

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

The Official Journal of The White Privilege Conference and The Matrix Center for the Advancement of Social Equity and Inclusion.

Consumerism as Racial and Economic Injustice: The Macroaggressions that Make Me, and Maybe You, a Hypocrite

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Abstract

When Gorski started to take stock of his own behaviors and how they might contribute, even if indirectly, to racial injustice, the only conclusion he could come to was this: he is a hypocrite, especially when it comes to consumerist behaviors. In this essay he discusses consumerism as a series of MACRO-aggressions that feed racial and economic injustice in which nearly all of us, in one way or another, are complicit.

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Acknowledgement: Many thanks to Azadeh Osanloo for fantastic feedback on this essay.

I am writing this essay to come clean. When it comes to racial justice, or really any kind of justice, I am a hypocrite.

Learning about racism, for me, has been a continual process of the same basic routine. Just when I think I have somewhat of a grasp of what racism is, some new bit of consciousness comes along and whacks me right in the hind end, reminding me that I don't know squat. Like many White people, my introduction to conversations about racism started with the assumption that it was purely interpersonal. *If we can just figure out how different racial groups can get along with one another, everything will be cheery and sweet.* Then—*whack!*—oh, it's *institutional*, it's bigger than individual relationships. I started to wrap my mind around that, and then—*whack!*—oh, it's *global*, it's connected to a history of imperialism. And so on. I easily could implicate myself at any of these levels of racism. But recently, a couple of experiences conspired to give me the latest whack, and it flattened me. The gist of the whack is this: every day I participate in pervasive systems of oppression, not just through microaggressing or reaping the “benefits” of White privilege as they normally are understood, but by consuming mindlessly in ways that exploit already disenfranchised communities.

In this essay, I describe what is very much an emerging theoretical framework for understanding what I have come to call *macroaggressions*. Macroaggressions are the ways I comply with these big-level consumerist-capitalist systems that perpetuate racism and economic injustice, despite the fact that I do not intend to exploit the people I exploit in my complicity.

I begin by describing two experiences that led to the most recent

reevaluation of my relationship with systemic racism. Then, drawing on two important theoretical concepts—intersectionality and microaggressions—that informed my view of these experiences, I introduce macroaggressions as a theoretical framework for examining a brand of racism and economic injustice characterized by participation in oppressive consumerist practices. With these theoretical tools in mind I examine three of my own macroaggressions, illustrating the embarrassingly enormous gaps in congruence evident in my life, as somebody who identifies as an advocate for racial and economic justice. I end by describing some of the ways I have chosen to strive for greater congruence.

Experience #1: Sodexo as a Diversity Leading Light

In 2012 the InterNational Multicultural Institute (IMCI), a nonprofit organization in Washington, D.C., announced the recipients of its annual “Leading Lights” awards for workplace diversity. One awardee was Sodexo, a company with a long and worldwide history of human rights abuses (Human Rights Watch, 2010; TransAfrica Forum, 2011). The idea, I guess, is that if you have a diverse workforce at the corporate headquarters, it doesn't matter that you refuse to pay workers in the field a living wage or that you fire workers who are trying to unionize. It doesn't matter that human rights groups found that you were abusing workers in Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Guinea, Morocco, and the United States, denying overtime pay or paying the lowest legal wages. Even if you treat your most disenfranchised workers as disposable, as long as the suits in the corporate office

play nice with each other, according to the IMCI, you deserve a diversity plaque.

That got me thinking about the university where I work, George Mason University (GMU). It has been recognized and celebrated as the most diverse university in the United States (Walsch, 2005). At the same time, the university is full of underpaid Sodexo workers, a vast majority of whom are people of color and most of whom are immigrants. Sodexo runs GMU's food services. I hate to think about how many times I went to a program about racism in higher education at the university, and then met friends on campus for lunch or dinner to talk about the program, never thinking that by giving our money to Sodexo we were contributing to a worldwide system of racism and economic injustice.

Experience #2: My Trivial Needs

The middle of last year I was editing an essay about the exploitation of nonhuman animals for human profit written by animal rights activist, Jennifer Hickman. Buried in her essay was this line: "Animals don't exist for human entertainment, sport, or utility, and we ought not to deprive them of their *vital* needs in order to satisfy our *trivial* needs" (Hickman, 2012, p. 3). I shivered at that sentence. Even now, two years later, I still shiver at it.

Try this experiment: If you have a bag with you that has any form of cosmetics in it—makeup or hand sanitizer or lotion or anything—remove one item and study the packaging. If it does not say, "This product was not tested on animals," that means animals were tortured so you could use that product. They were forced to ingest it. It was rubbed into their eyes and injected into their

skin. You might look at your animal-tested hand sanitizer and think, "That's not trivial to me, it's vital." Well, no it isn't, because you can buy hand sanitizer that wasn't rubbed into animals' eyes. You can buy shampoo and cosmetics that weren't tested on animals. It's less convenient, maybe, but if you have any leisure time at all and if you can afford to pay a little more for those products, then that is an example of depriving living creatures of their vital needs to satisfy your trivial needs. I have spent my life mindlessly consuming products that were not essential to me, clueless that sentient creatures suffered somewhere in the production process.

