

SOCIAL JUSTICE BELIEFS AND ADDICTION TO UNCOMPASSIONATE CONSUMPTION

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

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I grew up working class in a blue-collar town. Since my teenage years, I have been a fervent literary activist when it comes to antiracism, anticlassism, and antisexism. However, I was never able to understand how eco-sustainability, animal rights, and plant-based diets could be integral to my work. I honestly thought that these issues were the domain of the privileged, white, middle- and upper-class people of America. *Sure, it was easy for them*, I had thought with ignorance and prejudice. *Race and class struggle is not a reality for them, so they can “waste” their time on saving dolphins, whining about recycling cans, and preserving Redwood trees while my Black and brown brothas continue to be denied “human rights” because of the color of our skin.*

It has been only in the past several years that I realized that eco-sustainability, nonhuman animal rights, plant-based diets, and human rights *are* inextricably linked. Unfortunately, in my opinion, it has been the *tone and delivery* of the message—via the white, class-privileged perspective—that has been offensive to a majority of people of color and working-class people in America. Though there are many factors that prevent people of color and working-class people from practicing plant-based diets, eco-sustainability, and more (such as environmental racism, financial stability, connections food has to ethnic solidarity, and so on), this chapter focuses largely on why people of color engaged in antiracism and antipoverty social justice work can strengthen their understanding of social justice by taking a critical and often difficult look at how our consumption choices—dietary and nondietary—may actually be hindering our social justice activism.

I know that health problems due to improper nutrition and knowledge about food are not specific to “ethnic diets,” such as postindustrialist Soul Food among Black people. A significant number of people in the U.S. are suffering from improper nutrition and inadequate health care. My research interests are specific to the intersections of health disparities, and perceptions of social justice, animal rights, environmental racism, and critical race theory as it pertains to Black- and brown-identified people in North America.



I have experienced personally over the past few years how a purity of diet and thought are interrelated. And when Americans become truly concerned with the purity of the food that enters their own personal systems, when they learn to eat properly, we can expect to see profound changes effected in the social and political system of this nation. The two systems are inseparable.¹

The above quote is by Dick Gregory, civil rights activist, comedian, and nutritional liberationist, who has spent much of his adult life advocating that people in America—particularly African-Americans—cannot obtain *true* social justice until we begin to question our postindustrial, unhealthy dietary practices and food beliefs.² Gregory believes that the sugar-laden, meaty-dairy, high-fat-saturated, junk-food diet of Black America is at the root of many of our social justice problems.³ Gregory’s concerns, voiced decades ago, ring especially true for today’s Black population in the U.S., whose health has been compromised due to our diets and inadequate health care.⁴ Gregory states:

I personally would say that the quickest way to wipe out a group of people is to put them on a Soul Food diet. One of the tragedies is that the very folks in the Black community who are most sophisticated in terms of the political realities in this country are nonetheless advocates of “Soul Food.” They will lay down a heavy rap on genocide in America with regard to Black folks, then walk into a Soul Food restaurant and help the genocide along.⁵

The implications of this brotha’s words are profound and unsettling—especially since Soul Food has been rooted in how many Black-identified people embrace or define their “Blackness.”⁶ However, it is with Gregory’s words that I feel I must scrutinize how collectively

our health and consumption practices (food as well as nondietary) are frequently contradictory to our social justice beliefs, in the Black community as well as other communities engaged in antiracist and antipoverty social justice work in the U.S.

Let me start with our overconsumption of sugar products. The Dunkin Donuts slogan “America runs on Dunkin” scares the hell out of me. The suggestion that a country prides itself on being “nourished” on donuts and lattes is rather curious. Since entering the workforce in 1994, I’ve witnessed my friends and colleagues become depressed, restless, and irritable when they don’t get their coffee and pastry in the morning. Wait a minute! Aren’t these the same traits shown by a heroin or cocaine addict in need of a fix? I’m mesmerized by the American work culture. These sugar- and caffeine-induced mood swings are deemed normal. What would a colleague do if their officemate displayed these characteristics, then excused himself with “I’ll be fine once I snort some cocaine”? He or she would most likely be reported, fired, or arrested. Isn’t it hypocritical to respond differently to illegal drugs or alcohol as opposed to our addictions to legal drugs and health-decaying junk food on the job?

I used to eat at least three donuts per work day. When I first moved to Boston in 2000, twenty-three years old, thin, and exercising religiously, I naively thought that as long as I exercised four times a week I could load up on as many sweets as I wanted. Simultaneously, I’d wonder why I was *mysteriously* experiencing highs and lows, apathy, paranoia, depression, and insomnia. I was a sugar addict! I was going nuts and didn’t even realize it was my addiction to sugar-drenched foods that was causing severe disharmony within my brain chemistry.⁷

William Dufty, author of *Sugar Blues*, is convinced that yearly increases in sucrose (refined cane sugar) and beet sugar consumption are the reason why emotional disharmony—such as depression—has drastically risen within the United States.⁸ Likewise, from historical times to the present, the First World initiated civil unrest and legalized slavery—starting in the 1700s—to get our fix of sugar products.⁹ In addition, we’ve taken fertile land and used it to grow a plant of which the end product for a majority of people in the United States is a nutritionally deficient substance. Sugar consumption in the U.S. has gone from ten pounds per year per person in 1821¹⁰ to 150 pounds per person.¹¹ In addition, an estimated one hundred million people in the United States drink coffee in the morning, “a total of two *billion* cups of java every single day.”¹² What happens to an entire nation if a majority of the population goes

from taking crack or heroin a few days per year to every day and in high quantities? Dufty argues that sugar might as well be “dope”:

