Marshall Poe
Welcome to the New Books Network.

Hello, everybody. This is Marshall Poe, and you're listening to an episode in the Princeton University Press Ideas podcast. This is done in conjunction with the New Books Network of which I am the editor. And today I'm very pleased to say we have Jennifer Morton on the show and we'll be talking about her terrific book, *Moving Up without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility*, and it’s out from Princeton in 2019. Welcome to the show, Jen.

Jennifer Morton
Thank you so much for having me.

Marshall Poe
Absolutely. My pleasure. Could you begin the show by telling us a little bit about yourself?

Jennifer Morton
I'm Presidential Associate Professor at the University of Pennsylvania. I'm a philosopher. Before I came to Penn, I was at UNC briefly, and before that for many years at CUNY, where a lot of the research that went into my book started. I work in philosophy of education, philosophy of action. And I'm really interested in how issues that have to do with class and race and other kinds of social identity affect our agency and how we lead our lives and how we flourish.

Marshall Poe
That's terrific. Thank you very much. So let's turn directly to the book, let’s get right to business. Why did you write *Moving Up without Losing Your Way*? And what were you hoping to accomplish with the book?

Jennifer Morton
Yeah, so the research that led me to write the book started really from an effort to understand my students. I was teaching at the City College of New York. Before I got to City College, I had taught briefly at Swarthmore College, an elite liberal arts college, and I got my graduate degree at Stanford.

And so the student population at CUNY was very different than the student population that I had taught before. I was also a very young assistant professor and knew very little about teaching and so I found that my first year at CUNY, I was really struggling with one figuring out how to teach, but also how to teach these students. Because I realized that so many of my students had challenges that went way beyond the classroom or academic preparation or writing skills. Of course, some of my students had those challenges. But a lot of the challenges they faced had to do with how to kind of lead lives that were very rich outside of school, where they were playing all these important roles in their families, and their communities.

And then they were coming to college to try to get a degree. And I saw them often struggling with a burden of trying to do both of these things at once. It was in an effort to sort of understand my students and try to teach them better that I delved into a lot of the social science and thinking about class and education and also generally the terrific work that has been done on higher education recently.

And as I was reading through all this social science, I realized that there were really important ethical issues here, not just issues about how to support students to get them to graduate, but really thinking about the kinds of challenges the students were confronting and leading flourishing rich, valuable lives.
And so that's kind of the genesis of the research project of the book. My many years of teaching at CUNY, my students, you know, they just gave me so much but they really were very open about sharing with me a lot of the challenges that they confronted in succeeding on this path that a lot of them were excited about, right?

Getting a college degree, getting a good job, being able to help their families and how challenging that was for them, for reasons some of which were economic, but a lot of which were about values and doing the right thing, and, you know, their relationships with their family and their friends, and their communities.

Marshall Poe
So just to frame the discussion a little bit. When we think about the cost of higher education, higher education, being at least in the American mind, the great uplifter, those costs are primarily economic. It costs a lot to go to college. Everybody knows this, but these are not the costs that you're talking about.

Jennifer Morton
I struggled with framing this conversation in terms of cost. But part of the reason that I decided to frame it in that way, is because so much of the discourse in higher education is about financial costs. Right? And so we are used to thinking about financial costs, about the barriers for students to face in terms of not just tuition but cost of living, and that had been where the discourse in higher education had been.

But what I wanted to contribute to the conversation was noticing what the students were giving up in other aspects of their lives that weren't financial. And these are what I call in the book “ethical goods” and it's just aspects of their lives that they value and that are important to all of us leading flourishing lives. So their relationships with their families, to their friends, to their communities, and the value that they derive from those relationships and how involved they were in their identities, right? And so what ends up happening with some students and not all of them, but some low-income students, some first-generation students, is that going to college involves not just negotiating financial costs, but figuring out how to maintain relationships with important people in their lives that might become strained through the process of higher education.

And that's what I was seeking to kind of put on the table. In the conversation we were having about costs, there are these costs that are not quantifiable, they are not financial, they're not like student debt but they are for students an important and often very painful cost that they pay when they find that their relationships suffer from their educational trajectory.

Marshall Poe
I recognized what you're talking about immediately because of my own college experiences. I'm from Kansas in the Midwest and then I went to a rather tiny and really quite excellent liberal arts college, I owe them a lot. I really love the place. But when I got there, I felt a certain amount of, I don't know what to call it, culture clash? Or I didn't really know how to operate in the environment because the other students at this wonderful institution, they had been raised differently than I had, and that was fine. But, it did cause a certain amount of perplexity on my part. It took me a while to develop a new identity.