That example was about the exploitation of animals: how elephants or dolphins or racehorses are tortured to satisfy our trivial cravings for entertainment; how farm animals are tortured to satisfy our trivial cravings for cheeseburgers; how foxes and other animals are tortured to satisfy our senseless cravings for clothes made with fur. And really, for me, that ought to be enough to rethink much of my behavior. Research has begun to show how all sorts of animals have a consciousness that is similar to the human consciousness (Keim, 2013; Savage-Rumbaugh, Fields, & Tagliatalata, 2000). They feel fear. They feel pain. They grieve. They know when they're being tortured.

But then I began thinking about Hickman's quote in a different way. My mom's family is from poor Appalachian stock, most recently based in western Maryland. They, like most poor people in Appalachia, were at one time subsistence farmers. Two industries put a terribly violent end to that way of life: the coal industry and the lumber industry. (Of course, White people in that region, including my forebears, were, themselves, occupying land

that was stolen from Native Peoples, so there are layers of violence in this story.) Coal and logging companies did so much damage to the land, with their clear-cutting and run-off and waterway pollution, that many poor subsistence farmers were forced to stop farming. And what work was available to them? They could join the military or work for one of the industries that were destroying their livelihoods and eviscerating their communities. Several of the most recent generations of men on my mom's side of the family were coal miners. Then, like now, coal mining was among the most dangerous, exploitive industries in the world.

Try another experiment: Think, for a moment, about the community that is home for you. Now imagine that your only employment option is work that destroys that community: polluting it, filling it with contaminants, causing illness in your own family and your neighbors' families. That's what a lot of poor people are forced to do, from coal miners to factory farm workers, limited, as they often are, by whatever industry happens to be nearby.

I started thinking about my mom's peoples and the generations of men my family lost to black lung and other ailments associated with the coal mines. I remembered the pristine beauty of Appalachia and how much of it has been destroyed right out from under poor people of every racial and ethnic background. And that helped me make the connection. Here, I recognize, is part of my hypocrisy: It's happening to *my* people, so suddenly my eyes are opened and my outrage spills over.

I came to recognize that, when I choose how I'm going to live, when I choose what I'm going to consume, when I choose which corporations and industries

I'm going to support, *this* is what I'm choosing: the extent to which I am willing to help deprive people—especially disenfranchised people, poor people, people of color, indigenous communities, children—of their vital needs in order to satisfy my trivial needs. I am choosing the extent to which I am willing to support the worst of global racism and sexism and economic injustice for the sake of convenience or for the social cachet of owning or consuming this or that trivial thing: a fashionable pair of shoes, a computer gadget, a sugary beverage, or a stylish piece of furniture.

When I think about my choices and their lack of congruence with what I pretend is my commitment to racial and economic justice, I have no choice but to admit, I am a hypocrite. And while it is true that I have dedicated my life to confronting *some kinds* of racism and *some forms* of White privilege and *some acts* of economic injustice, and while I think I have done some worthwhile social justice work in my life, it is equally true that a basic review of how I participate in consumer culture, the everyday ways I live my life, would uncover a myriad of ways I contribute to what I have come to see as one of the most destructive forms of exploitation: the ways I deprive disenfranchised communities of their vital needs in order to satisfy my trivial consumption needs.

Cognitive Tools for Assessing Vitality and Triviality: Intersectionality and Macroaggressions

As somebody who tries to live his life in socially just ways, I find that reflecting on my consumerist complicity forces me into some difficult cognitive and

spiritual territory. I no longer can avoid acknowledging connections among several types of violence it has taken me a 41-year lifetime to start taking seriously. I have begun to rethink much of what I thought I knew about being a social justice educator and activist. A couple of cognitive tools have proved helpful in this process, allowing me to begin making sense out of this mess of exploitation and how it is tied to my patterns of consumption.

Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) popularized the term *intersectionality* to describe the recognition and examination of sameness and difference within identity groups. Other scholars, such as Nana Osei-Kofi (2013) and Nina Lykke (2010), have buttressed the theoretical foundations of intersectionality, tweaking it into a robust conceptual tool that complicates all manner of discourse on social justice. Lykke describes it as a

tool to analyze how historically specific kinds of power differentials and/or constraining normativities, based on discursively, institutionally and/or structurally constructed socio-cultural categorizations such as gender, ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, age/generation, dis/ability, nationality, mother tongue and so on, interact, and in so doing produce different kinds of societal inequities and social relations. (p. 50)

Stepping back a few paces from this construct, I believe that the entire sphere of intersectional human identity and oppression can be placed, with all its complexities intact, into an even *bigger* intersectional model that considers the relationships between human exploitation and liberation,

environmental exploitation and justice, and nonhuman animal exploitation and liberation (Gorski, 2010). The thing tying these forms of exploitation together, especially in a corporate-capitalist context, is *profit*. These are all forms of exploitation that are part of a bigger system of economic-driven exploitation—the violent results of corporate capitalism.

To clarify, I'm not arguing that the exploitation of animals is equal in importance or immediacy to the exploitation of humans—that's a philosophical debate for another essay. Comparing exploitations isn't very productive, anyway, as Audre Lorde (1983), who famously warned us against imagining a "hierarchy of oppression," taught us. Still, I find it hard to imagine how somebody could know something about gross animal abuse and exploitation—about bullfighting, say, or cosmetics testing—and not see it as part of a larger circle of violence, as part of the same culture of consumerist-capitalist viciousness that includes secret medical testing on humans, like the venereal disease research that the United States performed on unwitting Guatemalans in the 1940s, and other forms of oppression. A majority of publicly traded corporations and industries will do *anything* to make a profit. They will torture animals while construing and presenting it as human entertainment. They will chop off the tops of majestic mountains. They will use child labor, then claim that a portion of their proceeds go to children's causes. They will literally kill people, or at least create conditions to all but ensure people's deaths, when facing the consequences of doing so is cheaper than other alternatives. Of course, as with intersectionality theory more generally, the most radical thinkers when it comes to these bigger connections, such as A. Breeze Harper (2010), come, in part, out of a Black feminist tradition.