On summer vacation, I hitchhiked thousands of miles and lived on Pepsi Cola in those large, economy-sized nickel bottles. It was not until I visited the South for the first time that a girl turned me onto something called “dope.” They served it at soda fountains with lots of crushed ice, vanilla flavoring, syrup, and soda. Up North it was called Coca-Cola.¹³

So, how does this tie into social injustices such as exploitation, classism, and racism? Well, authors such as William Dufty and Sidney Mintz both theorize that the African slave trade started because of sugar.¹⁴ I argue that slavery manifested itself in multifaceted ways, too: the obvious one is the enslavement of Africans and other indigenous populations. However, addiction is another form of slavery. As Derrick Jensen notes, “to be addicted is to be a slave. To be a slave is to be addicted.”¹⁵ What happens if a significant number of people in the world’s “most powerful” nation are sugar-addicted slaves? Are sugar and caffeine addictions truly the reason why the British Empire fell?

A majority of Americans are dependent on sucrose, bleached flour, high fructose corn syrup, flesh food, and caffeine. Therefore, what does it mean that “America runs on Dunkin”? Who and what are we hurting, deceiving, and stealing from to bring us our powdered-sugar donut, that Coolatta, or that ham, egg, and cheese English muffin? Recent research shows that we’re hurting ourselves and exploiting and enslaving others—nonhuman animals and humans—in a way that is similar to colonialism; similar to when many of our African ancestors were torn from their communities and shipped to the Caribbean and Americas to chop cane for the production of sucrose and rum for addicted Europeans: an entire nation whose civilization rested on the shoulders of the savage African and indigenous American slaves to harvest their drug.¹⁶

It is 2009, and sugar consumption continues to increase globally. Sucrose is a toxin and has no nutritional value to the human body.¹⁷ *Isn’t that a little strange?* Particularly, since sugar cane is grown upon thousands of acres of land to produce sucrose. Eight hundred and thirty million people in the world are undernourished, and 791 million of them live in so-called developing countries.¹⁸ Hence, what nourishing foods could these acres potentially

grow if (a) sugar cane were no longer in high demand from the U.S. (as well as the rest of the top consumers—Brazil, Australia, and the EU) and (b) the land was used specifically to grow nourishing foods for the population in the global South?

Back to breakfast in the United States... a Dunkin Donuts meaty dairy breakfast meal, such as the Supreme Omelet on a Croissant, not only has 38g of fat, 590 calories, hydrogenated oils, sugar, and bleached flour, but the production of this food encompasses multiple layers of suffering. Production of addictive “civilized” substances such as refined sugar, processed flesh foods, chocolate, and coffee take away and often pollute land that could be used to grow whole foods that can feed the malnourished and starving human beings of this planet. Even more important, human beings *and* nonhuman animals and the ecosystem suffer greatly because of our First World addiction to unmindful human, egocentric consumption.

Many people do not know this (I include myself, when I used to eat meat), but the pig that had been enslaved and eventually killed, mutilated, and processed to become part of America’s Dunkin Donuts breakfast sandwich (or any other pig-filled meal) required a lot of water to be raised and eventually slaughtered. Pig farming—along with all nonorganic meat and dairy farming production—is overconsuming and contaminating the world’s water supply.¹⁹ “Farm animals directly consume about 2.3 billion gallons of water per day, or over 800 billion gallons per year. Another 200 billion gallons are used to cool the animals and wash down their facilities, bringing the total to about 1 trillion gallons.”²⁰

This cannot be taken lightly. You like clean drinking water, right? Every single being on this planet requires water for survival. Yes, this includes *you*, your grandbaby, your family cat, your best friend, the turnips in your garden, and the physician that you may seek medical services from. I recently learned that the World Resources Institute predicts that at least 3.5 billion people—that’s more than half of us—will be struggling with water shortages by 2025. Water is likely to join oil as a primary cause of armed conflicts. Already, multinational corporations have used their power within donor nations to force indebted nations to privatize some water resources. This is just one example of how, yet again, those who are already oppressed will be hurt the most by environmental crises. Around the world, women and girls are those mostly responsible for obtaining household water.²¹

Yes, my brothas and sistahs in the United States, even if you're one of the many human beings on the planet who aren't concerned with nonhuman animals rights at this point in your antiracism and antipoverty praxis and spiritual path, your consumption of unsustainably produced animal products may not only be increasing your chances for cancer, obesity, and heart disease,²² you may be (in)directly oppressing and causing suffering to people who *look just like you*. I was astounded to learn that the poor and people of color have a much higher chance and likelihood of suffering and dying simply because they don't have rightful access to clean water, water that has been polluted and/or misused for our American addiction to flesh foods. To give you some more perspective on how much water is used in animal farming, here are some statistics:

- Five times as much water is used for irrigation to grow animal feed grains compared to fruits and vegetables.
- 4,500 gallons of water are needed to produce a quarter pound of raw beef.
- 8,500 square miles is the size of the dead zone created in the Gulf of Mexico by fertilizer runoff carried by the Mississippi River from the upper Midwest.
- 17 trillion gallons is the amount of irrigation water used annually to produce feed for U.S. livestock.²³

I must elaborate once again that those who will potentially suffer and/or die from lack of clean water access will be the poor and people of color. My brothas and sistahs in the struggle, that could be *you*.

