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Introduction

“Birds born in a cage think flying is an illness.”

—Alejandro Jodorowsky

When I give presentations around the world on the importance of centering equity in transportation, I start with racial segregation maps. They’re useful in showing the stark racial and ethnic divisions in cities across the United States and illustrating how past transportation and land use decisions shape present-day mobility challenges.

The maps are color coded to show the predominant race in each neighborhood (White indicated by blue, Black by green, Hispanic by orange, and Asian by peach). There is rarely a spot where the green, orange, and peach neighborhoods seep into the blue ones. “Every city in America looks something like this,” I say, pointing to maps of Peoria, Illinois; Detroit, Michigan; Houston, Texas; Atlanta, Georgia; and Washington, DC.

Without fail, someone asks, “Are there any exceptions to these cities?” Jokingly, I respond by showing a map of Portland, Oregon, and exclaiming, “Yes, go to Portland, where there are no Black people!” That line usually gets a laugh from everyone, even people from Portland. But the truth behind it is far from funny. The maps reveal deep segregation, born from a history of exclusion, that still dictates who has the freedom to move, to live, and to thrive in the city today.

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Portland—and Oregon as a whole—were built on exclusion. The state of Oregon was founded on a Black Exclusion Law, which was enshrined in its 1857 constitution and prohibited Black people from settling in the state.¹ Although the law has been repealed, its legacy is alive and well. Portland remains the Whitest big city in America, with more than 66 percent of its residents identifying as White.² And for the few Black people who settled in Oregon—primarily drawn by the shipbuilding industry during World War II—racism limited their opportunities. As in other cities around the country, Black residents were systematically excluded from wealth-building opportunities, redlined into certain neighborhoods, denied mortgages, and later displaced by highway expansions and urban renewal projects that bulldozed their communities.

Oregon's political leaders have been slow to address the systemic racism in the state. Laws and policies designed to promote racial equity are often weakly enforced or underfunded, and racial disparities in public infrastructure persist. Even in Portland, which has a reputation for being progressive, policing has been weaponized against Black bodies in public spaces. Portland has the fifth highest arrest disparity rate in the country where Black Portlanders are arrested at a rate 4.3 times higher than White people and are killed by police 3.9 times more often than White people.³ Existing in public as a Black person comes with inherent risks, from police or civilians.

In Portland in 2017, a White supremacist fatally stabbed two men and injured a third, all who were intervening while the man hurled racist and anti-Muslim slurs at two Black teenagers on a MAX Light Rail train.⁴

In September 2023 Adrian Cummins stabbed two Black teenagers on a MAX train in Portland.⁵ The teens were attacked without provocation, with one suffering a life-threatening injury that necessitated emergency surgery.

Incidents like these call attention to the lack of safety for people of color moving about the community. This is arrested mobility. The ability to move freely, safely, and confidently through one's city—whether in a car, on foot, by bike, by e-scooter, or by public transit—is a fundamental aspect of participating in society. Yet for Black and Brown people, mobility is constrained by systemic racism in policing, planning, polity, and policy. They are more likely to live in neighborhoods with dangerous roads and less likely to benefit from the city's vaunted bike infrastructure. Their access to safe public transit is often undermined by racial profiling and violence.

Although Portland is celebrated for its investment in public transit, bike lanes, and sustainable urban development, these improvements often came

at a cost to communities of color. Many Black and Brown residents were pushed out of their neighborhoods as property values rose in areas that received transit investments, forcing them into more isolated, less connected parts of the city with higher crash rates and fewer public amenities.^{6,7} Therefore, Portland's investments in green infrastructure may have created a reputation for progressiveness, but they also reinforced the racial divide.

I saw this in my research for a 2021 study for PeopleForBikes, "Where Do We Go From Here? Breaking Down Barriers to Biking in the U.S."⁸ Although Portland boasts one of the highest bike ridership rates in the country, our study found that Black and Brown residents rarely felt comfortable or safe using the city's bike infrastructure. During a focus group with Black Muslim residents, the consensus was clear: They did not feel that Portland's bike culture was meant for them. The city's bike lanes may be celebrated by White cyclists, but Black and Brown residents felt alienated, excluded, and in some cases even targeted. Hijab-wearing women in the group reported feeling specifically vulnerable while cycling, adding yet another layer of racial and cultural exclusion.⁹

But Portland also offers a glimmer of hope. There are efforts under way to un-arrest mobility. The city's BIKETOWN program, launched in 2016 in partnership with Nike, was designed with equity in mind.¹⁰ In fact, BIKETOWN was one of the few bike share programs in the country to prioritize station placement in low-income neighborhoods.^{11,12} Of the ten bike share systems we looked at in various US cities, BIKETOWN was the only one that had a higher-than-average station density in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods and lower density in the advantaged neighborhoods.¹³ It was the highest-ranking program for bike share equity among the ten cities.^{14,15}

Even in a city as overwhelmingly White as Portland, planners and policymakers can—and must—take steps to un-arrest mobility for Black and Brown people. The stakes are high. For Black people, the right to move freely isn't just a matter of convenience or comfort. It's a matter of life and death.

BEING BLACK IN PUBLIC

Talk with any Black person in America and they can recount an interaction with law enforcement. When asked, I can immediately recall three such

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incidents, all of which took place in a car. Once in college, the car in which I was a passenger with three other Black men was pulled over for what seemed to be no reason. Another time as a passenger with a White woman driving, the officer pulled us over and asked my White companion whether she was okay, as if *I* were the one speeding. The third time was when I was driving, and the officer asked my wife whether she was okay.

Although I was not physically harmed on these occasions, the feeling of dread, the question about whether this was the moment that I become the next name added to the rolls of Black men shot by police, entered my brain.

As a Black man in America, I expect these encounters every time I leave the house. I make mental calculations when I'm choosing my clothes. If I'm wearing a hoodie, particularly a black or dark-colored one, will I be targeted? If I run through a predominantly White neighborhood, will someone find me suspicious? Will wearing a suit be enough to make people less suspicious of me?

