

## The Cocked Fist Culture

### Crossing the microaggressions minefield

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Don't take this the wrong way, but are you offended? I know I haven't said anything yet, but it's never too early to be aggrieved. Studies I've invented, since we're all entitled to our own facts these days, show that 4 out of 10 Americans are offended by something at all times. Ten out of 10, if they're taking a course containing the word "intersectional" at Swarthmore.

Many of us who came of age on a college campus in the early nineties mistakenly believed that full-throttle political correctness was too insidious, not to mention too exhausting, to follow us into the new century. Person, were we wrong. See what had to be done there? Under the new rules, I had to insert "person," a non-binary, gender-neutral noun, so as not to offend people with the expression "man," the preferred signifier of oppression of a white heteronormative cis-male member of the Kyriarchy. (I only understood about half that sentence myself, but I'm assured that everything in it is bad.)

Like New Kids on the Block or high-waisted shorts—other '90s relics we'd left for dead that didn't quite stay that way—political correctness is back with murder in its eyes. In our newly minted Cocked Fist Culture, the question when confronting nearly anything—a book, a film, an overheard comment on a Privilege Walk—is "Is this problematic?" Though it would save time to simply ask, "What isn't?"

So problematic have the problem-miners become that my former colleague Sonny Bunch, now of the *Washington Free Beacon*, [launched his own "Everything's A Problem" Tumblr](#). Written in the scolding voice of the problem-miners themselves, each news item/outrage-du-jour arrives pre-satirized. The blog is only six months old, and was supposed to be a toss-off hobby. Yet Bunch has cranked out 142 posts, so many that I find it problematic keeping up with them. For as advertised, everything is problematic: from Caitlyn Jenner being called attractive ("We've smuggled in the same old cis/Eurocentric narratives about womanhood," huffed the *HuffPost's* Marc Lamont Hill) to *New Yorker* cartoons (94.7 of their characters are white, according to the Proceedings of the Natural Institute of Science, it now being considered essential to count such things).

The Cocked Fist Culture has turned into an ouroboros, except the snake is well past swallowing its own tail. It's eaten its way clean up to mid-sternum. Recent books across the political spectrum have extensively documented this turn, notably Mary Katharine Ham and Guy Benson's *End of Discussion* on the right and Kirsten Powers's *The Silencing: How the Left Is Killing Free Speech* on the center-left. Though the outrage industrial complex shows no sign of shrinking, some thought a high-water mark had been reached earlier this year when Jonathan

Chait, a *New York* writer and reliable liberal, broke ranks, accusing his own team of ideological repression through all the thought-and-speech policing. He charged that the hijacked left had adopted the modus operandi of old-line smash-mouth Marxists, who've always been contemptuous of mainstream liberalism's tendency to enshrine dissent. The present left merely swaps Marxist preoccupation with economics for race-and-gender-identity fetishization.

While some on the right gave Chait a swat for sniffily arriving a quarter-century late to the anti-p.c. party, his comrades lined up to steamroll him. Amanda Taub, *Vox's* self-described "senior sadness correspondent," responded that there's no such thing as political correctness. Even using the term is just a way "to dismiss a concern or demand as a frivolous grievance rather than a real issue," a device "often used by those in a position of privilege to silence debates raised by marginalized people." A sentence that sounded suspiciously like it had been written by a political-correctness meme generator. The kind that Orwell described as prose consisting "less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a pre-fabricated hen-house."

But the senior sadness correspondent must've grown even sadder when several months later, *Vox* itself ran a piece by a professor bylined Edward Schlosser. He complained of students' claiming grievous harm over every imagined affront. Of his and his colleagues' having to adjust their teaching materials so as not to trample the fragile buttercups, for fear of losing their jobs. Of being afraid to teach the likes of Upton Sinclair and Mark Twain at the risk of triggering sensibility-offending IEDs. Of cultural studies and social-justice writers enabling these attitudes in popular media by attempting to make complex fields of study as easily digestible as a TGIF sitcom, which has "led to an adoption of a totalizing, simplistic, unworkable, and ultimately stifling conception of social justice."

The piece's headline, incidentally, was "I'm a liberal professor, and my liberal students terrify me." One is tempted to reply to Professor Schlosser (not his real name, he was too afraid to use it): How do you think the rest of us feel? Especially as the students being taught—if "teaching" is actually what happens in the trigger-warned, hermetically sealed safe spaces that higher-education classrooms have become—move into the workforce. There, they can further the debate, which no longer remotely resembles a debate, since a debate is something too unsafe-spacey to have. Perhaps one will even do so as the "race and identity editor" at *Vox*, a newly advertised position that I'm unfortunately not making up.

