It’s Your Fault, Chicago [1]

December 21, 2020 Memoir [2]
Diversity [3]
Journalism [4]

Report by H Jonathan Klijn

The Day I Became an American



Living in a Chicago high-rise for the past three years has turned me into a pathological liar. I prefer to think of it as social lubrication, however.

Hi, Mrs. Harris. It’s okay, you can get in. Trixie is adorable.

She’s not. She smells like poop. Trixie, that is.

I fantasize about jumping off the roof just to scare my noisy neighbors. I can pull faces as I plummet to the ground, thereby ensuring they'll be guilt-ridden and shamed into trauma counseling for years.

Of course not. Can’t hear a thing. In fact, we often wonder if you’re even at home.

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They are. And the sound emanating from their subwoofers will eventually wake the estimated 4,000 Confederate soldiers buried at the site of today’s Lincoln Park, which is a leafy block or three up the road.

I’ve lived in mostly rural locations in Africa for most of my life, so the adjustment to micro-negotiations in a quasi-community is a constant slog. Even before the pandemic, I had to get used to bestowing instant cheer and random compliments.

What? Could not even tell anyone was up there!

I could. The noisy sex gave it away. The roof deck is right above our unit, and the yellow ‘70s frayed and rickety recliners squeak. A lot. There is also the unspoken but coercive pressure to find *something* to comment on that conveys a modicum of civility yet conceals a bitter truth.

Sure! I want to hear all about Tawny and Amber’s struggle to find patterned lampshades in this old-white-lampshade world.

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Coming from a country with eleven official languages, I’ve had to get used to the pale, planned enclaves of the American city. And yet, I’m still surprised by my visceral reaction to this careful separatism. It underlines the Africanness coursing through my body. Being from Africa is a constant source of pride. And inspiration. Nevertheless, apartheid’s taint fills me, a white South African, with shame. It probably always will. It motivates what I do and how I do it. It informs who I am and who I want to be.

I am, however, more than an inherited lexicon of hate. I’ve been an American citizen since 2019, the next step after a 2014 marriage to my American-born partner of nearly twenty years. But my new nation’s clumsy revisionist attempts at whitewashing history or frequent denials of white complicity in the asymmetric application of justice makes me wonder if the United States has learned anything from observing countries they’ve always pointed a finger at.

Because the battles of inequality and discrimination are still being waged, I read and learn and grab every opportunity to learn more. I keep an eye on social shifts. I gauge political temperatures.

I’ve learned that people—even well-meaning ones who only occasionally argue against the instant privilege bestowed by lower melanin levels—are hard to engage with. Privilege and racism are real, and not just in South Africa. And they frequently appear just down the road.

Chicago’s Near North, which includes Streeterville and the Gold Coast, is curiously non-diverse. At first, I was at a loss for answers when visitors—especially South Africans—picked up on the high level of entitled whiteness of the area. That characteristic is not coincidental, although when compared with South Africa, the optics of it seem blatantly different: less brazen, more matter of fact, apparently justified along economic lines.

As Ta-Nehisi Coates detailed in his 2014 *Atlantic* article “The Case for Reparations,” some of the boldest American cities (including Chicago, Atlanta, and Detroit) developed along racial lines because of *redlining*. On its city maps, the Federal Housing Authority in effect created pockets of wealth and home ownership by insuring mortgages in “stable” neighborhoods, while marking other neighborhoods in red and withholding credit. No prizes for guessing who ended on what side of the red line. From the 1930s on, Black home buyers have been denied mortgages and, consequently, the opportunity to buy property in certain areas.

To further fray my patience, reverse redlining is also a thing: In predominantly nonwhite neighborhoods, services and goods are significantly overpriced due to the relative absence of competition. And that’s not even taking into account the tough-to-digest hairballs 2020 has managed to throw up. As my mother-in-law, a woman raised among Mennonites during the Depression and steeped in frugality, used to say: *poor people can’t afford cheap things.*

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April 2020

I tend to prickliness. As it was, I needed a tranquilizer to survive expressions of white entitlement in regular life sans COVID-19. During times of heightened reality in our altered States, unbearable layers of paranoia, dressed as concern, surface intermittently.

