

# **Lemonade from Lemons:**

**The Ethics of Suffering, Oppression, and Newfound Privilege**

*If I told you a flower bloomed in a dark room, would you trust it?*

**-Kendrick Lamar**

My dad's truck stumbles down pot-hole infested country roads. Lush strips of dark green foliage line our view as humid air blows in from the windows. My mom's favorite song, "Peaceful, Easy Feeling" by the Eagles, plays over the rush of the wind.

I am back home for the summer. The more familiar our surroundings become, the harder I have to suppress a deep-seated feeling of confinement. I am filled with a dismal sting as the facade of my childhood home fills my view. I desperately try to embrace the familiar sight, to no avail. How is it that I can feel so much hopelessness and resentment toward this place that is also filled with good memories?

No words can adequately match the feeling I get when my dad drops me off and I step into my mom's apartment. It is both comforting and panic-inducing in its familiarity. The smell of stale cigarette smoke hits me first, one that I hadn't been reminded of for 10 months. I'm repelled by how run-down my home now seems: the drip stains down the kitchen cabinets, the homogenous yellow tint of nicotine stain on our popcorn ceilings, our grease-coated stove where my mom taught me how to make banana pudding at age 7.

The summer of 2015 was not unlike every summer I spent back in my hometown after finishing up the academic year at college. The more time I spent in a place that wholly liberated me, the harder it was to endure a place that felt so stagnant, hopeless, dead-ended. The more I hated home the more I realized I was really beginning to hate what this place *represented* to me. Growing up, I'd never heard the word: poverty.

I have wanted to shed this personal narrative-- the hopelessness of the poverty I was raised in-- using my newfound privilege and opportunity in college. I have wanted to wrap it away in a box and store it in my closet to collect an odor of the past. I have suppressed the memories, bad *and* good,

while simultaneously facing ways in which I found this narrative set me apart from my peers. I now have access to resources and opportunities that my family members do not have. I also confront the reality that I still lack opportunities and resources compared to my middle-class peers. As a result of the complex identity of being a first-generation, low-income student, I regularly feel loneliness, betrayal, and exasperation.

Even if I can finally allow myself to believe I have escaped poverty, how can I allow myself to ignore the fact that everything I fear and resent about my experience with poverty is happening down the street, just outside my privileged bubble of academia? If I resent poverty *so much*, how can I allow it to continue to hurt undeserving people?

Though I believe it is important to examine pain in constructive ways, I don't want this to be an essay solely about my personal suffering. Rather, I strive to be thoroughly vulnerable in using my experiences as a lens through which we can understand the opportunities we possess to productively channel our suffering. I *do* hope for this essay to be a voice for others who cannot or choose not to speak up about their hardship. But ultimately, I am inviting us to explore our ethical responsibilities regarding what we ought to do with our identities as individuals currently, or previously, oppressed and discriminated against, given that we have obtained privilege and means to work for our cause.

As a first generation, low income student, I encounter a unique set of challenges that are often invisible to my middle-class colleagues *and* my family. The extra effort I have to take to obtain basic resources goes unappreciated by those who have always had access to them. Instead of being admired for my resilience and perseverance, I have been perceived as immature or lacking in initiative because I do not already have certain resources, e.g., a car.

Some challenges are obvious: many of my middle class friends do not fear not having enough money to buy textbooks for that semester. If all else fails, their parents will step in to ensure their child is able to continue their education. They are unfamiliar with the fear and instability of not knowing whether they will be able to continue school, when higher education is the only hope for first generation students to lead a comfortable life.

Some challenges are more obscure: because our parents may not have the experience to help us, many first generation students only apply to one college, and we do it on our own. We often feel panicked by the application fee, worrying there may be more hidden fees that make us unable to follow through. We can't even begin to think about college fit or touring multiple colleges. We fill out financial forms and loan agreements ourselves.

First generation students have fewer professional resources. We can't afford to work for free, leaving unpaid internships out of the question. We're forced to spend our summers working small part-time, minimum wage jobs that don't allow us to develop our professional skills. As a result, our resumes are weaker.

First generation students likely will not know how to establish relationships with superiors, limiting our possibility of gaining any opportunity that requires faculty references. This also makes us less likely to approach a professor for help. Once I dropped a course because I couldn't afford the textbook. After I emailed my professor about it later, she suggested we could have easily found a solution had I just come to see her.