When a person has to make these mental calculations about safety and security and is not able to move freely through a city, that person's mobility is arrested. What I experience day to day is what most if not all Black people in America experience. Of course, many people who are historically marginalized, including Native American and Latinx people, women, people with disabilities, and gender nonconforming people, all experience a lack of safety in public to some degree, but for the purpose of this book, I'm focusing on the experience of Black Americans. This is my lived experience and the experience of most Black Americans, as well as the focus of my research and work. The circumstances may differ from person to person, and my more recent relative economic privilege might shield me from *some* dangerous scenarios, but for all of us Black Americans, the danger looms constantly—consciously or not.

For all intents and purposes, I'm a successful person. I am a veteran of the US armed forces. I have an advanced degree. I am a professor. I am a CEO. Yet still, I feel the effects of my limited mobility because racism is in the air we breathe.

Beverly Daniel Tatum, expert on the psychology of racism, calls racism a “smog” in her seminal book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*¹⁶ “Cultural racism—the cultural images and messages that affirm the assumed superiority of Whites and the assumed inferiority of

people of color—is like smog in the air,” she writes. “Some days it is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in.”¹⁷

This smog hinders the movement of Black Americans, whether it is from gaining upward mobility or moving around public spaces in a society built for people who don’t look like us. I refer to this as arrested mobility.

I also think of arrested mobility like a cancer. If you ignore it long enough, it can kill you. This book and the work I do are dedicated to fighting that cancer every day.

Arrested mobility, I argue, is the direct manifestation of structural racism (racism that is personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural), which has led to the intentional and deliberate overpolicing of Black Americans. It has led to disinvestment in Black communities and communities of color that has cut them off from generational wealth development as well as everything that is afforded a person to achieve the so-called American Dream.

For the arrest of physical mobility, we need to look at the various types of violence against Black Americans. Some of it is more direct, such as police killing and brutality in predominantly Black communities, and some more subtle forms of violence that come from living in a place where the streets are not safe.

A 2022 study by Matthew A. Raifman and Ernani F. Choma from Boston University’s School of Public Health and Harvard’s T.H. Chan School of Public Health, respectively, found that Black Americans had the highest mortality rate per mile of travel by means of walking, bicycling, or light-duty vehicles (e.g., passenger cars).¹⁸ The rates were especially high for cycling: Black cyclists were 4.5 times more likely to die in an accident than White cyclists, 2.2 times more likely than White pedestrians, and 1.8 times more likely than White people in vehicles.¹⁹

This inequity is rooted in power: who has power, who maintains power, and the social forces that lead to such power, which is strongly linked to race. This seems to be changing on the surface in terms of who is in power, but there are still two parallel systems of opportunity: one for White people and one for everyone else.

Avant-garde filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky gave us the oft-quoted words, “Birds born in a cage think flying is an illness.” I feel this deeply when I think about arrested mobility. It is as if we are caged birds when our

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movement is limited by the barriers created by a society designed from the outset to oppress us. We have internalized the historic oppression by limiting our freedoms for our own safety. We have seen what has happened to Black Americans who are perceived as a threat. We have been in situations where we have been perceived as a threat. And we have been given less access to the means of social mobility. We move about the world as if movement were an illness.

Yet Black people have always resisted. Since the time of enslavement, Black people have worked for racial justice. We have known our rights. Yet here we are in the twenty-first century still fighting for the most basic right to move around our communities freely and to have equitable access to transportation, jobs, housing, parks and open spaces, and basic services.

Certainly, much has improved, but as we see year after year, police kill disproportionately more Black people than people of all other races. Between 24 and 27 percent of people killed by police in the United States between 2018 and 2023 were Black when only 13 percent of the population is Black. This is all despite the fact that Black people are more likely to be unarmed and less likely to be threatening someone at the time they were killed.²⁰ Thus, much work remains.

Mobility embodies freedom and allows people, places, and cities to thrive. Moreover, in the United States, freedom—synonymous with national identity—is often represented by acts of movement such as driving a car, riding a bicycle, walking down the street, or traveling to a different city. However, for Black Americans, exercising freedom of mobility has always meant confronting the harsh reality of White fear, fragility, and violence.

WHAT IS MOBILITY?

On a personal level, mobility is the ability to move one's body freely and the freedom to move around any given space. *Social mobility* implies a metaphorical upward movement, an ability to participate freely in our economic institutions and thus to build personal wealth in order to live a happy, healthy, and stress-free life. There are several indicators of lower rates of social mobility among Black Americans, including higher Black unemployment rates (between June 2023 and June 2024, Black unemployment remained between 5.6 and 6.3 percent, whereas White unemployment fluc-

tuated between 3.1 and 3.5 percent²¹) and lower high school graduation rates for Black students (for the 2021–2022 school year, 81 percent of Black students and 90 percent of White students graduated²²).

Physical mobility and social mobility are intrinsically linked. Both forms of mobility play a fundamental role in the lives of urban, suburban, and rural residents. In order to access the levers of economic and social mobility, we must be able to move safely and freely around our communities to access jobs, to participate in civic engagement, to socialize with friends and family, and to engage in leisure activities.

In an ideal world, physical mobility would be accessible to every single person equitably.

WHAT IS ARRESTED MOBILITY?

I use the term *arrested mobility* to mean a condition that is imposed only on people of a certain race, specifically Black people. Arrested mobility is the intentional and incomplete access to all means of movement in public and sometimes private spaces by way of deliberate overpolicing, which has, in turn, made us less safe and limited social mobility. Arrested mobility leads to paralysis among Black Americans who find themselves trapped in a system that confines their physical movements and provides only narrow, perilous openings for social mobility. Arrested mobility makes it difficult for Black people to engage in civil society.

