

Sofia Dominguez

Mr. Greco

English IV

8 December 2023

Under the Surface: The Illusion of Liberalism and Women of Color

When my family immigrated to Arizona from Mexico City, I stopped being my parents' daughter, at least in the eyes of those around us. My paternal grandmother's Spanish genes had skipped a generation, giving me straight brown hair and light skin. And so, as my mother, Ligia Verona Salcedo Gutierrez, painfully recalls, there were several times in parks and stores in which she was referred to as my "nanny". Not my mother, who had loved me so much she put aside her career and her family and friends for the United States, who played with me and taught me to read. *A nanny*. Like she didn't deserve me.

But now I live in the Bay Area, California, which is regarded as one of the most liberal areas in the country. One of the wealthiest areas in the country. And one would think that my mother has never experienced racism again.

An assumption in American liberal consciousness is that if we move away from the 'bad, conservative' areas, women of color are suddenly freed as they cross state lines into the backyards of multicultural places like San Francisco. But the reality is that affluent communities only create the illusion of progressivism, through a strong belief that institutions are not racist or sexist, and through a colorblind ideology that avoids discomfort in conversations about race. Underneath this generalization of liberalism, people's own biases, stereotypes, and ignorance on systemic racism are allowed to stay unchallenged, as long as it's in secret. Yet women of color do still struggle with racism and

sexism, and the more we let this illusion of progress take hold, the more their experiences are dismissed and their voices silenced, the more they will experience microaggressions and harassment without consequences for the perpetrator. The truth is that inside the illusion of progressivism, women of color themselves become desensitized to their own oppression, and the status quo of racism is solidified and preserved.

To be able to address and expose this racism and sexism, we first have to examine the argument behind this widespread belief of liberalism. When asked about the most liberal aspects of the Bay Area, residents point to its vibrant immigrant communities, its urban neighborhoods in which residents seem to be more conscious about stereotypes in order to respect each other. Here, racism seems less prevalent because people have to be more careful about what they're going to say, because their boss may be from India or Nicaragua. Additionally, the emphasis placed on receiving higher education and working hard is an ideology that unifies the people of many cultures in this area: "[Bay Area residents] believe probably in equality for every race, but not equality if you don't study hard and work hard"(Gutierrez).

But under the surface, things are not so simple. The reality is that the Bay Area is still a center of capitalism, shown by its lack of public transportation and the wide disparities between people of different income levels, and therefore the dynamic that arises from that environment is very conservative. Gutierrez describes this by explaining that even for her, a middle-class teacher, public goods like public transportations are unreliable and inaccessible: "I work in San Jose-from Mountain View to San Jose in public transportation probably will take me 2 hours to get there. And driving takes me 25 minutes. So it's impossible for me to be using something like that". And she continues by saying that

the myth that hard work ‘fixes racism’ in the Bay Area crumbles quickly when one looks at the lives of people “that cleans houses or works in restaurants... they are making a living and probably have work but the way they live is pretty unequal”. The Bay Area Equity Atlas is a data system project made to track equity in the region and provide data for community leaders to address inequities. It is produced by the San Francisco Foundation, the non-profit PolicyLink, and the USC Equity Research Institute. The inequalities outlined by Gutierrez are corroborated by their research in wage growth gaps in the Bay Area from 2010 to 2020. During this time period, workers in the 90th percentile have seen a 20% increase in their wage growth, while workers in the 10th percentile have only seen a 6% increase in wage growth. The Bay Area is not a safe haven of opportunity: it is a place constructed by and maintained by the values of capitalism, therefore, economically, it is quite conservative. And growing inequalities between the upper and lower class burden women of color more, as can also be seen when analyzing trends in the renting crisis. For context, a rent-burdened household is defined as one that pays more than 30% of its total income on housing necessities like rent, utilities, and mortgage payment (Martinez). In the year 2020, the three most rent-burdened groups were Black women (66%) , Latinx Women (59%), and Pacific Islander women (62.4%). This is in contrast to the least rent-burdened groups, which are Asian American men (36%) and White men (37%) (Bay Area Equity Atlas). This is all further evidence of the underlying systemic problems in the Bay Area. Finally, while it may be true that on the surface the relations between people of color and white people are inclusive, supportive, and amicable, the ideology underneath may not be as liberal as it seems. Lara Fernando, a 17-year-old student at Mountain View High School, adds that in the Bay Area “there's a pressure of people who don't have liberal ideologies to conform”, and