Perhaps most obscure and unexpected: first generation students experience "breakaway guilt" and familial tension that further degrades our sense of support as we pursue upward mobility. Our autonomy and individuality have likely not been a focus in a family where interdependency is

necessary for survival, which inhibits our journey through academia. Our families accuse us of abandoning them as they are unable to understand how much investment is required to produce independence and stability via academia. The family may reject the current “educated” version of their child, wanting him or her to fit in with the family culture. They undermine the child’s personal growth, making them feel phony or elitist. First generation students often bear the burden of needing to contribute to the home’s income while at college. The family may even go as far as to guilt the child into abandoning academia altogether.

As you’d expect, these things contribute to the student’s emotional attrition. To top it off, first generation students experience discrimination from those in their new life: we are pitied, deemed less capable, and assumed inherently inferior by our peers and, in extreme cases, professors.

While struggling to meet basic needs, first generation students cannot be concerned with higher levels of needs: self-actualization, transcendence, thinking in normative terms about their lives. Introspection is a luxury. With stamina and tenacity, first generation students forge their own path up the hierarchy, taking action to establish their own stability. This exhausting, seemingly endless trek goes unappreciated by others who have had stability established for them.

One personal experience serves to illustrate the social implications of this obliviousness of peers. On my 21st birthday, I got lunch with two friends. I was in between living situations for the summer, worried I may not have a place to stay at all. I had no car. Because of this, I needed to find a job on campus to pay rent. Even if I could make enough money to cover rent, being able to get on a lease was not guaranteed. I could not possibly make triple the rent with a part-time job, as was a common requirement. I had no one in my family who would co-sign and be approved. I was terrified of what would happen to me. The only support I had during this time was my roommates, my friends.

Prior to our lunch for my birthday, one of said roommates had told me that he found me to be “childish.” After a lovely lunch, we had a conversation in the car about why he felt that way. He appeared to have difficulty articulating what he was feeling, but eventually determined that it was because I had *all these plans and goals, but wasn't doing anything to pursue them.*

It was not the way I spoke; it was not my language. It was not what I believed. It was not the way I carried myself or the way I treated others. But it *was* based on what I *couldn't do*. He came from a family that had a vacation home and took frequent international trips. He was an intelligent person, but he overlooked the fact that I needed to obtain basic resources before I even began to think about personal goals again: a sufficient financial package to help me get back to school, a car, a job, a place to live for next semester.

Later that month, I would be explicitly excommunicated from that roommate arrangement based on my inability to be “inspiring.” I became a “burden.” My closest friends were blind to the debilitating weight of the challenges I faced, inappropriately expecting me to be in a congruent place of self-actualization. Because I was not in a position to prioritize self-actualization, I was subordinated, rejected, and stripped of the last ounce of stability I had.

The few times I experienced a *palpable* classism came from those who were closest to me. Prior to the first time, I had no reason to believe that others would think of me as inferior for something I couldn't control. I believed that instead, they would appreciate that I took control of my situation. I have always excelled in academia. I perform at the top of my class. I have been told I am “bright” and “talented” by people who know nothing of my past as well as those who do. I have cultivated my life into what I had dreamed of as a child.

After becoming aware of some kind of ambiguous rift in my relationship with my then-best friend, I had a discussion with her to try and resolve it. We talked around in circles for a while before she finally told me she's less likely to take me seriously or consider my perspectives, and consequently less interested in me as a person compared to our other friends. I probed her further, asking her what *about* me makes her have that reaction to me. She told me she assumes my perspectives are going to be less developed because I had access to fewer good resources than she did before college. For instance, I went to an underfunded public school in a small town and she went to an auditioned arts high school.

That was the first time I realized others may objectify me as a figure that represents everything I myself hated about my past instead of appreciating what it takes to make it out. I recognize now that the lingering effects of those attitudes against me based merely on what family I was born into make it impossible for me to be satisfied with my achievements. If someone is less likely to be interested in who I am just because I grew up poor and didn't have the resources they did, I am dismissed. I'm given no chance to dismantle the prejudice they carry.

As I've become increasingly aware of the nuance of class-based oppression and how it has shaped my experiences in college, I have simultaneously become more aware of the ways in which I am that which I grow to detest: classist. I avoid Walmart. I shudder in gas stations. Even being near people who *look* poor makes me deeply, existentially uncomfortable. I have come to realize that in those moments, part of me is afraid poverty is surrounding me, encasing me, erasing the stability and the promise I've constructed entirely. The other part of me lashes out in resentment and disgust at the individuals themselves: they serve as some symbolic amalgamation of years of only the most painful parts of my upbringing. They, the oppressed, unfairly become a figure of the indiscriminate oppression I happened to be born into.



