De'Von Bailey.”

And this news outlet should know better. They deal in words, circulate headlines on social media, which is where I found the news article first. They know how Twitter and headlines work. They know that many often do not read them carefully. Many people only read the headlines and do not look at the story itself. So we can say that the *USA Today* knows what it's doing when it comes to the words they tweet or circulate. They know this story calls into question not just De'Von but his family, who are all victims. They know a reader can read this headline with some sarcasm. They know the headline erases the bad decisions of a White police officer, and bad policies and laws. These words protect bad systems, racist ones. They are working with the narratives of Black boys in the US as thugs, as always guilty and dangerous, as always suspect, even their family's words.

The story is so common. Black boys are just shot by "police." Justice has already been meted, apparently. No one is to blame, really, not when a Black kid gets shot. The bottom line is: Black boys are no Ragged Dicks. They don't get to be a part of the Horatio Alger story of success.

## EXCEPTIONALS THAT LIFT US UP AND KEEP US DOWN

I'm in a room with about fifteen university administrators and staff, mostly from offices in the administration building and the marketing communications department. They're interviewing me for a communications position. It's a technical writing job of sorts with some marketing in it. The room is dark, quiet, but friendly enough. Most in the room smile or seem interested in what I've said up to this point.

"Don't you think that your image and face on university marketing materials would encourage other Asian Americans and minorities to succeed in college, or to go to college? How do you feel about being a role model for other students of color?"

I feel awkward in the moment, a moment I'm sure decided for those in that room my inability to do the job, at least not in the manner they were looking for. The question is sincere and honest, even kind sounding. It is meant to help me see the error of my logic in a parental fashion. Earlier in the discussion, the committee implied that I might be asked to "participate" in marketing campaigns, to be on "marketing collateral" that advertised the university. How did I feel about this? I am not enthusiastic about it.

I talk about a time that I'd refused a similar offer from another educational institution, a community college. It doesn't feel ethical to me. It feels dishonest to be a part of that. I think that they understand my sense of morality in this intimate question. As we continue, they ask me more questions, and the session turns into an examination of sorts. It all starts to make sense.

I was invited to this interview by one of them, asked to apply for this job. I had some background that applied. I had a good portfolio of work that a few had seen in another context. I am known by several in this particular hiring committee as a “strong candidate.” But I am also there to put “color” into their hiring processes. The university and the town it is situated in is a very White place. Candidates like me are at a premium.

They are testing me: Will I be a good token? Will I accept their notions of “diversity” and “multiculturalism”? In the moment, I want to tell them that by implication, any marketing material that uses people of color to sell a university to prospective students at a school that has barely any students of color on its campus is dishonest and unethical. The tactic constructs people of color as part of an exotic scenery for the vast majority of White students who come to the school.

I want to ask them if they know that at the time, 44.1 percent of those who identified themselves as “Asian Americans” 25 years old and older had a bachelor’s degree while only 26.1 percent of White people had the same degree.<sup>26</sup> Why do we need urging to go to school? We are already going to school. We are achieving higher rates of graduation than any other racial group identified on the US Census. I want to tell that committee, “Look, I should not be a role model.” And, if I’m to represent students of color at large, I am still no role model. I am an exception. Exceptions should not be used to prop up the rule, to justify how good the system is doing. I actually illustrate the opposite.

As problematic as it is, I am a “model minority.” And paradoxically, my story is more complicated than this myth allows. There are intersectional dimensions that make for my successes and failures: class, economics, language, geography, gender, and of course, race. I also have privileges that make being a model problematic, especially for such a broad grouping of students, like students of color.

Instead of saying any of this, I say, “Hmm, I see, but I feel it’s more complicated. I’m just not sure.” And then I tell them with a smile that I understand my racial designation as political and that I cannot knowingly allow it to be used in that way. From their puzzled looks, even by the African American and Filipino committee members, I can tell they do not understand. They cannot see why I am so against the idea. They cannot see that the message of me is false on their marketing materials if it suggests that there is now more opportunity for students of color.

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26 Kurt J. Bauman and Nikki L. Graf, *Educational Attainment: 2000*, U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, (Washington DC: U.S. Census Bureau, August 27, 2003), <http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-24.pdf>.

Some smile, some nod, but no one says a word. They just scribble on their yellow tablets. Maybe they think I am a bitter, little, Brown man, seething with anger, inscrutable. Maybe they can't put the logic together because of their investment in the school, its multicultural agenda, their personal commitments to institutional diversity, because they really care about diversity and encouraging students of color to come and succeed. Maybe they really think that displaying bodies of color for White students to see is a good idea, that it ain't some kind of conspicuous multicultural consumption. Maybe they think pictures of Brown students is the antiracist structural work that will change things?

This is how these kinds of exchanges have always gone down with me. They are collegial, pleasant, usually non-confrontational, and encouraging, friendly, and explicitly about tolerating "different voices" and "celebrating diversity." They are about lifting up the exceptionals of color. But I leave always wondering: Does lifting up an exceptional put down everyone else?

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While it's easy to see how the Horatio Alger story is false, especially for people of color, it's equally easy to see elements of it in any success story that gets told in the media. But don't let these exceptionals fool you. One can believe in the ethic of hard work without accepting the entirety of the Alger myth of success, namely that all hard work always pays off in the same way for everyone, regardless of your material conditions, who you are perceived to be racially and morally, or where you come from and how you talk.

The problem is that most success stories are told because they are spectacular and exceptional. We want to be like those exceptional people. But in the same way that Alger's novels functioned in the Gilded Age to keep the working classes working for very little, so too do narratives of bootstrapping and success work today. In fact, most of us likely believe we are the exceptions. Our hard work will pay off, even if we don't always see it around us. Holding up exceptionals too often keeps people satisfied with their current conditions, ironically by making them itch for more, a more that is possible. Exceptionals do not inspire us to change the system. They anesthetize us so that we leave it alone, broken. We see what the system has produced for the exceptional, and we want that for ourselves too.

