

**May Contradictions:
Stolen Land aka Private Property,
Fighting Political Corruption with Nepotism,
GLOBAL HIPSTERIFICATION**

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The elder who was MC-ing was speaking into the microphone in a slow deliberate voice. He sat in the middle of a green grass playing field under a white canopy which shielded him from the hot sun. A war dance was about to start, he said, in a few minutes. A steady drum beat rumbled to life as various middle-aged men in crisp, long-sleeved white shirts began to assemble in the circle formed by the white canopies. The MC said he wanted to thank the organizers: "It takes a lot of effort. It's a lot of bureaucracy to get permits to use the UCLA grounds to have our annual American Indian Pow Wow."

I stopped trying to buy some fry bread from the food vendors behind the inner circle. I stopped and listened and shuddered. What was this man saying?

The elder continued: "In these modern times, it's difficult to raise our kids with an interest in and a respect for the culture, especially in big cities like San Francisco and Los Angeles and Chicago where many of our tribal peoples live."

I felt very cold despite the heavy California sun. The steady drumbeat grew louder and the men began to chant as the war dance began, the bright sunlight seeking the feathers twisted into their shiny black hair growing past their shoulders. But apart from a few feathers and long hair, they were mostly wearing black trousers and white high-collar shirts, sort of the way JR Ewing used to dress in *Dallas*.

Several visceral realizations hit me at once. After so many years of living on and off in the US, this was the first time I had ever seen people who looked visibly Indian because the majority of people with Native American blood are so mixed they can "pass" as white or black or Latino. This was the first time I had ever been to a gathering of this country's indigenous people perhaps because it is difficult for them to get permission and the necessary permits to come together on the land that was stolen from them.

Pathos. Pure pathos distilled by the blue sky above the earth.

Before this green field belonged to the United States, it was Mexico, and before that it was Spain. But that is only the colonial history of the last 235 years. Before that, the inhabitants of this land were the Tongva which means "people of the earth." It is believed they have lived in this region for 10,000 years.

According to some people's laws, this piece of earth is now the private property of the University of California, Los Angeles. But as the old joke goes, "you got our land, we got your laws." The same laws which now declare this stolen territory, private property, leave the true children of this bountiful land with literally no space to practice their own traditions.

I trudged up the steep Janss steps back to my office, the war drums ringing in my ears long after I was too far away to hear them anymore because there is nothing worse than watching a wronged people performing a war dance on land that is rightfully theirs but whose use requires the permission of the thieves who stole it.

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The email stated clearly that either a Western business suit or traditional national dress was required. I don't own a western business suit and if I were to really go in my traditional dress, I would be topless and therefore get arrested for public indecency because this is not rural Kwa-Zulu Natal. Weighing these two choices, I decided best to wear a stylish outfit featuring Java print cloth which although originally produced in Indonesia and brought to Africa by the Dutch colonizers is now considered to be "traditional" African wear.

As soon as I arrived at the museum, I was hailed by a black man in a western business suit. "Are you the delegate from Zimbabwe?" he asked. "I am the delegate from Nigeria."

Small groups of people were clustered together in the sun-drenched courtyard, eagerly exchanging ideas about the world's problems, their nations' tribulations. We are not real delegates. We are delegates at the People's United Nations, an "experimental conference that applies techniques and resources from social psychology, theater, art, and conflict resolution to geopolitics. Unlike the real UN, whose delegates are appointed by states...the people's UN welcomes a diverse group of Los Angeles residents...in this truly unique global encounter."

I am wondering exactly how I have found myself at this whimsical affair when I have so much to do but meanwhile, the Nigerian delegate is asking me about the problems we are having with the foreigners in my country. I put thoughts of the upcoming Mayweather - Pacquiao boxing match from my mind and then ask him to repeat the question. "Are you thinking of South Africa and the attacks on foreign African nationals?" I say helpfully. No, he insisted. The foreigners, the land.

"Those are not foreigners," I explain. "Those are white Zimbabweans who own a disproportionate amount of the land because of the history of settler colonialism when all the land was stolen." Then our conversation became quite complicated because land reform is one of the most emotionally difficult but necessary topics in my world at least. Although I never like to publicly agree with my president whose violent and hypocritical land reform program was really just a

political ruse to maintain power, I think land reform is an ethical imperative. However, killing people and violently displacing them is not the way. Me and Mr. Nigeria had an interesting discussion about the how as in how should it be done.

Then I congratulated Mr. Nigeria on his country's successful democratic elections which were not marred by violence as many had feared and I asked him if he was happy about the soon-to-be-installed new Thief in Chief. He laughed and told me he was planning to return home to work for his new president because one day he was planning to run for president himself. He explained that he would be running on an anti-corruption platform because he wanted to stop the depraved elite from looting the country. But to do this, he must first get a job in government and luckily he went to a fancy Ivy League American university with the new president's younger brother's wife. So she will be able to get him a job. Because there is nothing like using connections and nepotism to secure your first job in government so that when the time is right, you can start fighting against corruption?