Of all the spirited new events in the Oppression Olympics—rescinding commencement-address invitations to speakers whose politics you dislike, accosting presidential candidates to see if they correctly answer which-colored lives matter, etc.—there is none so perplexing as that of "microaggression," an indignity so microscopic that you'd have to be a critical race theorist, MSNBC pundit, or college sophomore even to detect it.

If your Internet service has been down for the last two years, chances are good you're unfamiliar with micro-aggressions. But they've gained currency so quickly that the word was

recently added to Dictionary.com, along with other new essentials like “slacktivism” and “bi-gender.” The site defines microaggression as “a subtle but offensive comment or action directed at a minority or other non-dominant group that is often unintentional or unconsciously reinforces a stereotype.” As an example, Dictionary.com provides: “I don’t see you as black.” Fair enough. A white person saying that to a black person would at the very least be considered rude or condescending, if not a bank-shot racist. But what constitutes a microaggression is open to both wide and wild interpretation, as we will shortly see.

Microaggression scholars (yes, there now are those) emphasize that just because an offense is subtle or perhaps not even an offense at all doesn’t mean microaggression isn’t serious. Offensiveness is, after all, a subjective judgment rather than an objective certainty—offense always residing in the eye of the offended. So in fact, some call microaggression “the silent killer,” as in something that sneaks up on you and is cumulatively injurious. Think hypertension, or carbon monoxide, or the muffled rippers your little brother used to let in the backseat on long family car-trips. That’s microaggression in a nut: the Soundless Fart of racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism (don’t stop the -ism’ists now, they’re on a roll), classism, ageism, looksism, speciesism, “Nesting Orientalism,” and whole genera of other -isms that have not yet been discovered.

Despite microaggression’s vogueishness, the term itself was coined in 1970 by Chester M. Pierce, an African-American psychiatrist and professor at Harvard Medical School. While Pierce, by some accounts, was a well-liked, genteel scholar, not given to rhetorical excess, he did manage to anticipate our present Cocked Fist Culture when writing, “Every child in America entering school at the age of five is mentally ill, because he comes to school with certain allegiances toward our founding fathers, toward our elected officials, toward a belief in a supernatural Being, toward the sovereignty of this nation as a separate entity. It’s up to you teachers to make all of these sick children well by creating the international children of the future.”

But microaggression didn’t really take flight as a concept until decades later, when expanded upon by Derald Wing Sue, an Asian-American professor of counseling psychology at Columbia University. If there is a microaggression bible, Sue’s 2010 book *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* is it. Having pushed through all 310 punishing, repetitive pages, I can say with a clear conscience that it reads less like a seminal breakthrough in an important new field of study and more like a cry for help. In fact, it closely resembles the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, specifically, the “Paranoid Personality Disorder” section.

From the *DSM*:

The essential feature of this disorder is a pervasive and unwarranted tendency . . . to interpret the actions of people as deliberately demeaning or threatening. Almost invariably, there is a general expectation of being exploited or harmed by others in some way. . . . The person may

read hidden demeaning or threatening meanings into benign remarks or events. . . . Often these people are easily slighted and quick to react with anger or counterattack; they may bear grudges for a long time, and never forgive slights, insults or injuries. . . . They tend to avoid blame even when it is warranted. . . . They intensely and narrowly search for confirmation of their expectations, with no appreciation of the total context. Their final conclusion is usually precisely what they expected in the first place.

To be clear, Sue is correct that even in our relatively enlightened age, there are still acts of racism, sexism, and the like that are committed actively, passive-aggressively, and even out of blind ignorance, as has been the case since time's dawn. And white, heterosexual men have inarguably had an easier time of it in America, taken on average, than women or gays or minorities (blacks in particular having spent their first 245 years here in chains, then until half a century ago under Jim Crow—hardly an auspicious start). To not acknowledge that injustice existed, or that it still has some real-world carry beyond legal remediation, requires a keen capacity for denial, if not dissociative amnesia.

In Sue's hyper-paranoid world, however, there is nearly no act of everyday intercourse—what sociologist Amitai Etzioni calls “the normal sounds of human rambling”—that cannot be linked to race, gender, or sexual orientation, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost of the Cocked Fist Culture's secular liturgists.

As if microaggressions weren't already small enough, Sue further subdivides them into microassaults, micro-insults, and microinvalidations. To elucidate, he breaks up his cerebrum-numbing academese with helpful charts, giving examples of microaggressions and what they're really saying. Charts, which by the way, have been widely employed in college faculty training throughout the country, including at UCLA, where 80-year-old professor Val Rust was witch-hunted by irate students for, among other atrocities, asking a student to lowercase “indigenous” in her dissertation.

