

## CHAPTER 6.

# THE ECONOMICS OF RACISM

Growing up on Statz and in Pecos trailer park, the economics of racial groups mattered and muddied things for me.<sup>1</sup> In my youth, like many folks in the US, my own race-judgements were often economically motivated. Money, the abundance or lack of it, always complicates our abilities to understand and fight against things like racism or sexism or ableism, even when we think we are doing good work like antiracist practices. If you have adequate monetary means and are White, then you have more privilege and freedom to fight things like racism or simply to stand aloof from racism in your attitudes and decisions.<sup>2</sup> But turning one's back to racism, ignoring it, is not the same as fighting against it.

Not engaging in racist behavior or practices doesn't mean you've actually done any antiracism work yet. Abstaining from racism is still complicity with racist systems and policies. It allows the systems to continue and grow. Ibram X. Kendi, the Director of the Center for Antiracist Research at Boston University, speaks at length about this.<sup>3</sup> There's an analogy that may help. I think of economics as one set of rules and conditions in a larger society's game of tricks and fake-outs, a game in which the outcome is always White supremacy.

## PLAYING ANTIRACIST GAMES IN RACIST SYSTEMS

If you are rich enough, then you don't have to shop at Walmart, but if you're poor or on a limited income, it may be the only place where you can afford to

---

1 To read about racial hierarchy in Western societies around social contract theory, see Charles Mills, *Racial Contract*; to read about racial formations and hierarchy in the U.S., see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation*; to read about the pressure that working class White racial formations have placed on other formations of color, see David R. Roediger, *Wages*, or George Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment*; to read about racist hierarchical thought and behavior, see Ibram X. Kendi, *Antiracist*.

2 I realize that a person of color cannot be racist in the same ways that a White person can since the systems of racism are set up against us (people of color), even when some of us may have economic or other kinds of privileges. However, a person of color can hold values and make decisions that reproduce racist systems and outcomes in the same way that a poor White person can vote for political candidates or initiatives that work against White economic or other interests; thus anyone's decisions and ideas can work to oppress them further regardless of racial or class or gender status.

3 See Ibram X. Kendi, *Antiracist*. For a language- and literacy-based argument along the same lines, see Asao B. Inoue, *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching And Assessing for A Socially Just Future* (Fort Collins, CO, and Anderson, SC: WAC Clearinghouse and Parlor Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.37514/PER-B.2015.0698>.

shop. It's prices are low enough that you can get by there. But Walmart has been known to engage regularly in harmful practices that destroy local communities' small businesses and that pressure companies to sell their products cheaper to them, which depresses other local economies that produce those goods and lowers workers' wages in those places. They use employment practices that are unethical and harmful to their own employees, such as denying full time work, health insurance, and other benefits.<sup>4</sup> Buying from Walmart supports them in these practices and the oppressive ways they harm communities and people all over the globe.

Now, if you're rich enough, you can afford to be more ethical in your own shopping practices. You can boycott Walmart and shop at more expensive local stores. You have that privilege. Your money allows you to turn your back on Walmart. But if you are poor, you don't get that privilege. That's not how capitalism is set up. Capitalism is set up so that the more money you have, the more you're able to exercise your ethics. All the while, the folks who have to shop at Walmart help that company continue employing its bad practices. It's not simply an irony. It's a built-in contradiction, a paradox that perpetuates the badness of the system. It is a systemic bias that makes Walmart both good and bad. It is an inexpensive place to shop and a place that oppresses its workers and others around the world in order to provide low prices to people like their employees, not so ironically all because of the lower prices they can offer.

Walmart's badness continues to oppress poor communities, the very communities Walmart preys on with its low prices and less-than-full-time jobs. Meanwhile, the folks who have the privilege to choose not to shop at Walmart and not have to work there haven't done anything to stop Walmart's unethical and oppressive practices. And ironically, they are likely the ones most in positions to do so. They have economic privilege to stand aloof from that bad place.

In this analogy, in my youth, I was the Walmart shopper who, through his own racial oppression, hated the Mexican Walmart shoppers around me, in part because I was seen as one like them, which paradoxically I was and wasn't. I wanted the privilege to not shop at Walmart—both literally and figuratively.