Although arrested mobility is most acute among foundational Black Americans who are descended from enslaved Africans, it applies to all marginalized people and is compounded with each layer of marginalization: all people of color, low-income people, people with disabilities, and female, queer, trans, elderly, and unhoused people.

With each layer of marginalization, the conditions are incrementally more difficult. For example, disabled Black Americans face profound difficulties not just in getting around a city but also in accessing healthcare. And Black trans women are the most at risk of homicide among the already highly vulnerable trans community.²³

Because of the legacy of structural racism, White supremacy, povertyism, and ableism, we do not live in a society where mobility is afforded in the same way to everyone. People with physical or mental disabilities are

forced to adapt to a world built for the able-bodied. The lack of infrastructure for modes of travel other than the car and disinvestment in public transit in low-income neighborhoods make getting around vastly more difficult for people facing poverty. Black people and other people of color more often live in communities that are physically cut off from the economic and power centers of society, through urban planning and political decisions past and present. This arresting of social mobility is no accident.²⁴

Black people are also limited in public spaces because of safety. With each news report of a Black person killed by law enforcement or harmed by White community members, the emotional and psychological scars lead to fear about our own public safety.

Black people and other people of color face unsolicited and profound obstacles reflecting structural racism and White supremacy in policy, planning, design, engineering, and law enforcement.

Black people are less likely to have unimpeded access to critical resources and everyday destinations such as grocery stores, healthcare facilities, schools, parks and open spaces, and jobs.

The lack of mobility affects physical health. The National Health Interview Survey found that between 2006 and 2015, Black, Asian, and Hispanic people “were significantly less likely to engage in sufficient physical activity compared with [non-Hispanic] Whites.”²⁵ The Centers for Disease Control reports that Black adults are 1.2 times more likely to die of heart disease than White adults.²⁶ The public health field links these statistics to the social determinants of health, which are the factors in one’s environment—where they live, work, play, and age—and how those affect one’s health.²⁷

This book won’t be going deeply into the social determinants of health, but they are important indicators of what happens when we design our cities and communities and enact laws and social norms that create enormous barriers to mobility for Black Americans.

THE FOUR PS: POLITY, POLICY, PLANNING, AND POLICING

Society has created barriers to mobility for Black people through what I call “The Four Ps”: polity, policy, planning, and policing. All of these “Ps” are a

manner of policing Black people's behaviors, just through different means—some less overtly violent but all harmful in distinct ways.

It all begins with **polity**, which consists of the social forces and governance structures that create a separate set of rules for Black and non-Black people. Our polity has been shaped over centuries of written and unwritten rules that guide how people engage within our society. Our polity shapes how the government enacts laws, how laws are maintained and enforced, and the unwritten social codes linked to societal behavior. At a basic level, polity is a nation, a city, a church—a collective identity.

Beyond the laws, the collective actions of dominant groups have maintained the polity. White neighbors have long played a role in arresting the mobility of Black people through threats and harassment. This enforcement by the community creates a hostile environment that reinforces racial boundaries and restricts the freedoms of Black people.

Policy refers to legislation and laws that create conditions of arrested mobility. These are the rules and regulations shaped by the structures that a polity establishes. For instance, policies such as redlining have historically been used to confine Black people to certain neighborhoods and prevent them from moving freely within a city. These policies were designed not just to segregate but to control and limit the economic, social, and physical mobility of Black communities. Even when explicit laws were removed, the legacy of these policies continues to arrest the mobility of Black people, as the very structures and practices they created still influence who has access to resources and opportunities.

The organization of our communities is determined by urban **planning**, which is practiced at the federal, state, local (county, city, or other municipality), and regional government levels. Decisions about zoning, land use, urban design, transportation, and engineering all shape the physical and social structure of communities. They can have a profound impact on issues such as mobility, access to resources, and overall quality of life for Black Americans.

And finally, **policing** is how law enforcement is used to enforce policy and planning practices. The way policing is enacted depends on the polity, the overall culture and expectations of a populace. Sarah A. Seo, author of *Policing the Open Road: How Cars Transformed American Freedom*, shows how the history of driving and policing are deeply connected. In the early twentieth century, traffic norms were enforced through citizen groups, but

with the mass production of the automobile there was an “immediate imperative to regulate the motoring public,” Seo explains. “The law’s accommodation of discretionary policing profoundly altered what it meant to live free from state intrusion in the Automobile Age.”^{28,29}

“Before cars, American police had more in common with their eighteenth-century forebears than with their twentieth-century successors. What revolutionized policing was a technological innovation that would come to define the new century.”³⁰ There were traffic regulations in place at the advent of the automobile, but almost nobody followed them, which resulted in a lot of property damage, injury, and death. “It soon became clear that the public’s interest in street and highway safety required more policing,” writes Seo. “The police power not only authorized social and economic regulations; it also sanctioned the police’s power. In other words, the breathtaking expansion of the police rested on the same public rights that gave rise to the modern administrative state.”³¹

Citizens still police the movements and activities of other citizens. This is most often seen in how White citizens police the behavior, and sometimes existence, of Black citizens in public.

The concept of arrested mobility can help planners, policymakers, and the general public understand the social and political forces that lead to a lack of mobility—both physical and social—for Black people and other people of color. By understanding the causes, we have more tools to create solutions that directly address mobility for Black people, other people of color, and other marginalized groups.

It’s important to note that we cannot and should not cast Black Americans as helpless people who must be “saved.” Throughout the book, I’ve focused on the leadership and resilience of the Black community that is leading efforts for solutions to un-arrest mobility.

For me, arrested mobility is a chronic disease—a condition with deep-rooted causes and acute impacts, disproportionately targeting Black people. To treat this disease, we must first diagnose it accurately, something most discussions fail to do. In the first half of this book, I diagnose the problem, exposing the mechanisms that have systematically limited Black mobility. This will give you an unflinching look at what needs to be dismantled.

But diagnosis alone isn’t enough; we must also pursue solutions, which I explore in the last two chapters.

