

## Reflecting on Heather McGhee's *The Sum of Us* through a South African Lens

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*"No governments in modern history save Apartheid South Africa and Nazi Germany have segregated as well as the United States has, with precision and under the color of law. (And even then, both the Third Reich and the Afrikaner government looked to America's laws to create their systems)" (McGhee, 2021, p. 170)*

### Growing up in South Africa

Eight days before my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday, Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as president of the Republic of South Africa (South African Government, 1994). Our new national anthem, Nkosi Sikelel'iAfrika (which means "God Bless Africa" in isiXhosa), sung in five out of our 11 official languages (News24, 2018), started healing a nation as it rang out proudly from township to town hall. An Afrikaans verse from the former anthem was included, to everyone's surprise: to say that *we all* are South Africans. It did not matter how difficult it was to learn all the languages of our new anthem; we all did, as we knew what it meant.

A year later, Mandela wished our Springbok rugby team good luck for the Rugby World Cup Final on the field just before the game, wearing a Springbok jersey with the South African rugby captain's number on the back. He shook each player's hand, calling them by name. For the African National Congress, this was almost unthinkable, as rugby was an official symbol of Apartheid (Taylor, 2013). Again, Mandela extended a hand to white South Africans in the spirit of uniting a country. The Springboks won that day. We henceforth waved our new flag in sports stadiums across the country, where everyone was welcome, and still are. In 2018, Siya Kolisi was appointed the first black Springbok rugby captain, leading us to win the 2019 Rugby World Cup (Robertson, 2019). Mandela was right: sport unites a nation (Hughes, 2013).

The "Rainbow Nation," coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, started taking shape in the late 90's (Handa, 2007). No drained and cemented swimming pools (as described in McGhee's book, Chapter 2) existed, as South Africans started building bridges between different races, opened beaches to all, shared schools and swimming pools and public transport and neighborhoods. Many initiatives—from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to admit to the wrongs of the past and work towards forgiveness (Tutu, n.d.), to Affirmative Action, aiming to economically empower the

previously disadvantaged (Burger & Jafta, 2010)—surfaced as part of the project of building a nation based on equality, mutual respect, unity, freedom and democracy. Although constitutionally a very advanced democracy, considerable work is still being done on the continued prevalence of race and racism in post-Apartheid South Africa. It is noteworthy that McGhee poses the question in Chapter 6 whether America has ever been a real democracy.

Apartheid withheld a country rich in a vast array of resources from reaching its fullest potential. Racism exerts costs on whites too, as McGhee states in her book (Chapter 3). In South Africa, it cost whites economically and emotionally, especially after Apartheid (Naidoo, Stanwix & Yu, 2014). Racism burdens not only society, but also individuals.

### Moving to the United States

Moving to work in the USA a few years ago, I realized that systemic racism still has a ripple effect through American social institutions and even daily social interactions. Folks in South Africa only started believing me that racism is prevalent in the US when the recent Black Lives Matter movement and protests inundated international broadcast media. I am no expert in American politics and will never claim to be. However, from my limited exposure and reading “The Sum of Us”, three thoughts surfaced that I want to reflect on from a South African perspective: the “born-free” illusion, the philosophy of Ubuntu and what *respect* means in context of racism.

### Reflection 1: The illusion of being “born free”

The so-called “born free” generation in South Africa is often attributed to individuals of color born after Apartheid ended in 1994 (BBC News, 2015). In the USA, the equivalent concept would be post-slavery and the legal end of segregation in 1964, right (History, n.d.; Lumen Learning, n.d.)? Reading McGhee’s book, I wonder for how long the proverbial shackles will still be so ubiquitous? In the USA and South Africa, it may take generations and a significant shift in systems and structures, be they social or political, to establish the reality of that supposed freedom. This myth of freedom is aptly identified as something to “perpetuate a deceptive and dangerous story,” according to student activist Lovelyn Nwadeyi, spoken at a Youth Day lecture, commemorating the students who were slain in the 1976 Soweto Massacre (Forster, 2021). Lovelyn continued by saying that the words “born free” function “as tools for silencing, silencing and diminishing the genuine grievances of young people, and particularly young South Africans of color.” Similarly, one could argue that young Americans may feel the same way.