---

4 Walmart's unethical business practices have been the subject of much discussion over the years; see Chris Osterndorf, "10 Reasons Walmart is the Worst Company in America," *The Daily Dot*, last updated March 1, 2020, <https://www.dailydot.com/via/walmart-labor-unions-bad-company/>; Nicholas Conley, "Shady Secrets Walmart Doesn't Want You to Know," *Grunge*, last updated July 31, 2019, <https://www.grunge.com/26656/shady-secrets-wal-mart-doesnt-want-know/>; Barbara Farfan, "Walmart Ethics Shown in Class Action Lawsuits," *The Balance Small Business*, last updated December 12, 2019, <https://www.thebalancesmb.com/walmart-classic-action-employee-lawsuits-3974960>; Philip Mattera, "Wal-Mart: Corporate Rap Sheet," *Corporate Research Project*, last updated December 7, 2020, <https://www.corp-research.org/wal-mart>.

I thought naively that simply turning from racism was antiracist, all the while holding racist ideas about Mexicans.

Meanwhile, the good White people around me, the ones with liberal and good intentions, such as my White teachers or my college friend Erik, who had more power to aid me and alleviate some of the systemic racism in our schooling, did nothing to actually stop the racism around us. What they did was avoid shopping in the Walmart of racist ideas and practices, but the racist system itself was still operating and thriving. And all I wanted to do was be like those rich White liberals and avoid racism in the system without seeing that it was the system itself that I was trying to avoid.

I thought escaping racism was a game in which to avoid racism, individuals avoided oppression, but it isn't. Thinking racism or White supremacy is an individual sport, that the game is about how each of us play it, is a hustle. It's a line the system sells us. It's just like the fact that you don't get to determine what products are available at the grocery store, nor what stores are available to you, when they are open, or anything about those stores. You have choices in what you buy or avoid buying, yes. However, be careful with that kind of thinking. It's a hustle too.

You are pitched the narrative that you have free choice, the power to choose where to shop and what you want, but what you want and where you want to shop are limited to what the system dictates is available to you. You can only see the choices you've made and the ones presented to you. It's great to have choices for shopping, but do not confuse your ability to choose the best possible free range, organic, non-GMO chicken with the freedom to choose the healthiest chicken to eat, or whether it's a good idea to eat chicken at all. Your shopping habits and choices are determined by the system that makes stores and food possible. The freedom to make a choice in a system is not the same as the freedom to choose just anything.

The game of racism is much like this constrained and determined system of judgements and choices. And it works better if we all think that the key to success, the key to not being racist, or to avoid racism, is to take care of one's own decisions and judgements, to not be prejudiced, to play your game well. But antiracism is not simply an ethical game individuals play. It is not solely a team sport. Individuals alone do not win the game of antiracism.

It is also not won solely on the field of play. It is won before the game, when the rules and guidelines of play are determined. It is won by those who decide which grocery stores are built (or not) in your neighborhood. It is won by Walmart. It is won by those who architect our society and decide on language standards. It is won in the places where privileges and roles are decided, and who gets them, and who doesn't.

When I speak of privilege, particularly White privilege, I am not saying that White people do not struggle, or that they have higher grades, better jobs, and more opportunities handed to them with little effort. We all work hard. But too often, White people's hard work is worth more than people of color's, even though there are plenty of poor and disadvantaged White people. Everyone is capable of achieving, but we shouldn't be fooled into believing that our own individual paths toward success or achievement can be others' paths, that everyone's hard work is rewarded in the same ways. Our material and economic conditions, which are patterned by race in the US, are often dramatically different.

Despite what it sounds like I'm saying, hard work and merit are not abstract concepts in real life. For most people, they are gritty, sweaty labor that is experienced in context and through specific material conditions that define them. But they are not experienced in the same ways by everyone. We are not all running the same races, or starting in the same places, to use an often invoked metaphor for racial inequality. Most of us are also not in the room before the race begins, deciding on the rules of the race.

If you don't believe me, likely you are White and middle class. Your hard work generally has benefited you. You've had choices. That's not an insult. It's a real privilege to think that everyone has the same chances at things, that life is fair, and success is mostly about hard work, and dedication, and being a good person. If you believe this, it likely means your hard work, and dedication, and goodness in the past have paid off, that you've seen your friends' and family's hard work pay off. That's really wonderful. It should be the norm for everyone, but it is not.

