BAYWB Edition #1

A Youth Perspective: Issues in Society

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Hidden Pressure

Zahana Tate

I used to believe I could outpace expectations. Maybe if I were careful enough, quiet enough, perfect enough, the world might offer me a fair chance. But life does not operate that way. Life is a game; a rigged game. Some people roll loaded dice, while others, like me, are handed broken pieces and expected to play by the same rules.

For as long as I can remember, I have carried a weight; the weight of what others think I might do. Every step I take feels scrutinized, judged, and inevitably compared. And it is never just about me; it is about how my actions will be interpreted as a reflection of my entire community. I exist in a constant state of alert, not because I have done something wrong, but because people expect me to.

A few months ago, I was followed through a store, a jewelry store. I was not stealing. I was not even acting suspiciously. I was just shopping. Still, the store worker's eyes tracked me aisle by aisle, as though my presence alone constituted suspicion. One of my moms, the one who was White, came with me. The other one. No one even spared a glance at her. That is when an old thought resurfaced, one I had encountered before, but had not fully absorbed until that moment: if one Black person makes a mistake, the entire community is shamed. If I mess up, people will not simply see me as mistaken. They will only see the color of my skin; they will view Blackness itself as culpable.

When I told my other mom (the Black one) about my experience later, we slipped into one of our long, familiar, and unfortunately repetitive conversations.

"This is why," Mom Rico said, "you have to be careful. Because *They* won't hesitate to cast you in whatever light suits *Them*."

"I'm exhausted," I admitted.

"Racism does that to you," she replied, her tone steady.

Her words echoed the lessons I had heard many times before, but the repetition never dulls the sting. Each time it happens, it still hurts. Each time, it still catches me off guard. It is like a wound that never quite heals, but just scabs over until the next cut.

Many other similar instances happened in the interim, but one that stood out to me most was a year after the aforementioned event. A classmate looked me in the eye and asked if I was in a gang. I had not said or done anything to invite that question. I had been polite, focused, and hardworking. Still, the stereotype clung to me, uninvited but persistent. That moment hit harder than I expected, because it forced me to confront a truth I did not want to believe: even if I do everything "right," many people will never notice because of the color of my skin.

Racism, in this reality, becomes a thief. It steals the simplicity from moments that should have been just that, simple. Grocery shopping. Joking with a classmate. Just existing. Instead, I am left with memories of being watched, judged, and wrongly assumed. Racism chips away at the ease of youth and replaces it with the fatigue of being constantly aware. It comes in many different forms, whether they are micro-aggressions (which are not micro at all) or right in your face, it is always there.

I am still carrying that weight. I have not fully let go of the need to overperform, to overcorrect, to try and shield myself from stereotypes that were never mine to begin with. I want to believe that I do not have to live for the approval of people who refuse to see me clearly, but I am still learning how. I want to stop striving for perfection in a world that will not recognize it in me, but I am not there yet. Healing, I have come to realize, is not a straight path. It is slow. It is uneven. Some days, I feel strong. Other days, I feel like I am still just surviving.

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So I end not with a resolution, but with a promise in progress: I will try to stop letting the world's expectations define me. I know that people will continue to put me into boxes, but I will try not to shrink myself to protect an image that never needed defending. Loving myself is still difficult, but I am working on it. Choosing joy does not always come easy, but I know it matters. And even when I move forward with hesitation instead of certainty, I am still moving. And maybe, for now, that is enough. I am enough.

What If I Burned All Your Money?

Varnika Gajulapalli

Accumulating a lot of wealth is often justified as a result of intelligence and hard work, and the roles of privilege, systemic advantage, networks, safety nets, and timing are commonly overlooked. **If wealth is frequently seen as a sign of merit, then poverty could easily be interpreted as a sign of failure.** When this happens, empathy from the wealthy slowly starts to fade away.

Those at the top are viewed as deserving of respect and authority, along with the money they earn. They can easily spread influence, while those at the bottom are blamed for their circumstances. These barriers are constantly dismissed as excuses, and the act of not accumulating wealth to survive is regarded as a flaw, even if someone got to the top through a systemic outcome. When, at the end of the day, “success” is a product of the same system.

Once this happens, inequality has shifted to a hierarchy. And once someone’s wealth is confused or seen as proportional to their virtue or moral value, challenging the very inequality that helped them rise is often seen as a personal attack, even when it isn’t.

Let’s break it down:

SELECTIVE EMPATHY. You are constantly taught to be empathetic. However, in reality, empathy from a common person is often extended to those who resemble themselves, and this can obviously support one's own internal biases. However, when it's personal, the struggle is much better understood. Selective empathy allows a society to care in theory while remaining indifferent in practice. As a result, suffering that exists outside one's immediate circle becomes so much easier to ignore, and empathy is often given selectively. Many studies help showcase this divide, along with a study done by Piff et al. (2010; 2012). Through a series of experiments, researchers found that "people of higher socioeconomic status show lower empathic accuracy". Over time, this pattern starts to normalize inequality, and certain struggles are made visible and considered worthy of concern or help, while many others remain completely invisible altogether.