There was a time when I didn't realize how much is at stake if we continue to overconsume animal products, which have been proven to be not only unnecessary in the diets of most people,²⁴ but a threat to our personal health because of our overconsumption of them. This is no small matter; a majority of Americans—especially Black, brown, and indigenous people—suffer from obesity, diabetes, heart disease, reproductive ailments, and colon cancer at rates higher than the white population.²⁵ Health is suffering in the United States:

- *50 percent*: how much less dietary fiber Americans consume than recommended (note: animal products contain no fiber, which is necessary for prevention of diabetes and colon cancer).

- *\$37 billion*: the annual cost of drugs to treat high blood pressure, heart disease, and diabetes.
- *\$50 billion*: the annual cost of coronary bypass operations and angioplasties (just imagine what we could do with that money if it hadn't been spent on diseases that stem significantly from unhealthy meat, dairy, and junk-food diets).
- *24 percent*: how much lower the rate of fatal heart attacks is in vegetarians compared to nonvegetarians.²⁶

If nonorganic and nonsustainable animal farming is causing this much pollution and jeopardizing the water supply to the point that 3.5 billion people will be struggling to find clean water, why should we stand for such environmental racism, degradation, and pollution in communities of color and working-class communities in the U.S. and abroad? We all know too well what happens to the economically poor and people of color during environmental disasters... we get the sh*t end of the sh*t stick first.

When Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans in 2005, the consensus among Black Americans was that the Bush administration's less-than-stellar response indicated just how pervasive institutional as well as overt racism and classism still are in the United States. Black America and our antiracist allies cheered when hip-hop artist Kanye West bravely said on live television, "George Bush doesn't care about Black people."²⁷ However, if the Bush administration's lack of quick and effective rescue actions indicate that he "doesn't care about Black people," what do the consequences of our own unmindful, uncompassionate, and/or overconsumptive dietary practices say about how we care about ourselves? About the plethora of people in the global South who are starving and dehydrating, enslaved for our American addictions? About our own Black and brown communities here?

Let's reflect on how our own overconsumption, unhealthy, and environmentally unsustainable patterns—indoctrinated as normal—are collectively contributing to the suffering of ourselves, nonhuman animals, and the ecosystem. We speak of how addictions to illegal drugs and alcohol can ruin entire families and neighborhoods within households and communities in the U.S. However, let's look deeper into ourselves and ask how flesh food products, cane sugar, caffeine addiction, and overconsumption in general are not only destroying our

beautiful bodies, but Black and brown families, neighborhoods, and communities, locally and globally, along with the global ecosystem.

Interestingly, such consumption may be linked to how many of us, from the past to the present, have dealt with institutionalized racism. bell hooks writes:

We deal with White supremacist assault by buying something to compensate for feelings of wounded pride and self-esteem. . . . We also don't talk enough about food addiction alone or as a prelude to drug and alcohol addiction. Yet, many of us are growing up daily in homes where food is another way in which we comfort ourselves.

Think about the proliferation of junk food in Black communities. You can go to any Black community and see Black folks of all ages gobbling up junk food morning, noon, and night. I would like to suggest that the feeling those kids are getting when they're stuffing Big Macs, Pepsi, and barbecue potato chips down their throats is similar to the ecstatic, blissful moment of the narcotics addict.²⁸

Why is she bashing Big Macs? Well, in addition to contributing to our collective health ailments, American fast-food, flesh-based meals actually mean that land must be deforested for grazing cattle that are slaughtered primarily for fast-food hamburgers in the United States.²⁹ Forests also recycle and purify our water. Tropical forests actually produce a substantial amount of the earth's oxygen supply:

An ever-increasing amount of beef eaten in the United States is imported from Central and South America. To provide pasture for cattle, these countries have been clearing their priceless tropical rainforests. It stretches the imagination to conceive how fast the timeless rainforests of Central America are being destroyed so Americans can have seemingly cheap hamburgers. In 1960, when the U.S. first began to import beef, Central America was blessed with 130,000 square miles of virgin rainforest. But now, only 25 years later, less than 80,000 square miles remain. At this rate, the entire tropical rainforests of Central America will be gone in another forty years.³⁰

Many human communities indigenous to tropical forests are starving to death; native rainforest tribes are being wiped out.³¹ I was startled and saddened to realize that America's addictions and overconsumption are in collusion with environmental racism and cultural genocide of our own brown and Black indigenous brothas and sistahs as well as the working

poor, locally and globally. Once I learned these truths about the fast-food industries, I felt betrayed by restaurants such as McDonald's and Burger King. McDonald's was always promoting its food through this "happy-go-lucky-I-care-about-kids" clown (a.k.a. Ronald McDonald). However, it seems they only cared (in terms of profit) about the kids whose parents supported this "death foods" industry by treating their children to Happy Meals—foods not only produced without eco-sustainability in mind, but also contributing to today's diabetes and obesity crisis among children. Brain nutrition specialist Carol Simontacchi wrote in 2000, "according to the McDonald's Nutrition Facts, the child's soft-drink portion is twelve ounces, and the small size is sixteen ounces. The child's serving of Coca-Cola Classic contains nearly ten teaspoons of sugar."³²

Our unmindful consumption is not only harming our own health in the U.S.; we are supporting the pain, suffering, and cultural genocide of those whose land and people we have enslaved and/or exploited for meat as well as sucrose, coffee, black tea, and chocolate, too. Unless your addictive substances are labeled "fair trade" and "certified organic," they are most likely supporting a company that pays people less than they need to live off, to work on plantations that use toxic pesticides and/or prohibit the right to organize for their own human rights.