Because your view, like everyone's individual view, is limited and situated in your life, it may be hard to see that it's only your view, not a universal one. This is fast thinking, an incarnation of the availability heuristic. And yet, many often act as if their view is a universal one—that's HOWLING. When someone says things like, "Surely you can see that . . .," or "Obviously, this is the case . . .," they assume their listener is seeing things just as they are, but that is not a certainty. It's the trap that Strunk and White fell into so easily, thinking that their readers were just like them. What I'm describing are two habits of HOWL that often get used in arguments about race and racism: hyperindividualism and a naturalized orientation to the world that is universalized or is assumed to be everyone's orientation. Together these HOWLs justify all kinds of racism in society by those who get to have a voice, those with social and cultural power to speak or be heard.<sup>5</sup>

---

5 In discussing the way science creates its ideas, Donna Haraway says that the language of science too often offers universals, which leads to thinking in terms of "god-tricks," or visions of

To compound this limitation, the stories you've been told reinforce the idea of abstract merit and hard work, that everyone's hard work will be rewarded as yours have. I'll say much more about this narrative of success that is central to the US in Chapter 10, but it's worth a few words here. We've been told stories about how anyone can pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and make it in the world, that life is essentially fair, or at least rule-bound. And if we know the rules, we can follow them and win. The rules are objective, not biased, the same for everyone. One of those rules is that hard work pays off for everyone in the same ways.

We make movies about this story. We wish for it, because this kind of story is comforting, and gives people faith in tomorrow and their own laboring in the world. It tells us that, yes, we too can be successful, can make it. It's the opium we all take in teaspoons daily.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, these stories allow us to ignore or downplay the counterstories and statistics that disprove this harmful narrative of merit and the pulling up of bootstraps.

This is a White story told and sold by White elites. It's told and sold in those grammar and style guides for English. It's told and sold in schools. It's told and sold in churches. Then it's purchased by many poor and working class Whites and people of color. We might even have seen some around us succeed through their hard work, the Oprah Winfreys and Barack Obamas of the world. But these few exceptions fool us because we can see them, and we think "I too can be a Barack Obama." But there can only be one Barack Obama with his particular set of circumstances and material conditions. That's how the system works.

Most of us find that our hard work pays fewer dividends, but we still have hope because we've bought the story of hope in all of its audacity.<sup>7</sup> But does this story simply keep people in their place, keep people hoping and working hard

---

knowledge and our world that projects a particular group's view of things, which historically has been a White, Western, male view. This view is called objective and universal, and if we buy into it as objective, then all other views of things are subjective. To read more about situated knowledges, see Haraway, "Situated."

6 This is a reference to Karl Marx, "Introduction," A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Works of Karl Marx 1843, ed. Matthew Carmody, last updated 2009, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>. In the Introduction, Marx makes a structural or systemic critique of religion as human-made. He says: "The foundation of irreligious criticism is: Man makes religion, religion does not make man . . . Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."

7 More about audacity and hope can be found in Barack Obama's second autobiographical book, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006).

with stories of hard work and dreams deferred?<sup>8</sup> Believing in the story has the effect of keeping money and power in the same groups of people if the story doesn't come true for enough people.

And the story doesn't work for most of us. It didn't work very well for my Black neighbors on Statz, nor my White, working-class neighbors in the trailer park, nor the nearby Latine communities, nor my mom. Why? Because none of us sets the terms for success and what that hard work is worth in the marketplace or classroom. We play a game we cannot win. All we can do, right now, is keep playing with our hands tied behind our backs, keep playing and hoping. Keep having faith in a system not made for our success. Meanwhile, those White, rich, elites make the rules about hard work because they own stuff and have lobbyists who help make laws that benefit them and the kind of hard work they do, but not the kind most others' do.

Again, hard work is not abstract. It's contextual and contingent on the material conditions you live in, just like our languages. Our words come from our material conditions. The minute someone mentions "hard work" or "merit," you should ask what conditions make such a thing and what it looks like. In other words, whose conditions get to define hard work and merit? Who benefits most from that definition? If it ain't clear, likely the story is meant to be swallowed in one gulp, unproblematically. It's meant to be unquestioned and undefined, as if no one has questions about what it means to work hard, or how much work merits something else. If it isn't defined and situated in someone's life story, then it's just an empty slogan, or what some language theorists call a "floating signifier," a term that the reader or listener is supposed to fill in with meaning.<sup>9</sup> It's meant to convince, not inform. It's meant to mean anything you want it to. It's the Southern language strategy.

Using and reading terms like "hard work" are race-judgements, among other things. And to complicate this, our own hard work generally defines us as individuals within communities that have understandings of things like "hard work." That is, we are what we do in the places we are at with those there. And who we are, and what we do, and where we are at are floating concepts in another way. They are biased by those who use them. That is, they are

---

8 I'm reminded of Langston Hughes' poem, "Harlem," which begins: "What happens to a dream deferred?/Does it dry up/like a raisin in the sun?/Or fester like a sore—/And then run?" See, Langston Hughes, "Harlem," Poetry Foundation, accessed March 8, 2021, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46548/harlem>.