Do you hear the contradiction in this logic? We know they, the models placed in front of us, the Ragged Dicks of the world, are not the rule, yet we think all of us are above that rule. Each of us likely thinks that we are above the statistics. We are the extraordinary ones. A Ragged Dick in each of us. At the same time, exceptions do happen. It's nice to dream, to shoot for the impossible. Why can't we all achieve our dreams, be Ragged Dicks making it in our own ways in the

world? It should be the rule. There should be room for that. But what should our narratives tell us? What rules of the system should we hang our hats on?

In our current economic circumstances, we need such dreams, something that helps us believe in a better tomorrow. I needed such things to create my dreams as I climbed out of the ghetto, struggled through college, always looking for markers of conspicuous success. This is why we have lists of these exceptionals published in magazines like *Inc* and *Entrepreneur* and on the Business Insider website, with each exceptional's net worth attached.<sup>27</sup>

If they were not so rare, if they didn't make so much, the lists would be uninteresting. They'd be of our neighbors, friends, and family. The people would be common in their successes. Success itself would be typical, un-newsworthy. These people and their success have to be rare and spectacular. How else does a Brown kid make it as a remedial reading student in North LV or through the blinding Whiteness of Corvallis, Oregon? Does he have to be an exceptional? Is that an unfair ask of him?

The lists are framed as ways to "inspire" us, or "blow our minds." Of course, we only need inspiration if we know that the chances of success are rare. Here is a list of just a few of the Alger-like descriptions from these articles:<sup>28</sup>

- "Starbucks's [CEO] Howard Schultz grew up in a housing complex for the poor . . . Net worth: 2.9 billion"
- "Born into poverty, Oprah Winfrey became the first African-American TV correspondent in Tennessee . . . Net worth: \$3 billion"
- "Legendary trader George Soros survived the Nazi occupation of Hungary and arrived in London as an impoverished college student . . . Net worth: \$24.2 billion"
- "Ed Sheeran dropped out of school and slept in subway stations . . . net worth of \$110 million"
- "Leonardo DiCaprio comes from a drug-torn town outside of Los Angeles . . . net worth is upwards of \$245 million"

What we find among the successful, if we bothered to look at the total—all of the successful people in the world—is that there are far, far more stores of

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27 The articles I'm referring to are: Jacquelyn Smith and Rachel Gillett, "17 Billionaires Who Started Out Dirt Poor: When in Need of Inspiration from Real Life Rags-to-Riches Tales, Look to These CEOs," *Inc.*, August 5, 2015, <https://www.inc.com/business-insider/>; AJ Agrawal, "These 5 Rags-to-Riches Stories Will Inspire You," *Entrepreneur*, September 29, 2016, <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/282092>; Erin McDowell, "20 Rags to Riches Stories That Will Blow your Mind," Business Insider, July 5, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/>.

28 The first three come from Smith and Gillett, "17 Billionaires"; the last two come from McDowell, "20 Stories."

rich and successful people who make it because life has dealt them a really great hand. Conditions create millionaires and billionaires, not hard work. They get a few extra cards up their sleeves, or a few more pulls from the stack. They were made for success, birthed into it. The game is set in their favor, much like my college friend Erik. It ain't his fault. He's playing the hand he is dealt. It doesn't help to blame the exceptional, or those the system favors. The system is to blame.

Race, the White card, is the good card dealt in this game. It trumps most other cards. Most of these exceptional people may have worked hard, done wonderful things—the Elon Musks and Bill Gates of the world—but they are as successful as they are because of the help they got from their families, connections, from their particular material conditions that allow people like them to succeed in the ways they do. But let's think more carefully about these lists of exceptional and inspirational figures, the Ragged Dicks in front of us.

There are few people of color on these lists. The typical story is not, Brown kid makes it big by his own hard work and grit. No. Ragged Dick is a White kid, one who, despite his rough exterior and flaws, is honorable and noble inside. He just needs a bit of pushing, or direction. That's the normal story. In the first chapter of the first novel, Alger offers this exposition at its end as a way to set up the story of Ragged Dick, the boy who will go from rags to riches:

I have mentioned Dick's faults and defects, because I want it understood, to begin with, that I don't consider him a model boy. But there were some good points about him nevertheless. He was above doing anything mean or dishonorable. He would not steal, or cheat, or impose upon younger boys, but was frank and straight-forward, manly and self-reliant. His nature was a noble one, and had saved him from all mean faults. I hope my young readers will like him as I do, without being blind to his faults. Perhaps, although he was only a boot-black, they may find something in him to imitate.<sup>29</sup>

Unless we are talking about the rare, truly exceptional among exceptional stories, this is not the image of most Black or Latino boys on TV, in films, or on the news. It's not how De'Von was framed in the *USA Today* story. In Alger's novel, Ragged Dick is poor and homeless, smokes cigars, and spends what little money he has by day's end, but he doesn't "steal or cheat." He is "manly and

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29 Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick; Or, Street Life in New York with the Boot-Blacks*, (Salt Lake City, UT: Project Gutenberg, 2004), n.p., <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5348/5348-h/5348-h.htm>.



self-reliant.” His nature is “a noble one.” But mostly, he is White. He has potential. He is worth a second chance, or a third.

The problem isn't that White Ragged Dicks get second and third chances, get help. The problem is that when we believe without evidence to the contrary that everyone gets these same kinds of chances in our systems, we can then blame those who do not succeed for their failures and misfortunes. The failures and misfortunes, like De'Von's essence as just a Black man who was shot by police, are not attributed to the system but to people only.

The presence of Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan, Barack Obama, or any other Black exceptional seems to suggest that De'Von is to blame for his own death, for his lack of worth. This is the danger of the model minority myth. It uses exceptionals as the rule. And our systems support such uses, like those college marketing materials that yearned for my image. Systems, like police, schools, and language itself, seem to be neutral, but they are not. If you have rules and other structures that make up a system, then you have bias in the system. Focusing too much on exceptionals hides the system's biases.

It's not that I think these magazines and websites or their editors do not want to show people of color who are good, moral, and successful, who work hard and are rewarded for it. There is no evil conspiracy here. There are people of color on their lists. By my count, the previous lists have Oprah Winfrey, Shahid Khan, Do Won Chang, Lakshmi Mittal, Li Ka-shing, and Halle Berry. The rest of the individuals are White.