has been surprised by many conversations with peers that end up being very conservative. The problem is not necessarily a diversity in ideologies, but rather it is the lie of homogeneity, because through it, racist assumptions, stereotypes, and institutions are not dealt with.

Something that is little known about the experience of women of color in these “liberal” affluent cities is that they are very vulnerable to harassment and aggressions, because they are still seen as weak and less likely to fight back. As a fifty-year-old Spanish teacher who has been living in the Bay Area for eleven years, Gutierrez has undergone things like this several times. When asked about examples of these experiences, she immediately detailed recent experiences she had when going out for jogs in the summer at six in the morning. The first time, she was running around her neighborhood when a man in a truck stopped, got out of his truck, and started following her. She managed to turn into a busier street, and he stopped. Within a week, another man in a different truck also went after her, yelling at her to come inside his truck. Gutierrez went on to say: “It was just such a bad experience, because I [went on a run] to feel better, to relax, to settle my mind... And then, all of a sudden, I needed to start protecting myself”. She connected the experience to her life as a young woman in Mexico City, a time when she was always being “stalked and harassed”, and had to constantly be alert. She added that none of her white female friends who also go on jogs in their neighborhoods have ever complained about being followed. When commenting about the men who had followed her, she said: “It’s like they saw a woman on the streets, and they saw that I am Hispanic. And then they saw: ‘she’s not going to defend herself, so we can do something to her and she’s going to be defenseless, powerless, weak.’”

This thought isn't a stand-alone idea of what these two men were thinking in this specific situation: it has been proven through many cases of hate crimes and aggressions that people of color are perceived as vulnerable, and then they become more susceptible to being victims of hate crimes. This can be seen in cases like one in 2021, when Gabriel Brunson and Sierra Fletcher targeted people they perceived as Mexican or Hispanic in grocery stores and gas stations, proceeding to rob them at gunpoint ("South Carolina Man and Woman Plead Guilty to Hate Crime"). Or it can be seen in the experiences of high school student Michelle Suarez Maeda, who works in a Walmart in Mountain View. She says that the location she works at, "it's a high Hispanic, Filipino and Indian (Southeast Asian) population among the workers. Which is why I feel like a lot of the customers don't seem to have respect for any of us." She has had two coworkers, one also a young Hispanic female, and another an older Hispanic man, who have both been hit by customers with object. "And the customer doesn't really get much of a repercussion. But the management also has failed to report it". She herself has also had an experience in which a white male customer started screaming at her for telling him he had too many items in his cart, and he, too, faced no consequences, and was not even escorted out. The perceived inability to fight back grants a perpetrator confidence that they can act without consequences.

A parallel can be drawn to the recent surges of hate crimes against Asian American women, and how century-long stereotypes and racism is revealed to be quite alive, even in designated 'liberal' cities such as San Francisco. In an interview with Sung Yeon Choimorrow, executive director of National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum, she draws a line between the stereotypes against Asian American women and several historical instances of racism. At one point, Choimorrow refers to the 1875 Page Act, which she says

“essentially barred East Asian women from coming to the United States if we weren't coming with a male family member because we were assumed to be prostitutes.”

Choimorrow says that the generations of Hollywood media and systemic racism have “created an environment where Asian American women are not only disproportionately being targeted, but... [the] majority of these incidents are happening in public places or the attacker is somebody unknown to us” (Gonyea).