As I reflect on the incongruence between my own behavior and what I claim to stand for I am shaken by the extent to which I participate in each of these forms of violence. In the end, I believe condoning any of it by purchasing products or services or entertainment from companies or industries that profit from my thoughtless consumerism is, at least implicitly, like condoning all of it. I can't figure a way to separate the violence rodeo animals experience from the violence mountains experience from the violence workers that produce the shirts hanging in my closet experience. The full circle is a sort of macrointersectionality. If I'm going to claim that I stand for justice, that I desire the end of oppression, and I put my trivial needs ahead of the vital needs of people or of any living creature, that makes me a hypocrite. And this is something I do over and over and over again.

Second Concept: Macroaggressions

More than 40 years ago Chester M. Pierce (1970) coined the term "micro-aggression" to refer to nonphysical aggression directed at people in disenfranchised communities. More recently, due largely to the work of Derald Wing Sue and a team of colleagues, the term "microaggression" has become part of the racial justice lexicon. Sue and his colleagues (2006) defined micro-aggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (p. 271). It remains a contested concept in the sense that the focus on these day-to-day interpersonal *symptoms* of systemic racism can distract us from an

analysis of the *roots* of systemic racism. Still, most advocates for racial justice would acknowledge, at the very least, that racial microaggressions are real and damaging manifestations of racism. Certainly, if I saw micro-aggressive behavior, I would recognize the need to respond; if I caught myself participating in such behavior, I would self-critique ruthlessly.

Some scholars have used the term "macroaggression" to refer to purposeful, overt forms of discrimination (e.g., Russell, 1998). I find this somewhat confounding, as the prefix "macro" does not mean purposeful or overt. It means large in scope, big-picture.

I have come to use the term "macroaggression" differently, to help me understand my own mindless participation in or compliance with big, systemic forms of oppression rather than interpersonal forms of bias or discrimination. It shares with "micro-aggression" the quality of not necessarily being purposeful. In other words, when I talk about how badly I "need" a piece of furniture made out of a hardwood, I don't necessarily link that thought in the moment to logging, to clear-cutting forest, to destroying the habitats of millions of animals and the communities of my own people, Appalachian farmers, or of indigenous communities who count on the rainforest for their survival. When I used to eat at KFC I didn't link that act to the horrendous work conditions of low-income, largely people of color, largely immigrant workers at KFC's chicken farms. I didn't connect my action to Greenpeace's (2012) finding that KFC was using wood from Indonesian rainforest hardwood trees to make their food boxes. I certainly didn't think of the torture experienced by the chickens. I might have considered the poorly paid workers at the KFC where I was eating,

but I didn't think about the people all over the world working in horrific conditions picking the lettuce and tomato on my sandwich.

There are countless systems of oppression, endless ways to macroaggress, and I've participated in many of them. I've gotten married, participated in repressive tenure and promotion processes at two universities, deposited money into big, exploitative banks. In each of these cases I didn't purposefully oppress anybody, but I participated in systems that are very oppressive, particularly to already disenfranchised people. These are my incongruences, the sorts of actions that make me a racist, a sexist, and a heterosexist.

Many other macroaggressions, and the ones in which I feel I've been most intently socialized to participate, are related to what I consume, to how I spend money, to the destruction I'm supporting in *that* way. In the next section I describe three such macroaggressions, each of which wreaks intersectional havoc; each of which exemplifies the oppressive, privilege-ridden act of putting my trivial needs ahead of the vital needs of already disenfranchised people as well as nonhuman animals.

The Consumerist Macroaggressions of a Social Justice Activist

I have spent most of my life drinking Coca-Cola products, eating meat from factory farms, and wearing Nike apparel. These were fairly mindless acts on my part, not purposeful attempts to participate in racist or economically unjust enterprises. However, as I learned more about the impact of my trivial consuming habits, I began to realize that my mindless consumerism was

contributing to some of the most dreadful human rights abuses and injustices I could imagine. I have chosen to discuss these three habits—these three macroaggressions—and their impacts in detail, although I recognize that my choices are somewhat arbitrary. I just as easily could discuss Pepsi-Cola as Coca-Cola or Adidas as Nike. But there's a price to pay for sitting atop an abusive industry, and part of that price is representing that industry's atrocities.

Eating Food Produced on Factory Farms

Similarly, I could have chosen to discuss how my daily consuming choices have profited a wide range of destructive industries, such as coal or lumber, but instead I discuss industrialized farming, not because it is more oppressive, but because, as I will detail soon, factory farming is the biggest source of greenhouse gas emissions in the world (Goodland & Anhang, 2009)—bigger, in fact, than all other sources combined. But that's not all, because the havoc factory farms wreak is varied and extensive, and it targets some of the most marginalized beings in the world.