Of the approximately 30 business people and entertainers listed in these articles, just six are people of color. That's about 20 percent, but these lists, while clearly U.S. centric, are international too. Li Ka-shing is from Hong Kong, JK Rowling (who is on the list too) is a U.K. citizen, Lakshmi Mittal is from India. And there's only one Black woman, Oprah, no Black men. These numbers don't seem to square well with the world's population.

As of this writing, the estimated world population is about 7.8 billion people. The largest three ethnic groups by number are the Han Chinese (1.315 billion), Arabs (450 million), and Bengalis (230 million) from India.<sup>30</sup> That's almost 2 billion people of the 7.7 billion. That's 25 percent of the world's population that is not White, and we've not counted most of the world yet, the continent of Africa, South America, or places like Japan, Korea, Vietnam, or Thailand, not to mention the US or any of the countries in Central America, like Mexico and Panama.

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30 For a rolling calculation of world population, see “World Population Clock,” Worldometer, accessed January 10, 2020, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/>; a graphic map of world populations over time is available at World Population History Project, accessed January 10, 2020, <https://worldpopulationhistory.org/>.

So it's safe to say that 20 percent of the world's population is a fucking low number for Ragged Dicks of color, if we think everyone has equal access to hard work that pays off in similar ways, and equal access to grit and persistence in their efforts toward success. If we think this and accept that 20 percent as accurate, then how does one account for such low numbers? People of color should represent something like 60 to 70 percent of the Ragged Dicks on these lists. But they never do.

Are people of color just not as smart and hard working as White people? Of course not. The problems are structural, in the systems. Many don't get the chance to work hard or pursue things, and most of those people proportionally to their numbers are of color. People of color in the US have to work for less, but often do the same job better than their White peers. And if you think, "Well, there are many people of color who have success in the world. It is just that the U.S.-based magazines don't show us those people because they are less meaningful to a U.S. audience. We've never heard of all those millionaires in China or Brazil. The list wouldn't be interesting," then you're missing something. This logic points to another face of the problem I'm showing.

Why are exceptionals of color less interesting to a U.S. readership when seen en masse? Why would a list more representative of the world, perhaps one with more Chinese, Indian, Latin American, and Arab millionaires, be less interesting, less inspiring? Why not include someone like the Nigerian billionaire Aliko Dangote, who is the richest Black person in the world?<sup>31</sup> He's worth almost three times what Oprah Winfrey is. His net worth was over \$8 billion in 2020. Then again, Jeff Bezos, the former White CEO of Amazon, is worth almost 20 times what Dangote is, or about \$153 billion.<sup>32</sup> Apparently, White and Black exceptionals are not the same.

And who are these lists really pointed at? Who are they really meant to inspire and uplift? We've all bought into the Horatio Alger story of success. And when we show ourselves lists of Ragged Dicks, we want to imagine ourselves like those people on the list, or rather what is projected on the lists is a White imaginary reader or viewer who then imagines themselves as one of the Ragged Dicks on the list. Do you see the difference? The second instance is structural in nature, not personal. It's not a story about an individual making it in the world. It's a story about a world making certain kinds of people into exceptionals in order for the system to continue. Bezos, not Dangote. Lists of exceptionals lift up White people by pushing down or away Black and Brown people.

31 Mfonobong Nsehe, "The Black Billionaires 2019," *Forbes*, March 5, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mfonobongnsehe/2019/03/05/the-Black-billionaires-2019/#149a4d936795>.

32 Gibson, "American Heritage."

## THE MYTH OF THE BLACK PREDATOR

The Alger myth of success and inspirational lists of Ragged Dicks do not circulate in a vacuum. In Western cultures, something or someone must be Ragged Dick's opposite. That's how the HOWL of clarity, order, and control works. Think of the urban Black boy in the imagination of the U.S. today. He is likely a scary individual, a thug, maybe a gangster or drug dealer, seemingly unredeemable. This is the way Trayvon Martin, the 17-year old Black boy, was understood by his killer, George Zimmerman, a 28-year-old community watch coordinator in 2012.<sup>33</sup> Black boys are not seen as needing guidance, but punishment.

Apparently, "justice" is always suspect when we are talking about killing this kind of boy. He may have deserved it. We don't know what he was up to. He doesn't deserve the benefit of the doubt or a second chance like Ragged Dick. There's no bright spark in him, no White essence just needing some polishing to show itself. What he needs is a bullet in the back. The root of this unequal vision of people of color is an historical White racial fear.

There is no surprise here, really. The US has a long history of demonizing Black men and boys—and of being unjustifiably frightened of them. Black males have been viewed as worthless and indolent, as well as dangerous savages. They need supervision or they'll rape White women. Wasn't that the fear behind the 1955 brutal killing of Emmett Till, a fourteen year old Black boy who allegedly whistled at a White woman in Mississippi?<sup>34</sup> Wasn't White racial fear of the Black body who would rape White women the central message of the infamous silent film, *Birth of A Nation*?<sup>35</sup> In the eyes of White people in the US, Black men and boys have always been imagined as dangerous predators.<sup>36</sup> This is seen in White fears over slave revolts before 1865, when slavery was abolished.

The *Virginia Gazette* from January 25, 1770, offers a detailed account of one such unsuccessful revolt by slaves in which a White steward of one plantation's

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33 For an account of how Martin was portrayed in the media and the 911 call that Zimmerman made the night he killed Martin, see the introduction in Ersula J. Ore, *Lynching: Violence, Rhetoric, and American Identity* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2019).

34 For an account of Emmett Till, see "Emmett Till is Murdered," History, last updated August 28, 2020, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-death-of-emmett-till>; or "The Murder of Emmett Till," Library of Congress, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/articles-and-essays/murder-of-emmett-till/>.

35 *The Birth of A Nation*, was originally called *The Clansman*, and was directed and produced in 1915 by D. W. Griffiths. It was a commercial success and was the first film in the US to be screened at the White House by President Woodrow Wilson at the urging of a college friend, Thomas Dixon Jr., the author of the book from which the film was based.