### Reflection 2: The philosophy of Ubuntu

Ubuntu is a Nguni word meaning "I am because we are" (also "I am because you are"), or "humanity towards others" (ANF Conference, n.d.; Thompsell, 2019). Abraham Maslow states that community is an essential building block for self-actualization (McLeod, 2020). McGhee addresses the assumption of competition of all against all, preventing adoption of many win-win policies that will be good for all. We are only as strong as the sum of our parts. That sum is the community: everyone, be it black or white. Individuals exclusively out for self-gain, blinded by self-involvement to win at the cost of others, lack understanding of the provable strength of a diverse community. Diverse communities are melting pots where everyone shows humanity towards another and where everyone can contribute at their fullest potential to benefit the whole of society; understanding that you prosper only because of others.

### Reflection 3: Respect in context of racism

In South Africa, a deep understanding of our dysfunctional past paved the way for a respect for each other as we realized that everyone has a story, viewpoint and culture. South Africa is a nation that has taken meaningful steps towards the dismantling of segregation and systemic white supremacy but also is very much a work in progress. The past 30 years have taught many South Africans the value of liberty, the process of healing by admitting past wrongdoings, the power of forgiveness, and the rewards of reciprocated respect; because you see the *human* in every person you encounter. Everyone has a role to play. Everyone is to be regarded. Everyone has the right to have their honor protected. Everyone matters. Even if you do not necessarily know their narrative, we have respect.

### What I am realizing now

Can more opportunities be created for sharing narratives? Space for reconciliation? For forgiveness? For letting go of the ego? Especially where no real cultural denominations like Zulu, Xhosa, or Afrikaner exist: Americans are Americans, whether they are black or white? McGhee quite rightly asks the question: "Who is an American, and what are we to one another?" (McGhee, 2021, page 288).

As for "The Sum of Us," I am just wondering at what point Americans will realize how much humans need each other. We thrive when we feel connected and supported by each other, and we suffer when connection and support are not available. We have these needs as babies and we never lose them.

When will the suffering that racism is causing this remarkable nation end? South Africa had a clear line in the sand. McGhee says, and this is pivotal to McGhee's argument: "When the arc in America bends from slavery in the 1860s and returns to convict leasing in the 1880s; when it bends from Jim Crow in the 1960s and returns to mass

incarceration in the 1970s, when it bends from Indigenous genocide to an epidemic of Indigenous suicides; when it bends, but as a tree does in the wind, only to sway back, we have to admit that we have not touched the root” (McGhee, 2021, p. 288). That deep-seated root, says McGhee, is the belief in the hierarchy of human value.

America is the leader of the free world and prides itself on being the “land of the free and the home of the brave” (Morley, 2013). Do Americans treat freedom as something static, a pre-existing condition, a birthright? Are *all* Americans undeniably experiencing this birthright of freedom? Or is it rather something that should be strived for? The ending quatrain of the South African anthem (South African Government, 2022), goes:

*Sounds the call to come together,  
And united we shall stand,  
Let us live and strive for freedom,  
In South Africa our land.*

Freedom is not an absolute but often fluid, contextual and something that must be actively strived for. *Our land* is also something to be strived for: America, where the *sum of us* is recognized to be greater than its individuals or some individual segments, and where mutual respect should always be a focal point. This is the essence of McGhee’s argument: it is not a zero-sum game. It does not mean that when one succeeds, another fails. As President Joe Biden also quite rightly said: “When anyone of us is held down, we are all held back” (Semuels, 2021). So, above all, the greatest ideology that I want to urge Americans—from policy-makers to social, political and economic influencers, to everyday citizens chasing the proverbial American Dream—to deeply consider is the spirit of ubuntu, meaning “I am because we are”.

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