Gross Violence Toward Animals

When it comes to factory farming and industrialized meat, egg, and dairy production, the violence faced by animals might be more obvious than the violence experienced by people and the environment. Farm animals—living creatures—are seen as property. Despite accounting for roughly 98 percent of the animals raised and killed in the United States, slaughtered at a rate of about 1 million per *hour* (Wolfson & Sullivan, 2005), they are not protected by animal cruelty laws like pet dogs or cats. The morbid abuses are many. As People for

the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA, 2013) describes, “Cows, calves, pigs, chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, and other animals live in extremely stressful conditions” (§ 3). They are

- “kept in small cages or jam-packed sheds or on filthy feedlots, often with so little space that they can’t even turn around or lie down comfortably”;
- “deprived of exercise so that all their bodies’ energy goes toward producing flesh, eggs, or milk for human consumption”;
- “fed drugs to fatten them faster and keep them alive in conditions that could otherwise kill them”; and
- “genetically altered to grow faster or to produce much more milk or eggs than they naturally would” so that “many animals become crippled under their own weight and die just inches away from water and food” (§ 4).

Uncharacteristically, PETA omitted one of the most violent and inhumane parts of the factory farming process. One of these involves the alterations made to the animals, almost never using a numbing agent. These alternations include branding, tooth-clipping, ear-clipping, de-beaking, tail-clipping, and spaying or neutering.

Labor Rights Violations on Factory Farms

Factory farming also is a form of violence against humans. At the basest level, the people hired to commit the most atrocious indignities against animals at factory farms are people of color and disproportionately migrant workers or immigrants—often undocumented immigrants (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2004)—who are paid below a living wage,

and sometimes below minimum wage. These workers work in squalid conditions, surrounded by feces and disease. Rarely are they provided with the kind of safety equipment that would keep them safe from injuries. In fact one of the racist benefits of hiring undocumented immigrants on factory farms is that they are less likely than other workers to seek medical attention if they are injured on the job. As a result, safety hazards and workplace injuries often go unreported. In fact, the HRW (2004) reported that “Meat and poultry industry employers set up the workplaces and practices that create these dangers, but they treat the resulting mayhem as a normal, natural part of the production process, not as what it is: repeated violations of international human rights standards” (p. 24). That means more profits for the corporations that own or contract with factory farms. The latter include virtually every fast food or big chain restaurant at which I’ve ever eaten and the food services at the hotels at which every social justice conference I’ve ever attended were hosted.

Other labor rights concerns on factory farms disproportionately affect the mostly undocumented immigrants or migrant workers who work on them. In many cases, employers have threatened to contact, or in fact have contacted, federal authorities regarding workers' immigration statuses in order to intimidate them into dropping charges of unfair labor practices or safety violations (HRW, 2004). Remember, these are among the least healthy possible jobs, due to air contaminants, use of heavy machinery, and unsanitary conditions, so being able to report health risks is literally a matter of life and death for factory farm workers. Over 5,816 farm workers and laborers died from work-related injuries between 2003 and 2011 (Occupational Safety and Health Administration, 2013).

Getting a little more specific, I used to enjoy eating at Brazilian steakhouses. Now I know that many Brazilian cattle farms use a form of slave labor called debt bondage to trap workers into deplorable working conditions (Phillips & Sakamoto, 2012)—the same sort of practice coal mining companies and other industries have used in the United States. This is how it works: You work for me, but I force you to pay for rent and goods and equipment, and before you know it, despite working *for* me, you're in debt *to* me. U.S. companies profit from this enslavement of the poorest workers all over the world. In many cases, particularly in Latin America, farms, often contracted with U.S. or multinational companies, hire armed guards or local militias to intimidate workers, mostly with the goal of discouraging union organizing (HRW, 2004). (This will become a theme.)

If worker conditions aren't amply indicative of the human rights violations that plague factory farming, consider the widespread use of child labor on factory farms around the world. Youth factory farm workers in the United States, mostly but not exclusively the children of migrant workers, often are forced to work due to the poverty wages their parents earn. According to HRW (2010b), for these children, whether they are toiling in the fields or in a factory farm barn,

farmwork means an early end to childhood, long hours at exploitative wages, and risk to their health and sometimes their lives. Although their families' financial need helps push children into the fields—poverty among farmworkers is more than double that of all wage and salary employees—the long hours and demands of farmwork result in high drop-out rates from school. Without

a diploma, child workers are left with few options besides a lifetime of farmwork and the poverty that accompanies it. (p. 5)

To make matters worse, due to industry-friendly agricultural labor law, “children can toil in the fields at far younger ages, for far longer hours, and under far more hazardous conditions than all other working children” (p. 5).

Runoff and Contamination of the Local Community

Local communities pay an awful price for the existence of factory farms. Consider, if nothing else, the stench created by the waste of hundreds or thousands or tens of thousands of animals. Factory farms are located almost exclusively in rural working-class or poor areas. They would not be tolerated in wealthier areas, given the stench and runoff and disease.

The contamination from factory farm waste affects the ecosystem of many square miles around farm sites. Just like the contamination from landfills and toxic waste sites, which most often are located close to poor communities of color, animal waste pollution from factory farms causes a wide range of health problems in the communities that are least likely to be able to afford to treat them, such as skin infections, respiratory diseases, nausea, and depression (Von Essen & Auvermann, 2005). Making matters worse is the fact that, according to the Environmental Protection Agency (as reported by Karla Raettig [2007]), factory farm runoff is the biggest source of waterway pollution in the United States, doing more damage than *all other industrial sources combined*. This affects all of us, but the people who experience the most immediate, most damaging effects in the

United States, aside from the workers themselves, are poor rural people whose surface and ground water are contaminated.