There are some pretty obvious microaggressions that almost anyone of good faith could agree should be no-go territory. (Telling someone, for instance, “You're a credit to your race.” *Duh.*) Sue, however, provides loads of additional head-scratchers. To hear him tell it, if you, as a member of the “dominant” culture, errantly ask a Latino or Asian you take to be foreign where they were born, what you're really saying is, “You are not an American.” In pre-Cocked-Fist America, we'd call that an “honest mistake.” Now, it's a four-alarm microaggression.

Ask a student of Asian descent to help you with a math problem? What you're really saying, according to Sue, is “All Asians are intelligent and good in math/sciences.” Sue fails to take into account that, while there are worse indignities than being considered good at math, Asians indisputably *are* better in math and science, on average, than other subgroups. In the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's worldwide math and science rankings, the top five countries are Asian. And on the SAT going back to 1986, Asians scored

higher than every other group every single year. (On occasion, stereotypes become stereotypes for good reasons.)

But wait: Sue has more micro-crimes against humanity. Ask a woman her age and, after hearing that she's 31, look at her ring finger? What you're saying—with your eyes, apparently—is “Women should be married during child-bearing ages because that is their primary purpose.” Tell someone “America is a melting pot”? What you're actually saying is “Assimilate/acclurate to dominant culture.” Offer the remark “When I look at you, I don't see color”? What you're really doing, according to Sue, is “denying a person of color's racial/ethnic experiences.” Have the temerity to express the view that “There is only one race, the human race”? Go right ahead, if you're pro-micro-genocide. Because the violence you're committing is “denying the individual as a racial/cultural being.” Not a physical injury, perhaps. But, in Sue's telling, you're inflicting “a soul wound.”

While Sue feels no compunction about playing microaggression meter maid, ticketing everyone else for the smallest imagined infraction, he's worked out a pretty great deal for himself: He can say whatever he wants, but is incapable of racism! As the *College Fix* reported, during a recent microaggression seminar at Northwestern University, when asked by a student if his entire speech was a “microaggression against white people,” Sue informed the poor rube that only white people can be racist, since minorities like him “do not have the power to oppress in the way that a white person might do because they have the very institutions that support it.” You know, unlike a widely published Ivy League professor whose views are forced down the gullets of helpless participants in compulsory campus training sessions.

Apparently Sue can't even be racist when he says macroaggressively racist things, such as: “There is considerable evidence to suggest that oppressed groups have developed an ability to discern the truth and to determine reality better than those who occupy positions of power and privilege.” Yet near the end of his book, on page 244, he seems perplexed: “Why do many white students find it so difficult to honestly dialogue on racial topics?” Here, “dialogue” is used as a term of art to mean “monologue”—one in which he does all the scolding, while you do all the listening.

But let's take a wild stab anyway at the cause of the reluctance he correctly senses. It might have something to do with his prior 243 pages of categorical indictment. If whitey (particularly male, heterosexual whitey) notices any “oppressed” group's differences—differences that Sue and company are always eager to accentuate—he's a racist/sexist/LGBTQA-phobe. If he fails to notice any, or chooses not to, seeing everyone as undifferentiated, he's a racist/sexist/LGBTQA-phobe. (If you're behind on oppression acronyms, the “QA” does not stand for “quality assurance,” but rather, as the University of Nebraska's Student Involvement website instructs, for “Queer/Questioning, Asexual/Aromantic, Allies and Advocates—and the A can stand for All.” The tent of suffering is a big one.)

If you're unfortunate enough to be in the "privileged" club (many of the nonprivileged, in Sue's estimation, enjoy cross-privileges—for instance, white women), then Dr. Sue's microaggression theory is like a jammed revolving door. No matter what you do, it sticks you coming and going.

It might be tempting to write off Sue's utterances as those of just another cloistered crank. Except, as the problem-miners like to say, it's more problematic than that. Because too many of the country's aggrievement factories—from college campuses to social-media echo chambers—are now parroting his rhetoric. Often, to even stranger effect.

Just witness the myriad microaggression websites, the equivalent of micro-Holocaust museums. There was Fordham's microaggression photo project, where students played the race card, being photographed with scrawled placards announcing "injustices," such as the lass who was asked—brace yourselves—"What are you?" Her thin-skinned answer to an innocuous question: "HUMAN. Being biracial doesn't make me a 'what.'" (The *BuzzFeed* article first featuring the project now has over 2,879,065 views.)

Then there's the "I'm Tired" photo project, where one thing nobody ever tires of is complaining how they've been wronged. Here, men and women remove their shirts and have scrawled on their backs what they're tired of. A skinny guy is "tired of being told I'm too skinny for a guy." A portly woman with love-handles spilling out over her waistband is tired of "assumptions being made about my eating habits because of my SIZE." Another is tired of "pretending I'm over my miscarriage." Which strictly speaking, is self-microaggression, but no matter—she's tired of it.