Jennifer Morton
Yeah. And so there's been a lot of really wonderful sociological work on this kind of cultural divide or cultural gap that some students feel when they get to college, especially colleges that are dominated by students who come from wealthier families, that come from families in which the parents have gone to college, maybe even the same college. Right? And have this wealth of knowledge and this
way of moving through that world, that feels easy to them. And you know, for those of us, like myself that came from like a family where that wasn’t the norm and where I was just raised in a different cultural environment, there can be this feeling of this mismatch.

And that’s definitely a part of what I discuss in the book. I think there is more than the mismatch. And so, the mismatch in a way I think, is a part of this bigger phenomenon, which is that for many low-income students, many students who are first generation, college is the path to a different community than the one that they grew up in. And that involves not just, like, learning the cultural norms, though that’s part of it, but it probably means living in a very different place after you graduate from college than the one you grow up in and becoming friends with very different people than the ones that you grew up with. Also just developing relationships with people that are very different from you and at the same time, potentially seeing the relationships you have with people back home weaken because of this process.

And so the way that I think about it in the book is that it’s important to recognize that these costs are ethical because it concerns student’s aspects of their lives that contribute to flourishing. And what that means is that it’s not just like a psychological burden. There is a psychological burden, of course, and there’s a cultural divide that might lead to anxiety and stress and all of that. But it’s really about these important goods in a student’s life that they’re putting on the line. And these goods are not just goods that are valuable to the student, but to the person they have a relationship with, right?

So for students, who end up, kind of either metaphorically or literally leaving their communities to take advantage of opportunities, there’s someone on the other end there who’s losing something valuable whether its family, although, you know, we maintain the family ties, but it might be friends or members of the community, neighbors, who are feeling this loss as well, that there is an important aspect of their lives that they’re also sacrificing when they see, you know, a talented and motivated student leave and often not come back.

Marshall Poe
This also rang very true to me. I remember after my first semester of college, I went back home to hang out with my people and many of them made fun of me and called me college boy and noticed that I had picked up some weird pretensions. I mean, it’s not like I spoke in an English accent, but yeah.

Jennifer Morton
Right, yeah. And I think it’s the familiar feeling of the people who didn’t make that choice, who stayed, remain connected and have evolved. Their relationships have evolved with each other as you’ve been away, and then you’re coming back-- and I myself have experienced this-- you’re coming back, and it's like, you’re a visitor now, right? You’re no longer part of the community quite in the same way as you were before, and that can be very disorienting especially, and I mean this, speaks to your kind of initial story about getting into, you know, this college campus, if you haven’t quite found your place in this new community, right? And then you feel like I’m losing my connection, perhaps the identity that I had tied to these connections I had with people I grew up with and I still haven’t figured out a space in this new place or a group of friends or relationships that make me feel at home.

And so what I see and in the interviews I conducted were students who felt really alone in this process because the people they grew up with might not really understand what they’re going through, might not really relate to their experiences, but the people around them in the college campus might not understand either, right? And so you’re kind of in this in-between space and that can be quite upsetting.
Marshall Poe
I was very lucky in this way because I think simply by chance I was put on the floor in a dormitory with people who essentially I learned to love and I am still in contact with them. I mean there are five or six people on that floor that I still talk to.

Jennifer Morton
I had the same experience really. A lot of my good friends from college I met that first year, and you do wonder if it’s by chance.

Marshall Poe
Yeah, I still talk to four or five of those people. I talked to one of them yesterday, Richard. And that was just luck. I don’t know if it was luck or not. But it was just wonderful to have that context.

Jennifer Morton
Yeah, and this points to a difference in the experiences that students who go to, you know, often private highly selective institutions often have the resources to invest in aspects of the student experience that can feel like, oh, it’s just chance, right? But they’ve like, thought about some of the student experience and how students move through campus, like how to help students make friends, where students are living, you know, so in some college campuses, you have dorms that are tied to particular ethnic identities. So all of those resources are going into trying to build community on campus.

For students that are commuter students, as my students were in CUNY, that can be a lot harder, finding that community. And often they’re working a lot of hours outside of going to class. So they might be taking a bunch of classes, working 20-30 hours a week, then they go home and their families need them to help around the house. Whether it’s, you know, financially, but sometimes it’s just providing babysitting, providing elder care, whatever it is. And so they don’t really have the time or a space in which people have been putting all of this thoughtful care and resources to make sure that they’re meeting other students and developing those friendships and those connections.

And so for them, and I saw this with my CUNY students, it can be just this kind of process of feeling like you’re not entirely sure where you belong and you haven’t found people in this community you’re trying to join that you feel very connected with, and at the same time, you feel this kind of increasing sense of distance from family and friends and that can just be a very stressful place to be in. And so the institutional differences matter a lot here to what kind of experiences first-generation and low-income students have.