Studies conducted for both the World Bank (De Haan, Van Veen, Brandenburg, Gauthier, Le Gall, Mearns, & Simeon, 2001) and Great Britain's Department for International Development (Heffernan, 2004), not exactly bastions of progressivism, have shown that the spread of factory farming is harming the poorest people, including those in developing countries, especially indigenous communities, by *increasing* food and water scarcity. Feeding, watering, and slaughtering cattle, then processing meat and dairy products, accounts for a major portion of grain and water production worldwide, even as growing numbers of people do not have enough to eat or drink (Doreau, Corson, & Wiedemann, 2012; Robbins, 2010; United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, 2007).

Environmental Destruction

As I mentioned earlier, among the most environmentally destructive industries, factory farming has the highest level of greenhouse gas emissions and plays the biggest role in climate change. It accounts for roughly 51 percent of greenhouse gas emissions worldwide (Goodland & Anhang, 2009). In other words, despite all my recycling, walking, and other environmentally conscious practices, I could have decreased my carbon footprint much more drastically had I simply eaten less food produced on factory farms.

It is important to remember, again, that the most immediate negative impact of climate change (Renton, 2009), food scarcity, water scarcity, labor rights violations, and other forms of violence that

are symptomatic of factory farming and corporations' quests for profit are felt most harshly by poor communities worldwide, especially poor indigenous communities, where there are fewer resources to mitigate the oppression or to fight back. This is what makes participation in such a system an example of a racial and socioeconomic macroaggression. My intent, when I did consume factory-farmed products, was not malicious, but my impact was malicious. By enjoying the convenience of factory-farmed meat, I deprived the most marginalized people, not to mention other marginalized living beings, of their vital needs in order to satisfy my trivial need for cheap ice cream or omelets or bacon cheeseburgers.

Drinking Coca-Cola Products

When I did eat bacon cheeseburgers—and I definitely ate my share of them over the years—I tended to wash them down with a Diet Coke. Diet Coke with a slice of lime: That was my beverage order. I stopped consuming Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola products several years ago, but I still crave Diet Coke. And that isn't much of a surprise, because Coca-Cola products are made to be addictive. Those bottomless cups of soda at restaurants and those Super Big Gulps are not just indicative of people's organically voracious appetites for a nutrient-less combination of harmful chemicals and sugar. Coca-Cola, Pepsi-Cola, and just about every processed food company that makes everything from sugary drinks, to salty chips, to crunchy cookies are in the business of accumulating addicts. They do so in very sophisticated ways, such as by pouring millions of dollars into figuring out just what combination of processing they need to do to their products to hit what the industry calls the "bliss

point” (Moss, 2013): the perfect, and most addictive, combination of sugar, fat, and inorganic ingredients we can’t pronounce.

Every consumer of these products pays a price for consuming them, given the health risks of eating highly processed junk foods. However, when I drank Diet Coke—when I helped make the Coca-Cola Company and the predominantly White men who own the biggest chunks of the company wealthier—I also was macroaggressing against a wide range of already marginalized people all over the world.

Workers’ Rights and Racism

On April 3, 1968, the day before he was assassinated, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called for a boycott of Coca-Cola for discriminating against African American workers. The company regularly has been sued for its racist hiring practices. In 1999 the Coca-Cola Company agreed to a \$192 million settlement in a class action case charging it with discriminatory treatment of African American and Latino workers (Miah, 2000). Most recently, 16 plaintiffs, all people of color, are suing the company for racist practices in New York area Coca-Cola plants ranging from biased work assignments to inequitable disciplinary practices. The lawsuit describes an “endemic culture of racism” propagated from the very top of the company hierarchy (Greenwald, 2012). Of course, when I purchased and drank Diet Coke I was not intending to support a company whose history is full of workplace racism. I did not intend to macroaggress. But by purchasing those products, that is exactly what I did.

And that is just the tip of the exploitation iceberg I supported by consuming Coca-Cola products. When it comes to boosting profits by violating, or

condoning the violation of, the human rights of poor and working class people of color all over the world, Coca-Cola appears to have few peers (Zacune, 2006a).

Consider a small international sample: In Colombia, armed guards at a Coca-Cola contracted bottling plant, according to workers, have imprisoned union organizers seeking safer working conditions and living wages. The bottling company has been accused of using local paramilitary to intimidate workers who have attempted to organize. The paramilitary has kidnapped, tortured, and even murdered union leaders (Wilson, 2004). Just a few years ago managers and armed security guards at a Coca-Cola bottling plant in Guatemala were accused of using rape and murder against trade unionists and their families in order to quiet demands for safer working conditions and living wages—intimidation practices that have been common in the company’s Guatemala operations since the 1970s (Frundt, 1987; Zacune, 2006a). In 2005, 105 workers at a Coca-Cola bottling plant in Turkey joined a union and were immediately fired. When they and their families peacefully protested the firings, they were attacked by Turkish riot police (Zacune, 2006a). In China, a student-led undercover investigation in 2008 revealed that Coca-Cola bottling plants often required 12-hour workdays, denied workers any days off, and provided inadequate protective equipment. They found, as well, that worker pay often was decreased for no reason and that workers who spoke up to demand better treatment were beaten (Student Coca-Cola Campaign Team, 2008). There is more of the same in Mexico, El Salvador, and pretty much everywhere else Coca-Cola has or contracts with bottling plants or other operations, especially in poor countries.