And yet, as people who do have never lived through targeted harassment or hate crimes would object, women like Gutierrez can't know the perpetrator's motives for certain: they may argue that the reasons for following or harassing women may have nothing to do with a personal bias towards Hispanic women, but instead may simply be a fault within their character. In fact, they may point out, the event itself was not even “proper” harassment or a crime. These people may share many opinions alike those to the ones journalist Cathy Young develops in her article “Most Crimes Against Women Are Not Hate Crimes”: “Except for one or two sensational cases, such as the 1989 massacre of 14 female engineering students at the University of Montreal by Marc Lepine, one would be hard pressed to think of a gender-based hate crime comparable to the murder of (Matthew) Shepard or of James Byrd”. Furthermore, when Young moves discussing whether domestic violence is a hate crime, she adds that aggressions towards women have more to do with drugs, alcohol, or personality disorders, rather than “patriarchal attitudes”. People who share her opinions may connect these ideas outside of domestic violence, to rape, sexual harassment, and other aggressions: ‘It may simply be that the offenders have other problems, patriarchy may have nothing to do with these problems.’ To validate these ideas, one could look at data such as that in the “2021 Hate Crime In California” report from the

California Department of Justice, noting that the number of anti-female hate crime cases is 8: just 0.5% of all the cases reported. People may question, then, if it's reasonable or logical to put so much weight into the few exceptions of actual hate crimes towards women, let alone common aggressions.

But the reality is that these numbers are only one part of the story, because “smaller”, more common violence towards women like sexual harassment or microaggressions or stalkings aren't reported. Not even my mother reported these two events which bothered her so much. And sexual harassment is really, really common: an online survey conducted in 2018 by a nonprofit called Stop Street Harassment found that 81 percent of women (compared to 43% of men) in the US have experienced sexual harassment. But only 10% of the women surveyed filed a report to an authority figure (“Measuring #MeToo”). Aggressions towards women are so frequent that they become tolerated and normalized, and victims struggle to confront and report their perpetrators. Suddenly, data like the one in the 2021 Hate Crime Report seems incomplete, under-representative of what is truly going on. If this prevalence of sexual harassment is true for the rest of the country, how could it suddenly not be true to affluent communities? Stories like that of Gutierrez are proof that women of color are not so much safer here as more silenced, their problems more overlooked. And it is even more crucial to keep in mind that women of color are put in an even more vulnerable position than white women, because of the intersectional aspect of their identities and oppression. Surges in hate crimes such as the recent one towards Asian Americans may exacerbate the sexism, too, in which stereotypes of Asian American women devalued them even more, even dehumanized them. And these aggressions have major impacts. One of the most common impacts of

sexual harassment is that women start to avoid conflict: they avoid areas they were harassed in, they avoid the people who harmed them or the people who were bystanders: in the same online survey, 23% of the women surveyed reported changing their route or regular routine afterwards, and only 1% reported having confronted the perpetrator. Additionally, in the same study, 68% of women reported having experienced sexual harassment in a public space like a street, park or store (“Measuring #MeToo”). These two facts result in a suffocating and isolating environment in which women of color unfairly have much less access to a safe use of public spaces, which can cause problems with their mental health and even more obstacles in their daily life, and can make spaces meant to feel familiar unsafe, dangerous, as Gutierrez experienced with being followed in her own neighborhood, in a public street doing an activity that anybody should be able to enjoy undisturbed.