Marshall Poe
See I was going to mention that and I do wonder whether there is some sort of differentiation we can make between liberal arts colleges and large commuter schools, then land grant universities. You’ve reminded me of my mother. My mother went back to college when I was very young and her college experience was entirely different than mine. She went to college and she didn’t really go to college. She accumulated credits. She was trying to get to 120. That was the goal. She was not looking for friends or colleagues or people to hang out with. She had kids to raise, two of us, my sister and myself, and she just was accumulating credits.

Jennifer Morton
Yeah, and this is what has become an interesting area of research in higher education, right? That there is such big differentiation in terms of the higher education sector and we tend to operate with this mindset of, like the liberal arts college, you know, the residential liberal arts college and what that looks like, but of course, many more students are going to community college or going to a
Marshall Poe
In the case of my mom, she needed teacher certification because she needed a job. And that's where it ended. She got the certificate and she became a junior high school teacher and that was that. Yeah, so my experience was entirely different than that, really apples and oranges.

Jennifer Morton
Sure. The way that I conceived of strivers in the book were first generation or low-income students and sometimes these are the same category and sometimes they're not. For example, I was a first-generation student, I wasn't a low-income student by some measures, it depends how you think about it, but some students are both first-generation and low-income. And so I had lumped these two groups together for the purposes of the book and called them strivers and the idea of a striver is someone that is seeking upward mobility through education and increasingly in our country, that is the path through which one even has the chance to move up the socio-economic ladder is through higher education, and this wasn't also always true. 40 years ago, you know, there's this great book and now I'm forgetting the name.

Marshall Poe
That's okay. We forget the names of books all the time here.

Jennifer Morton
[Unintelligible] I believe that they, you know, have this book about kind of upward mobility but within industry, right? So, you might start off as a worker and then you get promoted up and at some point, like there is this tension of upward mobility with your family because now you're the manager, right? Or like the manager of the floor of the factory and that puts you in different relationships with the people that you used to be colleagues with in a different way. But that's changed a lot. And so now, really higher education is the path that we uphold as a path towards upward mobility.

And so to be a striver in the sense of my book is to kind of see higher education as an avenue towards socio-economic mobility. Of course, that is not to say that you don't care about all the other things that you should be learning and the skills but that's how I conceived of a striver. It is someone who is turning to higher education in part or at least one of the reasons is to seek socio-economic mobility.

Marshall Poe
If I understand correctly, you spent a lot of time with these people both while you were teaching at CUNY and you also interviewed them and this kind of thing. Is that right?

Jennifer Morton
Yeah. Yeah. So I many of my students at CUNY were first-generation low-income students. I also interviewed people who had been first generation or low-income students, and were now professionals in the working world and ask them to reflect on their experiences, and I'm not a social scientist so this wasn’t some rigorous study trying to figure out what is representative of those experiences. What I was interested in was this issue of how they were thinking about what they gave up and about their connection to their home communities now that they were, you know, in the working world and a few years out of college and had been quote unquote successful on this path.

And what I found was that a lot of them have very mixed feelings about it, right? And so often the portrayal that we offer students is that they have to work hard and it's going to be difficult and perhaps expensive to go to college. But then once they get that degree and they have a good job, your life will be so much better and all of these different ways.

And what I actually found talking to people who had been successful in this way, was that their feelings were that they had much to gain and I didn't really talk to anyone that regretted having gone on this path, but that there were also losses and a lot of guilt and kind of feelings of loss that I thought were a reflection of what it was that they felt they had sacrificed in order to succeed in this way.

Marshall Poe
Hmm. So let's move on to the cost themselves. And this leads me back to my friends calling me college boy. And then your first chapter, you talk about weakening or loss of relationships with family and friends and ties to the community and you talk about what you found in talking to these people and what you experienced.

Jennifer Morton
Yeah. So there is a wide range here of how much weakening there is in terms of the relationships strivers kind of put on the line, as I put it in the book, in the path of upward mobility. I did find that people whose parents had been incredibly supportive and still maintain very close relationships and were, you know, very connected to their families, despite being in a very different place than their parents had been. But there were also some strivers I talked to who felt this increasing distance from their communities, and their families, and their friends. And so, one of the strivers I interviewed, I gave them the pseudonym Todd, found that as he made his way and was successful in the working world, his relationship with his sister got increasingly frayed because she was in a kind of bad socio-economic position. And she felt like Todd should help her out financially and he did, he did help out his family financially, but she thought it was never enough, and they got into these arguments over how much money he was sending back home. And then, eventually, he told me, he stopped calling as much or visiting as much, right? Because it was this kind of fraught relationship.