Take a look at your diet and the ingredients of everything you put in your mouth. Is your health suffering because of your addiction to sugar? Is your addiction causing suffering and exploitation thousands of miles away on a sugar-cane plantation, near a town that suffers from high rates of poverty and undernourishment simply because that land grows our "dope" instead of local grains and produce for them? I wonder, has America confused our addictive consumption habits with being "civilized"? The British who sipped their sugary teas considered themselves civilized, despite the torture and slavery it took to get that white sugar into their tea cups, along with the cotton and tobacco they used.

Collectively, maybe we in the U.S are too addicted to see clearly, to see past the next fix. This addictive behavior has occurred for centuries. Sadly, those who were originally enslaved to harvest sugar cane (Africans and indigenous Americans) are now enslaved in multiple ways: as consumers of sucrose, hormone-injected processed meat and dairy products, and junk food. This enslaved palate—along with other nutritionally dead foods such as bleached

white flour and partially hydrogenated oil—has helped to foster an astronomical rise in health disparities (obesity, heart disease, diabetes) in African-American communities that far exceed the health statistics of white America.³³

Statistically, Black folk are far sicker than white Americans. Unfortunately, institutionalized racism and the slave health-deficit, which are manifestations of the inequities of Black slavery in America, are key reasons why so many Black people struggle daily to get access to proper health information, food, and resources to maintain optimal wellness.³⁴ Health disparities between Black and white Americans are one of the worst legacies of slavery and colonialism.

This is why compassionate and environmentally sustainable health and nutritional practices *must* be part of our antiracist and antipoverty praxis in our own fight against the continued colonization of our Black and brown bodies and the ecosystem. If in Black America, health and nutrition are still suffering because of institutional racism and colonialism, we should be the first people to want to prevent this from happening to anyone else who is now on the receiving end of American addiction and materialism-induced neocolonialism, neo-slavery, and neo-imperialism in the developing world. This means supporting our indigenous cousins in the tropical forest, Coca-Cola factory workers in Latin America, and exploited and abused cane sugar harvesters in the Dominican Republic, because, yes, we Black, brown, and working poor American folk were in similar positions when we were enslaved for European sugar, spice, and cotton addictions, as they are now.

I ask you to envision that you are a slave in the 1700s, on an American plantation. How would you feel, after your wife or son had just been sold and you're suffering from emotional and physical trauma, when those who benefit from your slave labor tell you that they don't care about your pain and agony because their addiction to sugar, cheap cotton, and tobacco is worth more than you? This is a serious question, because the same can be applied today, except now *you* would be asked the same question by a plantation worker in the global South harvesting sugar, cocoa, coffee, or cotton for *you*.

The time is now. We must extend our antiracist and antipoverty beliefs to all people, non-human animals, and Mother Gaia. Yes, unless the cane sugar you are consuming is labeled "organic" (as well as "fair trade"), our collective overconsumption of and addiction to cane

sugar also helps destroy—not nurture—Mother Gaia’s ecosystem. Phosphorus-laden fertilizers that run off the sugar fields destroy the land and water.³⁵



Let’s talk about soda. In the U.S., addiction to sodas such as Coca-Cola not only loads the body with empty calories and nutritionally dead substances, such as refined sugars and caffeine, but consumers who support Coca-Cola may unknowingly encourage a corporation that supports torture, kidnapping, and murder of the workers to ensure that people in the U.S. will never be without their effervescent drug. Murder? Torture? Kidnapping? Weren’t these the same methods used in European imperialism to create an African and indigenous-based slave economy?

The SINALTRAINAL, the Colombian food and beverage workers unions, have attempted to organize the [Coca-Cola] bottling plants. But the bottling companies, in response, have contracted Colombian paramilitaries to do their dirty work—meaning the murder, kidnapping and torture of hundreds of union organizers, forcing many to live under 24-hour death threat. . . . [T]echnically, neither Coca-Cola USA nor Coca-Cola Inc. own the bottling plants. They intentionally maintain less than 49 percent of ownership for the purpose of distancing themselves from these activities. That said, they maintain control of the board in terms of voting rights and membership. And more importantly, the bottling plants exist only because of Coca-Cola.³⁶

Also, in terms of clean water rights, how much water in soda production, such as Coca-Cola, is being used, just for the taste of it? It’s striking to me that racially and socioeconomically oppressed minorities in America, who continue to experience institutionalized and overt classism and racism, are collectively complicit—and usually unknowingly—in being oppressors to our brothas and sistahs of color and the poor from afar because we buy without knowing how it got to the store. I ask you to envision this: You are an employee at your local plant. You have fought long and hard to finally have the opportunity to organize. This is incredibly important to you, because you firmly believe that everyone at your plant has the right to organize. Now that I have familiarized you with Coca-Cola’s practices, how would you feel about drinking a can of Coke like you usually do? Is it okay to support Coca-Cola

now? Another scenario: If you're an activist in the eco-sustainability movement, ask yourself how many times you and/or your peers have had a meeting about environmentalism while drinking Coca-Cola. Crazy, no? This isn't judgment on my part. I'm simply asking you to rethink your perceptions of activism by reflecting on how and what we consume in America connects to suffering and lack of human rights far away.