While there're tons of additional microaggression sites, the genre's gold standard is the Microaggressions Project, started in 2010 by Columbia students to address "power, privilege and everyday life." As the site's curators announce, "This project is a response to 'it's not a big deal'—'it' is a big deal." What's a big deal? Well, pretty much everything is, no matter how small.

Everyone can contribute, and seemingly, everyone does. I read only the first 35 pages or so, but micro-aggressees kvetch about every slight imaginable. A woman whines that her mother, aunt, and grandmother ask her, "Meet any nice boys?" when she comes home from college. A 13-year-old girl whines that the cashier at a video store counter asked her if she wanted the pink Nintendo DS Lite instead of the black one. A female engineer whines that when she was at a loud party and spelled out words with the phonetic alphabet (alpha, bravo, Charlie . . . ) a guy asked her if her dad was a pilot: "Made me feel frustrated, like my achievements and abilities were written off." When two guys on a whale-watching trip joke that a female whale is fleeing their boat because she thought it was a male whale trying to mate, a beside-herself 20-year-old whines, "I am . . . a sexual assault survivor. I felt shocked, worthless, depressed."

But once you exit the online micro-Holocaust museums, here's a trigger warning: It gets worse. A cottage industry has sprung up. One that monitors the never-ending overreach of the microaggression machine—everyone from *Reason's* Nick Gillespie and *National Review Online* blogger Katherine Timpf to the watchdogs at Campus Reform and the Foundation for

Individual Rights in Education. But especially vigilant are the gluttons for punishment at the *College Fix*, who actually run dispatches from student journalists throughout the country, fated to live at microaggression Ground Zero. Rake through their archives, and you find an embarrassment of microaggression riches.

To wit: A University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign study has concluded that black students “walking into or sitting in” a roomful of white people can be considered a microaggression. (This is destined to be a recurring problem, since blacks constitute only 13 percent of the U.S. population.) At Northeastern University, courtesy of the LGBTQA Resource Center, students can now be trained and certified as human “safe zones,” allowing them to receive “safe zone stickers.” (Is it any wonder that helicopter-parented, milk-fed millennials might regard a kindergarten-style sticker as a laudable achievement?)

At Washington State University, students were told they would be downgraded not only for using microaggressive descriptors such as “illegal alien,” as well as “male” and “female,” but also for failing to “defer” to nonwhite students. While at Brandeis University, a campus group that put up an exhibit to raise awareness about micro-aggression against Asians felt compelled to apologize, after a student protest, for triggering those Asian students who were “hurt by the content of the microaggressions in our installation.” Putting me in mind of the comedian Chris Rock—nobody’s idea of a knuckle-dragging conservative—who last year explained why he wouldn’t play college campuses anymore: “You can’t even be offensive on your way to being inoffensive.”

At Wheaton College, an evangelical liberal arts school, a microaggression survey found that some students were offended that “the class worship band does not include worship styles familiar to my cultural background.” At Ithaca College, students proposed an online reporting system in which the offended could rat out classmates for “belittling” or “isolating” words and/or behavior. At the University of Missouri, despite the state declaring it unlawful to restrict free-wheeling campus speech to campus “free speech zones,” faculty were advised to correct any peer’s “noninclusive language” and were given a four-page “inclusive terminology” guide to help them along. University of Illinois faculty have been advised to “nail” microaggressions through use of helpful admonishments, such as “Watch it! Racism.”

Harvard’s dining service felt it necessary to remove SodaStream stickers from its Israeli-manufactured water-machines, so as not to microaggress Palestinian students. A University of Washington union, in its bargaining demands for academic student employees, insisted on “genderless bathrooms, and working towards bathroom equity in access to already existing gendered bathrooms.” Arizona State now offers a course on “U.S. Race Theory and the Problem of Whiteness.” Princeton students have proposed making a “privilege-examining program” mandatory during freshman orientation. The student government president and Hispanic/Latino campus club at Northwestern admonished students not to eat tacos or drink tequila on Cinco de Mayo on grounds that it “offends, marginalizes, and isolates many of our friends, classmates, and community members.”

How micro can the policing of microaggressions get? Consider it a sign of the times that when I checked GoDaddy's web domain registrar, nanoaggressions.com and picoaggressions.com were already taken.

To gain a better understanding of how micro-aggressions work, I arrange to meet with a microaggression consultant in Seattle. Caprice Hollins, Psy.D., "self-identifies" (as they say in the biz) as African-American, teaches at the Seattle School of Theology & Psychology, and along with a white colleague runs Cultures Connecting, a full-service diversity shop "addressing race relations in the 21st century" (microaggression being just one component of her larger consultancy).