9 To read the original discussion of "floating signifier," see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, 61–62; for a very good discussion of race as floating signifier, see *Race: The Floating Signifier*, directed by Sut Jhally, (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 1997), DVD.

racial, gendered, classed, sexed inherently because they come out of our lives and life stories.

And so, these stories that we tell ourselves, when taken as hyperindividualized and universal orientations for everyone equally, hide the way economics is a part of the way racism is reproduced in our society.

## RIGGING THE RACIST GAMES WE ALL PLAY

Tax laws in the US are a good example of the way the game of literacy we play in school, business, and civic spaces is already fixed to create certain unfair outcomes. The federal income tax rate is a progressive tax, meaning as you make more money by your labor, portions of your income are taxed at a progressively higher rate. In 2019, this rate started at 10 percent and went up to 37 percent. Meanwhile the tax for capital gains, that is monetary gains made by owning assets, like property or stocks, were between 0 percent and 20 percent. You get taxed less for income you make from having lots of money and buying things that make you more money and that appreciate in value. These tax laws benefit the hard work that rich people do, not the hard work that poor or working class or even middle class people do—that is, wage labor. And within one's racial group, who is statistically more likely to be poor or working class in the US? Who is more likely to have a wage, to work by the taxable hour? People of color. Who makes up most of the rich deciders in the US? White people.

So if you are White, statistically you have economic advantages that most people of color do not have—I'm speaking of the racial group as a whole, not individual cases. Exceptions that any of us can name, like myself, do not disprove the rule. This is why we call them *exceptions* to the rule. But systems are not made up of exceptions. They are made up of rules and patterns. Another way to see this racial inequality is to compare wealth among racial formations in the US. In 2016, White households had 41 times more accumulated wealth than Black households and 22 times more than Latine ones.<sup>10</sup> Black households that were at zero or negative wealth, meaning they had more debts than assets, had risen to 37 percent of all Black households; meanwhile, the same proportion of White households in the same category was 15.5 percent.

These gaps are the outcomes of historical inequalities—the material conditions that each group lives in and learns to communicate in. They are the

---

10 "Wealth Inequality in the United States," Inequality.org, The Institute for Policy Studies, accessed March 8, 2021, <https://inequality.org/facts/wealth-inequality/>; see also, Kimberly Amadeo, "Racial Wealth Gap in the United States: Is There a Way to Close It and Fill the Divide?" The Balance, updated November 23, 2020, <https://www.thebalance.com/racial-wealth-gap-in-united-states-4169678>.

outcomes of what people have done in the places they were at with those there. They do not just go away in a generation or two. You inherit a range of opportunities because of who your parents are, what they did, and where they were able to live and raise a family. You inherit where you went to school as a child. You inherit who your family's friends and connections are. You inherit the language your parents use, and the schools they got you into, and those with whom you associate, your friends. All inheritances.

None of these things you choose as a child. They are part of an historical system, a game the rules of which have been determined by racism and White supremacy before you were a player. Do you think E. B. White or William Strunk were in full control of their opportunities to go to Cornell University, an elite, Eastern university? Do you think they would have met if their fathers hadn't been a lawyer and a president of a company?

And paradoxically, the economics of racism is not simply a predetermined system, one in which people do not have any agency or control. People generally do have some control. Sometimes agency ain't enough, though. I made it out and up, but surely the game was more rigged for me than my Black neighbors. While I didn't get to start where Erik started, inherit what he got, I did have some inheritances that the system accepted.

My mom crawled, scrubbed, and scraped her way out of the ghetto. She took us south from North LV to North Pecos Street in Las Vegas, the trailer park. While it was just a short 2.7 miles south of Statz, following roughly Boulder Highway (1582), I remember Pecos Trailer Park feeling very different. It seemed miles and miles away, almost a different city. The streets, the neighbors, the texture in the air was dramatically different. When we moved into the trailer at Pecos, I felt rich, like we'd made it, Jeffersons' style.<sup>11</sup> I'm sure my friend Chris did not feel this way about that place, having moved from a home in a middle-class area on the other side of town.

