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Stuff White People Buy: Race, Consumption, and Group Identification

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In January 2008 Los Angeles computer programmer Christian Lander decided to start a blog after a humorous conversation with a friend about things that they noticed that all of their white friends liked. Within the first month, the website received more than four million hits. The website Stuff White People Like (www.stuffwhitepeoplelike.wordpress.com) became so popular that Lander was offered a book deal by Random House to create his list into book format; it is reportedly the highest book deal offer made to a blogger who has not previously had any traditional publications. It was released in July 2008.

But not everyone appreciates Stuff White People Like (SWPL). Lander has been accused of being racist, despite the fact that he himself says he identifies with most of the characterizations of white people on his website. The website is very cynical, and for those that get it the website provides the feeling of being a part of a great inside joke.

The first time I was introduced to the SWPL blog was by a friend and fellow graduate student. He emailed a link to me for #81: Graduate School. The cynical and snarky description of graduate school for the white person details the lengths to which white people will go to prove their intelligence and perceived expertise, all the while hiding ineptitude and a fear of being found out not to be smart. The entry ends:

It is important to understand that a graduate degree does not make someone smart, so do not feel intimidated. They may have read more, but in no way does that make them smarter, more competent, or more likable than you. The best thing you can do is to act impressed when a white person talks about critical theorists. This helps them reaffirm that what they learned in graduate school was important and that they are smarter than you. This makes white people easier to deal with when you get promoted ahead of them.

After reading this entry I was amused, fascinated, and totally hooked. I went on to review the list of the other 80 plus entries, including: Coffee, Barack Obama, Sushi, Oscar Parties, Netflix, David Sedaris, Wine, Vespa Scooters, The Wire, Scarves, and Farmer's Markets.

One notices quickly that the bulk of the items on Lander's list are things one can buy. Sure, some of the items on the list are ideals, political causes, or references to lifestyle choices, but often times the stuff that white people like is consumable stuff. Whether he means to or not, Lander suggests that this certain brand of whiteness he describes is something someone can purchase. Being a part of the group is about having or appreciating certain stuff.

What is this specific brand of whiteness? In an interview on NPR's Talk of the Nation in late February 2008, Lander noted that he is clearly targeting a specific demographic of white people. He is not talking about the "Nascar and moonshine" set, as that has been overdone, he says. They are also not part of the generic "Middle America." Instead, he says he has created a satire of the "Park Slope parent." The Park Slope parent drives a Volkswagen or a Subaru, never a Mercedes or a Lexus, though probably could afford one. The Park Slope parent does not let their children eat processed food, play with toys made in China, or wear clothes from Wal-Mart. The Park Slope parent dresses casually, even dowdy, so as not to appear too flashy or uptown like many of her/his Manhattan counterparts. This group is educated, often with graduate degrees. The members are part of a privileged class, often times despite their own perception that they are not. They appropriate upper class cultural appreciations into middle class budgets. They are socially and politically progressive. They deem themselves to be post-racial. They simultaneously reject yuppie values while embracing a nuanced consumption that appears different from the yuppie to the casual observer, but is very similar in execution. Most of all, this group is so easily marked because one doesn't have to match all of the criteria on the list to feel like one is included on the list.

Critics accuse the website of conflating race with economic status, and that is an important aspect of his point; part of Lander's criticism is that "white privilege is still there." To that end, Gregory Rodriguez of the Los Angeles Times points out that, "Lander is gently making fun of the many progressive, educated, upper-middle-class whites who think they are beyond ethnicity or collectively shared tastes, styles or outlook. He's essentially reminding them that they too are part of a group."

This claim is nothing new to academic critiques of status groups. In classic social science literature on consumption and consumerism Baudrillard discusses sign value and how groups communicate who they are by consuming certain goods; Bourdieu shows us the significant link between class position and tastes; and of course Veblen suggests that achieving status is one of the most important components of conspicuous consumption. So, Lander's group of white people is no different than any other group, except that they think they are. They see themselves as unique and not mainstream, which perhaps they are, despite the fact that there are millions of them wandering around cities like Brooklyn, San Francisco, Portland, and Austin. Juliet Schor discusses the importance of individuality and differentiation in consumptive behavior. She states, "The ostensible reason for these preferences: quality, craftsmanship, individuality. The less obvious symbolic message: social distance." I would argue that this is exactly what Lander's group of white people is doing. They are distancing themselves from other whites: Middle America, Wall Street Suits, the Nascar set, the Carrie Bradshaws. Their consumption patterns portray who they are not as much as they portray who they are.

Satirizing whites is nothing new to 21st century, American pop culture. In recent years we have seen Billionaires for Bush satirize the Elites; Jeff Foxworthy satirizes the "moonshine and Nascar" set with his series "You know you're a redneck if..."; and Stephen Colbert has struck a cord with his show on Comedy Central about the political and social inclinations of Middle America. It is important to note that Lander's target demographic has been touched upon before in the academy and in popular culture, including Richard Lloyd's Neo-Bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Post-Industrial City, Robert Lanham's The Hipster Handbook, David Brooks' Bobos in Paradise, and most recently in this Newsletter in Halnon's piece on Poor/Heroin Chic as well as in mainstream literature with the publishing of Amy Sohn's fictional novel Prospect Park West. Considering that race is "never not a factor" (Dyer, 1), it is surprising that this group's whiteness has not been discussed more explicitly previously. All of these texts discuss similar descriptive and ideological aspects of this demographic, but none so blatantly and forcefully places whiteness at the center of the argument. Of course, when you talk about whiteness, you also are talking about privilege: "Separating whiteness and white privilege is a bit like trying to unscramble an egg" (Kendall, 41).

In fact, this is what makes Lander's satirization so unique and powerful. He not only critiques a specific and recognizable socio-economic demographic, but he also lays out clearly that when these characteristics come together, they are primarily a very specific sub-set of whites who not only share tastes and interests, but an ideology. That ideology is one of being un-white, or at least less (annoyingly) white than other whites, while maintaining the privilege associated with whiteness. The irony, of course, being that this website calls them out on their whiteness. Though other humorous critiques are clearly about whites, the whiteness of the characterization is rarely if ever mentioned. Discussing the factor of whiteness is not only unique, but also a characteristic that is cognizant of how the target demographic secretly sees things: through a racial perspective, even if that perspective is anti-racist.

There are three key points one takes away when analyzing Lander's blog for the relationship between white identity and consumption. First, that there is a large and strong group of whites in the United States who have independently made it a point to differentiate themselves from other groups of whites, so much so that they represent a new constituency. Second, this site is functioning as a space for this group to reflect and refine itself so that it truly can be a demographic that is different and makes a difference within American society and its view of whiteness. Finally, the specific identity this group is self-creating is highly defined by its consumption patterns. Taylor tells us that, "the development of the modern notion of identity has given rise to a politics of difference" (Taylor, 38). Though this group of whites is different than other whites, the fact that the modern notion of identity creates issues of difference is likely the primary reason why this group has not seen itself as a group. "Groupiness" causes agitation between groups. Yet to view oneself as an individual and in constant development to be something better and therefore different than the traditional options presented is a rather unique perspective, even if a few million people are literally trying to buy their way in everyday.

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