FRAGILITY. Going back to what probably hooked you into this article in the first place, the belief that wealth is earned purely through intelligence and effort in a naive society can serve a psychological function: It reassures the wealthy that the world is fair. When success is attributed to personal merit, those so-called "successful" people try to avoid themselves from facing the ugly truth, or the discomfort of recognizing advantage, luck, or inherited wealth- Therefore placing a deep need for control into their minds. If one believes their current position is well deserved and stable, then poverty becomes threatening. Threatening in the sense that if one acknowledges the structural causes of poverty, they would imply that success itself is fragile and could easily be reversed, therefore distancing themselves from vulnerability and empathy as much as possible.

STATUS ANXIETY. The fear of falling down the social hierarchy is the driving force of the upper classes' resistance to equality. However, the wealthy constantly cling to this hierarchy because it offers relative safety. This provides them with a way to locate themselves above someone else in an unstable, unfair world. Even those who are not at the top of the system still cling to the hierarchy. Why? Due to the fear of losing what little advantage they even have in the first place. Why this hierarchy works is because it reduces overall status anxiety - As long as there is someone beneath you, your position feels secure.

System Justification Theory helps show that people tend to "rationalize and maintain unfair systems" to cope with this threat. This further convinces people to believe that inequality is deserved. Total fairness in a system such as this, on the other hand, challenges comfort. It takes away the illusion of guaranteed status, making people realize and confront how conditional or contingent their security really is, therefore meaning that a fairer world would reveal how fragile the hierarchy has always been.

FEAR. The fear of losing it all…scary, right? That's why money is clung to so tightly. Money is important for basic human needs, but a lot of excess is treated the same way as well. On top of being safeguarded as comfort, it's been a way to showcase one's identity. Especially for those at the top. But if I'm being honest, who could blame them? As if right now, money has become proof of someone's intelligence and overall worth as a human being. The idea of losing it all, however, might sound like losing yourself to many. Losing your own legitimacy. This fear is another major driving force of resistance towards redistributing one's money. One won't feel superior to another.

So what if I burned all your money? Is your status going to diminish within the flames? Will your moral shortcuts burn down, leaving you with the char of what you once stood up for? More importantly, would your values remain the same? **Money has the power to excuse so much harm.** If I were to burn one's money, however, it leaves many with an important question:

Without it, who are you? And what do you stand for?

Shot on sight



Samuel Hiltgen

My brothers, my sisters, my siblings, my people,
please tell me,
why do they want us dead?
Maybe that's a bold statement,
but I'm about to get even bolder.

Why are me and my people illegal in 66 countries?
What happened to love and peace?
Love is love?
Screw that.
Love is a shot through the heart, literally.
Should love really be deadly?

Please tell me people,
do you really agree,
that a white man in 1946 who screwed up a book,
should now dictate the rest of eternity?



They take us down like they did Harvey Milk.
All it takes is a whisper,
there goes another life.
Speak up.
They send us down,
down with a bullet,
a bullet through a heart,
a heart filled with love.
Love has killed us.
And some of us don’t get the pleasure of death,
we have to deal with your name calling, slur throwing,
bullying instead.

Tell me,
why do you want us burning in hell?
Like Stonewall in 1969.
Trapped in a building,
Satan locking the door and throwing out the key;
some of us have that said to us by our own damn
family.

So I'll ask you again
to please reconsider,
the things that you've said,
the things that you've heard.
Is it really true,
that your love is right,
that our love is wrong,
that we deserve to die,
that we have to worry,
about getting shot on sight?
Please tell me people,
do you really think that we deserve that life?

And I know that by saying all of this
I have painted a bright red target on my back.
If you believe
that I deserve to be shot on sight,
I do not care.
If this is how I go,
let it be here as I fight.
Even if I die,
I have stood up for what is right.
So here,
go ahead and shoot me,
shoot me on sight.

Inside the lines

Anonymous

If we cherish volition, why do we eradicate it in classrooms? Taught to learn the same things. Taught to color in the lines. Taught to follow every rule, to be “normal.” Get a normal job, marry someone well off, build a family, play the role meant for us in society. Spending 7 hours sitting with our backs in chairs, told to listen in order to learn. Taught to keep quiet when speaking and learn from others who have more knowledge, more experience than us.

We compete for a single letter printed on a piece of paper, chasing a letter shaped through subjective opinions. Do you think we TRY to fail, do you think we’re TRYING to attain that letter on that piece of paper?

Try harder, they say, listen more, take more notes. And we do. We slowly turn ourselves into the same type of person, the same goal in life. And when we grow up, we aspire to be more successful, richer.

Structure and education are impactful and paramount to learning today. But if we force students into the same mold, it slowly erodes what makes humans innovative. Being different.

Look at many well known entrepreneurs today. We ask ourselves, how, HOW did they get to where they are? They failed. They experimented. They tested boundaries. They wondered. They dreamed. They didn’t try to compete for the best grades or do what society told them to do.

If every brain is different, why do we expect them to succeed the same way?