And, you know, even though Todd had a lovely wife that he told me about and a good job and a house and all the stuff, he still had these complicated feelings about how distant he now felt from his sister and from his extended family and from the neighborhood in which he had grown up. And, that had been difficult for him to kind of reflect on even as he had been successful in all these ways.

Another striver I interviewed, Henry, who is a white academic but had grown up in pretty extreme poverty told me about the feeling that he had that he had no soul because he had walked away from family. Even though he acknowledged, you know, his sister had battled drug addiction and he was in college or graduate school at the time and he couldn't help her. Right. And he acknowledged that there was little he could have done to really help her given his position at the time, but he still felt terrible that he basically had to cut her out so that he could focus on finishing his degree and he still carried that guilt and that feeling, even as he was now a successful tenured professor. He just kind of still carried that feeling that it reflected something bad about him that he had made that choice.
So those are the sorts of stories that I found in conducting these interviews. And that I think kind of put real face on this somewhat abstract idea of the ethical cost that strivers pay.

**Marshall Poe**

While you were speaking, I was reminded of my mother asking me when I was going to come back and I was not going to come back. It was you know, I try to be very delicate about it, but I never went back. I mean, I would visit, but I never went back and I haven't been back to my home state essentially for 30 years, I think. And all my people are still there. I mean, it's not like I talk to them but the realities of my career were such that it could not happen there. I went where I could get the employment that I thought I needed. But there was always this question of when are you going to come back?

**Jennifer Morton**

Right. And that points to the ways in which the costs that strivers pay are also so dependent on these factors about how we organize the labor market about where opportunities are to be found. And so, you know, even students who would want to come back, right? And I saw this with some of my students at UNC in Chapel Hill because many of them were from rural parts of North Carolina, and so getting to Chapel Hill, is this amazing feat, their parents were so proud. And their friends were so proud. Their communities were so proud. But they also knew that this student was probably never going to come back here. And it wasn’t because the student wouldn’t want to or didn’t care or thought they were better than that, you know, that might be the case in some cases, but it was often because there are no jobs for someone with those kind of qualifications in some of these rural towns. And so, what I think is just as a parent I think about this now. This is kind of a painful thought that your child is going to college and you know that they will not be a part of your community in the same way anymore.

And that’s in effect what you’re signing up for, right? And, yeah, that is such a complicated set of feelings and conversations the students often have with their parents, as they're considering, you know, going to a place, like Chapel Hill, as opposed to go into the local, maybe the community college or another public university that’s nearby in which students are not sort of like making these leaps.

**Marshall Poe**

This is a nice segue to the next chapter in the book, and that is about what I would call, I'm making this up, “student tradecraft” and you see the thing of it is, when I went to college, I didn't know that was it. I mean, after I’d been there about a year and a half and I understood the way people at this college, the way their careers progressed, I soon understood that I was not going back to Kansas.

But I learned a lot about how to negotiate the small liberal arts college and academic life and so on and so forth while I was there, you know, but I did not come with that knowledge and this is really what you're talking about in this chapter. You focus on various things: socioeconomic segregation, and safety nets, cultural mismatch. Can you talk a little bit about those things, about this kind of student tradecraft and how some people don't have it and have to learn it?

**Jennifer Morton**

Yeah. I mean when I got to college, we didn't really have this this lingo around first-generation college students and we didn't really think of that as an identity that people had.
And now we think about it that way. And I think what that shows us is that this concept can be helpful, right? For people to organize their experiences that they might just feel, like, are about their own personal failings or skills. Now you can sort of identify that there is this background of how the institution is constructed, who’s in that institution, the socioeconomic reality kind of outside of campus that is impinging on that kind of experience you’re having of going to college.

And so what I was trying to do in that chapter was to situate these ethical costs in that broader context. Because what happens is that some students, when I talk to strivers, some of them said this, they took the choices they had made to be reflections of who they were, instead of often understanding that they were making constraint choices against a background of socioeconomic inequality about, you know, these kind of cultural mismatch that we were talking about. And so, that actually their choices were happening against these tight constraints and what’s important to understand, I think is that for strivers, succeeding in college and getting that degree can really feel like life or death, right? Failure feels very scary in a way that for some students, not doing so well or maybe needing a semester off or whatever it is, might feel not as scary because they are somewhat familiar with what going through college is. They might have parents that are checking in with them and talking to them about, not just are you doing okay, but what classes are you taking? Are you finding this class hard or have you gotten to talk to the TA, you know, all of this really valuable information. Students are conveying to their parents who are in the know whereas first-generation students and many low-income students don’t have parents that can guide them through that. And so for them, and I thought this as a first-generation college student, it feels like you’re doing it on your own and you cannot fail, right? So that raises the stakes of really doing this well, whatever that means. But it can also make you feel like the failures that you do encounter or the choices that you make that you feel uncertain about reflect something about you and your abilities or your skills or your values or your identity, instead of really noticing that there are all of these factors at play in why you’re feeling this way or why you’re in this situation.