36 For discussions of the Black male in the U.S. imagination, see Takaki, *Iron Cages*, 113–116; see also chapter 6 of bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York & London: Routledge, 2015).

slaves was overcome and “beat severely.” The slaves then assembled in a barn and attempted to take on those who would rescue the now bound steward.<sup>37</sup> The story, like many others of the time and afterwards, reveals the White anxieties over slave rebellions, anxieties rooted and attached to the Black male body, adult or child, who would revolt over seemingly the smallest slight. The narrative neglects the fact that the steward was the guy with the whip, the one doling out lashes daily. There was, no doubt, a long history of violence against the Black slaves in the account from the *Virginia Gazette* before the incident occurred. Instead, the news account favors the innocent White victim, even though the only people killed are Black.

But we don't have to go that far back to see how narratives of dangerous Black males continue to be circulated in the White American imagination. The term “superpredator” captures this White fear well. The term was first popularized by Hillary Clinton when she was First Lady in 1996. She got the term from John J. DiIulio Jr., a professor of economics and political science at Princeton University (now at the University of Pennsylvania). William J. Bennett, DiIulio, and John P. Walters use the term in their 1996 book, *Body Count: Moral Poverty—And How To Win America's War Against Crime and Drugs*.<sup>38</sup> The book uses the term to help define their theory of “moral poverty,” which they say explains the rise in crime and drug problems in the US from the 1960s to the early 1990s.

These problems were predominantly in poor, Black and Latine communities. They explain that “the poverty of being without loving, capable, responsible adults who teach the young right from wrong” was central to the rise in rates of drug use and criminal activity. It wasn't economic poverty, they say, that causes such rise in rates of dangerous criminality.<sup>39</sup> It isn't the structural problems in Black and Latine communities. It isn't the outcomes of historical racism inherited by those communities, like redlining practices or restrictive covenants. It is moral poverty, they say. Moral poverty occurs when kids don't have parents, guardians, relatives, or teachers around to provide important

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37 The *Virginia Gazette* article is reproduced on *The Geography of Slavery* website, accessed March 21, 2021, <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/index.html>. For a fuller account of several famous slave rebellions, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Did African-American Slaves Rebel?” PBS, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/did-african-american-slaves-rebel/>. For an annotated list of sources that discuss the fear of slave rebellions, see Jason T. Sharples, “Slavery and Fear,” Oxford Bibliographies, last modified November 29, 2018, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199730414/obo-9780199730414-0308.xml>.

38 William J. Bennett, John J. DiIulio Jr., and John P. Walters, *Body Count: Moral Poverty— and How to Win America's War against Crime and Drugs*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996),

39 Bennett, DiIulio Jr., and Walters, 13.

moral lessons and capacities to them, capacities like feeling “joy at others’ joy; pain at others’ pain; satisfaction when you do right; [or] remorse when you do wrong.”<sup>40</sup>

Bennett, Dilulio, and Waters claim this moral poverty creates the superpredator. And here is one description of this superpredator that the authors offer:

Based on all that we have witnessed, researched and heard from people who are close to the action . . . America is now home to thickening ranks of juvenile “superpredators”—radically impulsive, brutally remorseless youngsters, including ever more preteenage boys, who murder, assault, rape, rob, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, join gun-toting gangs and create serious communal disorders.<sup>41</sup>

It would seem that these young ones are inherently bad, unredeemable. So severe are their behaviors that they have no morality. They are brutal, animalistic, savages. They are predators. This is the image that is placed onto young, Black boys like De’Von. They are not Ragged Dicks. This description could be voiced from the anxious mouth of a colonial slave owner in Virginia, or a KKK Grand Wizard in Mississippi, or the former governor of Alabama, George Wallace, yelling in his 1963 inaugural speech, “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.”<sup>42</sup> Why else would one segregate if not to keep savages and predators away from the innocent? Everything works from a Black vs. White binary. Superpredators vs. Ragged Dicks. Savage vs. Civilized. Dangerous Black predators vs. innocent White citizens.

Obviously, I see moral poverty theory as deeply flawed, ignoring the structures that enable choices available to those in poor communities, ones I’ve lived in. Unlike White, middle-class suburbs, places I’ve also lived in, the communities in question do not have the same access to the kinds of things that the authors of *Body Count* say make for morally upstanding boys and men, Ragged Dicks. In effect, this theory, like Alger narratives of success, blames the Black and Latine victims for bad choices made among too many other bad options.

The theory too easily lets us assume that people have innate morality and behaviors. It falsely claims that our material conditions have little effect on developing either our morality or behaviors, except for good parents who are

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40 Bennett, Dilulio Jr., and Waters, 14.

41 Bennett, Dilulio Jr., and Waters, 27.

42 See, “‘Segregation Forever’: A Fiery Pledge Forgiven, But Not Forgotten,” NPR, January 10, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/2013/01/14/169080969/>.

present or not. It neglects the reasons for why some parents are absent, as if we all have the same choices, the same proximity to the things they say make us all moral. This argument and theory HOWLs like no other.

Beyond the assumed binary that artificially orders bodies in the world by color, it also assumes a universal proximity to such things as safety, health, education, language, and a freedom from police harassment. My mom had to work three jobs. How could she be present, how else could she make ends-meet? How else is one to be moral and responsible to their children if not by working and providing for them?

Years later, DiIulio himself would recant his idea, saying, "If I knew then what I know now, I would have shouted for prevention of crimes."<sup>43</sup> What DiIulio knows now is that violent and property crimes since 1993 have sharply declined. For instance, between 1993 and 2018, violent crime rates dropped 51 to 71 percent, depending on which sources you use, while property crimes dropped 54 to 69 percent. Meanwhile, typical U.S. views of crime did not track with these lowering rates of crime. A Pew Research Center survey in 2016 revealed that 57 percent of registered voters felt that crime continued to worsen since 2008. And numerous surveys by Gallup, conducted between 1993 and 2018, found that 60 percent of Americans felt crime was worse than the year before.<sup>44</sup>

Why do Americans have an inability to see declining rates of crime? Part of the answer could be that we make a false conclusion from what appears to be evidence of criminality in many Black people. It's our availability heuristic operating, a mind bug, fast thinking. I'm talking about the increase in incarceration rates generally, and most notably, the even higher increase in Black incarceration, which many people conclude means crime rates are increasing. But the truth is: crime has decreased over the last 25 or 30 years, even as the prison systems have prospered, swelled.<sup>45</sup> The swelling prison population is due to the increase in

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43 Elizabeth Becker, "As Ex-Theorist on Young 'Superpredators,' Bush Aide Has Regrets," *New York Times*, February 9, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/02/09/us/as-ex-theorist-on-young-superpredators-bush-aide-has-regrets.html>.

