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An Exploration on "Facts of Life" and Pessimism: Living with Inequality

Throughout this semester, I read this course's texts in the comfort of Seligman House, a beautiful dormitory with a fireplace and smart TV in the common room and a miniature fridge and microwave in every bedroom. (What luxury!) Of course, I was stressed at times, but nonetheless, I was a student at an elite institution that provided room and board, and promised success after graduation. I read *Begin Again* by Eddie Glaude and *The Working Poor: Invisible in America* by David K. Shipler in this comfortable environment. Even though I wasn't experiencing anything close to what was shared in these texts, I was drawn into their worlds. Worry enveloped me. I worried for the people I read about, their situations, and how they would survive. I worried that I would turn the page, and find them in a worse situation. Pessimism also enveloped me. In my heart, I doubted that they would be able to thrive or to enjoy the myth of the American Dream. The cracks that I saw in the economic system became gaping chasms.

I began to question "facts of life" that I had accepted before. For example, when quarantined Americans began to see the value of owning their own home last year, my father, a real estate agent, saw more sales and purchases. This should have been a cause for celebration, but my family and I couldn't celebrate. Instead, we worried about whether the small increase in my father's income would cause my Amherst scholarship to decrease drastically. Back then, I didn't know that worrying about a rise in income was strange. This was my reality, so I simply accepted it as a fact of life; I didn't question it.

I didn't see how ridiculous it was until I was a third-party reading about Christie in *The Working Poor*. She experienced something similar: "Her low income entitled her to food stamps and a rental subsidy, but whenever she got a little pay raise, government agencies reduced the benefits" (Shipler 89). It may be tempting to suggest that if her salary increased by one dollar per hour, then her benefits should decrease by the same amount. Then, the flow of income would remain the same, even though the details changed. However, that was not what happened. "When Christie completed a training course and earned a raise of 10 cents an hour, her food stamps dropped by \$10 a month" (Shipler 91). The little gain she had from an increased education backfired. Even though more certifications can open more doors for people, the loss of food stamps almost encourages them to *not* complete training courses. If they do, then they lose time and money on paying for and taking the course, as well as government benefits; they have to be really, really poor to receive help, but they no longer qualify. If they don't take the course, then they may lose an opportunity to apply for a higher-paying job. Either way, they are stuck on the current rung on the social mobility ladder.

So now, I'm desperately looking for a silver lining. Some hope for Hope. Maybe, at least, the lowest rung has a safety net. If one hits rock bottom, maybe the government will help them. However, I won't find my silver lining here. Shipler writes of another woman, Ann, who "discovered that she was too poor to declare bankruptcy; she would need \$700 for the lawyer and \$200 as a filing fee," which was money that she did not have (Shipler 61). So, her financial counselor "advised her to stop paying her credit card bills, pay the rent and electricity first, save the money for bankruptcy, and file when she had enough" (Shipler 62). For Ann, it is a fact of life that she should accrue interest on late credit card payments in order to "save money for bankruptcy." **How is this phrase even logical? Why are such facts of life so commonly**

**accepted? Why are they not seen as outrageous instead?** In some cases, like mine, I suppose that people speak the phrase “It is what it is” often. Individuals cannot do much to change the economic system, and realizing its outrageousness may only cause more emotional tolls.

In uncertain lives plagued by poverty, if the cost of an additional emotional toll can be avoided, then it most likely will be. (After all, it’s common to “take the path of least resistance.”) Shipler explains that many of the poor do not have “the luxury of rage. They are caught in exhausting struggles” (15). In *Begin Again*, though Glaude focuses on a life plagued by racism, not poverty, he uses the same word: “exhausting” (Glaude XIII). **How does one survive in an exhausting life?** How do people pull themselves out of bed to face a world that does nothing to help them, except to give them the bare minimum so that they can continue working thankless but needed jobs? Maybe they escape to an elsewhere, which Baldwin coined as “that physical or metaphorical place that affords the space to breathe, to refuse adjustment and accommodation to the demands of society, and to live apart, if just for a time, from the deadly assumptions that threaten to smother” (Glaude 129). For Baldwin, his elsewhere was an escape to other countries, where foreign languages shielded him from the news and he wasn’t bombarded with the American Lie, which claimed that America had achieved racial equality.

For those in poverty, it may be difficult to escape to a faraway, physical elsewhere. (In America, even some comfortably in the middle class have to wrestle vacation days out of their employer’s hands. How much more difficult is it for those with unpredictable hours or little pay?) Maybe, then, those in poverty escape to metaphorical elsewheres. One such elsewhere can be an idealized America, where the American Dream of a large house and white picket fence is achievable. In this elsewhere, as long as people work hard, they can succeed; “any individual from the humblest origins can climb to well-being” (Shipler 24). This dream gives hope. It

inspired my parents to immigrate to the United States, and it reassures them that, though they can only give their daughters a humble origin, their daughters can go on to do anything they set their minds to. This story is true for millions of immigrants nationwide. When success stories make the news, the American Dream is reinforced. “Look at them!” others say. “Their hard work paid off. America is a place where anyone can achieve anything.” The American Dream, then, uses the underdog story as motivation for people to keep on working and toiling in the hopes that they will one day achieve success. Such labor makes the country go round.