Destroying or Privatizing Water Sources

Coca-Cola's investments in racism and economic injustice reach beyond the treatment of its workers and workers in plants (as well as sugar cane fields) with which it contracts. One of its most egregious imperialist strategies has been its ongoing attempts to privatize water sources in poor and developing countries (Blandling, 2011)—an atrocity that contributes to water scarcity and especially oppresses poor people all over the world (Beck, 2004; McKinley, 2004). For example, during his time as president of Mexico, Coca-Cola worked with Vicente Fox, one-time head of the company's operations in Latin America, to privatize water in his country (Blandling, 2011).

Meanwhile, citizens of India have been rising in protest over the ways in which Coca-Cola and the plants with which it contracts are destroying their water systems (Ciafone, 2012). By draining out groundwater supplies for its product and the production process, Coca-Cola has contributed to water scarcity and spoiled vast amounts of farming land, causing tens of millions of dollars of damage in one of the poorest regions of one of the highest-poverty countries in the world. Zacune (2006b) summed it up this way:

Coca-Cola's operations have particularly been blamed for exacerbating water shortages in regions that suffer from a lack of water resources and rainfall. Nowhere has this been better documented than in India, where there are now community campaigns against the company in several states. New research carried out by War on Want in the Indian states of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh affirms

the findings from Kerala and Maharastra that Coca-Cola's activities are having a serious negative impact on farmers and local communities. (¶ 3)

By consuming Coca-Cola products, by satisfying a most trivial need, I become part of this sort of macroaggressive exploitation.

Preying on the Poorest Communities of Color

As I mentioned earlier, Coca-Cola is in the business of cultivating addicts. In order to do so most efficiently the company is preying on the poorest communities.

With a little help from its operatives fighting to privatize water, Coca-Cola pushes its product most voraciously on poor people (a strategy that is increasingly common as companies seek new imperialist ways to expand profit potentials [Karnani, 2014]), particularly in areas where a Coke is cheaper and more readily available than clean water. There literally are parts of Latin America and India where you can't walk in any direction without being bombarded with Coca-Cola advertisements. The company practices predatory marketing of an addictive, unhealthy product in communities where people already are undernourished and have little access to health and dental care.

Plastic Bottles

People in the United States drink more bottled water than people in any other country. On average, we each consume 30 gallons of bottled water each year, most of which we drink from bottles containing a single "serving" of water (Gleick, 2010). We purchase a confounding 29 billion bottles of water every year—more than 60 percent of

the worldwide total. Remember, now, that the best-selling bottled waters are owned by the big cola companies, Coke and Pepsi. Making the plastic for all those bottles uses the equivalent of 17 million barrels of crude oil annually (Pacific Institute, 2007). That is roughly equal to the amount of fuel required to keep one million vehicles on the road for an entire year. If you have a bottle of water with you now, imagine filling one quarter of it with oil. That's the amount used to produce it. Roughly 1,500 of those plastic bottles *every second of every day*, a majority of which end up either in landfills or in the ocean (Mosko, 2012). And, again, when I consider the locations of most landfills and the communities (and animals) most immediately hurt by all sorts of pollution, I have no choice but to acknowledge that by purchasing *any* beverage in a plastic bottle during times when I have other hydration options I am macroaggressing.

Wearing Nikes

I have purchased clothes and shoes produced by a wide variety of companies that do a lot of damage to disenfranchised communities, animals, and the environment. However, I've been playing basketball for most of my life and until recently I always said I *needed* Nike basketball shoes. They fit best, I've said. I've paid outrageous amounts of money for Nike shoes, which, I now admit, had nothing to do with fit and everything to do with the Swoosh logo, a symbol associated by some people with the athletic prowess of Michael Jordan or Tiger Woods, and associated by many other people—people exploited for cheap labor in developing countries—with awful sorts of oppression.

Thinking about how we are socialized to macroaggress through consumption, I reflect now on this urge: *I need Nike basketball shoes*. I often have found myself using the word “need” to describe all sorts of trivial desires. Nobody *needs* Nike shoes. I'm reminded of when I became a vegetarian. Like many vegetarians I told myself I couldn't be a vegan, even though I knew it was the just thing to do, because I “couldn't give up cheese.” Given the entire history of human existence, only a tiny, tiny fraction of people ever have tasted cheese. To put it in “privilege” terms, that statement of “need,” that sense of entitlement to something so trivial, is the worst kind of privilege. It's the worst of what sits right at the intersection of my White privilege and my economic privilege. *I am entitled to this land. I am entitled to this job. I am entitled to consume whatever I want to consume, to wear whatever I want to wear, regardless of who is exploited so that I can consume it. I never needed Nikes. But I've probably bought 25 pairs of them over the course of my life.*

So, how does that make me a macroaggressor?

Worker (Including Child Worker) Abuse

For more than a decade Nike has faced criticism for slavelike child labor in the overseas factories with which it contracts to produce its goods (Connor, 2001; Locke, 2013). Despite promises from CEO Phil Knight to refuse to contract with factories that use child labor, the problem persists. The biggest abuses tend to be in Southeast Asian developing countries whose workers regularly are exploited by U.S. corporations.

In fact, Nike has a penchant for doing all sorts of damage in Southeast Asia. For example, they continue to contract with sweatshops where they know atrocious forms of abuse, including physical abuse, are happening—conditions that would be illegal in the United States and most other industrialized countries. Indonesian workers at Nike factories have complained of slave wages, physical abuse, denial of sick leave, and violent intimidation (Ballinger, 2001; Wright, 2011). And, as with Coca-Cola plants, many of these factories use paramilitary forces to intimidate workers.