The cure requires more than just acknowledgment; it demands action. We must penalize discriminatory enforcement, invest in Black communities, enact equitable policies, empower community voices, expand educational and economic opportunities, raise public awareness, and provide essential mental and physical health resources. Only then can we begin to reverse the damage of arrested mobility and create lasting change by *un*-arresting the mobility for all Black Americans.

Change is possible, and it starts with all of us.

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ONE

How Arrested Mobility Is Created Through Polity and Policy

“Racism is not merely a simplistic hatred. It is, more often, broad sympathy toward some and broader skepticism toward others. Black America ever lives under that skeptical eye.”

—Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

Arrested mobility of Black Americans is tightly wound into our country’s institutions through systemic racism. When it is not overt, the effects of arrested mobility often remain invisible to people who don’t directly experience them. To change the system and reshape our communities so they are safe and livable for people of all races, we must understand what shaped them in the first place and how it arrested the mobility of Black Americans.

Some of the rules we live by have been formalized through governance structures such as the US Constitution, but some are less tangible and are more ingrained in what society deems as appropriate, civilized behavior.

Because race is such an important undercurrent to how our country came to be, it has shaped almost everything in how the public engages with



NATIONAL
EQUITY
PROJECT

THE LENS OF SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION

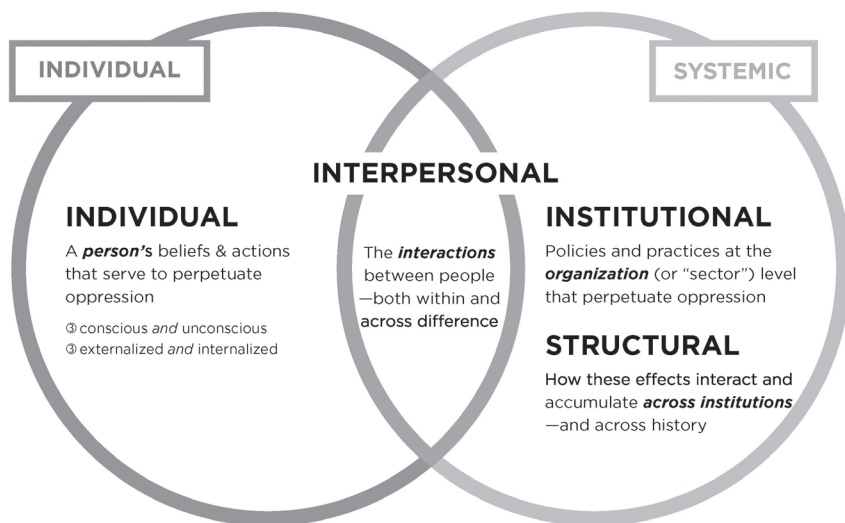


FIGURE 1-1 This diagram from the National Equity Project shows how the four forms of racism interact with one another. (Image courtesy of National Equity Project 2018, <https://www.nationalequityproject.org/frameworks/lens-of-systemic-oppression>)

social codes. To understand our polity—the social forces that shape how we are governed and what set of rules we follow—we must first understand the four types of racism: *individual*, *interpersonal*, *institutional*, and *structural* (Figure 1-1).

INDIVIDUAL RACISM

Individual racism describes a person's beliefs and actions about other people, particularly people of a group different from their own. Often people are not conscious of those beliefs when they're infused through the default culture. For example, thinking of what is considered "professional" office culture, the standard almost everywhere in the United States is based on White cultural norms. This dictates what is expected in how a worker dresses, how they speak, and certain formalities. If a person of color does not match these expectations, such as a Black woman coming to work with locs or a braided hairstyle rather than straightened hair, a colleague or boss might see this as a

lack of professionalism. That assessment might feel neutral because it's couched in standards of professionalism, but when the norms are rooted in White standards, it is a form of individual racism.

When people of color absorb individual racist viewpoints because of the White-dominant cultural norms all around them, it is known as internalized racism. "In a society where racial prejudice thrives in politics, communities, institutions and popular culture, it's difficult for people of color to avoid absorbing the racist messages that constantly bombard them," wrote Nadra Kareem Nittle in *ThoughtCo.*¹ For example, a Black woman may feel pressure to hold up the White standards of "professionalism" by changing her hairstyle for the workplace.

When the dominant culture is rooted in Whiteness, that becomes the standard by which all judgments are made, resulting in *individual and internalized racism*. In a world where concepts of "colorblindness" such as messages of "I don't see race" are pervasive, they are not recognizing or acknowledging the racism behind these standards.

INTERPERSONAL RACISM

Internalized racism never stays internal; rather, it guides actions and interactions, or *interpersonal racism*.

Examples of interpersonal racism can be extreme, such as the lynching of Black Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and modern-day hate crimes.

Interpersonal racism can also be subtle, such as through microaggressions, which are everyday interactions based on a bias or stereotype that largely go unnoticed by the aggressor. Examples include a person moving to the other side of the street when they see a Black person walking toward them, comments on a Black person being "surprisingly articulate," or critiquing a Black woman for being "too aggressive" in her interaction. In the workplace example of individual racism, interpersonal racism could be underhanded comments about the lack of professionalism in wearing her hair in braids or locs.