It’s easy to indulge in such congratulations, and to believe in the American Dream. After all, one cannot deny the blood, sweat, and tears that many successful people--immigrants or not--shed in getting to the top. However, there’s a certain judgment in these congratulations: if you remain poor, then you must be doing something wrong. You must not be working hard enough. You must not be pushing yourself to your limit. The responsibility for succeeding lies squarely on the individual’s shoulders, even when people recognize that an individual is shaped by so much: environment, family, culture, to name a few.

Why does this mentality, this culture of blame, exist? Why don’t people acknowledge that success is a variety of factors, including luck as well as hard work? Shipler attributes the culture of blame to America’s roots. “In the Puritan legacy, hard work is not merely practical but also moral; its absence suggests an ethical lapse...If a person’s diligent work leads to prosperity, if work is a moral virtue, and if anyone in the society can attain prosperity through work, then the failure to do so is a fall from righteousness” (Shipler 25). Traditional American philosophy dictates that the rich have good morals; they have a good work ethic, they are responsible, and they are diligent. These good morals lead to wealth. The poor, on the other hand, are immoral: they are lazy, and care more for present passions than future stability. The only reason they are

not wealthy is because they suffer from an “ethical lapse.” With this perspective, people can blame the poor for their own situations, rather than money-hungry banks offering loans with high interest, public education with few supplies and underqualified teachers, parents who have to choose between heating or eating, and others. The poor are not poor because of their *nurture* (their environment), but because of their *nature*. So, “they get what they deserve.” What an unfeeling, damaging, and unrealistic perspective.

I say it’s unrealistic because laziness is attributed to the poor, but take a look around. Who is serving Amherst College students their dinners when, ideally, they should be home instead? Who is cleaning up every mess that college parties leave behind? Who is manning the 24/7 cashier counter? Who is hunched over a bolt of fabric in a sweatshop, sewing a hundred pant flies in order to make seventy-five cents (Shipler 166)? Those on the lowest rung of the ladder. How are they anything but hardworking? It’s clear that nurture, not nature (as the culture of blame suggests), leads to poverty.

**So, why does the culture of blame still exist?** Perhaps, once people realize that success is a mix of factors, the sense of accomplishment they feel diminishes. The phrase, “I got there all on my own,” no longer rings true. Perhaps, low-paying jobs will no longer be seen as the starting point, but simply as *a* point; wages, then, will have to increase, because it cannot be assumed that people will leave to higher-paying jobs. When the culture of blame is rejected, people at the bottom may move up the ladder. Then, everyone will have to move up, because the economy must “maintain a substantial distance between salaries” (Shipler 189). Why? “It is somehow morally wrong not to pay an accountant more than a secretary” (Shipler 190). Well, what’s the hesitation with everyone moving up? Maybe the current economic system needs people at the bottom of the ladder to steady it for those at the top. If this is the case, then there is no incentive

for people to move and share space on a rung. Inequality undoubtedly exists because there are “haves” and “have-nots.” Inequality continues because the haves do not want to decrease their share of the pie. This is partially why people do not want to reject the culture of blame.

So, many people are stuck on the same rung of the ladder their entire “exhausting” lives. What other elsewheres can they escape to? The first one we examined, an escape to the American Dream, is an unproblematic one. It pushes people to work harder, and to reinforce the American Dream for others. Mainstream discourse will agree that people who escape to this elsewhere deserve success; it is just a matter of time. However, what about problematic elsewheres? What about Ann Brash, who “chose poverty” so that she could spend more time with her children (Shipler 393)? Though her only two choices, emotional security with no financial security or “threadbare financial security” with decreased emotional security, are both undesirable, her choice to escape into an elsewhere filled with her loved ones may be seen as problematic by mainstream culture (Shipler 393).

Ann will have to continue relying on government benefits, welfare, and the kindness of others. Her TV and raspberry purchases will be criticized, even by her own relatives (Shipler 57). After all, why splurge on these “luxuries” when she still has bills to pay? In this way, she belongs to the “unpalatable poor.” Macie Kilgore created this term in class, using Shipler’s words as the definition: these are the people “caught between America’s hedonism and its dictum that the poor are supposed to sacrifice, suffer, and certainly not purchase any fun for themselves” (Shipler 66). According to many, they are losing the battle of willpower. However, for those in poverty, maybe escaping to this problematic elsewhere can help them live and enjoy another day as best as they can.