And when women share their experiences with discrimination with men-especially white men- their problems and feelings are minimized and dismissed. The root of this problem in communication is privilege: even white men who are “liberal” fail to support of women of color, because they have never had to think about what it’s like to be a racial being in public spaces, and this truth makes them uncomfortable, making them resistant to changing their worldview. As a result, the struggles of women of color are normalized, so they stop talking about them, which perpetuates the blindness towards their problems. Fernando, who is very deeply involved in robotics and engineering, which are heavily male-dominated fields, describes how she has experienced many situations of danger in which she has narrowly gotten away from older men, and how when she’s tried to talk about it with her all-male friend group, their responses are very “victim-focused”. They



often tell her things like: 'What do you do to get yourself into these situations?'. Fernando says that they "have good intentions, they're trying to understand the background [information]", but she says that ultimately "that's how things get shoved under the rug. It's just things people aren't comfortable talking about with". To her, these kinds of experiences are so common that they've become normalized, but to them, "it was a whole new thing that they were fully unaware of". Instead of being empathetic with her struggles and encouraging her to report incidents or look for help, women like Fernando are told to be silent because their experiences are uncomfortable topics. Then, because women of color are not speaking up about their experiences, members of a community are led to believe that there are little to no problems of racism, and men can continue feeling comfortable and undisturbed by thinking that they are exempt from the sexism and racism, and never have to confront the ugly truth.

A key part of this disconnect between white men and women of color comes with the idea of Racial Colorblindness. In Jacqueline Yi's (et. al) study "Ignoring Race and Denying Racism", she uses sociologist Frankenberg's definition of Colorblindness to introduce her topic. As Yi summarizes, there are two parts to this ideology: Color Evasion, which is the idea that 'we should focus on our similarities as individuals and not on superficial racial groups in order to preserve harmony', and Power Evasion, which has several sub-parts. These include Unawareness of Racial Privilege (which is the idea that everyone can achieve success in the system, no matter their race, they only have to work hard), Unawareness of Institutional Discrimination (the idea that reparations like affirmative action are discrimination instead of ways to address the obstacles put in front of people of color in every kind of institution), and Unawareness of Blatant Racial Issues

(avoiding discussions about race because of the discomfort). The issue in conversations between white men and women of color is that white men do not understand that their experiences are not the same for everyone. As seen in Fernando's example, her friends couldn't understand that the level of safety in their life may not be experienced by other people, that being pushed into dangerous situations may be a very rare experience for them, but something much more common to women of color. The idea of Color Evasion may worsen this disconnect because it keeps men from confronting the truths that make them uncomfortable by glorifying this homogenizing of experiences, rationalizing it as a tool for 'harmony' and 'connection'. The subcategories beneath Power Evasion are also strategies used in the Illusion of Progressivism in order to tear down potential equity measures or initiatives by labeling them as "racist" because of how they acknowledge the hidden racism.

Stereotypes also play a big part in the isolation of women of color, because of how deeply ingrained they are. Illusions of liberalism allow them to be left undealt with by hiding them and pushing them aside. In Fernando's experience, conversations around race are frustrating because they "can lead to more stereotypes than actual progress or understanding". She gives the example of comments like 'You're Asian, so math comes naturally to you', which minimizes the issue of race and puts people into boxes, which can make women of color feel like they have to strive to fit into those stereotypes, or else they won't be taken seriously. Fernando finds that a conversation on race ultimately "turns into more of a laughing matter versus a serious conversation. I don't think I've ever been able to hold a serious conversation about it." In robotics competitions, she has been the target of hundreds of sexist microaggressions and invalidating comments, all deriving from stereotypes of what a woman can do or should be able to do. One example of this is how

she's always assumed to be a spokesperson for her robotics team in competitions and networking events, someone who can "speak well" and who was "explained how the robot worked well", and people, mostly men, never believe her when she shares the truth: that she's one of the biggest contributors to the robot, the one who knows the most about it, and that she's the one that builds the most complex parts, and does the most difficult tasks. Gutierrez also shares this experience as a teacher who has had to re-start her teaching career from Mexico, and has only recently been able to go back to teaching. She explains how first interactions with colleagues can be difficult because they "don't know what to make of" her. "Until I give them all my credentials, until I say 'Yeah, I'm a teacher, I study [all] this...'", only then do they hear her and pay attention to her. "But otherwise", she says, "I am [just] like 'another Latina'". Both of these women continually have to re-establish themselves and their credibility with every new colleague they work with, they have to continuously make sure they are being credited for their work, that they are being taken seriously. They are held back by the stereotypes people have against them, things that they can never control or separate themselves from.