How are you doing…with all this?

Emerging as the most-asked question of the season, it takes on a pointed, invasive tone when sharing elevators with masked neighbors.

Do you think we should suggest the building be more…you know, closed off?

From what?

I’m mildly annoyed and more than a little disappointed that I even fleetingly consider it. But that’s the molasses-like creep of privilege, glossy and accompanied by a wringing of the hands—the defining gesture of pious concern.

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I wonder if anyone in the building has it? We have to do something….

The only thing I’m doing is trying not to sneeze—is it the virus or just hay fever? Those with a particularly virulent strain of affluenza like to coalesce around concepts such as “social distancing” and “lockdown,” without much thought to those who can and cannot afford that luxury.

Keeping others at a distance under the guise of disease, dread, or looming dystopia is a well-worn privileged approach—think apartheid—and it is especially suitable during pandemics. And nothing exemplifies the me-culture of our zeitgeist more than loaded statements about “keeping ‘em out of our building” while balking at wearing masks in shared spaces.

A March 2020 report by the Economic Policy Institute found that less than one in five African Americans are in a position to work from home. That figure drops to one in six for Hispanic workers. All of which takes on even greater poignancy in the aftermath of the execution of George Floyd.

We need everyone to wear masks in the building’s common areas. Especially workers from the outside. We must protect the most vulnerable among us.

The chaise longue midnight-squeaker looks concerned. His tone coarsens on the words “workers from the outside.” I suspect he means “old white” when he says “vulnerable”—it’s remarkable how often they mean the same thing. Take our street, for example. A significant number of our neighbors flout the city’s proximity guidelines, as if they suffer selective amnesia caused by too much feel-good cycling and running endorphins. Or maybe we’re simply confused.

On a good day, nary a mask can be seen on our street. You’d be forgiven for thinking that blond hair and blue eyes guarantee a protection mechanism of sorts or represent some kind of get-out-of-jail-free card. A stark stinging shock then, when I see a Johannesburg news report from Human Rights Watch, one that illustrates how COVID-19’s casualties extend beyond the virus itself or a lack of ventilators.

As part of a draconian lockdown schedule, Human Rights Watch notes, the South African government during early 2020 “deployed 24,389 security forces, including the army and police, to enforce regulations prohibiting people from leaving their homes except for essential purposes.”

By June, South African media will run a story about Calvin Kevin Ilungu Inkongolo, an undocumented Congolese foreign national who made a living by walking dogs in Cape Town. Since any form of dog walking (or outdoor exercise) was forbidden during lockdown, Calvin was denied an income. Emaciated and desperate, he hanged himself from a fence. With a dog leash.

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May 29, 2020

Back in the Near North of Chicago, nothing makes already alert eyes wider than the words “looting” and “Gucci” in the same sentence while dining out in the neighborhood’s Viagra Triangle—so named for the proliferation of patio-dining venues frequented by rich, randy predators and their adoring, obliging conquests.

I swear I see the same men twice on a Saturday. Once for brunch with the wife, and again for a late dinner with a different woman—or man. It is Chicago.

My neighbor is a manager at one of the famed Viagra Triangle hangouts. Good luck trying to break through the veneer of disengagement and self-protection. But if COVID-19 has not done enough to put the kibosh on neighborhood shenanigans, George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis has changed the physical landscape. Shops are boarded up, often in profoundly conscientious displays.