Seattle, it would seem, is as good a place as any to be in this line of work since, progressiveness-wise, it can make even Portland feel like piney-woods Alabama. Its (gay) mayor recently unveiled 11 rainbow-colored crosswalks in honor of LGBT pride, and he pardoned a Tofurky last Thanksgiving (a tofu turkey). Its Fremont neighborhood boasts a 16-foot sculpture of Vladimir Lenin. And its Office of Civil Rights recently instructed government workers not to use potentially offensive terms like "citizen" and "brown bag" in official documents or discussions. The same office, along with a grant for "anti-racism technical assistance," even helped present a free microaggression workshop (taught by Caprice) so participants could "develop a critical lens to examine subtle forms of bias."

Stepped now in the literature myself, I cab downtown from the airport on Interstate 5, my own critical lens picking up potential microaggressions everywhere. There's the Yellow Cab I'm riding in—is it trying to culturally appropriate Asians? What about that Kenan Advantage fuel truck—is the "advantage" white privilege, as companies exploit POCs (people of color) by perpetuating blood-for-oil wars around the globe? And that sign saying "Use Exit 164 for ferries"—great, heterosexism.

Before meeting Caprice, I half expect to encounter a stern, humorless bore. She had, after all, for four years, headed Seattle public schools' Office of Equity, Race & Learning Support, which was tasked with dismantling "institutional racism." She caused plenty of controversy during her hitch, occasionally garnering national headlines, as when she sent out the "myths of Thanksgiving" right around holiday break, including Myth #11: "Thanksgiving is a happy time. Fact: For many Indian people, Thanksgiving is a time of mourning . . . a bitter reminder of 500 years of betrayal returned for friendship." Her office's website defined "individualism" and "future time orientation" as being valued by white people, though they "devalue, stereotype and label people of color." By 2008, the city pulled the plug on the operation.

But when Caprice picks me up at my hotel, she has nothing of the Pilgrims-hater about her. Warm and inviting, with close-cropped hair and a radiant smile that makes her look 20 years younger than her 50 years of age, she immediately hugs me. Neither does she appear to be a political-correctness automaton, admitting to behaviors that could get her thrown into the stocks in some quarters of Seattle.

A devoutly religious woman, she tells me she listens to Christian music most of the time. She admits that when her kids were younger, she actually spanked them. When I notice a lighter in a cup-holder, she confesses—hold onto your hats—that she still smokes, though smoking is up there with baby-seal clubbing and Confederate-flag manufacturing among forbidden pursuits. I ask her brand, not wishing to microaggress by stereotypically assuming a black woman smokes menthols. She makes me guess. So I guess menthols. She says she wishes I'd guessed Capris, because of her name and the slender elegance of the cigarettes. But, she admits, gamely, "I smoke Virginia Slims Menthol Ultra Lights."

The idea of our day together is for Caprice to give me the upshot of her microaggression workshop. We'd planned on sneaking me into one, but her client didn't want some journalist skulking around. Instead, Caprice generously offered, "Just come see me and I'll do the training for you one-on-one."

In the car, however, she has some air that needs clearing, for Caprice is not a naïf. She knows the orientation of my magazine and draws a pretty good bead on where I'll land on microaggression. She doesn't put herself forward in the media much, not since she was scorched by the Thanksgiving-is-a-day-of-mourning controversy. She received irate letters that made her pretty fearful, inviting her to go back to Africa, and other "messages that kind of stripped me of my humanity." Not microaggressions, mind you. Just good old-fashioned racism.

Nevertheless, she's agreed to open her life to me, so she'd like me to open mine a little to her. "To create a safe space, right here in your Camry?" I ask. Yes, she says, not brooking my backtalk. "Like, I'm not comfortable right now," she says. She'd like to know a bit about my background. "I assume that you're white. How might that impact our relationship? How might your understanding of the culture that I come from?"

I scroll through my mental hard-drive in an attempt to ameliorate her concerns by making appropriate multicultural noises. Should I tell her *The White Shadow* was my favorite show as a kid? Should I tell her I've visited black churches just because I like the music? I don't tell her these things. Instead, I tell her that I'm a Gemini. (She's a Virgo—and our horoscope-compatibility prognosis indicates that we're both "excellent communicators and both very adaptable, a solid foundation to build on, however, your temperaments are very different, and a lot of give and take will probably be needed.")

I tell her of my diverse military-brat upbringing, of healthily Latino-and-black-populated schools I attended growing up, of the heavily black private school my kids have attended. All of this makes me feel like a total fraud. Like I'm bean-counting my own life, trying to check boxes to impress a stranger who will gain no real insight into the content of my character (assuming it has any) as a result of this cosmetic exercise.

