

## The Border is Their Public Swimming Pool

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In *The Sum of Us*, McGhee argues that the majority of white Americans have become invested in a set of policy priorities that only benefit a small minority of white people, and that the cost of this is borne by all of us.

Several years ago, I spent a Saturday afternoon in a dusty church rec room sitting through a presentation by white Arizonans who I disagreed with on every point. These ranchers, whose properties lie on the border, represent a vocal and organized force in their small town. They argue that they are the ones who pay the price for “illegal” immigration because undocumented people stumble through their properties, leave garbage, making them feel unsafe, and sometimes – quite inconveniently – die on their properties. “I find garbage all the time!” they complain, showing pictures of the black water jugs sold in Mexico specifically for migrants crossing the border because the dark color won’t glint in the sun the way a transparent water bottle does. “You can’t imagine how awful it is to find a body on your property” they say, standing next to a posterboard of photos they have snapped of the remnants left behind by these migrants. Prayer cards and pictures and talismans once-tightly-clutched and then lost, symbols of their hope for protection. They are tiny glimpses of who the migrants are and where they come from. The ranchers share their opinion with anyone who will listen, hoping to persuade local and federal authorities to do more. They call for stricter border patrols, harsher border enforcement, more money for the increased militarization of the border, and harsher penalties for migrants caught crossing the border. I am a scholar of education and immigration. I grew up on the border and have spent more than half of my life advocating for immigrant rights. I know the daily violence faced by migrants who risk everything, even their lives, to escape poverty and violence. And that afternoon, to my surprise, in that dusty church rec room, I actually found that those ranchers and I have some common ground.

The conversation was part of an educational trip for M.A students of Migration Studies for which I served as the faculty chaperone. This was the “educational exposure” component of the trip for us – listening to people who had very different opinions and approaches to border issues than we did as migration scholars and students of Migration Studies. The presentation was painful to sit through. The ranchers spouted every anti-immigrant talking point heard on the Fox evening news. They talked about how terrible it was to live on the border with these migrants disturbing their otherwise peaceful ranch lands. They positioned themselves as the victims, powerless in the context of a government that had abandoned them by not doing enough to protect their land, and thus by extension, them.

The session concluded and as we were packing up our items to leave, one of the most vocal ranchers said to me, in an off-handed way, "I've lived here long enough to remember what it was like when you could freely cross the border. People didn't need to try to cross in the darkness at night, they could cross freely during the day, work, and then go back to Mexico by dinner time. It's a shame we can't get back to those days."

Wait. What?!

It turns out, I learned, that there is a sizable section of conservative, anti-immigrant ranchers on the border who feel this way. They call for increased penalties and stricter enforcement, but at the heart of their calls is an affinity for a simpler time at the border when none of that was necessary. They do not come to that opinion from a humanitarian lens but from a pragmatic one. And though their policy prescriptions call for the opposite, just underneath the surface, it becomes clear that they know that the current constellation of policies that has turned the border into a killing field hurts all of us.

McGhee helps us understand how this happens. In short, white people are invested in whiteness even when it does not work for them. This is clear in the way that many of these ranchers are calling for closed borders, voting Republican, arguing against humane immigration policy, while all the while knowing that life was better when the border was more porous, when people could cross freely, when people were not at risk of dying on their properties because the border was not [one big open grave](#) of the poor.

The metaphor at the center of *The Sum of Us* is the decline of the public swimming pool. McGhee explains how the US government invested in the mass construction of grand, "resort-style" public swimming pools in this country in the 20s, 30s and 40s. These were, in many places, de facto "whites only" spaces. The desegregation of public spaces broadly emerged as a policy priority, and Black communities and other communities of color began to call for the desegregation of the public pools which their tax dollars helped to build and maintain but from which they were barred entry. McGhee explains that when faced with integration orders, many white towns decided to drain their public pools rather than allow Black families to swim. The wealthy, in turn, built private clubs or constructed backyard pools, and it was the poor and working class – of all races – who were left without access to the public pool.

McGhee's intervention is fundamentally about trying to figure out how the majority of white people in the United States became staunchly opposed to the kind of policy agenda that helped to create the white middle class. This is a policy agenda that includes a social welfare state, big government spending, high taxes and an investment in the commons. The draining of the public pools is one historical representation of a time in which white America acted against its own interests in the spirit of upholding racism and white supremacy. There are many others.

I often think of those ranchers. The border is their public swimming pool. They are invested in the maintenance and militarization of the border but when you scratch the surface, the contradiction is exposed: this border does not serve them. They are wistful for the time when it was easy to cross the border, when someone who lived in Nogales could come over, work for the day, and go home to their families. Families in Nogales, struggling under the weight of poverty, are also wistful for those times<sup>1</sup>. Yet these ranchers, bolstered by white supremacy and conservative politics, lobby their congresspeople for policy that does the exact opposite. And while it is undeniably true that the people who pay the highest price for the enactment of these policies are migrants, the reality is that the entire border region is negatively impacted by the border policy the ranchers clamor for.

There is a way we can read McGhee's work as a "racism hurts all of us" banner that is big enough for everyone. I am uninterested in wrapping myself in this banner because solidarity is not sloppy. I don't want you to be against racism because it hurts you as a white person, I want you to be against racism *even when it benefits you* as a white person. That is true solidarity. But what McGhee is offering is not a simple diversity banner that we can all hide behind. What this book offers, fundamentally, is a claim that there is collective investment in white supremacy, an articulation of what that means for white people, and a reminder of what it costs us all. The migrants on the border certainly understand that cost.

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<sup>1</sup> To be clear, I am not advocating for a guest worker program. I think nothing short of comprehensive immigration reform and a reimagination of the border is necessary.