Yeah, I’ll give you an example. I had this kind of “aha moment” in graduate school about something that happened my first year of college. I had done very well in my international baccalaureate math exams as a high school student, so when I got to college, I went to advising, which often is quite terrible in many places, right? And so, I was talking to the advisor and he said, “oh you have done really well on this test, take this math class,” which was the most advanced math class that you could take as a first-year student. It was for math majors. All right, and I had thought maybe I’d be a math major because I like math and this class was you know, I got there, there were maybe three or four other women in a class of 40 some students.

The professor had to solve some theorem, like he was on the splash screen for, you know, the college cover. Splash screen of the webpage. He never made eye contact with anybody. He just came into the room and just wrote on the board. Never turned around. Never looked at us.

So I got to my dorm room looked at the homework assignment, opened that up and it said, you know, something like prove that three follows from two and two follows from one, you know, like it was a real analysis class and I had no idea. This had nothing to do with the notes I had taken in class. I had no idea how to connect it. I didn’t know what to do. And of course, immediately, I was like, I just must not be very good at math, as good at math as I thought I was coming into college.

So I dropped the class, never took another math class, right? I took, I think it was like, astrophysics or something to fulfill my quantitative requirement. Years later, I get to graduate school in Philosophy and as part of logic, we have to do real analysis and do set theory, kind of basic set theory and once I was sitting in that class, I was like, “oh! I could have definitely done that if I had the knowledge of who to talk to.” I later discovered a lot of the students in my class had just gone to the to the TAs because they also did not understand what the professor was saying, it turns out I did not fully
realize that. There was and is still this issue of like minorities and women in math and how unwelcoming math can be to people. But I didn’t really understand any of that. I just walked away thinking this is about my lack of math ability. You know, I thought I was good at math, turns out I wasn’t. And later as I dug into it and kind of conceptualized stuff, I saw my experience in a whole different way. And so I think understanding this background can really help students in that situation kind of put what they’re seeing in the right context instead of thinking this is just about me understanding, this is about who else is in the classroom.

There’s a history here about why there are only four women in this class. And, you know, 40-some men and sort of putting all of that stuff in context can really, I think, help you navigate a situation like that. And so, my hope with writing the book was sort of putting a name on the ethical cost, right? And kind of explaining how they’re connected to this background would help someone who was in that position and was feeling tempted to draw the conclusion that maybe college wasn’t for them or that, you know, that they’re a bad brother or a bad sibling or a bad son or daughter because, you know, they’re making these choices that distance themselves from their families that it’s a product of this background structure and not really about them personally having bad values or something like that.

Marshall Poe
What I remember is the weight of expectation, both from home and also from the students that I met at this college. It’s a wonderful college too. I don’t want to say anything bad about this place. It’s a great place. And just, for example, the idea that you would take a semester or a year off was anathema, you had to finish in four years. There was no choice. If you did not finish in four years, you fail and of course, then I later went on to be a professor and I spent about half my time telling people to take a semester off, it doesn’t matter, not one bit. Not at all over the course of your life. It will improve your life, you know, but still there was this notion like four years. And that’s it.

Jennifer Morton
Yeah, exactly. And I think that a lot of the expectations around what it is to be a successful college student, in some ways have gotten worse in some schools. I mean, this might just be, you know, as you probably know when you’re looking back at when you were in college and you see what college students are going through, you’re liable to engage in this like “back in my day.” Students just have this heightened sense of anxiety that they should be professionalized in their college attendance, right? That they should have figured out how to get the most out of college, what internships to get, what classes to take to position themselves for various fellowships.

And there is this heightened sense of anxiety about this time in their lives. That, you know, we initially tell them is going to be great, you’re going to have so much fun, you’re going to find yourselves, you know, whatever it is. And then, as I see it with my students, a lot of them have a lot of anxiety about what the college experience is supposed to look like, or what it’s supposed to be like or how to do it right.

Marshall Poe
Yeah. I look at it from a different angle. So the expectation from my people at home was, you’re going to finish in four years. That’s it. If you didn’t, you’re a failure. But then to kind of turn it around a little bit, I fell in with this group of people at this college, who went to the library all the time. I did not know people did that. I did not know that. And so I started to do that, you know, because I kind of wanted to be with them and do what they did, they were the cool, kids or the kids I wanted to hang out with. This turned out to be a really great thing because I did pretty well in school.

