

Book Review: The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together

Book By Heather McGhee

Review by Denise A. Senter

There is a treasury of books on topics of racism and the historical impact of racial disparities in America – politically, economically, and sociologically. The past five years have produced powerful discourse on antiracism. As a consultant who has led discussion groups and trainings on diversity, equity and inclusion topics – I have been particularly encouraged by the depth of narratives written by scholars such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Donald Yacovone; Elie Mystal; Isabel Wilkerson, Ibram Kendi, Stacy Abrams, and Jonathon Metz, to name a few. These writers often present “weighty” material in ways that take the reader on a journey of imagination, of history, of pain and possibility, which render their work “necessary reads”. One book, specifically, has evoked a fire of recognition, memory, affirmation, and celebration in reading it. This book is Heather McGhee’s The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together. 2021 One World, Random House LLC, New York.

McGhee is a noted economics specialist, researcher, and former president of an inequality-focused think tank, Demos. In *The Sum of Us*, McGhee utilizes her specializations in putting forward compelling and engaging discussion of how racism has shaped our understanding of who we are and how we have all been limited or left out of our potential due to systemic, multigenerational, racism. McGhee does a masterful job in presenting complex histories in relatable experiences. Beginning with a seemingly simple question of “Why can’t we have nice things?” comes a brilliant discussion of intricate processes, policies, principles, and historical practice that reveals discomforting truths. Contrary to traditional thinking about the impact of disparities and inequality, McGhee warns that “*racism gets in the way of all of us having nice things.*”<sup>1</sup> (pg. 14) McGhee lays out how racism drives inequality. One of the realities readers become aware of (or challenged by) is the role racism has played in the founding DNA of our nation. Intertwined in the framework of every American system (economics, education, health, social, and political) was racism. McGhee brings the reader along on a journey across America as she lays out critical discussions from interviews, research, economic data, and historical examples of findings that outlines the cost of racism to all Americans. We are warned that, in this current time of growing inequality, the economic benefit assumed to be afforded to non-people of color “is shrinking for all but the richest among us and is no longer sparing millions of white Americans from the degradations of American economic life as people of color have always known it.”<sup>2</sup> (pg. 14)

The following summarizes the ten chapters of the book.

**Chapter 1: An Old Story: The Zero-Sum Hierarchy** – *a historical look of race as a “zero-sum” game where in many views race as a ‘us vs them’ or ‘what’s for them is bad for us’ perspective that continues to be part of most public policy. Adhering these forms of thinking often enables people to vote against their own best interests.*

**Chapter 2: Racism Drained the Pool** – *a historical example from Montgomery Alabama where a pool at Oak Park, the crown jewel of the Parks Department, was closed after its “whites only” status changed after a federal court ruled its segregated status unconstitutional. The town council voted to drain the pool rather than share it with the black community. This ‘draining the pool’ becomes a metaphor for political actions where people vote or act against their own best interests out of racial fear and sum-zero thinking.*

**Chapter 3: Going Without** – *a discussion of the lack of funding or provision for necessary investments such as education, health, and other important safety nets have often resulted in people going without needed care and assistance. Cutbacks in social spending have led to disparities in drug enforcement, incarcerations, poverty, poor educational outcomes. Discussion includes the need for increasing a sense of social solidarity where, for example,*

*groups coming together to commit to cross-racial public investments can provide optimistic governing principles and models.*

**Chapter 4: Ignoring the Canary** - *a look at the legacy and impact of predatory lending and the economic crisis resulting from subprime loans. The economic downturn from these practices included \$2.2 trillion lost, 8.7 million jobs destroyed, and 5.6 million foreclosed homes.*

**Chapter 5: No One Fights Alone** – *how effective efforts toward interracial understanding have occurred through the work of trade unions – workers coming together striving for the same objectives. Through this work racial tolerance has occurred. Through these cross-racial efforts, Solidarity Dividend was experienced – resulting in higher wages across economic sectors. Unions helped to reshape how work was done – e.g., 40-hour work week, overtime pay, employer-based health insurance, workers compensation, etc. McGhee discusses the power of solidarity – cross racially and inclusively – as key to building equitable systems that benefit all involved.*

**Chapter 6: Never a Real Democracy** – *a discussion and illustration of how our democracy has been less equal than our economy and these two inequalities have been mutually reinforcing. Progression in people realizing the vulnerability of democracy and the importance of engagement and voting is optimistic.*

**Chapter 7: Living Apart** – *a review of how governments forced Americans to live apart throughout our history. This was seen in where one could live, work, shop, and have recreation – much of it based on race. The cost of segregation has been staggering and is perhaps incalculable.*

**Chapter 8: The Same Sky**- *Climate change and the economic costs Racial and class disparities in climate policies, the creation of sacrifice zones, and development of grassroots activism has demonstrated the role of racism in shaping environmental policy.*

**Chapter 9: The Hidden Wound** – *why does it seem a fairer economy is so elusive? Discussion on our moral understanding of ourselves, questions and considerations of the needs and “wounds” of those from different perspectives. Underlying the discussion is the important understanding of how racism makes an immoral view of the world into a moral one. This chapter looks at the themes among Christianity, Judaism, and Islam connecting our humanity and anti-racist commitments as connecting us with the image of God and connect us back to a divine relationship.*

**Chapter 10: The Solidarity Dividend** – *McGhee offers “Five Discoveries” for building equitable and inclusive prosperity as a result of her journey across the U.S. 1. We have reached the productive and moral limit of the zero-sum economic model and are left with no choice but to “aim for Solidarity Dividend.”<sup>3</sup> 2. Refill “the pool of public goods” – investing in generous public benefits that serve everyone. 3. Resist the temptation to use universal instruments to attain universal ends – suggesting there will need to be different strategies for achieving equity. 4. We truly need each other, and 5. “We must get on the same page before we turn it.”<sup>4</sup> (pg. 254) – it is necessary to tell the truth with a nationwide process that involves all of us in setting, understanding and accepting the facts of racism, “so that we can move forward – with a new story, together.”<sup>5</sup> (Pg254)*

In summary, Heather McGhee’s book, *The Sum of Us* is one of the most practical and poignant discussions of the economic impact of this country’s sin of racist policies and practices. The book includes important legislative and economic policy references, along with health and sociological data references. It includes a discussion guide at the end for individual or group study and planning. This book would be an excellent read for an ongoing book discussion group and in engaging in building local Solidarity Dividend strategies.