Coca-Cola is one example; our addictive dependence on sugar from the Dominican Republic is another:

Each year, approximately 20,000 Haitians cross the border into the Dominican Republic to work on sugar cane plantations, whereupon they are subject to forced labor, restrictions of freedom, inadequate living environments and dangerous working conditions. The U.S. is the largest consumer of Dominican Republic sugar.³⁷

Now, let's take a deep, calm breath. Perhaps this is your first exposure to how potentially devastating your consumption habits have been. It's okay if you start feeling angry because you've been lied to for so many years about where your food comes from. It's all right if you start feeling shame or guilt because of how many people and nonhuman animals have suffered, due to the standard American diet and nonfood consumption patterns; these feelings are normal. Maybe you are like how I was, years ago, unmindfully indulging in refined sugar and flour pastries, Dr. Pepper soda, Hershey's chocolate bars, grilled ham and cheese sandwiches, and Hostess cupcakes, while simultaneously being dedicated to obliterating sexism, heterosexism, classism, and racism in my home country of America. I don't know why it took the first twenty-seven years of my existence to begin to understand that I was living a half-truth as a social justice activist. Perhaps it's because many of us who were born and raised in the U.S. are immediately indoctrinated to believe that addiction, ecocide, and overconsumption are a normal part of our lives.³⁸

Granted, the words *addiction*, *ecocide*, and *overconsumption* were not explicitly used during my K-12 education. However, the school texts I read, the movies my friends and I watched, the food (and nonfood) advertisements my twin and I consumed, never told us how many human and nonhuman animals have been maimed, tortured, killed and/or enslaved for our individual freedom to choose a ham croissant in the morning, non-fair trade Dunkin

Donuts iced coffee to cool us down in the summer, or a T-shirt made of cotton harvested by an Uzbek child laborer. Damn, at that time I thought that, now that I'd gained the right to consume these products, *this* was racial equality, not neocolonialism. Little did I know that American society is a continuum of colonialism and imperialism driven by the collective addiction of material acquisition. These materials are usually stolen then extracted from the land as a natural resource, then drastically altered into a controlled, artificial, and addictive product perpetuating a life-killing imperial ideology we call *civilization*.³⁹ This [American] empire dictates that the corporations

enslave those whose labor is necessary for this theft [of natural resources from the land]. . . . [T]hey force the remaining humans to live under the laws and moral code of the occupiers. They inculcate future generations to forget their non-occupied past and to aspire to join the ranks of their occupiers, to actually join the degradation of [their bodies] and of the landbase that was once theirs.⁴⁰

It was within this perspective that I initially built my social justice beliefs. Never did I fully look at how my perception of antiracism and anticlassism was clouded by this.

Ultimately, we must deeply consider, do our addictions and other forms of consumption contradict our antiracist and antipoverty social justice beliefs? For twenty-seven years, my practices did, simply because I did not see the reason why I should even question whether my consumption contradicted my activism or understanding of equality.



We live in a crazy time, when people who make food choices that are healthy and compassionate are often considered weird, while people are considered normal whose eating habits promote disease and are dependent on enormous suffering.—John Robbins, *Diet for a New America*

When I was diagnosed with a tumor in my uterus in 2004, aged twenty-seven, I actively began engaging in research to learn how it was possible I could have a tumor in my uterus at such a young age. Afrikan holistic health practitioners, such as Queen Afua, opened my eyes to a world of lies, pointing to how the hormones and antibiotics in meat and dairy, refined

sugar and wheat flour, nonorganic produce consumption, and environmental pollution were at the source of my reproductive ailments. Furthermore, Afua suggests that the womb of the African-descended woman in the U.S. suffers from disease not just from the toxicity of the standard American diet, but also from four hundred years of trauma induced by slavery. She implores women of African descent to understand that much of our pain has come from our ancestor's wombs being raped and forced to breed slaves and breastfeed the slave master's children; we have silenced that aspect of our spirits that needs to be healed.⁴¹

Queen Afua's wisdom and my learning about American food (that eventually manifested as disease in my womb), health disparities, and environmental racism in the Black community were the impetus for my transition into practicing social justice for Mother Gaia and all of her inhabitants. Discovering this led me to uncover an American system of lies founded for the sole purpose of maintaining production and profit based on an entire nation's addictions. Such a system, I believe, is at the root of the health-disparities crisis affecting low-income people and people of color in the U.S.