44 Crime statistics and surveys of opinions on crime can be found in John Gramlich, "5 Facts about Crime in the U.S.," Pew Research Center, October 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/17/facts-about-crime-in-the-u-s/>. To read more about the connections between the term "superpredator" and young Black men, see Rachel Leah, "The 'Superpredator' Myth Was Discredited, but it Continues to Ruin Young Black Lives," *Salon*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.salon.com/2018/04/21/the-superpredator-myth-was-discredited-but-it-continues-to-ruin-young-Black-lives/>.

45 For statistics on incarceration rates, see "Fact Sheet: Trends in U.S. Corrections," The Sentencing Project, June 2019, <https://sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Trends-in-US-Corrections.pdf>. To see prison profiles and statistics, see, "United States Profile," Prison Policy

“three strikes” laws, mandatory sentencing laws, and the criminalizing of crack cocaine that began in the 1990s.<sup>46</sup> The ones who have paid most dearly for this massive expansion of structures, of biases in the police and justice system, are Black males and Latinos.

Michelle Alexander offers a trenchant and careful look at the way the US prison system has become “the new Jim Crow.” In fact, all that has really changed is the language we use. She explains:

The current system of control permanently locks a huge percentage of the African American community out of the mainstream society and economy. The system operates through our criminal justice institutions, but it functions more like a caste system than a system of crime control. Viewed from this perspective, the so-called underclass is better understood as an *undercaste*—a lower caste of individuals who are permanently barred by law and custom from mainstream society. Although this new system of racialized social control purports to be colorblind, it creates and maintains racial hierarchy much as earlier systems of control did. Like Jim Crow (and slavery), mass incarceration operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, I think, we are conditioned to see only that which we can see, hear only what the systems around us prepare us to be able to hear. The narratives that we tell ourselves, or that circulate in our culture, prepare us to see and hear particular things, things that the systems are set up for us to notice. These narratives are the grounds by which Kahneman’s availability heuristic and confirmation bias work. These fast judgements are shaped by narratives like the ones that Horatio Alger, DiIulio, and others circulate.

De’Von is no anomaly. He is the rule, the anti-Ragged-Dick. Further evidence can be seen in the many deaths of innocent young Black men and boys, all assumed much more dangerous than they were, all surely not deserving of death: Michael Brown, John Crawford III, Ezell Ford, Laquan McDonald, Akai

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Initiative, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/US.html>. For a discussion of trends in crime and incarceration rates in the US, see Campbell Robertson, “Crime Is Down, Yet U.S. Incarceration Rates Are Still Among the Highest in the World,” *New York Times*, April 25, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/25/us/us-mass-incarceration-rate.html>.

46 See chapter 3 in Michelle Alexander, *New Jim Crow*.

47 Alexander, 13.



Gurley, Freddie Gray, William Chapman, Jeremy McDole, Jamar Clark, to name just a few of the many.<sup>48</sup>

White racial fear structures our world, our theories of crime, our news stories, our narratives, our very language. That's the enemy here. It's not the police officers. They too are victims, although not as innocent and not as victimized as those they kill. We are all victims of the Horatio Alger myth of success and the White racial fear that comes from the myth of the Black predator. These narratives work in concert to criminalize, dehumanize, and demoralize the Black body and to a lesser extent the Brown body. In this historical context, why would we not remind ourselves that Black Lives do Matter?<sup>49</sup> We already know and tell ourselves that White ones do. I mean, the morality embedded in the Alger stories is nothing less than "White Lives Matter." And today, it appears they matter at the cost of Black lives.

The narrative of success that began with Puritanical ideals of hard work and Horatio Alger myths of persistent Ragged Dicks pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps hides the reality of systemic unfairness. It's a convenient excuse to hoard the few riches available to the working masses, to divide and conquer working people of all races, economic standings, and Englishes. It keeps us from seeing the way we are all oppressed, feeding us the idea that all we have to do is work hard, perhaps harder than the guy next to you. That's it. Just keep working and good things will come. Don't worry about others. If we all just take care of ourselves, everything will be a'right.

Your job is to take care of yourself. Get you yours! But if you ain't visualized as a potential Ragged Dick, you are more likely to end up shot dead on the street. Of course, there is always an element of truth in such myths of hard work. Working hard ain't a bad way to go through life, but don't use it as a method to get rich or successful. Don't hang your hat on it. It may be better to work hard because you find meaning and value in working hard.

## TURTLES GET HELP

A few years after finishing my master's degree at OSU, I found the man of color I could trust, a Brown languageling like me. He would end up being my mentor

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48 One way to see this problem is to consider the Mapping Police Violence project at <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/>. The web site shows a map of the frequency of police violence and offers several graphs that distill the data. For instance, the site shows that Blacks are three times more likely than Whites to be killed by police in the US. It also states: "Police killed 1,147 people in 2017. Black people were 25% of those killed despite being only 13% of the population."

49 In 2013, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, three radical Black organizers, created the Black Lives Matter (#BlackLivesMatter, or #BLM) movement. See, "Herstory," Black Lives Matter, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://Blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/>.

and eventually place the doctoral hood on me, symbolizing the “habit” of a Ph.D., renaming me Dr. Inoue. My mentor was Victor Villanueva. He has been my academic father since. I owe much to Victor.

In his acceptance speech for the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s Exemplar Award in 2009, its highest accolade, Victor ends with an image of a turtle on a post. He says, “The former president of our university once said to me that when you see a turtle on top of a post, you know it didn’t get there on its own.”<sup>50</sup> Of course, he’s thanking all those who made his learning, languaging, and career possible. He’s saying, no one does language on their own. No one succeeds on their own merit and work. Victor’s own literacy narrative, his award winning book, *Bootstraps: From An American Academic of Color*, is all about how the bootstrap myth in the US is false, how race plays an important part in the myth, among other things.