The subtler forms of interpersonal racism can lead to harmful and often dangerous circumstances for many Black people. In schools, Black students' behavior is often judged much more harshly than that of their White peers, leading to more severe and higher rates of punishment. In a 2021 study

published in *American Psychologist*, researchers found that among 2,381 students (35% Black, 65% White) from twelve schools in a district, the Black students reported much higher suspension rates for minor infractions. Twenty-six percent of the Black students reported suspensions, and only 2 percent of White students did.²

“Unfortunately, we were not surprised by the findings, considering what we know about the role of racial bias in painting school adults’ views of African American youth as less innocent, older and more aggressive than their white peers,” says study co-author and professor of psychology at the University of Pittsburgh Ming-Te Wang. “Regardless of the behavior that African American youth engage in, that behavior is viewed by educators as more worthy of harsh school discipline like a suspension.”³

Interpersonal discrimination also shows up in healthcare. According to a 2018 *California Health Report* article, Black mothers are “least likely to be listened to,” which in turn affects the health of the patients and can increase the risk of death during pregnancy.⁴ This fact gained national attention when Serena Williams almost died after her daughter was born.⁵

Similarly, Black Americans are undertreated for pain. Sophie Trawalter, professor and social psychologist at the University of Virginia, conducted various studies about biases in patient care, finding in a study of medical students that “for those who have these beliefs that biological differences are real, we see the predicted bias where these participants saying or reporting that White patients would feel more pain than Black patients.”⁶ Yet Trawalter notes that some studies have found that Black patients in reality report more pain than White patients, which highlights provider biases. This finding shows how internalized racism leads to interpersonal racism that endangers patients when enacted in healthcare settings.

We also know through the seemingly endless list of names of Black Americans taken from this Earth too soon, whether at the hands of police or self-deputized White citizens, because internalized racism led to interpersonal racism.

INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

Institutional racism is racism that is normalized through policies, practices, and discriminatory treatment that creates barriers to opportunity within an organization or institution.

Institutional racism is seen in racial profiling by the police, unequal access to educational and employment opportunities, discriminatory treatment by healthcare professionals, and discrimination in the education system, to name a few examples. What makes these institutional instead of interpersonal is that they are rooted in the practices and policies that are accepted by the institutions.

In the example of professional expectations about women's hairstyles, it becomes institutional racism when workplace rules prohibit braids or locs. For example, until 2017 the US Army enforced a no-loc or dreadlock policy in its grooming standards for hairstyles while in uniform.⁷ Although the policy was deemed neutral because it applied to everyone serving in the Army, it predominantly affected Black people.

In educational institutions, punishing Black students more harshly than White students (interpersonal racism) becomes institutional racism when the policies allow for harsher punishment of Black students. A zero-tolerance policy, which punishes students for minor infractions such as dress code violations, texting, or talking out of turn in class, is an example of an institutional policy that reinforces racial stereotypes when enforced inequitably.

"On the surface, zero tolerance policies are facially neutral; they are to apply equally to all regardless of race, class and gender," writes Nancy Heitzeg, professor of sociology and program director of critical studies of race and ethnicity at St. Catherine University in the journal *Contemporary Justice Review*. "A growing body of research suggests that these policies are anything but."⁸ Ming-Te Wang's study shows that Black students are much more likely to be harshly punished for these zero-tolerance policies than White students. The researchers found that harsh punishment based on racial bias takes a toll on Black students, leading to lower grades and a rupture in the students' trust and relationship with educators and the education system as a whole.⁹ Heitzeg also found that "zero tolerance policies contribute to the already high drop-out rate for students of color."¹⁰

In healthcare there is a fine line between interpersonal and institutional racism. Healthcare systems don't institutionalize policies that dictate less pain management for Black patients, for example. But the racism becomes institutional when little is done to combat how unconscious bias and interpersonal racism affect the quality of healthcare that Black people receive. The gaps in care often become justified because the provider has medical expertise.

In law enforcement, policies, laws, and practices are used to justify racial profiling, and the lack of accountability for law enforcement makes it difficult to get justice for Black people shot by police. In the employment sector, there is a perception of objectivity through steps applicants must take in the hiring process, but bias is still present. A 2021 study by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that applicants with “distinctively Black names” were 10 percent less likely to receive callbacks.¹¹

STRUCTURAL RACISM

Racism becomes *structural* when institutional racism accumulates over time and across institutions. This happens when White cultural norms are accepted as “the” cultural norms and are embedded in societal practices.

The accumulated effect of institutional racism toward Black students in schools affects their social and economic mobility because they are held back at every step. When Black patients face discrimination in healthcare and thus receive lower-quality care, it affects their overall well-being.

The media also has a hand in perpetuating systemic racism. “Media generated hysteria inextricably linked ‘teen super-predators,’ gang-violence and the crack cocaine ‘epidemic,’ and all were unmistakably characterized as issues of race,” wrote Heitzeg. “The coverage of the youth gangs, which focused almost exclusively on African American and Latino gangs, exaggerated the extent of gang membership and gang violence, contributing the creation of ‘moral panic.’”¹² That moral panic then leads to systemic racism that makes Black people less safe in public because White-dominant norms have embedded the idea that they are dangerous. Structural racism affects the physical and social mobility of Black people.

In Noxubee County, where my hometown of Shuqualak, Mississippi, is, public schools are predominantly Black, which has led to disinvestment. Noxubee County School District has been significantly underfunded: Over \$13 million should have gone to Noxubee County students since 2008.¹³

This is an example of systemic racism because it’s accepted by decision-makers in Noxubee County that predominantly Black schools will be underfunded, and there will be no consequences. In 2024, a decision by the Mississippi State Supreme Court allowed pandemic relief funds to go to the Midsouth Association of Independent Schools (which oversees 125

private schools in Mississippi), channeling more public funds to private education.¹⁴ Public school funding is contested all over the country, but the racial implications in Mississippi are stark. As of 2016, 87 percent of private school enrollment in Mississippi consisted of White students when only 51 percent of school-aged kids were White.¹⁵ This is the largest disparity between Black and White students enrolled in private schools in the United States, where the national average is 15 percent. Public schools in Mississippi have been underfunded for decades, yet the state is spending more of its meager education funds on mostly White private schools. This is a prime example of structural racism.

Laws and policies that overlook predominantly Black communities have long-lasting consequences. Poor road conditions, lack of sidewalks, and limited access to safe and efficient public transportation arrest the mobility of Black residents and contribute to the physical and social isolation.