Jennifer Morton
Yeah, it is kind of about finding your way to a place where you feel connected to others, and that new community, you're trying to join, right? And I, so when I was in college, I was an undergraduate at Princeton, which famously has eating clubs that are controversial and, you know people think of them and they are exclusionary in all sorts of ways.

I had a fine college experience in a way because I just didn't even participate in that. I found my friends who were also people that didn't want to be in eating clubs, a lot of them, and I kind of navigated around that by kind of opting out of the typical Princeton experience, right? I think what gets harder is, and I talked to students who experience this, who are interested in participating in that kind of mainstream experience, right? And like, what is a particular kind of experience at their college but feel that because of their socio-economic background, or their lack of understanding some of the cultural context, they can't really do it unless they engage in a fair amount of somewhat deception or hiding of who they are or where they come from.

And that can be, I think, very challenging for students that, you know, instead of opting to kind of find their crew outside of that mainstream, are really trying to be a part of that, experience that they've been sold. That experience for them can feel very alienating and very anxiety provoking when they feel like they can't afford to go to the restaurant in town that their friends go to every week. But they also don't want to opt out of that and feel like they're the weirdo that says they can't go there. And so there's all of these dimensions of how class plays out in students' college experience that can really be devastating for some students. And even as, some of the people I talked to, even as they quote unquote succeed and they find friends in that kind of world and do well, and get the job. So, you expect afterwards, they kind of carry this sense of, like, do I really belong here?

**Marshall Poe**

So I don't want to make this interview a love letter to small liberal arts colleges in the Midwest, but at Grinnell, there just wasn't any possibility of any of that because there really was nothing to do. There was no restaurant to go to really and there were no eating clubs or no sororities or fraternities. There was no football team. There was no way to show that you were wealthy, nobody had cars.

**Jennifer Morton**

But some of that does come out in all these other ways, right? Like more people go for spring break. So people will plan with you. Like let's go to the Caribbean or Cancun when it comes. Yeah, and this currency of also knowing your way around, right? And knowing how to do the college thing. I think is the kind of thing that can feel alienating to students who are just trying to figure out how to get through it.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah. Well, this is a nice segue to your discussion of code switching. And I think what happened with me is I switched codes and never went back. I think I was a kid from Kansas and I just kind of became somebody else. So, can you describe code switching? It is ethically fraught. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Jennifer Morton**

Yeah, so I think it depends on what community that you feel at home in before you got to college and what you're being asked to do the code-switching for, right? So people who have thought about code-switching in terms of race, and in terms of language, also kind of think of code-switching as this ability that you have to be fluent in the cultural norms and in the language of two different worlds. So the easiest way to think about it is with respect to language, you know, I'm bilingual. So if I go
back to Peru, where I'm from, I speak in Spanish and then I come here and I speak in English and I'm kind of switching back and forth.

The intangible aspect of code switching can be just changing what sort of things you say, the tone you use, how you dress and all of that to fit into a space. Now, everybody code switches to some extent, right? You don't act and talk the same way at work that you do with your kids at home or with your pals on the basketball court or whatever everybody does. The thing that's tricky for someone like a striver on a college campus is that code switching can feel very much like trying to play a part on somebody else's terms, right? You're trying to fit in, to be accepted in this context in which you feel like the stakes are very high that you do it well.

And at the same time it might feel like people like you generally are not the norm or not accepted or somewhat marginalized. And so you're trying to act in a way that will make you more acceptable or make you feel more connected.

Marshall Poe
It makes you feel inauthentic, if I can use that word.

Jennifer Morton
Well, that may be. But so some people feel that inauthenticity and that is definitely the experience of some people who are code-switching. I think for others it might be the sense of losing a grip on how far you're supposed to take it, right? And that's what I meant by ethically fraught, which is, “Sure, I'm trying to succeed here. I'm trying to do well and be friendly and to, you know, do right by the standards people use around here.”

But some of the standards and the norms that people might be buying into, might be ones that I don't think are right, or I reject, right? And yet, I might pay a price for resisting them. So in the book, I talk about the example of when I was an undergraduate and I was a philosophy major, a lot of the philosophy culture, this has changed some now, was very combative and very argumentative and really being the kind of person that could raise an objection to somebody's view that would take them down was seen as the kind of thing that got glorified. Now, I didn't, as an undergrad, didn't really have a very good sense of exactly what I was doing. I just knew that was the thing to do, and that was the thing that was valorized and valued in that community.