I am willing to be vulnerable and share the true ugliness of the prejudice I fight because I believe, though often unexpressed, many people grapple with equally as crude snap judgments. It is only when I put those feelings into words that I realize how awful they are. Realizing the crass weight of those feelings through articulation is a huge step in eliminating the habitual thoughts.

I recently saw an older Black man wearing “poor” clothes, riding a dingy bike around our campus with a backpack on. “*Hub, I don’t usually see homeless people on our campus.*” I watched him get off his bike and lock it on a rack as I walked passed him. Later that week, I saw the same man in our library. It occurred to me then he must have been a student, as only students and faculty have access to our library. I had just committed a “What are *they* doing here? They clearly do not belong. This is a place of higher education, for *civilized* people.” Imagine that! I phased through a familiar disappointment in myself, but this time it was accompanied by a dissonant, surging hope for this guy. Then for *us*: I felt a small sort of solidarity with him. I imagine he didn’t feel the same, though, if he noticed me at all in a cluster of my White, middle-class peers. I didn’t deserve to feel solidarity with this man towards whom I had just committed an offense I found so personally disgraceful.

If I no longer feel deserving of solidarity, does this mean, then, that I have transcended that class? I am in a lonely, frustrating place between where I once was alongside my family and where I hope to be, alongside my professors. I feel solidarity with neither those entrenched in poverty nor those who enjoy the stability of a regular job, predictable income, and access to health care. When thinking of this place, I can’t help but come back to this vision of myself walking across a tightrope over a canyon. I could fail. I could slip up, succumbing to a fatal fall that would be returning to the dead-end lifestyle I can’t help but now view as utterly and unconditionally unbearable. There is no going backward, back to when poverty was just my normal life.

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I drop my luggage on the living room rug. I see my mom in her mechanical wheelchair. Her face lights up. She smiles a wholehearted smile, opens her arms and says “My baby!” with a comforting voice that I miss often. She has been waiting for me, expecting me all day.

I am filled with a deep sadness when I see how elated my aging, quadriplegic mother is to see me. I, perhaps unfairly, perhaps prompted by the dread and dysphoria of being home, project a desperation onto her. How can she be existing here? I attempt to imagine how she can possibly be fulfilled here, day after day, doing nothing but watching cable TV. Smoking pack after pack. Drinking beer after beer. She hasn’t left the property in years.

Any opportunity for my mother to build her ideal life was stripped from her after a car accident in 1997 that left her quadriplegic and took her eldest daughter, Leah, from us. I have been able to lead a vibrant, enriched life in my college community, but my heart aches at the thought that the woman who sacrificed so much of her life to raise me wasn’t receiving the fulfillment, love, and belonging she deserved.

I once heard someone describe class as a greasy jacket you can remove if you wish. I have eliminated colloquialisms in my language that others associate with being uneducated. I maintain a well-groomed appearance. Trim my hair often. Take care of my teeth and skin. I can immerse myself in the world of academia and gain cultural capital. I can craft an external appearance that wipes away any hint at where I come from, and attempt to lead a life that gradually erases traces of its influence on me. I can suppress my past, and would probably not be discriminated against then.

But ought I? What would I begin to believe about myself if I had let myself forget about the challenges I once faced, the challenges that still plague many others?

In his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, David Walker made a call to arms to his fellow dark-skinned brothers and sisters, fueled by a frustration with Thomas Jefferson who believed firmly in the “innate inferiority” of Black people: “Such I do not mean -- I am after those who know and feel, that we are MEN, as well as other people; to them, I say, that unless we try to refute Mr. Jefferson’s arguments respecting us, we will only establish them.”

If we give people what they need, they will flourish. If they are not flourishing, they do not have everything that they need-- physiologically, biomedically, financially, emotionally, socially, etcetera. Is it moral to pass judgements of value and worth onto other people who do not have their basic needs met? If we are not giving people an opportunity to flourish, is it reasonable to make assumptions of their capacity? If Thomas Jefferson had only seen the African people as distressed and abused, living in incessant fear for their lives, was it reasonable for him to assume they lacked any greater capacity for love, intelligence, and reason?

