

The Sum of Us' Tallies the Cost of Racism for Everyone

By Jennifer Szalai BOOK ▾

Hinton Rowan Helper was an unreserved bigot from North Carolina who wrote hateful, racist tracts during Reconstruction. He was also, in the years leading up to the Civil War, a determined abolitionist.

His 1857 book, “The Impending Crisis of the South,” argued that chattel slavery had deformed the Southern economy and impoverished the region. Members of the plantation class refused to invest in education, in enterprise, in the community at large, because they didn’t have to. Helper’s concern wasn’t the enslaved Black people brutalized by what he called the “lords of the lash”; he was worried about the white laborers in the South, relegated by the slave economy and its ruling oligarchs to a “cesspool of ignorance and degradation.”

Helper and his argument come up early on in Heather McGhee’s illuminating and hopeful new book, “The Sum of Us” — though McGhee, a descendant of enslaved people, is very much concerned with the situation of Black Americans, making clear that the primary victims of racism are the people of color who are subjected to it. But “The Sum of Us” is predicated on the idea that little will change until white people realize what racism has cost them too.

The material legacy of slavery can be felt to this day, McGhee says, in depressed wages and scarce access to health care in the former Confederacy. But it’s a blight that’s no longer relegated to the region. “To a large degree,” she writes, “the story of the hollowing out of the American working class is a story of the Southern economy, with its deep legacy of exploitative labor and divide-and-conquer tactics, going national.”

As the pandemic has laid bare, the United States is a rich country that also happens to be one of the stingiest when it comes to the welfare of its own people. McGhee, who spent years working on economic policy for Demos, a liberal think tank, says it was the election of Donald Trump in 2016 by a majority of white voters that made her realize how most white voters weren’t “operating in their own rational economic self-interest.” Despite Trump’s populist noises, she writes, his agenda “promised to wreak economic, social and environmental havoc on them along with everyone else.”



Heather McGhee, whose new book is “The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together.”Credit...Andreas Burgess

At several points in McGhee’s book, I was reminded of the old saw about “cutting off one’s nose to spite one’s face,” though she prefers a less gruesome metaphor — the drained swimming pool. Grand public pools were sumptuous emblems of common leisure in the early decades of the 20th century, steadfastly supported by white Americans until they were told to integrate them. McGhee visited the site of one such pool in Montgomery, Ala., drained and cemented over since 1959 so that nobody, white or Black, could ever enjoy it again.

It’s a self-defeating form of exclusion, a determination not to share resources even if the ultimate result is that everyone suffers. McGhee writes about health care, voting rights and the environment; she persuasively argues that white Americans have been steeped in the notion of “zero sum” — that any gains by another group must come at white

people's expense. She talks to scholars who have found that white respondents believed that anti-white bias was more prevalent than anti-Black bias, even though by any factual measure this isn't true. This cramped mentality is another legacy of slavery, McGhee says, which really *was* zero sum — extractive and exploitative, like the settler colonialism that enabled it. She writes that zero-sum thinking “has always optimally benefited only the few while limiting the potential of the rest of us, and therefore the whole.”

Recent books like Jonathan Metzl's “Dying of Whiteness” have explained how racial animus ends up harming those who cling to a chimera of privilege. While reading McGhee I was also reminded of Thomas Frank's argument in [“What's the Matter With Kansas?”](#) (2004), about how the Republican Party had figured out a way to push through an unpopular economic agenda by stowing it inside a Trojan horse of social conservatism and cultural grievance.

But there are major differences between their books. Frank derides the idea that racism has anything to do with what he's writing about. Not to mention that McGhee isn't a stinging polemicist; she cajoles instead of ridicules. She appeals to concrete self-interest in order to show how our fortunes are tied up with the fortunes of others. “We suffer because our society was raised deficient in social solidarity,” she writes, explaining that this idea is “true to my optimistic nature.” She is compassionate but also clear-eyed, refusing to downplay the horrors of racism, even if her own book suggests that the white readers she's trying to reach can be easily triggered into seeking the safe space of white identity politics. Color blindness, she says, is just another form of denial.

One of the phenomena that emerges from McGhee's account is that the zero-sum mentality tends to get questioned only in times of actual scarcity — when people are so desperate that they realize how much they need one another. She gives the example of the Fight for \$15 movement: Already earning poverty-level wages, fast-food workers began to ask what they had to lose by organizing.

Against “zero-sum” she proposes “win-win” — without fully addressing how the ideal of win-win has been deployed for cynical ends. McGhee discusses how the subprime mortgage crisis was fueled by racism, but it was also inflated by promises of a constantly expanding housing market and rising prices. Once the credit dried up, win-win reverted to zero-sum, with the drowned (underwater homeowners) losing out to the saved (well-connected bankers).

“We live under the same sky,” McGhee writes. There is a striking clarity to this book; there is also a depth of kindness in it that all but the most churlish readers will find moving. She explains in exacting detail how racism causes white people to suffer. Still, I couldn't help thinking back to the abolitionist Helper, who knew full well how slavery caused white people to suffer, but remained an unrepentant racist to the end.

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