Even today, these economic conditions persist in the neighborhoods of my youth.<sup>12</sup> Today, the average household income for those living on Statz Street is \$26,000. If you are Black, it's \$20,000. The average rent is \$680 a month. Go 2.7 miles to North Pecos Street, and the average household income goes up to

---

11 My brother and I loved *The Jeffersons*, a TV sitcom (1975–1985) developed by Norman Lear and written primarily by Don Nichol, Michael Ross, and Bernard West. The show starred Isabel Sanford and Sherman Hemsley, a Black couple who owned a chain of successful dry-cleaning businesses and moved to a rich, White part of town, Manhattan. It was a spin-off from *All in the Family*.

12 All data in this and the next five paragraphs I take from The Opportunity Atlas project, which was formed by a group of researchers from Harvard University, the Census Bureau, and Brown University. See <https://www.opportunityatlas.org/>.



\$31,000. If you're Black, it's only \$24,000. Average rents in the area rise to \$845. It could all seem like economics, like capitalist markets working as they should. Such markets, even if they work as they should, become stubborn and persist generation after generation. They become racialized barriers and walls, but barriers and walls are paradoxical. For some, they are more permeable than for others. Barriers and walls keep people out while trapping people in.

Today, Statz is 93 percent residents of color, while Pecos is 80 percent. That's pretty much what it was in my day. And of course, just like when I lived in these places, more White residents coincides with higher household incomes, higher rents, and higher property values. This is why my trailer park neighbors hated me so much, wanted us out of the White trailer park. There were lots of Brown folks around the trailer park in the adjacent streets. But my Pecos trailer park neighbors were walling in Whiteness as much as walling out Brownness. It's why they kept asking me: "Why are you here?" It's why they kept their elaborate strike system *just for us*. My Brown body lowered their property values, degraded the value of their trailers. This is how the economics of racism works. It creates inherited conditions that beget certain kinds of racialized outcomes from one generation to the next. My neighbors' racism toward me was in part a product of our economics.

In the middle of high school, my mom would move us even more south, following Boulder Highway another seven miles to Ithaca Avenue, still in Las Vegas. Today, the average rent around Ithaca is at \$1,000 a month. This neighborhood is 67 percent residences of color and has an average household income of \$36,000. But if you're Black, that income is only \$25,000. That's only \$1,000 more a year than the Black population at Pecos. So, the more south one goes on I582 today, as was the case in my youth, the better people do economically, the better funded the schools are, the Whiter it gets, except if you're Black. If you are Black, you may live in the area, but you don't really make more money than those Black residents north of you. In fact, the White and Latine residents on Statz make \$1,000 a year more than you on average if you're Black.

There are other things related to economics that follow this same path south. Other life conditions change as one goes south out of North LV to Pecos to Ithaca. All are skewed by race. For instance, the percentage of married households increases. Teenage birth rates lower. On Statz, this rate is 40 percent, but it's 49 percent if you're Black. This means every other teenage Black girl gets pregnant and gives birth to a baby. On Pecos, the overall teenage birth rate is 39 percent, with the Black rate greater than 50 percent.<sup>13</sup> On Ithaca, it's 26 percent, and in that place, there are too few Black residents to report any data.

---

13 The data given on The Opportunity Atlas website simply says, ">50%".

Perhaps the most damning statistic is incarceration rates. On Statz, the overall average incarceration rate is 4.4 percent, but that's deceptive. When broken down by race, a very different picture develops. White rates are at 3.1 percent, Latine are 3.8 percent, but Blacks are 20 percent. That is, two out of every ten Blacks from the area are incarcerated. A similar picture develops at Pecos: Whites incarceration rates are 1.2 percent, Latine are 1.6 percent, and Blacks are 8.7 percent. And on Ithaca, only 1.4 percent of Whites, 1.9 percent of Latine, and 2.1 percent of Blacks are incarcerated.<sup>14</sup>

All these differences are not just from how much money folks make, but lots of other inherited factors, conditions that are mostly out of people's control but connected to our systems of economics. There is only a \$5,000 bump in household annual income from one neighborhood of my youth to the next. Does \$5,000 really make that big of a difference to one's life? My mom struggled to make each jump and had to get married in order to make the last jump to Ithaca. Two incomes. The barriers for us were more permeable. And yet, in the end, she'd lose that house to foreclosure.

So, all of us inherit many privileges, practices, and opportunities that make us, that allow us to play life's racist game in the ways we can, or maybe, give us a different game to play with better rules and chances at winning. Language is central to our inheritance and the game. I inherited a poor, single-parent household in North LV, a mom who only had words and love to feed me at times. But she spoke and used a standardized English, a White English from Oregon, an advantage, a White privilege. And my little success in that reading contest was enough for me to see that words could be mine. I could not change a lot of things, but maybe, I thought, I could language my way out and up.