Then again, isn't this how everyone gets their jobs nowadays? How else would a wannabe politico begin? Another one of those pesky contradictory paradoxes.

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"I express my individuality through buying mass-produced fridge magnets."

I have become obsessed with this witty fridge magnet lately because my recent research is on what I like to call global hipsterification i.e. hipsters all around the globe growing their beards and spilling their craft beer on their unflattering skinny jeans as they open comic book stores and Indie-music-playing cafes in areas undergoing urban renewal aka gentrification. It's amazing how hipsters are so similar everywhere but pride themselves on being so original and idiosyncratic.

So I went to give a talk about the current wave of gentrification remaking city centers from Buenos Aires to Bombay and found myself unwittingly contributing to the hipsterification of downtown Los Angeles. It happened like this. I arrived a little bit early and walked down Broadway searching for a place to eat so that I would not pass out during my lecture. A small Mexican restaurant presented itself because after white flight to the suburbs in the 1960s, downtown Los Angeles was left to poor blacks and Latinos and is home to Skid Row where thousands of homeless people sleep in single room occupancies or on the streets or in tents as if they are in a refugee camp after a terrible war.

California is one of the wealthiest places on the planet, home to many obscenely rich Hollywood celebrities and Silicon Valley billionaires. It is literally the eighth largest economy in the world - bigger than the Russian economy - and it's not even a country, it's just a state. Yet, somebody thinks it is okay to leave over 50,000 people

living homeless on the streets of L.A. County. Some estimates put that figure much higher but at least many of these people can access services that help them in the area of downtown officially designated as theirs.

However, in recent years, hipsterification is encroaching on Skid Row's turf because one thing about hipsters is that they like to feel like "urban pioneers" so some poor drug addicts actually enhance their feeling of living on the edge. As you can see, I am directing a lot of hateration towards hipsters but meanwhile, one of those pesky paradoxical contradictions is that I myself...well, you will see...

The problem was I couldn't find a single vegetarian item on the Spanish-language menu in the little hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurant. Veganism, gluten-free pasta – very, very hipster but I am a long-time ethical vegetarian, truth be told. So I asked hopefully if they had anything without meat and the owner sorrowfully shook his head and directed me to a café down the road. As soon as I saw grilled zucchini with pumpkin seed pesto and a list of frothy espresso drinks, I recognized the signs of hipsterification but my empty stomach's growls drowned out my weak principles.

When neighborhoods begin to gentrify, a new type of foot traffic starts frequenting the amenities. Those restaurants and shops which do not meet the needs of the new clientele are soon replaced by places that do. When property values rise, often these older businesses are the first to be priced out. In other words, when vegan hipsters come downtown, that Mexican hole-in-the-wall place is toast unless the hipsters deem it ironically carnivorous chic.

Gentrification/hipsterification is an old story - the displacement of the less powerful by the more powerful. If in olden days, it was straight up stealing the land because the pioneer aka settler colonist had a gun and you had an arrow, now it's I have a bigger bank account so you better move out. Is the violence of the market more civilized? Are these economic violations any less reprehensible? Is the notion of a civilized market economy not the biggest contradiction of them all?

As I sat sipping my latte in that brand new hipster cafe, a homeless black man came in and apparently stole the tips by the cash register. The staff rushed out from behind the counter and tried to reason with him to return their hard-earned monies but he insisted he had not taken anything. I had not seen a thing, so deeply engrossed was I in my grilled zucchini and making a list of how to recognize the signs of hipsterification which I will share with you here.

Voila my list-in-progress so you can recognize the signs should you see them whether in Jo'burg or Jersey City:

Sudden influx of bearded, tattooed, hat-wearing young people wearing super-expensive vintage/thrift store clothes, scarves, bow ties, too-short trousers, too-tight sweaters, check-patterned shirts as if they are "ironic" lumberjacks, SKINNY JEANS!

Artisanal anything

Craft beer, coffee, coffee, coffee, dirty chai, gluten-free pasta, Kombucha, super-expensive gelato/ frozen yoghurt with toppings like boba and mochi, whole grain bread covered in seeds as if it's a bird-feeder, vegan, organic, plant-based cuisine with a lot of kale and quinoa

Stores selling one random thing and things that are less use-value and more symbolic of their tastes/social status i.e. comic books or old records or sneakers

Loft-style apartments, beer gardens with bocce courts, bike racks for bicycles with no gears, (Bikram) yoga studios, wine bars, farmers' markets, cafes, cafes, cafes preferably with Wi-Fi and a suitable soundtrack e.g. eclectic hybrid pop or indie music but not so indie you're like, what is that?