For years, when I would write emails to him, I would accidentally write, “Dear Victory,” then change it. I was typing too fast, fingers slipping on the keys. I didn’t want to look bad in front of the one professor I really respected. Now, I want to chalk this up as a Freudian slip, or a *parapraxis*, which in Latin means, “contrary practice.” These are slips in our languaging that read as revealing hidden or unspoken intentions or meanings. They are the words we mean to say when we think we are trying to say something else.

Victor was a Victory to me. He was the rare gem in the mountain of rocks in my education. I don’t mean to devalue or put down Chris or any of my other teachers up to that point. I’ve had many great ones. They made me ready to do the work in my doctoral program. They all are important to my story, and I’m grateful for them, especially Chris. But I was thirty-one years old when I left for graduate school the second time to get my Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition. It was the first time in my life that I had a teacher of color, the first time. In all the eighteen years of formal education before that, I never walked into a classroom or office where the teacher was a person of color, let alone a man of color. So yes, Victor was a Victory for me.

I still remember the first class session I took with Victor. It was a rhetoric course, fall semester of my first year in the doctoral program. I got to class five minutes before it started, and the room was already full of students. A room that seated maybe 30 people had 35 or 40 people in it. I had no seat. There were students standing along the walls of the room. I was one of them.

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50 Victor Villanueva, “2009 CCCC Exemplar Award Acceptance Speech,” *College Composition and Communication* 61, no. 3 (2010): 581–582, <https://library.ncte.org/journals/CCC/issues/v61-3/9961>.

Victor came in and smiled, and I thought I saw him give me a side glance. He said, "Okay, if you're not registered officially for this course, you have to give up your seat to students who are." It took a few minutes, but I got a seat in the front row. It's what I wanted. I'm sure he was thinking of me. He had the roster. There were only 15 or so people registered in the graduate seminar. I was the only student of color. We'd already had meetings. He knew me. I thought, he's looking out for me. It was the first time in all of my schooling that I felt truly comfortable, truly at ease in a class. It was the first time I felt really connected to my teacher. I sat in that class glowing every day throughout the semester, smiling, basking in all of it. I thought, this is what I have been missing, what has been denied me. I will make the most of Victor.

Like my parapraxis, Victor's last name is meaningful to me too. Victor is Puerto Rican, grew up in Bedford-Stuyvesant, New York. His last name, Villanueva, is Spanish in origin, likely originating in the eleventh century in Catalonia (northeast Spain), and literally means "new town." How appropriate for my new mentor, the one who would show me new, fertile ideas, not forests, as wonderful as they are, but more cultivated farm lands of theory. New town. A new place to live and grow as a languageling of color. New career. New name. New town.

I knew I needed Victor when we moved to this new college town, Pullman, Washington, the home of Washington State University, but I never could have imagined in what ways. When we got there in the summer of 2001, it was hot. We were coming from Oregon, the Willamette Valley, a cooler place. In Pullman, many days it was in the low 100s. We didn't have air conditioning in our rented house, so sometimes we'd go to nearby Moscow, Idaho, and sit in the cool, air conditioned mall.

We had no money. I was now on teaching assistant (TA) wages, which actually hadn't started yet and wouldn't amount to much. About a month after we got there, I received a letter from WSU. It said that my dependents, my wife and two small children, would no longer be covered on the health insurance that the school provided me for being a TA. Kelly was just six or so months past the birth of our youngest child, Takeo. And our oldest was just three years old. All three needed medical care. They needed to have regular check-ups. In fact, Kelly was on some medication that needed refilling.

This news was devastating. My first thought was, well, I guess I'll have to quit grad school and get a job. My second was, maybe I can work a deal with someone, work somewhere, do the TA gig, and do grad school all at the same time. That would be very hard to do and graduate in a timely manner, or at all. We were already taking some loans to afford things. Every additional semester it took to finish meant not only living in poverty longer, but increasing our debt.

A few months later, we'd go on food stamps and WIC. Our savings, which was mostly a small cashed out retirement account, would also get spent quickly. I went to see Victor. He was the chair of the English Department as well, so the TA benefits were his purview.

"I don't know what to do, Dr. Villanueva."

I was on the verge of crying in front of this man I'd just met but knew and respected by reputation. I had asked him months before on the phone if he would work with me if I came to WSU to do the Ph.D. He said, of course. No hesitation. I didn't know at the time that I was a cohort of one—that is, I was the only Rhetoric and Composition Ph.D. student coming in that year. Victor would be all mine to work with. I wouldn't have to share him with other grad students in my same year of the program. What luck! That would be a big leg up, especially when it would come time to go on the job market, apply for jobs. And now, I was coming to tell him that I may have to leave the program before I even took a class.

I showed him the letter. We were sitting at his conference table in Avery Hall on the second floor where the English Department has its main office. I put the half-folded letter on the table between us. I looked up. I remember feeling hopeless and lost. I thought: just someone, please, throw me a life preserver, a piece of driftwood, something, anything. I'll do anything. I want this Ph.D., but I need my wife and children to be healthy.

I looked out the window at the entrance of the Bookie, the university bookstore. There was a flow of students coming and going through its doors in their pre-fall semester exuberance. They were all White students, probably 18 or 19 years old, and happy. A second later, Victor sighed. He placed one finger on the letter, then opened a drawer near him, pulled out his checkbook, and wrote a check to me.

"Look, you came here under the assumption that your babies and wife would have health insurance. They will have that."

I was speechless and grateful and stunned and happy and relieved. At that moment, I knew there was nothing I would not do for this man. In many other ways, Victor has helped me pull on bootstraps in my career. Turtles on posts, the two of us. And he is smart enough to see that once you're on the post, part of your job is to help other turtles get to their posts, which he has done for many others. I feel this same honor of posting turtles myself today.

I suppose I should have expected this treatment from him. I mean, the year before, when I was deciding to apply and go back to grad school, I started reading books I thought I'd need to know in a Ph.D. program in Rhetoric and Composition. His was the most striking one, the one that resonated with me. It was a big part of my going to WSU. I read Aristotle, I. A. Richards, James Kinneavy,

Edward P.J. Corbett and Robert Connors, all influential “must read” scholars in the field, all White guys. None really grabbed me.