Why are many unable to feel empathy for the unpalatable poor and understand their reasons for buying televisions or “unneeded” items? The rich may turn to food and drink, so why can’t the poor? Maybe people think that the rich have “earned” their indulgences. The rich have worked hard, so now they deserve a break. However, as we saw before, one cannot say that the poor do not work hard. So, maybe people think that the rich’s good moral character is only hampered a little bit, whereas the poor’s immoral character bleeds further into the red when they buy a little box of raspberries. Either way, the same behavior causes different reactions. Isn’t this the height of hypocrisy?

As a FLI (first generation and/or low-income) student myself, I am so excited for the day when I don’t have to worry so much about my finances. I am excited to take hot showers without worrying about the water bill, about turning on the heating in the house, about eating out more than a few times a year. But as I’m listing out everything that I’m looking forward to, I’m realizing that I have internalized the moral judgments I just denounced in the last paragraph. I can remember a little critical voice rearing its unempathetic head when a fellow FLI friend spent her paycheck on “wants, not needs.” I can remember feeling hesitant about getting dinner from town to uplift my spirits, even when my mother encouraged me to.<sup>1</sup> As I am a FLI student, frugality understandably takes up a large amount of space in my brain; however, it is so easy to become judgmental. Even though I haven’t escaped poverty, in some ways, I am thinking like I already have: I am looking down on those below, who seemingly need only save more to ascend one rung of the ladder to join me.

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<sup>1</sup> How is mainstream discourse so powerful and successful in indoctrinating people that I have absorbed its teaching over that of my mother? My mother is always telling me to prioritize my health over success, and to eat out when I’m feeling sad or stressed, but I find it difficult to not study from 9 in the morning to 9 in the evening, and to open my wallet.

According to Shipler, this phenomenon happens frequently. “Having found their way out of the quagmire, [the formerly poor] cannot stand to see those left behind, who remind them of themselves, wasting their chance” (66). In this statement, Shipler highlights an important question: **who will take care of the poor?** Who will advocate for them? It is difficult for people of similar or lower positions on the ladder to take care of the poor. Their utmost priority is the next paycheck, the next bill. Moreover, “although nobody needs government more than the poor and the nearly poor, they have little influence on its policies” (Shipler 582). Shipler explains why much more eloquently than I can: “Consumed with the trials of their personal lives and cynical about the power structure, most tell pollsters that they find elections uninteresting and politicians untrustworthy. Without getting candidates’ attention at the polls, then, low-income Americans rely on the more affluent to represent their interests” (Shipler 583).

So, the job to advocate for the poor will likely go to people in the middle class and above. However, I am doubtful that they will help the poor. For one, many may be just as indoctrinated as I am, thinking that one needs to save every cent or else they are solely responsible for their lack of wealth. They may attribute good, moral characteristics to the rich and immoral characteristics to the poor. Even if they were once in the same, worn-out, torn shoes, they may be unempathetic, judging the poor when they buy something “luxurious” or “unnecessary.”

Others, who have been in the middle class or above their entire lives, may not even see the poor. The poor, then, “are the forgotten Americans, who are noticed and counted as they leave welfare, but who disappear from the nation’s radar as they struggle in their working lives” (Shipler 23). The privileged may celebrate when the numbers of those on welfare decreases, or grumble about the “laziness of the poor” when the numbers rise, but they often move in their



own circles, seldom coming into contact with those lower on the ladder. The poor are out of sight, out of mind. Who, then, will care for them?

The current system seems dismal and depressing. Politicians aren't prioritizing the inequality crisis; many citizens either do not care or actively judge the poor; there are few opportunities for the poor to move up the ladder, as "poverty leads to health and housing problems. Poor health and housing lead to cognitive deficiencies and school problems. Educational failure leads to poverty" (Shipler 465). So, how do the poor survive? How do they keep themselves from drowning in a sea of pessimism? Well, some escape to an elsewhere. For example, William Butler Yeats says, "But I, being poor, have only my dreams" (Shipler 470). By dreaming, people actively invent hope, and in doing so, they may find the strength to face another day. Other elsewheres are the American Dream, or the love of family and friends. Whatever the elsewhere is, it brings some light into an oftentimes oppressive, anxiety-inducing world. So, have some empathy. It's the least you can do.

## Bibliography

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Shipler, David K. *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*. New York: Vintage eBooks, 2011. Internet resource.

Hope, this is a good essay. You use the sources effectively and as part of a narrative you create. I have some criticisms. One is being overly and uncritically dependent on the American Dream. Much reliable evidence makes clear it is nearly dead. In any case “millions” were tangibly never moved by it., because many never escaped limited circumstances, most Americans at most reached the lower middle class. The number of truly rich is small and these are mostly invisible to the majority of Americans. Few of these recognize how the severe wealth gap limits their life chances, how much are controlled by the rich and now how many rich Trump supporters participate in efforts to destroy democracy. I do like how you use your own voice and life. This is hard material to face, let alone to write well about. A-