European colonizers and imperialists argued that it was their right to enslave, maim, rape, and/or kill many of our great-great-great-great-great grandmothers to support their addiction to cotton, sugar cane, and caffeine. Is our perception and practice of freedom and liberation defined through support of materials and foods produced through the *massa's* system of domination, exploitation, and genocide? If you honestly feel that obtaining access to prime rib steak (rather than the parts of the animal *massa* didn't want), buying Starbucks non-fair trade coffee, or using expensive bath and beauty products containing animal byproducts that have probably been sprayed in animals eyes and/or forcibly injected into test animals who have only known a life of hell, is your right, I implore you to think again. How can this creation of suffering—because we believe we deserve to engage in materialism and overconsumption to show we're "no longer shackled"—be anybody's right?

In *Eternal Treblinka*, Charles Patterson argues that humanity's capacity to enslave, torture, and maim animals led certain groups of humans to accept a natural hierarchy of animal species and the inferiority of certain human beings; and that they themselves were the "superior" race/gender—that is white, class-privileged males—and had the right to do with all other human beings, nonhuman animals, plants, minerals, etc., as they

pleased.⁴² This attitude led to the Nazi Holocaust, Native American genocide, African slavery, and the medical experimentation and abuse of people of color and the working poor in America, such as the Tuskegee syphilis experiment and the forced sterilization of poor women in America. Patterson's research conveys an example of how we in the West constitute a society based on violence, oppression, misery, and domination that has led to an ongoing societal trauma from the microscale to the macroscale for all of us—whether we are the oppressors, the oppressed, or both.⁴³ I see this clearly in how we collectively consume and how we rationalize why it is okay if our products come from a place of suffering, violence, and inequality.

Contrary to what we've been taught, many of us in the U.S. do not need meat with every meal in order to be healthy or get enough protein. This is one of the first myths of nutrition we must acknowledge: that protein can only come from an animal-based diet. Just as most whites during antebellum America believed they couldn't live without the benefits of African slavery, so it's a misconception that all human beings cannot live without meat protein derived from enslaved nonhuman animals. If you think a cow is the only way you can get protein, then how does the cow itself get protein? This big, beautiful animal is an herbivore. Some of the most powerful and strongest animals, such as elephants and horses, are herbivores. Like elephants and horses, the human digestive system is suited for a plant-based diet.⁴⁴ The current medical research on proper whole-foods, plant-based diets makes it clear that we're not designed to be healthy by consuming the standard American diet of junk food and meaty, dairy-saturated meals, but rather by eating diets high in whole grains, greens, and fiber (remember animal products *do not* contain fiber).⁴⁵

Though it may not feel like it at the moment, you're not being asked to give up anything; you're being asked to reflect on your possible addictions to unhealthy materials, acknowledge this, and discover how life-giving alternatives can strengthen your body and community's social-justice goals. If you're one of the many people in America who support fighting racism and poverty, what good is this effort if the planet's water and land are so toxic in fifty years that no living thing can live on them, due to our collective addictions and poisonous lifestyles? A human being cannot live without water for more than a week, and oxygen for more than a few minutes.

What I'm asking you to consider deeply may seem like a lot. I know I felt I was being asked to give up everything at first, too. When I met those "crazy, tree-hugging" environmentalists and vegetarians (and the occasional vegan) for the first time, while attending Dartmouth College from 1994 to 1998, I couldn't believe they thought they had the right to tell me I shouldn't be eating Kentucky Fried Chicken or taking thirty-minute showers or buying GAP clothing. *Who the hell were they to tell me this?* I naively thought with prejudice. *They're just bored overprivileged rich white kids who do not have real problems.* I realized nearly a decade later that they simply weren't trained or well read enough in antiracist and antipoverty praxis to deliver their message to me in a way that connected to my social justice work as a Black working-class female trying to deal with sexism, classism, and racism at Dartmouth. Though I would have appreciated a much more culturally sensitive delivery in their message—and cultural sensitivity is something I think the largely white, middle-class, eco-sustainable, and alternative-health movements in the U.S. need to work on—these kids' concerns were not only real, but substantial; it was their white, middle- and upper-class, privileged perception of health and eco-sustainability that made most of them unable to connect to working-class people and to Black and brown people like myself.

My experience with this is not singular. Researchers such as Rachel Slocum, Saskia Poldervaart, Arnold Farr, Narina Nagra, Chithra Karunakaran, and Liz Appel have argued that predominantly white, liberal, social-justice initiatives—from community food organizing and antiglobalization protests, to veganism, to dismantling the prison-industrial complex—are often entrenched in covert whiteness and white privilege that are collectively unacknowledged by white-identified people engaged in them. This has blunted the effectiveness of these movements' outreach and intent to people of color like myself, who perceive the tone and delivery of their message as elitist and colonizing.⁴⁶ I believe this is one of the key reasons why so many people of color in the U.S. feel that ethical consumption is a "white thing" only and don't delve into how it will help our antiracism and antipoverty praxis.

Until I made the connections on my own, I too felt this way. However, I realized that the message made sense but was usually lost in an oppressive tone that reminded me of another form of trying to colonize people of color to live in a way the white class-privileged people deemed as civilized and healthy. I was also weary of the message of Euro-Anglocentric

“healthy consumption,” because I remembered that cow’s milk has been constructed in America as “healthy for everyone”—despite that myself as well as most Native Americans, Asians, and African-Americans are more lactose intolerant than white people. I thought these kids at Dartmouth were preaching yet another ethnocentric message about health and food that assumed everyone was from a Euro-Anglocentric ancestry, could digest the same things as them, and had monetary stability to make it happen.