And this assumption about the exchange value of a standardized English in the US has its tradition. I didn't make this idea up. Ta-Nehisi Coates, in his essay, "The Case for Reparations," recounts *The Chicago Tribune's* comment on reparations to African Americans in 1891.<sup>15</sup> Among the trade-offs that the newspaper argued was fair was English. The article states: "They [African Americans] have been taught Christian civilization, and to speak the noble English language instead of some African gibberish. The account is square with the ex-slaves."<sup>16</sup> So one might exchange slavery and "African gibberish" for Standardized English. The assumption is: lift up. And of course, there are lots of contemporary reports and articles that proclaim English as the lingua franca of

14 For a deep history of the U.S. prison and justice systems, see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

15 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (New York: One World, 2017).

16 Coates, 178.

the international business world.<sup>17</sup> It is common sense to say that one universal key to success in life in the US is fluency in English. Standardized English means more money in your pocket.

I translated this need for Standardized English as reading and writing like White people—talk White and go to college. But I was bucking social trends that were not in my favor. My mom never went to college, nor did her parents. My grandma had an eighth-grade education. I'm not even sure if my grandpa graduated from high school. We are talking about my mom's side of the family. On my dad's side, I don't know. I didn't know them, didn't know my dad, but I know that he didn't go to college. I know his family were farmers in Hawai'i, immigrants from Japan.

I was the first to get a college degree in my family, a first-generation college student on both sides. I am the first college graduate in my family that I know of. A 2018 study by the National Center for Education Statistics shows what we would expect: The more years in college parents have, the more likely their children are to go to college and graduate.<sup>18</sup> First-generation students have the lowest chances of going to college, staying in or persisting, and graduating. The White supremacist language system we live in, that some of us bear through, is overdetermined. It's one of the rules of the racist game, and much of those rules are written by economics. This means that the college game has multiple, overlapping, and redundant ways to be racist. There are many ways to keep Brown and Black people poor, in debt, underemployed, and uneducated. Most of those ways can be accomplished without direct reference to race.

So being in college, staying in it, and graduating is a privilege. Those privileges are racialized—that is, they follow racial patterns. They also follow economic patterns and social patterns that travel with those who have already gone to college or those who could not. If you go (or went) to college, chances are your parents did first. They helped you in significant ways to get there, stay

---

17 English as the dominant language for international business has been reported on over the years; see Tsedal Neeley, "Global Business Speaks English," *Harvard Business Review*, May 2012, <https://hbr.org/2012/05/global-business-speaks-english>; Dorie Clark, "English—The Language of Global Business?" *Forbes*, October 26, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dorieclark/2012/10/26/english-the-language-of-global-business/#447eeeabb57e>; Christine S. Sing, "English as a Lingua Franca in International Business Contexts: Pedagogical Implications for the Teaching of English for Specific Business Purposes," in *Business Communication: Linguistic Approaches*, ed. Franz Rainer and Gerlinde Mautner (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 319–356.

18 Emily Forrest Cataldi, Christopher T. Bennett, and Xianglei Chen, *First-Generation Students: College Access, Persistence, and Postbachelor's Outcomes* (National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2018), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2018421>.

in, and graduate. They even may have made sacrifices to pay your tuition or helped you with food or rent. But don't let your family's sacrifice blind you to your privilege.

While many White and elite families sacrifice much to help their kids go to college, it is important to remember that such families have enough means to make such sacrifices. Sacrifice is part of most people's college experience, but too often, people of color must sacrifice more than others. Furthermore, the ability to sacrifice for college is an exercise of privilege for some, and historically in the US, sacrifice, particularly economic sacrifice, has been a White privilege. Think the Walmart example.

If your family has negative wealth, there is nothing left to sacrifice. College is not a realistic option, which perpetuates the cycle of poverty, low household wealth, and negative wealth among many people of color in the US today. But if your family just has to give up some luxuries, take fewer vacations, or make extra loan payments that they can afford, then the sacrifice is a privilege, less of a sacrifice than others' sacrifices, yet still a sacrifice. Do you see the paradox? It's not a pissing contest. We should recognize that we all get pissed on but not equally. Some of us are drenched in it. Others just get sprayed a little. But we all stink of urine.