And so I did that to some extent and I was reasonably committed to doing it and definitely felt rewarded in some ways. And it's only later as I started to reflect more on the demographics of the profession. And not just me, but I think philosophy as a field, had a reckoning with, you know, why are there so few women, why are there so few people of color, kind of what is happening in the field that I really kind of noticed the ways in which I was acting that I had just sort of adopted that really contribute to this environment in which some people felt very put off by philosophy. Even though they might love the readings and some of the topics and have a lot to say. But there was something about the combative environment that really turns people off and I had somewhat unconsciously just adopted that way of approaching this aspect of my professional life. And it felt like I was fitting in. But then, on reflection, there was something really problematic about that. And so, I think there are many examples of this in the professional world, where we think, “Look, I want to do my job. Well, this is the way things are done around here.” But some of the ways that things are done around here are systems of exclusion that are meant to exclude people that are, you know, from low-income backgrounds, that are meant to exclude people who are minorities or women depending on the space. And sometimes we just unconsciously simply adopt those ways because we want to code switch successfully.
And so, I think there is this kind of aspect of it that can be ethically fraught. And it goes the other way too. So you go back home-- and I talk in the book about a striver that faced a situation, when back home is trying to reconnect with her community. She moved back there. It's like a rural farming town and she found a job that allowed her to do the kind of work she wanted to do but in this farming town, but then she all of a sudden noticed how many racist things the people in her town were saying. And now that she had left, she became a little bit more aware of the problems with that.

It was really grating for her. And so, she had this conflict. If I say something and say this isn't right, you shouldn't be saying this, that thing you said is racist, people were going to react to her by saying things like hey, you college girl...

Marshall Poe
This exact thing happened to me when I went home for a summer job, and I worked at the factory, and there was some sort of typical racist banter, I would put it that way, and I remember thinking, like, I need to say something, but I can't say anything. Like this isn't right, we can't be doing this, and I did eventually say something and it did not turn out well for anybody involved, it really didn't and I probably would have been better if I just shut up and then, you know, gone away, right?

Jennifer Morton
It's a kind of a parallel situation in which you go back and you want to fit back in with your community, with people you grow up with, but then, there are things that you've gained, a critical perspective of that, you want to be able to criticize and that is disruptive.

Marshall Poe
This is a really nice segue because you talk in the in chapter 4 about ethical complicity, that you are complicit with a system, which is kind of unfair, you know, it's good in many ways. It does help a lot of people get out of poverty. It is an engine for upward mobility. That's all great. You learn a whole bunch of really cool stuff. You know, that's neat, but there's some things about it that are imperfect. And you might find yourself to be involved in some sort of ethical complicity. Can you talk a little bit about that? And you say, you say that needn't be the case and it shouldn't be the case. Two different sorts of propositions. So can you talk a little bit about that?

Jennifer Morton
I think it's difficult for any of us living in the kind of world we do to really avoid complicity, right? So many of us work or operate within systems of oppression. So, you know, whether it's a corporation, or could be a university, or, you know, we kind of operate in this world in which the labor market rewards us for doing our jobs. Well, but doing our jobs well often involves looking over or ignoring some aspects of the institution we are in that might be oppressive in some way. So you just had the example work in the factory floor, right? And you're not going to necessarily say stop saying that racist stuff or you did but you think like maybe it would have been better if you didn’t.

And so that's like a small example, but I think it's really difficult for most of us not to end up doing that to some extent. And I think for strivers it can feel very fraught because you've worked so hard to get this job and to get this far and you don't want to lose that and so it can feel really hard to push back against things that you notice there that you see that you think are wrong and problematic. And so, you know, I remember at one point I was at a talk at an unnamed university and there was something about the talk. I thought this person's being really racist like some of the statements that they were making were just highly problematic. And I remember just later talking to the one other like person of color in the audience who had that exact same feeling. And we were just kind of like whispering in the background and, you know, we were both in somewhat non-senior non-powerful positions within this community. And so we just felt like we are just going to whisper here to the side
about what we thought was messed up about this, but we weren't going to get up and say something, right?

Like we might have but it might have come at a cost and they might have, you know, made it difficult for us to kind of be seen as good members of the community within this particular space. And so I think that there are these situations in which we feel like there’s a lot at stake for us. We’ve worked so hard to get to this position and yet we see something that we think isn’t right or that excludes people or hurt people.

And so what I argue in the book is we have to be really reflective about kind of pushing back on those points. And that might mean that sometimes you’re quiet, right? Sometimes you might be in a very vulnerable position, you are a graduate student and some senior person in your department says something that you disagree with and you think if you push back, it might be that they have a grudge against you, maybe you know this person has a history of doing that.

I think in that situation you make a note and later when you’re in a position with more power, there might be things that you can do and moments you can say something, but it is a tricky negotiating that you have to do. And it doesn’t mean that if you say something that was the wrong thing to do, of course, we all admire the bravery of someone that stands up even when they have a lot to lose. But I think for strivers in particular who often feel vulnerable in this way because this is such a difficult path to be on, it can be hard to negotiate these conflicts that they face between being complicit and maintaining the position that they earned by navigating this path of upward mobility.