"I would like to relax with you. I would like to tell you all kinds of things," Caprice worries aloud, "but I have these experiences. Is he tricking me? Is he being friendly?" I ask her if she's so

scared to do this, why'd she agree to let me come? Because you can't always preach to the choir, she says, and because the stories of mine she looked up made her trust that I'll give her a fair shake. When she was training to become a therapist, a professor of hers told her how to approach clients: " 'One of the first things you want to do is figure out what you like about them.' People aren't all bad, and it's kind of easy to maintain that enemy image." Besides, she adds, "I believe the work that I'm doing is God's work. Right now, if you weren't in the car with me, I'd be smoking my cigarettes and listening to Christian music. I see myself as an instrument for helping to make this world a better place for all human beings to live in."

We head to a diversity training session she already had on the books, which she allows me to observe before she conducts our private microaggression training later that afternoon. At the Sno-Isle Tech Skills Center in Everett, about half-an-hour outside Seattle, Caprice is conducting a three-hour session (the first of six she'll hold throughout the year) for a group of public-sector professionals on a two-day diversity retreat. Who precisely they work for I'm not permitted to say, as Caprice doesn't want to cause undue controversy, considering how it went for her with the Seattle public schools.

The crowd is mostly khaki'ed, socks'n'sandalista types—good, well-meaning (mostly) white people who don't seem the least bit offended having a black diversity trainer tell them they should feel privilege-conscious. Though when given the choice between two books for the seminar, *Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships Across Race* and *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*, most choose the latter. (A little white-guilt-tripping is good, but let's not go crazy.)

After announcements are made and Chef Becky, the on-premises caterer, tells everyone to be expecting chicken vindaloo and Asian noodle salad for future meals, in keeping with diversity themes, Caprice commands the room. Going mic-less and pacing as she speaks (she logs roughly five miles on her Fitbit during any of her workshops), Caprice puts the crowd at ease by talking a lot about herself.

The house she grew up in was a rainbow-land of diversity. Born to a white mother and a black father (who she didn't meet until fourth grade), Caprice ended up with four blond-haired, blue-eyed siblings from her mother's previous marriage, and along the way gained another biracial sibling, plus two African-American foster siblings. When her mother started working on the Alaska pipeline for six months of the year, she was partly raised by a black couple who'd employed her mom at their barbecue restaurant. Caprice has a gay brother (who once became Miss Gay Seattle in a pageant) and, scandalously, a Republican brother. So she has spent much time thinking about identity—hers and everyone else's.

In the gentlest manner possible, she speaks of becoming "culturally competent," of ceasing "predatory listening" and "othering" others. Of learning how to become "comfortable with discomfort," of "institutional -isms" and of privilege and the "ongoing work" that is necessary—not "just white people's work." The crowd loves her. They gleefully belt out to their neighbors,

“You are a good person!” when Caprice asks them to. They respond when she tells them that call-and-response is her cultural orientation. They laugh nervously, though forgivingly, when she tells them she spansks and smokes.

In the parking lot afterwards, I tell Caprice that was a pretty smooth performance. In the line of duty, I’ve seen some horse’s-ass diversity trainers: corny, condescending, browbeating, intolerable. But she’s good at her job. These people seem to want her back. Not that they’d have a choice if they didn’t. She reminds me I’ve witnessed only the introductory session. “This is the easy part,” she warns.

A few hours later, sitting at her dining room table in the Seattle suburb of Renton, we get down to knottier work. Pouring me a glass of red while popping the top off an Angry Orchard hard cider for herself, she fires up her Toshiba PowerPoint, and we are off, with the understanding that I will interject, argue, and generally be a Grade A pain-in-the-tuchis whenever the spirit moves. We have a three-hour sparring session.

When she brings up the Washington Redskins’ name as a microaggression, I tell her I don’t particularly care if the Redskins are caused public-relations pain and understand why some have taken issue—I’m a Dallas Cowboys fan—but that the controversy is largely bogus. Several predominantly Native-American high schools proudly use the name “Redskins.” Caprice cites “cultural appropriation” and asks how the Jews would like it if the same were done to them as to, say, Indians contemplating the Atlanta Braves. I suggest that if the Jews’ courage and martial brilliance were being celebrated—if a team were called, say, the Atlanta Maccabees—they’d have no problem with it.