SEPARATE BUT PARALLEL SYSTEMS

Racism in all its forms has created a situation where Black mobility is affected at every step. Despite living in the same society, Black people live in a different system than White people.

The separate but parallel roads are apt metaphors when we're talking about mobility. The two roads are built and maintained differently from one another, and that affects the people who walk, drive, or move along those roads (as illustrated in Figure 1-2). Certainly, it is an oversimplification because experiences vary from individual to individual, but it is a helpful way to look at the different roads Black and White Americans travel.

Legislative actions have attempted to correct harms done, including through the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Fair Housing Act of 1968, the Equal Opportunity Employer Act of 1970, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, and the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century of 1998. In 2023, the Biden administration signed two executive orders committing to environmental justice. Through the Justice40 Initiative, the administration will commit 40 percent of infrastructure and climate resilience spending to disadvantaged and marginalized communities.¹⁶ These actions by the president and Congress recognize that action at the federal level



FIGURE 1-2 White Roads and Black roads are not built the same. (a) The White road is fairly straight. (b) The Black road is much longer and more circuitous than the White road. This road metaphor is ironic because enslaved Black Americans literally built the foundations of the infrastructure we use today in the United States—the roads, the railroads, the buildings. (Illustration by Tom Grillo)

was needed to improve the road for Black Americans—ironic because the federal government played a role in creating these disparities and inequities. Many of these acts of Congress came out of the activism of Black Americans and calls for justice. It's unlikely any of these would have taken place without our agency. Yet challenges remain because they cannot address the roots of systemic racism that is so strong in our institutions.

Policing

Black people are policed more heavily than White Americans.

One in two young Black men will experience arrest by age 23. In 2016, 27 percent of arrests were of Black people despite Black people making up only 13 percent of the US population. Black people were arrested 2.12 times more often than White people for “drug abuse.”¹⁷

Black people are much more likely to experience traffic stops, and Black and Hispanic drivers are more often subject to searches than White drivers.¹⁸ (I get into this topic in greater detail later in the book.)

Reed T. DeAngelis, a population health scientist at the University of Michigan and formerly a postdoctoral researcher at Duke University, where he conducted research using the Mapping Police Violence dataset, says, “The threshold for being perceived as dangerous, and thereby falling victim to lethal police force, appears to be higher for White civilians relative to their Black or Hispanic peers.”¹⁹

The overpolicing of Black Americans has led to an incarceration rate for Black Americans that is five times higher than that of White Americans. One in 81 Black adults have served time in state prison.²⁰

Nazgol Ghandnoosh and Celeste Berry of the Sentencing Project write, “Police officers’ reliance on millions of minor traffic stops annually as a pretext to investigate drivers for criminal activity disproportionately impacts Black and Latinx drivers.”²¹

The challenge is complex and requires a multilayered response. Ghandnoosh and Berry write, “Ending racial inequity in the criminal legal system requires both effectively tackling disparities in serious criminal behavior and eliminating excessive police contact.”

There are unwritten rules by which Black citizens must live that White citizens don't have to think about (represented in Figure 1-2 by the speed limit signs, with Black drivers being held to a lower speed limit). There is an

old adage that Black parents tell their kids to “be twice as good” in order to succeed. “Twice as smart, twice as dependable, twice as talented,” wrote Gillian B. White in *The Atlantic*.²² Black parents don’t need the data to tell them that the rules don’t apply the same way to their kids. They know because they experienced it.

Access to Capital

In my community, confidence in obtaining access to capital from banks or credit unions—even when fully qualified—was so limited when I was growing up that I never imagined it was possible. The denials were constant, even for homeowners. To us, banks were nothing more than a place to deposit money, not a means to build wealth or secure a better future.

There is a long history of financial exclusion and systemic racism in access to capital. The legacy of the Freedman’s Savings Bank, which failed Black Americans after the Civil War, loomed large. It left a lasting distrust in financial institutions, a distrust that was reinforced every time someone was denied a loan or capital, regardless of their qualifications. As a result, many in my community turned to hiding their savings under mattresses—literally and figuratively locking away their potential—because they believed the doors to financial opportunity were firmly shut to them. This reality not only arrests our economic mobility but also stunts our belief in the possibility of anything different.

In a 2021 Brookings study, “Long Shadows,” researchers Scott Winship, Christopher Pulliam, Ariel Gelrud Shiro, Richard V. Reeves, and Santiago Deambrosi determined that Black adults over thirty years old were over sixteen times more likely to experience third-generation poverty than White adults. “In other words,” Winship et al. noted, “experiencing poverty for three generations straight is almost uniquely a Black experience.”²³

Most Black Americans start the road with less money at their disposal because previous generations were robbed of wealth that could have been passed on to future generations (represented by the beginning of the road where it’s broken and cracked in Figure 1-2b). Their homes and communities were devalued by redlining in the early twentieth century, so they couldn’t secure fair and affordable mortgages, and later their homes were destroyed during the urban renewal era to build freeways and expand development.^{24,25}

During this period of history, there were structures in place to help struggling Americans, specifically after the Great Depression, but Black Americans received less aid or were completely excluded from programs, including those to aid in homeownership.²⁶ So the means by which White Americans were able to build wealth were the same means that cut off access to wealth for Black Americans (the high cost of housing and education for Black Americans is represented by the tollbooth causing a backup of cars in Figure 1-2b).²⁷

Because of these historical wrongs, Black Americans are still less likely to own homes than White Americans. Rashawn Ray, Andre M. Perry, David Harshbarger, and Samantha Elizondo of the Brookings Institution note that as of 2021, only 46.4 percent of Black Americans own homes, whereas 75 percent of White families do.²⁸

“Compounding matters, homes in predominately Black neighborhoods across the country are valued at \$48,000 less than predominately white neighborhoods for a cumulative loss in equity of approximately \$156 billion,” they write.