To make matters worse, college ain't gettin' any cheaper, but it was more doable when I entered. In 1989 when I started college (the first time), the average annual tuition for a state university like the kind I attended was around \$3,200 in 2017 dollars. In 2017, the average tuition for a four-year public institution was almost \$10,000.<sup>19</sup> That's triple the cost in just tuition alone, before the cost of books, food, housing, and any medical or transportation expenses. And these are not the only barriers that keep many from college today.

Inflation, a devaluing of the dollar, also hits poorer people harder than those in higher tax brackets, keeping more poor folks from college. Their fewer dollars in their wallets or bank accounts are worth less. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' consumer price index, a dollar in 1989 was worth \$2.08 in 2019.<sup>20</sup> That's a 108 percent increase. This means today's dollar buys less than half of what it did in 1989.

But everything, all systems, are connected. The economics of racism are also influenced by environmental racism. Environmental racism is the condition in which the areas where people of color live are disproportionately contaminated

---

19 Emmie Martin, "Here's How Much More Expensive It Is for You to Go to College Than It Was for Your Parents," CNBC, last updated November 29, 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/11/29/how-much-college-tuition-has-increased-from-1988-to-2018.html>.

20 Ian Webster, "Value of \$1 from 1989 to 2019," CPI Inflation Calculator, accessed 22 March 2019, <https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1989?amount=1>.

and toxified.<sup>21</sup> The father of environmental racism as a concept and area of study is Dr. Robert Bullard, who is Distinguished Professor of Urban Planning and Environmental Policy at Texas Southern University. What environmental justice activists and researchers, like Dina Gilio-Whitaker, Kandi Mossett-White, Mustafa Ali, Jamie Margolin, and LeeAnne Walters, have found over the last few decades reveals more inherited barriers to life, clean air, water, and housing for people of color. And ultimately what all these inherited toxic environments mean is a decreased access to college. If you're sick, you cannot get to or survive long enough to go to college. Just to illustrate, here are some facts:

- Seventy-eight percent of all African Americans live within 30 miles of a coal fired power plant.
- The closer one gets to a superfund site (a site of toxic, abandoned, accidentally spilled, or illegally dumped hazardous substances) the more likely you will encounter Black families living there.
- Black people are exposed to 1.5 times more particulate matter than White people.
- Latine people are exposed to 1.2 times more particulate matter than non-Hispanic Whites.
- In over a 20-year period, more than half of the people who live within 1.86 miles of toxic waste facilities in the United States are people of color.
- In a 2009 report, 11.2 percent of African American children and 4 percent of Mexican American children are poisoned by lead, while 2.3 percent of White children are.
- Communities of color have more contaminated water than White communities.<sup>22</sup>

---

21 You can read about environmental racism in a number of places; see “Environmental Racism in America: An Overview of the Environmental Justice Movement and the Role of Race in Environmental Policies,” The Goldman Environmental Prize, June 24, 2015, <https://www.goldmanprize.org/blog/environmental-racism-in-america-an-overview-of-the-environmental-justice-movement-and-the-role-of-race-in-environmental-policies/>; Nina Lakhani, “‘Racism Dictates Who Gets Dumped On’: How Environmental Injustice Divides the World,” *Guardian*, October 21, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/oct/21/what-is-environmental-injustice-and-why-is-the-guardian-covering-it>; Renee Skelton and Vernice Miller, “The Environmental Justice Movement,” The National Resources Defense Council, March 17, 2016, <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/environmental-justice-movement>.

22 To read more about each of the listed outcomes, see, Chloe Reichel, “Toxic Waste Sites and Environmental Justice: Research Roundup,” *Journalist’s Resource*, September 24, 2018, <https://journalistsresource.org/studies/environment/superfund-toxic-waste-race-research/>; Anne M. Wengrovitz and Mary Jean Brown, *Recommendations for Blood Lead Screening of Medicaid-Eligible Children Aged 1–5 Years: An Updated Approach to Targeting a Group at High*

The point I'm making is that in order to have access to the kind of language practices that I saw as a child as worthwhile and valuable in school and the world, the kind that would take me out of the ghetto, a person usually needed to go to college. This means that you gotta inherit a number of things, among them are White racial language habits and economic conditions that give you a chance to afford college or make some sacrifices to go. And on top of these things, you have to also be well enough to go and learn. You have to have lived in a healthy enough environment, one that didn't make you sick.

College is still the primary place one goes to gain good language practices, or so we tell ourselves. But it's harder to get to and more expensive the poorer and Blacker you are. College has become more and more difficult to get into and persist in for too many people. Those barriers to entry keep more poor Black, Latine, Indigenous, Asian, and White students out than White, middle-class students.