And finally, when women of color have experienced these two parts of the cycle of silence that this illusion of progressivism creates, they will start to internalize and then normalize the racism and sexism. In the end, they are blind to their own oppression as a way to cope with the isolation, invalidation, discrimination, and lack of support. Because Gutierrez teaches in a school with a large population of low-income students, primarily Hispanic students, she witnessed a lot of this internalization. When interviewed, she detailed a time when her students were talking about Stanford, and how they believed it was the ideal university. In response, she asked them if they had ever really been at to

Stanford. Most had not. And she told them: "I have, and when I was there, I felt that that place was extremely white. You could see a few Asian origin students but mostly white", making her feel "very uncomfortable". And the students responded by calling her "racist". And she told them, "This is not about being racist, it's how I felt there." She explained that while she was there, she had thought "Wow, it must be very hard if you are not white, to come and to study here because you really don't look like anybody else or almost nobody looks like you, right? How can you feel like you belong there?... And the way [everybody speaks] and the way they behave-it's just very different." She added that it felt very weird to be in such a white university when the area it is located in, the Bay Area, is so diverse and multicultural. For example, while she was studying for her teaching credential in San Jose State University, she would notice that in just "3 minutes walking around, you will see probably 20 different people from 20 different cultures", and that that kind of environment is the same in UC Davis, or Berkeley, or Santa Cruz. It creates a very stark contrast with Stanford, and to her, it's obvious that something is not quite right. But to her students, and to many other people of color that look up to Stanford, that lack of diversity in higher education is so normalized that they don't even question it anymore. They instead internalize it into the message that "prestigious universities are white, less prestigious universities are racially mixed." That perspective is very damaging for people of color, and especially women of color, because it labels them as 'unworthy' of better education, 'unable' to attain a better living standard or socioeconomic status. Additionally, people of color may start to deny the systems of inequality in housing and education and within harassment. After being asked about the statistics on anti-female hate crime cases, Maeda herself even said that "I think there is always a chance you could get hate crimed, no matter who you are

or what you identify with.” This kind of glossing-over of problems of racism is common against people of color who, in order to not disturb this illusion of liberalism, will end conversations by painting over the issue with a racially colorblind statement. Because really confronting these problems would mean to really confront all the discrimination, oppression, and silence that women of color have been subjected to.

And it can feel really overwhelming and terrifying to accept one’s own suffering, but burying your head in the sand fixes nothing. When your worldview and experiences are pushed aside and neglected, it is even more important to stay true to what you’re seeing, to validate oneself, to be one’s greatest advocate. As a response to being questioned if she feels invisible when she talks to white colleagues, Gutierrez said that in some ways, no, because she has “a not very invisible personality”. She continues by saying that she rejects people’s stereotypes or ideas of how she should be, she stays true to herself and says what she truly believes. “And if it is necessary for me to speak out, even in a very big meeting, I will do it. And I am not afraid of speaking up. So that’s why I think people, even white colleagues, I earn their respect. Because they see that I am not shy or afraid.”

Honestly, it’s hard to figure out how to ‘fix’ things as multidimensional and convoluted as racism. It’s true that when we try to address a problem, we make mistakes, and we often make things worse. That’s why even when our intentions are honorable, we as a society may fall victim to lies like those of an illusion of liberalism, because we are still struggling to figure out a way out of a centuries-old labyrinth of systemic racism and sexism. But if we dissociate from the problems we’ve created, from the realities we live in, if we never question why things are the way they are, then ultimately we stop having ties to our community, and to the people around us. And so, I say to all the allies-in-progress, listen

to women of color. When asked what she would like white men to understand or know, Maeda said: "I think it's important to keep in mind not everyone is the same, not everyone has the same experiences...I think I would want them... to just kind of listen. Be open minded, and even when it may seem like it's impossible there's a chance it could still happen... And even if you don't witness it or if you don't experience it... it still happens out there." Like she says, keep in mind that even if you may not acknowledge it, the struggles of women of color still happen every day.