If I’m shedding my class, or past class, for the sake of sparing my sensitivity to being made to feel inferior, doesn’t that rob me of the opportunity to reframe any person’s beliefs of who, and *what*, can come out of poverty? If I am to see any form of success and be perceived by others as having done such, only to disassociate myself from the impoverished, aren’t I doing us the ultimate injustice of discrediting our potential? Am I not contributing to our objectification? Ought I just accept the potential pain of being assumed inferior as a necessary burden to bear for the cause of all those I “left behind”?

For the longest time I seemed to run in mental circles with these questions. I had not found a fulfilling outlet for my frustration with class oppression and prejudice. I could write it out in a journal.

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<sup>1</sup> Walker, David, 1785-1830. (1965). *David Walker's appeal, in four articles, together with a preamble, to the coloured citizens of the world, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of the United States of America*. New York :Hill and Wang,

I could write poetry or read of others' experiences with similar issues. I could vent to friends. I could even talk to my therapist. But what would that change? How ought I cope with an issue that's much larger than myself? What did it look like to come to terms with everything that had, and would inevitably continue to happen to me in spite of my efforts to combat it?

There may be certain ironic guilt attached with the ultimately empathetic act of turning personal hardships into political issues that can be targeted and eliminated. I carry this guilt: "Am I just trying to make it about me here? Am I annoying?" My frustration regarding my childhood in poverty and how it follows me today seems so small when I look at how terrible the world can be. After dealing with these thoughts, I understand the meaning behind my professor's words: The personal is political, and the political is personal. It is because of the fact that we activate when we are personally affected that change is made.

So what should I do with my pain? My friends, who had acted as the love and support I did not feel from my family, rejected me based on when and where I was born. Where do I put that pain? I can't hold resentment toward those who embody the effects of conditioning. So how do I begin heal that fracture?

I've eventually come to feel peace behind the reality that those individuals who have hurt me are not to blame; they are merely an effect of some far-spread, intangible creature. It is no single person. That intangible creature of natural circumstance is the true root of the pain, and that is what I ought to target. I can use my pain to activate myself, to target the true root of the suffering.

Further, I have come to develop an appreciation for the role suffering plays in my identity as an activist. It is *because* I have suffered that I feel so compelled to eliminate the source of

it. My drive to fight that suffering is born of a deep craving for solidarity with those who know my pain after feeling so alone in it, accompanied by a *yearning to help the way I wish I could have been helped*. I desire to contribute to the world after being made to believe I hadn't the capacity to do so in a meaningful way.

I felt betrayed and useless when my friends expected me to be inspiring when I was depressed and scrounging to get my basic needs met. Yet, how could I do the same thing to my family? If my parents were always stressed to the extent that they were about paying bills, buying groceries, interfamilial conflict, how could they have possibly given me the childhood I felt I deserved? The childhood filled with sports, vacations, prom dresses, college visits, music lessons, and a college fund?

I have begun to use the pain I've felt as a tool to help me understand the pain of others. I can appreciate privileges I have, as someone who wishes others would do the same. Because I work hard in ways that often go unnoticed, I know others work even harder in ways that also go unnoticed. Moreover, if I can feel *so* demoralized by only a handful of cases of class discrimination, I can all but imagine the psychological toll it would take on someone whose identity is often openly demonized and assigned inferiority. I can all but imagine a pain from a life-long prejudice that has historically been much more dangerous. And it is because I have suffered at all that I am moved by suffering much deeper, more chronic, than my own.

On a smaller-picture scale, I've spent the past few years reflecting on my mother's life, attempting to understand her pain. The morning I found out she died, I felt, among other things, a sense relief that she was no longer suffering within the cruelty of her circumstances. Through tears and an embrace with my friend, I shared with him that the hardest thing about her death was how tragic her life had been. He pointed out that I only felt miserable about my home life after I had discovered

there was a better life for me out there. It was a fair point. I had no way to say that my projection of tragedy was one that my mom actually felt on a day-to-day basis.

Nonetheless, I knew the most productive response to her death was to validate the effort of one of her greatest struggles through life: raising her children in poverty as a single, severely disabled woman. I vow to ensure that your effort and pain was not in vain, Mama. In your honor, I will relentlessly and tirelessly pursue the opportunities I am privileged to have. I will not waste our suffering.



*To my mother, Peggy Lorene Floyd,  
whose resilience I wish to immortalize*

*1961-2016*