Caprice brings up Jeremy Lin, the first American of Chinese descent to play in the NBA, whose Asian-ness prompted some negative assumptions. She highlights an ESPN headline about Lin—“A Chink in the Armor”—when the then-member of the New York Knicks helped lose to the then-New Orleans Hornets at the height of Linsanity. On the face of it, Caprice is right: The headline could easily be taken as a macroaggression. But the ESPN writer, a devout Christian, says he vomited in the bathroom after he’d realized what he’d done, and claims he never would have advertently racially slagged Lin. Even so, he was fired and banished to racist Siberia. Interestingly, Lin, himself a good Christian, reached out to the writer, lunching with him and forgiving him. Lin’s impulse to be gracious instead of automatically taking offense is astonishingly rare in the Cocked Fist Culture.

On the table, Caprice spreads an array of badges to show me her “Hot Button” exercise. The badges contain theoretically microaggressive messages, such as “I hate all people equally” and “Check the box for your race.” In a workshop, participants are supposed to pick one that they’ve either said or don’t understand. I pick “I’m not prejudiced, my wife is Asian,” which I admit to Caprice is a weird thing for me to say, since my wife isn’t Asian. I can tell she’s about to throw me out of her house, so I pick another: “I treat all people as equals.”

What's so bad about that? She refers me to the diversity workshop I just witnessed, where she'd had a slide on "Equity vs. equality," showing three kids at a baseball game, all with the same vantage point from their nosebleed seats, but one tall enough to see the field himself, the two others needing crates of different sizes to stand on to see the exact same thing. And what about the "Assume positive intent" button? Does what I intend to say, instead of the negative motives the microaggression police inevitably impute, ever have any bearing on the subject?

"Of course it matters," Caprice says. "But first listen to people who've experienced marginalization. If you want to move beyond the potluck conversation, if you really want to know what my spirit is like, then start with yourself and let me tell you how I'm experiencing you without you getting defensive."

Frankly, though, defensiveness sometimes seems the only defense, since, as the African-American linguist John McWhorter has written of microaggression madness, "All it does is create endless conflict, under an idea that basically being white is, in itself, a microaggression."

This notion is brought to its illogical terminus when Caprice shows me a graphic, and asks me to locate the microaggression. The graphic ran over an NPR story on Columbia University professor and forensic psychologist Michael Stone and his 22-point "Gradations of Evil" scale, in which he rates murders from "justified homicide" at 1, all the way to "psychopathic torture murder" at 22. "What would make this an example of a micro-insult?" Caprice asks.

I puzzle over the scale for a couple minutes, coming up blank. I feel like I'm keeping company with the microaggression-equivalent of a fundamentalist sect of record-burners who, before torching their Led Zeppelin vinyl, play the songs backwards to decipher hidden messages from Satan. "It's okay, this is why I'm here showing you," she says. The numbers within blocks are all color-coded, she points out. Number 1 is a yellowish tan, and as you go up the scale, they grow progressively darker, so that by number 22, when you're in deep psychopath territory, you're into dark brown.

I see where she's going and I don't buy it, pointing out that NPR isn't typically thought of as a hotbed of racism. "I don't think that NPR intentionally set out to create a micro-insult," Caprice explains. "I think that they used skin tone." Pointing to the yellowish-tan side of the scale, she adds, "This is what we commonly refer to as normal skin, the color associated with whiteness." Actually, it's the color we usually associate with Asian-ness, but I let it stand. "And it makes sense they would use skin tone, because they're talking about murders," she continues. "The darker the skin tone, the more psychopathology a person has—it's part of your sickness, part of your DNA. . . . Tell me what questions you have about that."

I point out to Caprice that she calls it "skin tone," but to most people, it's just blocks of numbers. No skin tone is intended or even implied. By her criteria, if we actually flesh out the scale, the yellow-tan (which she calls white) progresses into gold, which then progresses into red, and on to dark brown. What are we supposed to deduce? That whites aren't as evil as Asians, who aren't as evil as Indians, who aren't as evil as blacks? And why are our Latino

friends excluded? “Well, I’m not taking it that deep,” Caprice says. “I’m really just saying in our society, we continue to perpetuate messages that the darker you are, the worse you are.”

But once you start taking it somewhat deep, the trail of micro-tears could keep rolling on forever. To illustrate, when Caprice excuses herself to the bathroom, then returns, I tell her to close her eyes, I have a surprise. She does as instructed. I put on a hat I found in her hat bin—a “Live Lucky” ball cap with a four-leafed clover on it. I tell her to open her eyes, then ask her how dare she culturally appropriate the Irish, reducing them to a stereotype of lucky little leprechauns. She points out that she has some Irish in her on her mom’s side. But it’s her black husband’s hat, so she’s not getting off that easy—she’s living under the same roof with a microaggressor.

“Are Irish folks communicating that they have a problem with it?” Caprice plays along.

“I don’t know,” I tell her, by now having had it with microaggressions. “They’re Irish. They’re probably too busy getting drunk or fist-fighting somewhere.”