As you read this, maybe you’re asking yourself the same thing: *What right does she have to ask me to strongly consider how my current consumption pattern impacts my goal of abolishing race and class oppression? To ask the ways in which our own American consumption practices are frequently diametrically opposed to our antiracist and antipoverty practices?* Let’s go back to the 1700s antebellum South. How many whites angrily asked abolitionists: *What right do they have to take away my freedom to have access to cheap cotton and labor?* Most of us know that the answer was, *No damn right at all.*

Now, are we going to emulate the European colonizers and American slave masters from centuries ago who thought they had the right to kill or enslave people and damage the land to fulfill their addiction to material goods? Or will we start transitioning into antiracist and anticlassist lifestyle, philosophy, and practice that will cause the least amount of suffering for our bodies, our friends, family, and all life on this planet?

I’m not asking you to consider waking up tomorrow morning and becoming a raw foods vegan who only buys local organic produce and has access to your own land to grow your own food. Such a suggestion would imply that everyone on this planet no longer has to battle the poverty, environmental racism, and sexism that make this transition incredibly challenging—a reality that the white, class-privileged, eco-sustainable, and alternative foods movements in the United States tend to ignore. What I’m asking, instead, is for you to perhaps reflect on how you can start consuming with compassion within your own economic, health, and geographical situation. Veganism works for my particular situation because I’m able to buy most of my food, unpackaged, from local, organic, and eco-sustainable resources. However, you may be one of many folk who must reflect on whether it’s more ethical and environmentally friendly to get protein and essential fatty acids from tofu shipped across the world in plastic and an avocado trucked all the way from Mexico, or from free-range chickens’ eggs that come

from a town forty-five miles away? In an ideal world, people who want to practice whole-foods veganism would have access to local and eco-sustainably-grown plant-based foods that would give them all the nutrients they need—without the use of animal products or the waste of fuel and resources to package, process, and ship produce around the globe.

Our antiracist and antipoverty praxis must promote a break from addictive, ecocidal, uncompassionate consumption. Our praxis for social justice must center on ending our addictions and ecocidal habits. Addiction is the opposite of fully living. We must choose to live fully—not simply survive—and understand that we’re not sacrificing anything by ridding ourselves of old addictive and unmindful habits that are largely based on the colonizer’s imperialistic and uncompassionate consumption practices and value system.

I understand that many of us have our ethnic and racial identities embedded in the foods that we and our families have been eating since colonial times. We are scared to lose these. However, there are many ways to be Black without eating the traditional Soul Food diet. There are thriving communities of color throughout America that are rooted in holistic healing and have adapted their ethnic identity to more plant-based diets from their people’s indigenous philosophy *before* colonization, while simultaneously practicing eco-sustainability, decolonization, and respect for nonhuman animals. These communities wholeheartedly know that “the master’s tools will not dismantle the master’s house,” nor will his concept of food production or abuse of natural resources and nonhuman animals. They have chosen to live and thrive in ways that the postindustrial Soul Food and junk-food diets could not holistically support.

I emphasize this because I’ve met many people of color who are misinformed that eco-sustainability and plant-based diets are a “white thing”; that it goes against what makes them Black, Asian, Chicano, Native American, and so on. However, this is simply not true. I believe that much of the confusion stems once again from lack of cultural sensitivity from the mainstream ethical-consumption movements, whose tone and delivery make it seem like it’s part of white, class-privileged identity. However, I do ask you, How did our ancestors eat *before* colonization? For example, was our concept of Soul Food destroying our body temples? Was our concept of consumption polluting our water? Was our concept of equality similar to that of the colonizer’s model of consumption? Many people of color in African

communities practiced plant-based holistic nutrition and herbalism and didn't aspire to join the ranks of their occupiers and degrade their own bodies and the land that was once theirs. Today, many of these communities exist in America and quite a few are rooted in Blackness (many from an Afrikan holistic philosophy).

For example, many African Hebrew Israelite communities throughout the U.S.⁴⁷ practice holistic health and nutrition. The Queen Afua network throughout America teaches sistahs how to reclaim our reproductive gifts by decolonizing our wombs from the colonial diet and recentering our bodies and spirits through Afrikan/Egyptian-centered, plant-based diets and eco-sustainability.⁴⁸ And though I may not agree with these communities' entire philosophies (they appear to be quite heterosexist, while I am LGBTQ supportive), these communities have chosen to live and thrive, and break the addictions we learned from colonialism.

But what does "live" mean?