When a Black person on our metaphorical road reaches the tollbooth representing higher education, their lack of accumulated generational wealth requires them to borrow much more money. In effect, the cost of higher education is much higher for them than for their White peers. Of course, the cost of higher education and ballooning student loan debt is growing across the board, but it affects Black Americans most. According to the US Department of Education, Black graduates take out on average \$25,000 more in student loan debt than their White counterparts, and after four years Black students owe an average of 188 percent more than White students.²⁹ Thus, Black Americans accumulate more interest and pay more over time.

Because of the lack of generational wealth and structural racism entrenched in the lending system, Black Americans are less likely to have high credit scores and thus less able to attain fair and affordable mortgages.³⁰ “Lower average credit scores not only make it more difficult for Black people to achieve homeownership,” write Michelle Aronowitz, Edward L. Golding, and Jung Hyun Choi in a report from the MIT Golub Center for Finance and Policy, “but also contribute to homeownership being more costly for Black people after it’s been attained.”³¹ This is but one of many financial burdens placed on Black Americans when it comes to home owner-

ship. The authors go on to note that Black Americans pay higher rates to mortgage companies because of “perceived risk factors,” Black borrowers don’t have equal access to refinancing opportunities, Black borrowers pay higher mortgage insurance rates, and Black homeowners bear a higher property tax burden.

So not only do Black homeowners have less access to generational wealth to buy a house, but when they actually do get that opportunity, they end up paying much more than White homeowners.

Toxic Stress

Growing up in Shuqualak, I vividly remember when the glove factory and the Piggly Wiggly grocery store shut their doors for good. These weren’t just businesses; they were lifelines in our small town, anchoring the local economy and providing a sense of financial stability. Their closures sent shockwaves through our community, triggering economic paralysis and unleashing a surge of toxic stress. The toxic stress that permeates daily life is not just an emotional burden; it’s a destructive force that erodes the fabric of a community, leaving a legacy of trauma that stifles progress and perpetuates a cycle of poverty and hopelessness.

The loss of these economic anchors was devastating, underscoring the urgent need for renewal and investment to break free from this vicious cycle. Arrested mobility and toxic stress are a deadly combination.

Leila Morsy and Richard Rothstein of the Economic Policy Institute found that children growing up in lower-income settings from infancy are “more likely to have strong, frequent, or prolonged exposure to major traumatic events.”³² This can induce a stress response, often called “toxic stress,” leading to negative outcomes including depression, behavior challenges, lower academic performance, and poor health (represented in Figure 1-2b by the long, uneven, unpaved stretch of road). The study notes that Black children are “45 percent more likely than white children to be exposed to one frightening and threatening experience.”

Valentina Lagomarsino from Harvard University writes that biological changes occur in the brains of children who experience toxic stress. “Adverse childhood events, including racism, community violence, loss of a parent due to police brutality, poverty, and even the mental state of a child’s parent have been shown to cause toxic stress.”³³

Race-Neutral Policies

Race-neutral policies, also known as colorblind policies, are those that don't address race or racism in their design (represented by construction in Figure 1-2). Examples of race-neutral policies include many of the acts of Congress designed to right the wrongs of the past, such as those listed at the beginning of the section on separate but parallel systems. When they take a race-neutral approach, they're not going to go far enough.

"The Fair Housing Act only mitigated the harm inflicted on communities of color by outlawing future racist policies," wrote Adewale A. Maye of the Economic Policy Institute. "The act did not tackle the residential patterns—such as the segregation into neighborhoods with lower price appreciation and less investment—that resulted from the past policies."³⁴

There are examples in education as well. In June 2023, the Supreme Court effectively reversed affirmative action, a policy that acknowledged the history of race and racism in college admissions. With this reversal, we're potentially moving to an era of race-neutral college admissions.³⁵ As I write this, it's uncertain how colleges and universities will respond, but knowing what we do about achievement disparities caused by historical racism, there is no such thing as an even playing field when it comes to race.

"These race-neutral policies neglect the reality and history of race and the role it has played in stripping communities of color from opportunity," writes Maye. "Our country isn't race-neutral despite efforts to push race-neutral policy. Without targeted policies to address the structural barriers in access and equity, lawmakers will struggle to advance restorative policies that can truly combat racial disparities."³⁶

Although there is movement toward acknowledging and addressing racial disparities, there is a long way to go.

Community as Solidarity and Resilience

Community as part of the Black experience is an essential component to moving forward along any road.

"'It takes a village' is a proverb that has been attributed to African cultures," wrote Triesta Fowler, scientific diversity officer for the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD), and Monica Webb Hooper, deputy director of NIMHD, in the National Institutes of

Health *Musings from the Mezzanine*.³⁷ “This belief in the power of community is an important component and strength of African American culture. . . . Members of the village become part of a redefined extended family that share a common culture, values, and customs. These members may include other relatives, close friends, neighbors, and a trusted religious community. These connections have been defined as ‘fictive kin,’³⁸ or people who reinforce and extend the familial bonds beyond a biological relationship.”

There is no better example of this familial bond than through mutual aid that has been a part of the Black American experience since the times of enslavement. Mutual aid is solidarity-based support networks built by collective community action to support neighbors and the community writ large. It is driven by people donating goods, funds, or time to help others. During the COVID pandemic, mutual aid became essential for people who had lost their jobs or who were immunocompromised and could not leave the house to meet their basic needs. The concept was coined by anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin, who recognized our inherent inclination to care for one another in his book *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*.³⁹ The idea of mutual aid has strong roots in Black communities, which built community resilience when society failed to support them. It subverts the charity model that typically requires the “haves” giving to the “have-nots.” It is built on horizontal means of solidarity, recognizing the power in collective action, support, and connection.

Ariel Aberg-Riger detailed some historic examples of mutual aid networks in *Bloomberg CityLab*, including the Free African Society, one of many Black mutual aid societies that was essential in caring for the sick, housing orphaned children, and burying the dead during the 1793 yellow fever outbreak.⁴⁰ In 1969 in Philadelphia the Black Panthers started a free breakfast program. There are many smaller, localized networks in Black communities to help with childcare, food, housing, and other basic needs of survival.