Some of the most recent examples of mass abuse have occurred in factories in Indonesia with which Nike contracts to produce its shoes and garments. In one factory with over 10,000 workers, mostly young women, workers earn the equivalent of only about 50 cents per hour. Workers who complain about pay or other work conditions often are physically abused or fired (Daily Mail Reporter, 2011). Similar conditions have been reported in Nike contracted factories in Vietnam, Pakistan, and Haiti, among other places.

Polluting Water Sources

Factories producing Nike products have been destroying local water resources in several countries by dumping toxic waste into rivers and lakes. Greenpeace (2011) investigated two factories in China, the Youngor Textile Complex and Well Dyeing Textile Limited, that produce Nike goods, as well as goods for several other garment companies. It found that both were disposing of toxic waste into waterways, causing serious damage.

To be clear, Nike is not alone. A National Labor Committee investigation found several U.S. companies using child

labor in developing countries, including Wal-Mart, Hanes, Puma, and JC Penney (Kernaghan, 2006). Virtually every chain retail clothing store sells clothes made in sweatshops, including Amberbrombie & Fitch and Kohl's (International Labor Rights Forum, 2010). Other major offenders include H&M, The Gap (which also owns Old Navy and Banana Republic), Limited Brands (which owns Victoria's Secret), and Calvin Klein.

When I choose to satisfy my trivial needs for a constant stream of relatively cheap new clothes, falling prey to the social coercion of the seasonal fashion carousel, I support a massive system of racial and economic exploitation. I macroaggress against some of the most oppressed communities in the world. I struggle to understand how such an aggression on my part is any less racist, any less exploitive, than any one of the many microaggressions I surely have committed in my lifetime. I struggle to understand how I am any less the racist, any less complicit in economic injustice, so long as I respond vehemently to one while participating mindlessly in the other.

Macroaggressions, Macroprivilege, and Macroconsciousness

I have come to believe that I cannot rightly call myself a fighter for racial or economic justice, a rejecter of White or economic privilege, while I continue to consume as I have spent my life consuming. Buying Nike shoes, purchasing Coca-Cola products, eating factory-farmed meat, among many, many other ways I support oppressive systems that largely help to make wealthy White people wealthier, are acts that are just as racist, just as economically

unjust, as any other kind of racism or economic injustice. This has been a revelation for me. It has been a difficult revelation, because it has forced me to rethink most everything about my life, about where and how I live, about what I eat and drink, about what I wear. Attempting to pull myself out of the capitalist-consumerist mindset has felt, in some ways, like hearing “White supremacy” for the first time or hearing that capitalism is not the same as democracy. Now that I know what it means to buy a Diet Coke or wear Nikes or macroaggress in other consumerist ways, the fact that I struggle to respond as quickly as I would if, say, I heard somebody tell a racist joke or knew that a colleague of color was unjustly denied a promotion is telling of the ubiquitous nature of systemic oppression.

On Being a Hypocrite

I do know that, when it comes to being a hypocrite, I’m in good company. Recently I was reading a speech Gandhi (1931) once delivered about being a vegetarian. He said:

A vegetarian is made of sterner stuff. Why? Because it is for the building of the spirit and not of the body. Man is more than meat. It is the spirit in man for which we are concerned. Therefore, vegetarians should have that moral basis—that a man was not born a carnivorous animal, but born to live on the fruits and herbs that the earth grows. (¶ 6)

But what he said later in the speech shocked me: “I know we must all err. I would give up milk if I could but I cannot. I have made that experiment times without number... That has been the tragedy of my life” (¶ 6).

Gandhi called his failure to become a vegan *the tragedy of his life*. So we all trip. Even Gandhi.

That makes me feel a little better, although no less responsible for challenging the many consumerist incongruences between who I claim to be as a social justice activist and who my consuming habits expose me to be. The trouble is that, as a consumer in a consumerist-capitalist society, trying to extricate myself from these oppressive systems, from these macroaggressions, is a little like trying to extricate myself from White hegemony as a White person. Considered from a slightly different angle, these macroaggressions *are* manifestations of White, capitalist hegemony. They are the consequences of economic, political, and social conditions deployed to all but ensure that those of us who are not wealthy exploit each other and ourselves in order to further concentrate wealth among relatively few, mostly White, extremely wealthy families. I scarcely can buy a t-shirt or a sandwich without being complicit.

What is more, there are myriad complications even for those of us who wish not to comply. For example, soy is a popular source of nutrients and protein for people who have chosen to stop eating meat. But its popularity has resulted in deforestation in the Amazon in order to increase production and meet the demand (Steward, 2007). As a vegan, I refuse to purchase leather shoes. However, it is difficult and expensive to find shoes that are not made with animal products and that are produced under humane working conditions for those who are making them.

Perhaps the most troubling complication is that, overall, it can be expensive to not consume in

macroaggressive ways. Fast food is inexpensive. So are garments made in sweatshops. Living humanely and justly can be cost-prohibitive and inconvenient. For working-class and poor people, it might be impossible. They disproportionately are trapped into consuming in ways that are unhealthy to them and destructive to their communities. It is, in essence, a privilege to have within economic reach the ability to choose noncomplicity or to be able to decide how I will or will not comply based on convenience. Meanwhile, it is a privilege to comply mindlessly, unconcerned with my impact on already disenfranchised communities, the environment, and nonhuman animals.