I'm oversimplifying the problems, but that doesn't negate the problems. There are more issues than just race and economics that keep people from college. But I simplify the issues in order to magnify—in order to show more clearly—one part of the problem of the politics of language and its judgement in the US, which I lived in contradictory ways, in ways that were presented to me as paradoxes. That part of the problem is the tangle of economics in White language supremacy. One of the gates to economic success is taking on dominant White language habits, habits which one uses to get into and persist through college, which then allows one to have better chances at good jobs and places to live free from harm or disease.

Somehow, I made it. I'm one of the exceptions, and by all accounts, I succeeded quite well. My language has been good to me. But most people of color like me do not make it, and this is the problem. We should not judge a system by its exceptions, by those few who seem to thrive in the system. We should judge the system by its rules, by what happens to most.

And yet there is another complicating factor for many students of color to make it to and succeed in college, one you likely can guess. We are what we

---

*Risk* (Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009), <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5809a1.htm>; Jasmine Bell, "5 Things to Know About Communities of Color and Environmental Justice," Center for American Progress, April 25, 2016, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2016/04/25/136361/5-things-to-know-about-communities-of-color-and-environmental-justice/>; James VanDerslice, "Drinking Water Infrastructure and Environmental Disparities: Evidence and Methodological Considerations," *American Journal of Public Health* 101, suppl. 1, December 2011, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2011.300189>; Van R. Newkirk, II, "Trump's EPA Concludes Environmental Racism Is Real," *Atlantic*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/02/the-trump-administration-finds-that-environmental-racism-is-real/554315/>.

do in the places we are at with those there. That is, we language the way we do because of the places we are at and the people around us. North LV was not a place where the Standardized English of schools and colleges was used, neither was Pecos trailer park. As educators and linguists know, after a certain point in one's life, usually around adolescence, our ability to learn new languages, new ways with words, is a lot more difficult.

The linguist Rosina Lippi-Green describes this phenomenon as each person's "linguistic sound house," in which our childhoods greatly determine the boundaries of our language practices for the rest of our lives.<sup>23</sup> This doesn't mean that we are stuck with one way of speaking or using English after childhood, but our childhood determines most of the default language structures we use to make language. Our linguistic sound house is the language foundation we work from, add on to, or alter throughout our lives, but our original sound house is mostly stable.

This makes it even more difficult for many to get into college. Their sound houses aren't built for the White, middle-class, monolingual English habits of language expected in college, and yet everyone is built for college, built to learn and to language. So it's the rules of the college language game, the standards used to judge people and their language practices, that are set up as universalized, and when one doesn't match up to those standards, the failure is blamed only on the individual, not on the conditions in their lives that fostered the languages they use already, conditions that are conveniently not racialized but economic. But this makes economics an important part of the racist game we all play.

I'm glad neither my mom nor I knew the statistics of first-generation college students. I'm glad she had the audacity to think I could go to college, that I was worth that. We just accepted those false narratives of merit and hard work, despite them not working for most of the people we knew. I bought into them completely, even though I wasn't convinced I could get into college.

During elementary and junior high, I remember talking to my mother about what people do after college. What does one do with college? And while she was not that familiar with college, she offered me an idealized and romantic version of what college graduates do. They work in offices, make good money and important decisions. They wear nice clothes, drive new cars, and have health insurance. They get to go to the doctor and dentist regularly. They don't have to worry about the ends of meat. They get all of the meat. They take vacations away from home in faraway places. They have the privilege to sacrifice for their children.

---

23 For a discussion and further research on the influence that childhood plays in language use, see Rosina Lippi-Green, *English*, 48–51.

I often thought about college as a young kid, despite feeling it was likely an unrealistic goal. Even after I got accepted to the only university I applied to, I didn't think I'd make it all the way, graduate. I'd already flunked out of one community college and dropped out of another. I had also withdrawn from the same university during my first quarter there. In my first attempt, I lasted less than eight weeks. And yet, I had been preparing for college for as long as I could remember. I would plan my academic class schedule in junior high and high school with an eye toward what classes would prepare me best for college. No wood shop or extra P.E. classes. French and Spanish were more useful, I thought.

What we didn't understand was that there were few good ways to prepare me for college in the places we were at. The system, the game, is not set up to do this for a boy of color like me. I would have to be an exception—exceptional—if I was to make it to and through college.