I mean, the rhetoric was interesting. I always liked words, but it wasn't until I picked up Victor's book, *Bootstraps*, that I saw and heard what seemed like something I could do, something I wanted to do. It was rhetoric alive. It wasn't a disembodied voice trying to be neutral and objective. It was a ragged voice of color, words trying to *situate* themselves in a real world. It was a Ragged Ricardo of color. It was a real turtle on a post. And I got this sense from the subtitle itself: *From An American Academic of Color*.

But it was more than the personal and subjective way that Victor wrote that grabbed me. If the book were just personal and reflective, it would be another version of Chris' beautiful White prose. It was clear by this point in my life that was not enough. It was the theory that he interlaced into the personal. Theory shows the structuring, the history, the racism that was still unnamed by me at the time, although felt constantly.

In his opening prologue, Victor names the themes of race and language, of systems of racism and dominant language expectations, that he explores in the book. This is not an individual exploring his forest. It is more cultivated than organic, and it is passionate. It is explicitly political and material. It speaks of systems. It is about the conditions that make a man like Victor, or me, or someone else of color.

He explains that his “views are grounded in experience, elaborated upon by theory, and tested in research.”<sup>51</sup> That would be the general pattern, the outline of the book. The theory he speaks of is Gramsci's Marxian theory. He quotes Gramsci:

Autobiography can be conceived “politically.” One knows that one's life is similar to that of a thousand others, but through “chance” it has had opportunities that the thousand others in reality could not or did not have. By narrating it, one creates this possibility, suggests the process, indicates the opening.<sup>52</sup>

The book showed me how Ragged Dicks are made and unmade, how turtles help turtles onto posts, and how structures in history, society, and education work to keep some turtles from their posts by providing ramps for others. I, too, have had opportunities that hundreds of others on Statz and Pecos did not. Who am I to squander that? How irresponsible that would be, how selfish!

51 Villanueva, *Bootstraps*, xvii.

52 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, trans. William Boelhower (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 132, quoted in Villanueva, xvii.

Victor annotates Gramsci's words, saying "Perhaps in narrating, the exception can become the rule—boots for everyone, strong straps."<sup>53</sup> There is hope in this book—boots for everyone—without forgetting the real material conditions of people of color, I think. Victory feels knowable and possible for perhaps the first time in my life.

In chapter 3, Victor describes his family moving to Los Angeles, California, just a few years before my parents would meet in that same place, make love, and have twin boys in Inglewood. Victor's family settles in Compton, just a few miles southeast past the 110, very close. In the chapter, he describes his time at Manuel Dominguez Senior High School, the drafting class. I wonder, how is it possible Victor and I could be so alike? I was a technical drafting specialist (81 Bravo) in the U.S. Army National Guard right out of high school. It's a career that isn't possible anymore because of computers and software like AutoCAD. I was trained to draft on old drafting boards with pencils and rulers. Like Victor, it is a past that I've discarded.

Victor tells of his dropping out of high school around the time of the 1965 Watts riots. At the same time, he meets a friend at Dominguez: "Tiff was an Okie, alone, not living in Bell Gardens with the other Okies, a California minority, alone. Later there would be *The Grapes of Wrath*. Later still, there would be the realization that *The Grapes of Wrath* describes the victims of neo-colonialism, the dispossessed because of economics, though blamed on dust."<sup>54</sup> It's a subtle nod to Gramsci's economic and cultural theories and the theories of John Ogbu,<sup>55</sup> which Victor discusses in the previous chapter.

In that earlier chapter, Victor explains Ogbu's theory of three kinds of minorities. "[C]astelike" minorities "are those who are regarded primarily on the basis of some particular birth ascription, in this country, race or a particular ethnicity, like Latinos." Autonomous minorities are "those who are subject to ethnic or religious distinctiveness yet manage to accommodate the mainstream, even if not assimilate," such as Jews and Mormons. Finally, the immigrant minority, such as Italians, while still distinctive in some ways, are "not excluded from the mainstream."<sup>56</sup> There is something in Tiff, a "California minority" but White. That still makes him a minority. He is not a castelike minority. That's certain. But perhaps there is something of both the autonomous and immigrant minority in him.

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53 Villanueva, xvii.

54 Villanueva, 38.

55 John Ogbu, *Minority Education and Caste: The American System in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (New York: Academic, 1978).

56 Villanueva, *Bootstraps*, 30.

I hear in Victor's words a paradox: There is reason to build a relationship, to keep this White friend. The compassion resonates with me. We have some shared oppressions. I also knew this anxiety. More in common.

The chapter goes on. During the riots, Victor is in the mobile home of Tift with Tift's dad: "Tift, the father, sits with a rifle across his lap. Says, 'Might have to kill us some niggers.' And somewhere inside, Papi, Victor, is hurt, frightened, confused. He can't let on that something within him is also a nigger."<sup>57</sup> It's the old paradigm of "at least I'm not Black." You could be a poor, White, Okie in a trailer on the edge of Watts, but at least you ain't no N-word.<sup>58</sup>

Black folks get shot. Tift's dad would have cause, so he rationalizes. It's a version of De'Von's story before De'Von was born. When a Black person is shot, no one is to blame. There's always doubt, always a justifiable cause to do it, always quotation marks around "justice." If we have no theories to help us, no histories, we are doomed to repeat our terrible narratives. Or worse, we will not see how they control us, shaping what we think we see and hear and feel. It's fast thinking, implicit biases that help maintain White language supremacy. We don't see how they make only certain views of people available to us, like Black boys as savage criminals needing a bullet in the back.

This is how we come to understand the White language supremacy in our lives in order to remake those conditions. We see the languaging in our lives as racialized. We understand where it all came from with theories that allow us to experience our conditions differently, that make us feel our languaging from two steps back. Doing that, stepping back, can help us understand how our worlds make us and how we might remake our languaging in more socially just ways.

This racial friction that Victor shows in his book is how the oppressed are divided and conquered. The trouble comes from another set of narratives. These center on a term, "herrenvolk republicanism," or the idea that a republic like the US should be run by a "master race," a *herrenvolk*.<sup>59</sup> This herrenvolk republic is set up and visualized as a hierarchy in which, naturally, social and economic pressure is thrust downward on those groups who are seen as occupying the lower rungs of society. It's what Alger myths of success and focusing on exceptionals

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57 Villanueva, 38.