I can afford to make many changes in my consuming habits and in my activism and advocacy in order to shrink my macroaggression footprint. And I have begun to do so. Like any substantial life change, it has not been easy. Nor should it be. For me it started with acknowledging that continuing to cultivate an understanding of racism or economic injustice without incorporating attention to consumerist macroaggressions would be, at best, irresponsible and hypocritical. I would be *choosing* to frame my social justice work in ways that continue to privilege me and oppress other people.

This, then, is my challenge to myself and my fellow scholars, educators, and activists committed to racial and economic justice: Let us stretch our conceptions of injustice to include macroaggressions even if—*especially* if—we implicate ourselves in the process.

Paths to Macroconsciousness and Macrononcompliance

People often have asked me for a list of changes they should make in their lives in order that they might better align their consuming habits with their social justice values. Given my own congruence shortcomings, I hesitate. I share, instead, what I, with all my hypocrisies, have chosen to do in my own life. But before I do I mention that there are no easy paths, no list of Ten Things You Can Do to Stop Being a Macroaggressor. Often it is a matter of choosing the *least* oppressive path rather than the *nonoppressive* path, and in almost every case there is little clarity about which path is least oppressive.

The important thing, in my view and experience, has been training myself to be more mindful about my consuming habits. I have trained myself to be curious about what is driving me to make this or that consumerist choice. Why do I *really* consume what I consume? How do I distinguish between wants and needs, between trivial needs and vital needs? Who or what am I willing to destroy to follow my consumerist urges and cravings? I understand that the ubiquitousness of the consumerist-capitalist system means that I might never relieve myself of all of my incongruences. I understand, as well, that the choices I have made are not the right choices for everybody—that we all must choose for ourselves what it means to distinguish between vital and trivial needs, to lighten our macroaggression footprints.

I have chosen the following consumer changes in my life, each of which makes me a better advocate for racial and economic justice:

1. I chose to eat less or, better yet, eat *no* meat, eggs, or dairy products produced on a factory farm. My choice in this matter was to become a vegan—to consume no animal products at all—in order to ensure I would not contribute to factory farming atrocities. I often use the free Happy Cow guide to find vegan and vegetarian restaurant options (<http://www.happycow.net>).
 2. Similarly, I chose to avoid purchasing fruits and vegetables from big produce companies known to exploit workers, including Chiquita Brands International. I have used Ethical Consumer's detailed guide of other popular brand human rights abusers (<http://www.ethicalconsumer.org/>) to help me make racially and economically just consumer decisions.
 3. I chose to purchase clothes and shoes made by companies that pay workers fair wages and otherwise treat workers humanely. Admittedly, this is an expensive endeavor, and utterly inconvenient, as I have found few ways to purchase such clothes and shoes without doing so online, not having tried them on. It also is expensive. So I have begun shopping for clothes at thrift and consignment stores whenever possible. One Green Planet offers a helpful guide for sustainable, fair-trade, humane clothing (<http://www.onegreenplanet.org/lifestyle/a-guide-to-buying-sustainable-fair-trade-and-vegan-clothing/>).
 4. I chose to be mindful of the packaging of any product I purchase, and especially try to avoid purchasing single-serving, prepackaged, highly processed consumables such as sodas, chips, and snack cakes.
 5. I chose to avoid purchasing consumer electronics, including computers, tablets, and smartphones, from companies with poor human rights track records. I have referred to Green America's guide for more responsible consumer electronics purchasing (<http://www.greenamerica.org/livinggreen/computers.cfm>) and have decided to buy all such goods used.
 6. I chose to refuse to spend money on any sort of activity that requires that animals be confined, beaten, or otherwise tortured for trivial human entertainment. I particularly avoid aquatic animal shows (such as at SeaWorld), rodeos, dog or horse racing, bullfighting, zoos, aquariums, horse-drawn carriages, and circuses that feature animals. I often refer to the Animals in Entertainment Web guide provided by PETA to reflect upon my footprint in this arena (<http://www.peta.org/issues/animals-in-entertainment/>).
 7. I chose to learn about the labor practices of the businesses I frequent and, where they are problematic, I advocate directly or take my business elsewhere. I try to remember that any company's labor force is not comprised solely of the workers with whom I interact.
- My desire to respond more effectively to my macroaggressions also has led me to rethink the ways in which I expend my racial and economic justice activism energies. The fight against the globalization of corporate capitalism is, among other things, a fight for global racial justice. The struggle to secure living wages for all

workers is, in part, a struggle for racial justice. There is no racial justice without environmental justice. And yet, until recently, I had failed to make these macroconnections in the same way I understood the more immediate importance of challenging racism in, say, the legal and educational systems. I have chosen to start making those connections in my own activism, teaching, and scholarship.

Conclusion

Yes, being hyper-conscious of every way in which I macroaggress, thinking through every consumerist habit, can be overwhelming. But is it any more overwhelming than learning for the first time about White hegemony or patriarchy or heteronormativity? It is a process. We can

start by *cutting down* on certain types of consumption (recognizing, of course, that it is a luxury of privilege to ease ourselves, rather than sprinting, out of our complicity).

It bears repeating: It is not my contention that we should abandon our efforts to understand and respond to racial microaggressions and the many other manifestations of racism. Rather, I challenge racial and economic justice activists, educators, and scholars, just as I challenge myself, to incorporate into our conceptions of racial and economic justice the eradication of these larger systems. I challenge us to consider whether any appreciable level of solidarity with the disenfranchised communities that are rendered further oppressed by our day-to-day consuming habits is possible if we continue to endanger their vital needs in order to satisfy our trivial needs.

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