In the interest of full disclosure, I should point out that I have more meaningful, less contentious conversations with Caprice throughout the day. She tells me her fears, and I tell her mine, making it harder for each of us to go for the jugular, since as G. K. Chesterton—a very white guy—wrote: “If you do not understand a man you cannot crush him. And if you do understand him, very probably you will not.”

I tell Caprice that I’m afraid for our country. That it seems our fists are cocked and our fuses are short. That we’re looking for an excuse to claw each other’s eyes out, often over the thinnest of pretexts, which tend to fall under politicized identity issues. That we used to revere men such as Nelson Mandela, who didn’t have to reach back into the past or invent injustices—he actually experienced them in real time, living under apartheid, having three decades of his life stolen from him in prison. And yet, when freed, and ascending to a position in which he could’ve brought down a tidal wave of vengeance and blood in the streets—justifiably so—he forgave his captors, and even befriended them. He didn’t forget the bad things that had happened. He set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. But he understood that in order to heal his country, and himself, he had to choose to move on, to live a larger life, showing the way to so many others—even those who once oppressed him—since “resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies.”

But now, seemingly, we’ve swapped the expansive, ennobling, long-game vision of a Mandela for the micro, embittered tunnel-vision of a Dr. Sue.

Caprice takes my point, cautiously and reluctantly, but she has stories of her own. Not micro-imaginings, like the NPR “skin-tone” scale, but her actual stories, the ones she’s lived. She tells of when she, a light-skinned black woman who was always told how pretty she was, moved to a white school. She was nicknamed “Shadow,” and wasn’t asked to the school dance, and had her hair touched as if she were an exhibit at a petting zoo.

She tells me how her dark-skinned husband, a successful software salesman, had the cops called on him when he lost his key and was trying to get into his car. Because a black man trying to get into a nice car—well, that has to be trouble, now doesn't it? She tells me how her black nephew, just off work and taking the bus to the mall to meet a friend, was blocked by mall cops, who'd encountered some (black) troublemakers. Though her nephew didn't even know them, it was assumed they were cohorts.

"They're like, 'No, no, you cannot come into the mall,' " Caprice says. "And he goes, 'Oh no, excuse me, I'm here to meet a friend, just got off work. Would you like me to show you my text messages?' And they're, 'No, you may not come in.' Now my nephew, he's only 19. He can't understand how they can tell him he can't go to the mall. My husband and I are like, 'Look, this is how you get killed, okay? So don't try, in this moment, to prove who is right or wrong. We already know they're wrong. Just leave with your life, because it doesn't matter.' And he's like, 'This ain't right.' And so he refuses to leave. They throw him down on the ground. They jump on him. He's got something with his eye. They arrest him, they put him in jail. He can never go back to the mall again."

Caprice continues: "And my fear is that I've got a 6'3" son, size 16 foot, probably he's not even done growing. Naïve child who has grown up in private school. And I tell people, talking with children about race is like talking with kids about stranger danger. You've got to prepare your kids that not all strangers are safe. You know, don't be fooled by the man with the puppy, right? And at the same time, the balance is you don't want them to be afraid, or like, 'All white people are bad.' I don't personally have any problem with police officers. I know police officers. I think they're great. Most black people see the necessity of cops. But what I think is that police officers are no different from anyone else and their biases—like me as a psychologist and the stereotypes that I hold, the danger is that I could misdiagnose someone. I could treat them wrong. But what happens when you have stereotypes that you don't know that you have, and you have a gun in your hand? . . . My ultimate objective is that I want you to get it as a white man, because if you don't get it, you know, it could mean my son's life."

Caprice and I have been at it all day, and one of my preliminary plans—since this is also the day of the first Republican debate, in what is admittedly a cheap journalism stunt—was for us to watch the debate together so she could pick off candidate microaggressions. But by the time it winds around, we are both wrung out. We've agreed that it's time for me to go. Caprice doesn't have much use for current events anyway. Even when it comes to the inflammatory racial Rorschach tests that seem to arise every few months, over whether a police shooting of a black man was justified or not. She'd rather read Harry Potter books or fantasy fiction, to escape, instead. She doesn't watch the news often. It makes her bitter, and bitterness is not something she feels she can afford to carry into "the work," because "if I want you to understand something, even if I risk failing, I can't try to hurt you in the process of getting you to understand, because that's the very thing I'm trying to get you to understand."

We sit in front of her television, Donald Trump droning on. Caprice is trying to call a cab for me, with no answer. I get on my phone and try to do the same, with the same result. As we sit there, listening to the ringing of our unanswered calls, Caprice says, "If you get a cab before me, it's because you're white."

I laugh hard. My new friend is joking. At least I hope she is.

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