58 My practice at this point in my life is to not use the N-word, because of its particular history, one I do not wish to contribute to, even though regretfully I have used this word in my life. Since I know that all U.S. readers will understand my reference, I see no reason to use the word here. I have left the word intact in the previous quotation because it is what was published.

59 To read about herrenvolk republicanism and its connections to race, I suggest Pierre L. Van Den Berghe, *Race and Racism: A Comparative Perspective*, 2nd ed. (New York: Wiley, 1978); and David R. Roediger, *Wages*. For a similar account of how the US has been structured along such racial herrenvolk lines, see Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages*.



and imagining all Black men as predators do in our systems of language and judgement. It's a racial hierarchy built with language.

And as I've shown in this book, race has been an easy hierarchy to structure such a herrenvolk republic in language standards. And White people, like Tiff's dad, see themselves nearer the top of the herrenvolk republic, worthy of its narratives of success. He too, like his son Tiff, could be the next Ragged Dick if they just keep working hard enough, if they just let the system see their pluck and perseverance. And the gun in the lap is an assurance that the Alger myth of success will be theirs and not given to those Blacks in Watts.

A page later, Victor discusses Signithia Fordham's theory of "racelessness," "the decision to go it alone" in life as a person of color.<sup>60</sup> He's talking about his reading of Richard Rodriguez' autobiography, *Hunger of Memory*, another literacy narrative of an exceptional man of color, but not like Victor's or mine, and yet all three of us are literacy exceptions.<sup>61</sup> Rodriguez says he's left, given up, his Latino-ness. He's now reborn, renamed, an American only through his own success as a writer and student. His literacy has made him an American. He likes his standardized English, as he should. It is a great English, like Chris' English. It's enticing, mesmerizing, magical. But I think, maybe, Rodriguez let it bewitch him too much.

The book was a favorite of mine just a few years before reading Victor's. Victor disagrees with Rodriguez strongly. His success acceptance of a Standard English is not what makes Rodriguez famous, he says, not what gets his book read in classrooms. It is that he is understood as a Mexican American author. One cannot simply proclaim one's escape from their castelike minority status. It's not how the system works. You keep that for a lifetime. It's not a choice. It's a structure, an inheritance. White people decide your membership in the club, man. Don't forget it. There are bigger things that run deep and overlap each other at work. Biases in systems. Victor explains in a compassionate way, even as he disagrees with Rodriguez:

What he [Rodriguez] did—what I did in that tension-filled moment in Tiff's mobile home, have done in the years prior and since—is fall back on that painful, confusing strategy that people of color who succeed employ: what Signithia Fordham calls "racelessness." It is the denial of other-cultural affiliation, a denial of the collective, any collective; it is the embracing of America's dominant ideology, the ideology of individualism.<sup>62</sup>

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60 Villanueva, *Bootstraps*, 40.

61 Villanueva, *Bootstraps*, 39.

62 Villanueva, 39–40.

Ah, Alger's success narrative tricks us into accepting the ideology of individualism. Ragged Dick is the language vehicle in which these ideas travel. And this is what I realized that year before I went back to grad school to learn with Victor. I learned a little bit of how Whiteness in literacy works in schools and colleges. I began to learn about White language supremacy, although no one was calling it that. I started to figure out the bias in all of our systems—schools, news media, business, and religions.

As writers, no one gets a stance of neutrality and objectivity. When you put ideas in words, you cannot have a voice that plays god-tricks on its readers if you are gonna tell something meaningful, truthful (not the "Truth"), and ethical. We do not just walk through our own forests of words discovering truth and meaning, as seductive as that sounds.

The forest was already planted, engineered for certain truths by particular people in history. Our path and what we might discover on it was excavated before we walked it. And someone or something else put you in that forest in the first place. A student of color like me or Victor or Rodriguez cannot go it alone in school or life. We do not transform ourselves into unhyphenated Americans through our own will and persistence. We do not get to be Ragged Dicks. We are turtles on posts, the exceptionals. And that ain't nothin to brag about.

Horatio Alger's myth of success and the bootstrapping myth in the US reinforces the idea that stories like mine, ones of a person of color succeeding despite poverty, *can be* the norm in societies. But our society is subtly and carefully designed to maintain such color and poverty lines. Part of this structural problem has to do with how we judge language and the people who use different forms of English. My story is meant to offer nuance and paradox. It is a story about systems, conditions, not my own exceptional pluck and willpower.

If there is one thing you take from my literacy narrative, I hope it is that literacy ain't exactly what we usually say it is. It ain't just words and grammar. It is also a lifetime of experiences. It's Fred in the trailer park blaming you for things you couldn't possibly have done, but you look like the kind of boy who does that stuff. It's a second grade teacher urging you to say the N-word. It's winning a reading contest in that same class when you have no food in the cupboards at home. It's making "ends-meat," not "ends meet." It's the negative wealth of far too many Black households and the wealth gap of Black women who work harder than most only to be raggedy. No Horatio for them. It's one in every thousand Black males killed by police. It's the others around you letting you in the circle, sort of, and you finding out only later that you never really were in the circle. They thought you were a Mr. Yunioshi, and they smile and laugh as they sing The Vapors. It's a veteran breaking down in front of you, unable to make sense of his own words and life. It's the love of a forest

of voices, even with its impassable brambles of Whiteness, and the man who showed it to you, your beloved friend.

It's about finding your first mentor of color in your 30s, a man who shows you the roots of the forest you've been walking. He says, stop looking up so much. Dig motha fucka, Dig! There's more underneath those trees that can tell you how they grow, how they were watered, what fruit they bear and who can eat it. This is how you change the forest. You dig at the roots. It's the superstructure that holds all this shit together. Both the trees and the roots are important. And so really literacy is about help, lots of help, and chances, and systems, lots of systems. Necessary and ugly and historical biases. None of us do literacy alone or in a vacuum.

The point is, do not mistake my story of apparent language success as some kind of Horatio Alger story. My story is more than a poor, fatherless kid from the ghetto of North Las Vegas making good as a university professor and associate dean, a multi-award winning academic author. I did not pull myself up by my own wit, gumption, and bootstraps. I am no Ragged Dick. I am Above the Well is Morning Boy. I am the exceptional who ought to be the norm. I am a turtle on a post trying to help other turtles onto their posts.