#### Works Cited

Bonta, Rob. *2021 Hate Crime In California*. California Department of Justice/California

Justice Information Services Division/Justice Data & Investigative Services

Bureau/Criminal Justice Statistics Center.

<https://data-openjustice.doj.ca.gov/sites/default/files/2022-08/Hate%20Crime%20In%20CA%202021.pdf>

Fernando, Lara. Interview. Conducted by Olga Sofia Dominguez Salcedo. 27 Nov. 2023.

Gonyea, Don. "There's Been an Alarming Spike in Violence against Women of Asian

Descent in the U.S." *NPR*, NPR, 20 Feb. 2022,

[www.npr.org/2022/02/20/1082012448/theres-been-an-alarming-spike-in-violence-against-women-of-asian-descent-in-the-](http://www.npr.org/2022/02/20/1082012448/theres-been-an-alarming-spike-in-violence-against-women-of-asian-descent-in-the-)

“Housing Burden: Bay Area Equity Atlas.” *Housing Burden / Bay Area Equity Atlas*, San

Francisco Foundation/Policy Link/USC Equity Research Institute, 2023,

<https://bayareaequityatlas.org/indicators/housing-burden?breakdown=by-gender>.

“Income Growth: Bay Area Equity Atlas.” *Income Growth / Bay Area Equity Atlas*, San

Francisco Foundation/Policy Link/USC Equity Research Institute, 2023,

<https://bayareaequityatlas.org/indicators/income-growth>.

Martinez, Nuria Marquez. “Women of Color Face Highest Rent Burden in Bay Area.”

*Local News Matters*, Bay City News Foundation, 8 Aug. 2019,

<https://localnewsmatters.org/2019/08/07/equity-ripples-women-of-color-feel-the-highest-rent-burden-in-the-bay-area/> .

“Measuring #Me Too: A National Study on Sexual Harassment and Assault”.

*2019-MeToo-National-Sexual-Harassment-and-Assault-Report*. UC San Diego Center on Gender Equity and Health/Stop Street Harassment/Promundo/California Coalition Against Sexual Assault/Raliance, Apr. 2019.

<https://stopstreetharassment.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/2019-MeToo-National-Sexual-Harassment-and-Assault-Report.pdf>

Salcedo Gutierrez, Ligia Verona. Interview. Conducted by Olga Sofia Dominguez

Salcedo. 26 Nov. 2023.

“South Carolina Man and Woman Plead Guilty to Hate Crime and Conspiracy for

Bias-Motivated Armed Robberies Targeting Hispanic Victims." Office of Public Affairs | South Carolina Man and Woman Plead Guilty to Hate Crime and Conspiracy for Bias-Motivated Armed Robberies Targeting Hispanic Victims | United States Department of Justice, 23 Aug. 2023, [www.justice.gov/opa/pr/south-carolina-man-and-woman-plead-guilty-hate-crime-and-conspiracy-bias-motivated-armed](https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/south-carolina-man-and-woman-plead-guilty-hate-crime-and-conspiracy-bias-motivated-armed).

Suarez Maeda, Michelle. Interview. Conducted by Olga Sofia Dominguez Salcedo. 27 Nov. 2023.

Young, Cathy. "Most Crimes Against Women Are Not Hate Crimes." What Is a Hate Crime?, edited by Roman Espejo, Greenhaven Press, 2002. At Issue. Gale In Context: Opposing Viewpoints, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EJ3010196212/OVIC?u=los42754&sid=bookmark-OVIC&xid=62fa782d>. Accessed 19 Dec. 2023. Originally published as "Gender War Crimes," Reason, Jan. 1999.