

Contemplating the American Dream

By Melissa Lin



My name is Melissa Lin. I am the daughter of Taiwanese immigrants, but I have never once visited or been to Taiwan. I was born in Los Angeles, California, but grew up in Tucson, Arizona. I speak Spanish better than I speak Chinese. (Mi español es mejor que mi chino.) Until recently I had never been to Asia. After going to China, I have learned exactly how American I am—very American.

My parents met while studying at the University of Arizona. Like countless immigrants they came to the United States with big dreams and little money. Although both my parents came to the United States for business studies, only my father was able to complete his degree. After my grandfather died, my father's family could no longer afford to assist him financially. With no other available option, my mother dropped out of her program to get a job so my father could complete his business degree.

My mother's oldest brother sponsored my parents for U.S. citizenship after they were married. My uncle had come to the United States years before my parents and was able to obtain citizenship after completing his graduate degree.

After my father completed his business degree, he was unable to find a job. His heavy Chinese accent was often a barrier during interviews. He eventually found a job translating for a Taiwanese real estate investor. My father traveled across the United States, buying, selling, and managing properties. Later, he used this knowledge of real estate to support our family. My parents settled down in Los Angeles where they managed an apartment complex, and my brother was born. After saving all of their money, they bought a small apartment and later sold it for a profit. Three months after I was born, my parents moved to Tucson. Using the money from the sale of the apartment and a bank loan, my parents bought a small motel.

My parents owned, ran, and lived in that motel for over thirty-seven years. When I was young, my mother worked the front desk during the day while my father performed maintenance and repairs around the motel. My parents hired a night clerk to work the front desk during the

weekdays while my father watched the front desk at night on the weekend. They saved all of their money to send my brother and me to private school.

When I was in fifth grade, the local motel business came under financial distress. Too many motels and hotels had been built. The market was saturated. Several small, family-owned, motels went bankrupt. My parents were determined to survive. My father started watching the motel every night, napping in the morning, and performing repairs and maintenance during the rest of the day. They did this on and off for the remaining twenty-seven years they owned and ran the business.

Growing up, I was taught that America was a great country of opportunity where anyone could reach their dreams through hard work, dedication, and sacrifice. My brother and I lived in the motel for over twenty-five years. He lived at the motel while attending the University of Arizona and medical school. I also lived there while attending the University of Arizona and then law school. Through the sacrifice and hard work of my parents, I am a U.S. citizen. I feel lucky and proud to be an American. Through their example, my parents taught my brother and me the importance of hard work, determination, and a good education. Through my hard work and determination, I graduated from law school and made partner at my firm. I am my parents' "American Dream."

The term "American Dream" was coined by writer James Truslow Adams in 1936 in *The American Epic*. He wrote that the American Dream was "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement." Clark, Jonas, [In Search of the American Dream](#), *The Atlantic* (June 2007). "The American Dream is the belief that anyone, regardless of where they were born or what class they were born into, can attain their own version of success in a society where upward mobility is possible for everyone." Barone, Adam, [What Is the American Dream?](#), *Investopedia*, (Mar. 2020). It "is achieved through sacrifice, risk-taking, and hard work, rather than by chance." *Id.*

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However, the past and recent experiences of Black people, indigenous people, and people of color, including my own experiences, have challenged what I was taught about the “American Dream.” Is America a society where upward mobility is possible for everyone? Can anyone, regardless of where they were born, which class they were born into, or the color of their skin, attain their own version of success?

Or do unseen forces and beliefs, such as pervasive and systemic racism, prevent Black people, indigenous people, and people of color from reaching success? Does pervasive and systemic racism block and prevent members of those groups from obtaining and reaching opportunities that would enrich their lives? Does pervasive and systemic racism even go so far as to threaten and endanger their lives?

If the evidence presented is the number of Black people, indigenous people, and people of color who have made partner at law firms, become CEOs and board members at Fortune 500 corporations, and been elected as national representatives; the wrongful incarceration and conviction of Black people, indigenous people, and people of color like Frances Choy for the murder of her parents; the condition and treatment of indigenous people like the Navajo during the COVID-19 outbreak; the backlash and attacks against Asians during the pandemic like the stabbing of a two-year-old and a six-year-old in Midland, Texas; and the harsh treatment and deaths at the hands of certain

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law enforcement of Black people, indigenous people, and people of color like Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, then my unfortunate answer is yes.

I grew up believing that hard work and determination in America would provide opportunities for everyone, no matter what race you are—white, Black, indigenous, or a person of color—everyone had a chance at the American dream. However, it seems like hard work, determination, and all the things that people believe would lead to success are not the only determining factors. Recent events have highlighted that the existence of unseen and pervasive racism not only prevents Black people, indigenous

people, and people of color from reaching success; it may also threaten their unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

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