In addition to mutual aid networks, there are the countless Black community members—teachers, librarians, business owners, nonprofit leaders—who use their success and their position to empower and support younger generations. This support is symbolized on the metaphorical road by a tow truck, or by someone stopping to help after a fender bender, rebuilding a road, or removing the debris to allow others to pass.

These actions show the power of community in surviving and thriving on a harrowing and difficult journey. The street festival in Figure 1-2b represents the power of resilience and self-determination.

It was the innumerable Black community members—principals, teachers, business owners, elected officials, and grandmothers—who became the lifeline that saved me, my siblings, and many others in our community from the grip of arrested mobility. Their success was not just personal; they used their positions to empower and uplift the younger generations, providing us with the mentorship, support, and resources that so many others lacked.

On my block alone in Shuqualak, MS, these role models and community pillars nurtured and inspired a generation that went on to become doctors, professors, business owners, firefighters, high-level government employees, teachers, lawyers, barbers, truckers, coaches, and more. We are the exception, not the rule, in a system designed to hold us back. But it was through their relentless commitment to our futures, their belief in our potential, and their willingness to invest in us that we were able to break free from the constraints that ensnare so many others.

Black Americans have built up a great amount of resilience over the centuries of oppression. Even though the roads and the conditions were different and more treacherous for Black people, they were able to thrive by supporting one another. And in some cases, Black Americans built vibrant, economically prosperous communities after enslavement, such as in Wilmington, North Carolina, and Tulsa, Oklahoma's Greenwood District. But in both cases, resentment and hatred by White residents led to the only successful coup in American history in Wilmington (a buried piece of history covered in *Scene on Radio's* "Echoes of a Coup" series⁴¹) and to the massacre of about 300 people, with 800 injured, in the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre.⁴² Even amid the violence and intimidation, Black Americans have consistently fought for our rights while also building strong, cohesive, and resilient communities.

In order to truly repair the harms caused over centuries, we *all* need to focus on un-arresting the mobility of Black people.

By un-arresting mobility, we have an opportunity to create a better society not just for Black people but for all people. Arrested mobility is bad for our society as a whole, not just the people it directly harms. By not providing equitable access to jobs, community resources, and public spaces, we are

limiting the potential of a large percentage of our population to participate and contribute to society. In *The Sum of Us*, Heather McGhee argues that the zero-sum mentality perpetuated by racism has led to disinvestment in resources for all people, not just people of color, noting that we all lose by either intentionally or unintentionally maintaining systemic racism.⁴³ “A functioning society rests on a web of mutuality, a willingness among all involved to share enough with one another to accomplish what no one person can do alone,” she writes. “In a sense, that’s what government is.”⁴⁴ But when policies are created through a lens of racism, White people lose out as well.

In fact, the major bank Citigroup put a concrete number on this loss to society in a 2020 study. As a result of discrimination against Black Americans, the US gross domestic product lost some \$16 trillion between 2000 and 2020.⁴⁵

This puts a fine point on how our economy suffers and, along with it, our community vitality and our connection to one another when the mobility of Black people and other people of color is arrested. By correcting issues of social and physical mobility for Black Americans, we can create a more vibrant, diverse, connected, and successful society for everyone.

TWO

The Urban Planning Strategies That Have Shaped Our Communities

“Urban renewal . . . means negro removal.”

—James Baldwin, 1963

In 2016, thirty-two-year-old Philando Castile, who was Black, was pulled over by a police officer in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, a suburb of St. Paul. After he informed the officer that he had a firearm and that he wasn't pulling it out, the officer shot and killed Castile as he reached for his identification. His girlfriend was in the passenger seat of the car.

In 2020, twenty-five-year-old Ahmaud Arbery, who was Black, went for a run in the Satilla Shores neighborhood in Glynn County, Georgia. Suspected of being a burglar, he was chased by three White men, tackled, and then shot and killed by one of the men.

In 2023, sixteen-year-old Ralph Yarl, who is Black, drove to pick up his brother from a friend's house in Kansas City, Missouri. After ringing the bell of the wrong house, he was shot by the homeowner, an eighty-four-

year-old White man. Unlike Arbery, Yarl survived with two gunshot wounds to the head.

These names have become well known among Americans. They are just a few of the hundreds of Black people moving about America who have been shot by the police or by self-deputized community members who suspect anyone who does not look like them.

The White-centric planning and design of our cities and communities have led to racial segregation and created circumstances for Black and Brown people to be targeted as they move through White-dominated spaces. Although much of the segregation of communities is a result of early- to mid-twentieth-century planning, these practices are perpetuated when planning is not carried out through a lens of race and racial equity. Scholar Richard Rothstein wrote of residential segregation in *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, “The policy was so systematic and forceful that its effects endure to the present time. Without our government’s purposeful imposition of racial segregation, the other causes—private prejudice, white flight, real estate steering, bank redlining, income differences and self-segregation—still would have existed but with far less opportunity for expression.”¹

Many planning or policy decisions were thinly veiled acts of racism by government-run organizations to segregate communities by race and class. Some actions were more overt, what Rothstein and others call *de jure* segregation, which is “segregation by intentional government action.”² Even when segregation was no longer written into law, the circumstances created by planning and policy decisions reinforced segregation and made way for the disinvestment and destruction of Black and Brown communities.

When planners and policymakers fail to look at land use regulations, laws enacted through public policy, and urban design through the lens of un-arresting mobility for Black citizens, they continue to perpetuate segregation, discrimination, and the overpolicing of Black bodies.

We need to understand the decisions that got us here.

THE HISTORY OF ARRESTED MOBILITY THROUGH LAND USE REGULATIONS

While I was growing up in Shuqualak, Mississippi, my family warned me to avoid the “other side of the tracks,” particularly at night. Across the tracks

(continued...)