Marshall Poe
This negotiation that you have with the world is kind of the essence of the human condition. Really like you’re constantly negotiating these things and it’s very difficult.

Jennifer Morton
That’s right. I think what’s important though, and I try to remind my students, is that as they make it through there are things that you can do to kind of push back. Right? So I like to think about it as boundary-pushing within your role and also, you know, they’re people who of course are involved and are organizers in changing the larger structures, but even within your role, I think there are often places where you can sort of push back. And of course, as you quote unquote, make it, you are further up the hierarchy, there are more and more places where you can push back and you’re in a better position to do so, but it can be difficult to keep track of that if you’re worried about your own path.

Marshall Poe
Especially in a highly competitive environment because, you know, everybody’s looking for an edge and you don’t know if the other people that you’re dealing with are honest brokers or trustworthy. I think you see a lot of this online, quite honestly, when people are dealing with people they don’t even know and they’re saying things that you know, I don’t know about you but I am not on Twitter. I don’t trust myself to do it and it’s just yeah. But this negotiation, it’s really a very universal thing that you have to try to, you have to know when you can push back and know when you can’t push back and thinking about that itself is kind of a hassle.

Jennifer Morton
That’s why you need ethics, and it’s sort of that kind of reflection. I agree. It’s very difficult. But if we don’t do it, then the way I think about it in the book is you just get pushed around by the social
forces and you’re not really in control of the path that you are pursuing and then you find yourself ten years down the line somewhere and you’re like, “I don’t know that I liked how I got here or that I’m entirely happy at work where I am.” Yeah.

Marshall Poe
Yeah, that’s absolutely well said and it’s a good note to end the interview on. We have a traditional final question on the New Books Network: and that is what are you working on now?

Jennifer Morton
Well, you know, this is a very kind of long-term goal because right now I have a four-year-old and I just moved institutions. Things are a bit chaotic, but I’m interested actually in where we ended up which is the question of what happens after college and how people use what they learn in the liberal arts education. While we tell them the critical thinking, the reflectiveness to carve careers for themselves, where they feel like they’re doing something that helps the public good in someway that gives back to their communities. But that might also be interesting and engaging, right? So we kind of have these standard paths. So we think about, like, you could be a teacher or work in a non-profit or be a social worker which are all amazing things to do. Lots of my friends are teachers and I, you know, love them and what they do, but I think that for college students in particular, we don’t have a great description of the many paths that they could follow after college that would be contributing to the public good, but maybe not in the way that you think about it. And so I’m interested in interviewing people who have gone on to have interesting careers and whether it’s art or business, but are trying to be reflective about how to deal with this potential complicity, and actually give back and contribute to the public good.

And I really just started thinking about this because my students when I give the talk about my book are like, “You know, this is so interesting, what can I do? What happens after we leave?” And we don’t really have a good answer for students. I mean we have very standard answers, but that’s not, you know, those of us who are now many years out of college know that it’s rare that you get there in a straight line, that you major in history, and become a history professor. That’s a very narrow range of the cases.

Marshall Poe
It’s very funny you mention this, and then I will let you go. I was looking at my CV the other day and I don’t know, the older I’ve gotten the shorter my CV has gotten, but I was looking at it, and I was like, if you were a historian and that’s all you knew about me, you would have the completely erroneous impression of what happened. Because it’s basically greatest hits and it was nothing like that.

Jennifer Morton
Well and it’s also to students that get into this idea that they’re like should I major in history or biology because of how it will position them in the labor market? And they really have no sense of what you might end up doing with a history degree or what you might end up doing with a Philosophy degree. Well, I want a richly described set of cases that are not just you know, oh if you’re philosophy you might end up directing a Hollywood movie.

It’s like how does that happen? How do you get from, you got your degree and now you own a bakery that has like a prison reentry program attached to it. How did you get there and I’m so interested in that.

Marshall Poe
The advice that I always gave, I don’t want to keep you too long, it was for students who ask this question. What should I do now? And I said, decide what you want to be, find the person who is that
person and then go ask them. How did you do it? And yeah. Yeah, not by email. Go. See them. They'll tell you, they will tell you how they did it.

Anyway, Jennifer, thank you very much for being on the show. We have been talking to Jennifer Morton about *Moving Up without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility* from Princeton University Press. I'm Marshall Poe. I'm the editor of the New Books Network, and I'm the host of the Princeton University Press Ideas Podcast, and I hope that everybody tunes in again. Thanks, Jennifer.

Jennifer Morton
Thank you.