Choosing to live means that we no longer support the system as it is. Choosing to live means that we cannot eat much of the food in our supermarkets, breathe the air in many of our cities, allow our groundwater to be polluted by toxic wastes, or sit back and wait for the nuclear holocaust. The Addictive System asks us to accept these things—and more—as inherent to being because they are inherent to the addictive, nonliving system in which we live and hence, "reality . . .". The Addictive System asks us to become comfortable with actively participating in our own non-aliveness. Addictions take the edge off, block awareness that could threaten our seeming equilibrium, and allow us to grow, and keep us too busy to challenge the system. [Addictions] are essential to the system. . . . It is caring to confront the disease in the individual, and it is caring to confront the disease of the system. By definition, addiction *has control* of the individual. By definition, addiction *has control* of society.⁴⁹

Confronting unmindful consumption and addiction is a challenge, but it is not impossible. Looking back, I feel blessed that I was able to confront my addictions, learn moderation with shopping, and question where my goods come from. My health is much better and my understanding of how my own antiracist activism must be directly linked to all social and environmental justice issues is now clearer and indisputable. Most important, I learned how to heal my womb from the ravages of colonialism and slavery that have greatly impacted the

reproductive health of us women of color, who have lost the wisdom of our ancestral midwives due to colonialism and/or slavery.

Even as I write this, I continue to challenge myself and question my own habits and perceptions of social and environmental sustainability every single day. Compassion and awareness of the suffering we potentially cause to ourselves, those we love, nonhuman animals, and the environment constitute an ongoing journey. For me, whole foods veganism—inspired by Queen Afua—was a logical starting point because it simultaneously alleviated my own bodily suffering, the suffering of nonhuman animals, and the ecosystem. However, it isn't surprising to me that nearly four years after being diagnosed with a fibroid tumor and questioning the lies I had been taught about food, health, and American social justice, I am still learning. Hell no, I'm not perfect! Yes, I know that the transition to mindful consumption is challenging and often frustrating, isolating, confusing, and alienating at first, particularly if you are not part of class-privileged communities in which access to healthier lifestyles is easier, or if you have family members of color who feel you are "trying to be white" by rejecting your mama's southern fried chicken in favor of hummus or quinoa.

However, we must come to terms with the fact that the foods we've grown accustomed to—that have even helped to create the concept of our ethnic identity—may actually be feeding the machine of neocolonialism; that we remain enslaved to a system that thrives on our addictions and mental, physical, and emotional illnesses. Access to locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables, proper nutritional information, and community gardens is currently very difficult in most low-income communities and communities of colors.⁵⁰ This may prove challenging for many whose food choices are limited to Jack in the Box, White Castle, convenience stores, or grocers that do not sell fresh produce. In addition, TV food advertisements aimed toward people of color convey unhealthier items than those aimed toward whites,⁵¹ which potentially makes unlearning current concepts of food and nutrition difficult.

However, we must challenge the norm. We must no longer accept the lack of healthy food resources, community gardens, and nutritional information in our neighborhoods. People of color have organized at the grassroots level to bring necessary social justice changes to our communities that many found inconceivable, such as abolishing slavery and getting the Civil Rights Act enacted. We boycotted the bus line to desegregate the buses and it worked. I know

this is not going to happen overnight, but maybe if we start now, we will be able to get what we need to have access to local and eco-sustainable goods for harmoniously balanced plant-based lifestyles for our children. Let's start now.

Here are some of the things we can do:

1. Organize and petition to get natural foods co-operative grocers or natural chains (like Whole Foods) to consider coming to your neighborhood but charging people fifty percent less for the food.
2. You don't have to be from Georgia to benefit from the resources on the Black Vegetarian Society of Georgia's home page (bvsga.org).
3. Look at Queen Afua's site (queenafuaonline.com) to learn about healing our wombs and overall health, mind, body, and soul through whole foods veganism.
4. Contact organizations such as Oakland Food Connection (foodcommunityculture.org), or The People's Grocery (peoplesgrocery.org/content) in Oakland, California. Ask them how you can get started in bringing healthy but low-cost human rights-oriented foods to your community.
5. Try to bring eco-sustainable and food education workshops that connect to your communities' antiracism and antipoverty agendas to your school, community center, or church. Go online to www.Blackbrowngreen.com to get some good ideas.
6. Because there's a tendency for people of color to think only white people do this, share with your friends and family the literature that has been written by people of color that connects antiracism, decolonization, and freedom to plant-based diets, respect for animals, and eco-sustainability. These sites will be helpful as well: www.Blackbrowngreen.com, vegansofcolor.wordpress.com, and www.soulvegfolk.com.
7. The Food Project (thefoodproject.org) helps to teach young people from diverse backgrounds about food activism and eco-sustainable living.
8. Check out Solidarity, Sustainability, and Nonviolence at www.pelicanweb.org, an e-newsletter.
9. The Eagle Eye Institute (eagleeyeinstitute.org) teaches urban youth about the power of nature and eco-sustainable philosophy.
10. Greenaction.org is a site about health and environmental justice.

11. KillerCoke.org is a site that references the human rights abuses of Coca-Cola.
12. Check out United Poultry Concerns (upc-online.org) to learn ways to teach yourself and your community about how and why chickens suffer.
13. Check out The Compassionate Living Project (compassionatelivingproject.org).
14. To learn about current slavery, read Kevin Bales's *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*. If your local library doesn't stock it, have them request it from another library.
15. Check out Bryant Terry's recipe and food justice book, *Vegan Soul Kitchen: Fresh, Healthy, and Creative African-American Cuisine* (www.bryant-terry.com/site/books).
16. Check out Althea's Raw Mocha Angel blog. She has great recipes and ideas for raw, vegan, and gluten-free living: therawmochaangel.blogspot.com.
17. California Food and Justice Coalition: www.foodsecurity.org/california.