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The Wieners Circle, a Chicago-style hotdog takeout in neighboring Lincoln Park with a devoted following, regularly delivers searing political insight on social and political asymmetries. On this Friday night, their brightly lit curbside sign comments on the deaths of Ahmaud Arberry and George Floyd, the courage of Colin Kaepernick, as well as the threat of police action against Black birdwatcher Chris Cooper:

I CANT BREATHE

I CANT JOG

I CANT KNEEL

I CANT WATCH BIRDS

In that terminally preppie neighborhood, as I walk down a pandemic-deserted North Clark Street, the sign would be funny if it weren’t such a swift kick in the gut.



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May 30, 2020

We’re outside your building—are you coming down?

It’s noon on Saturday. From my building, I can see that all is not privilege-as-usual on Lake Shore Drive. What started

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as a few wayward cyclists and chanting marchers has swelled into a substantial protest. I join my friends from farther up the street and soon get swept up in the crowd making its way down the Magnificent Mile.

Would you like a mask?

In the excitement, I didn’t notice my makeshift bandana-mask has slipped off. Graffiti is going up as far as we can see; several storefronts have already been smashed, and masked figures emerge from pricey fashion stores with armfuls of handbags. Next to me, an older gentleman remarks that *all lives matter*, unable to read the crowd and inept at gauging the temperature. He’s met with unmistakable screaming sideways shade.

Okay, boomer.

One of my neighbors, walking with us as we head toward the Chicago River, is a first-generation Indian American.

White people are so breezy when they discuss racism. It’s disorienting. It’s not how we deal with it. It makes me a little bitter—that some of us cannot be that casual about it.

He reminds me that Chicago is home to Homan Square, a police facility once used for detaining and interrogating thousands without legal advice and no trail for loved ones to follow. Violence was synonymous with the Square, according to Chicago police records, and at least two people are known to have died. Naturally, the secret venue did brisk work primarily with Black men, as detailed in several 2016 articles from an extensive *Guardian* investigation—and, infuriatingly, any documents that might shed light on detentions at Homan Square can’t be found on the Chicago Police Department’s filing system. The men have effectively become Chicago’s disappeared.

We make our way across Columbus Bridge, because the city’s more convenient bridges, such as the one at Michigan Avenue, have all been raised to contain protesters in smaller groups on either side of the river. Forced to walk along labyrinthine Lower Wacker Drive, made famous in *The Dark Knight*’s Batman-versus-Joker chase sequence, we take a narrow set of steps to the surface.

We emerge to see a city erupting in outrage. *This* is democracy beyond headlines and voting booths. It reminds me of the “One Man, One Vote” mantra of the 1980s anti-apartheid movement, except that now, in a country like the United States, the tone is markedly different. Having a vote without your voice being heard is a hollow thing.

I’m surrounded by the motivated and masked, some carrying gallons of milk to wash out their eyes in case of a “non-chemical” pepper-spray deployment at the hands of an increasingly stern-looking Chicago Police. The cops stand guard at Trump International Hotel & Tower, that much-maligned edifice to greed on the banks of the river. I pause to take it all in.

No stranger to bearing witness to social change, while a student at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, I was teargassed during a protest over the May 1989 assassination of Dr. David Webster, a prominent anti-apartheid activist. I was there at the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa, proudly casting my vote for our first legitimate president.

Standing on the Wabash Bridge, I’m aware that the moment has become a movement. Caught in the throng, facing the mayhem, I feel at home. This is where I belong. From the bridge overlooking a city I’ve come to love, part of a ragtag bunch with handmade placards, we’re united by an idea that we are more. *These* are my neighbors—my chosen family.

And caught up in that moment on the bridge—a farm boy from a dustbowl in Africa who didn’t wear shoes until he was six—I become American.

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Publishing Information

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South African-born H Jonathan Klijn made a shift in point of view when, in 2019, he became a citizen of the United States. Reconditioned and assimilated, relocation has given Klijn a fresh view on thorny issues that shaped the country of his birth within a global context. Working in several languages, Klijn is enrolled at Harvard University Extension School and currently writing a book on Southern African/Xam folk mythology. He lives in Chicago.

For more information about H Jonathan Klijn, see his website Boyoyoboy! *[16]*

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