

The white man's burden

Kermit the Frog may lament it isn't easy being green, but blogger and author Christian Lander finds being white comes with its own baggage

BY ROSETTE ROYALE
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

What would you do, say, if you came across a group of people who'd never been studied before? Some yet-to-be chronicled civilization of homo sapiens who acted in ways that, on the surface, made little sense but whose internal logic demanded deeper explorations? Would you apply for a research grant to study them? Or would you write a blog? Well, if you've got a penchant for comedy and one-liners, you'd go for option two. That's what Christian Lander did and people can't get enough.

Maybe the ethnographic works of Christian Lander don't spring to mind as easily as those of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who upended the notion that savages exist, or Margaret Mead, who presented successful, war-averse matrilineal societies. But chances are, if you do yoga, drive a Prius, watch "Mad Men" or "The Colbert Report," read "The Onion," love the ACLU, Noam Chomsky or reusable shopping bags, Lander knows you. And he's written about you on his blog, *Stuff White People Like*, which, to date, has had more than 76 million hits (a factoid that would impress many white people.)

But hold on, white people. Before you get your hackles in a tizzy and throw your glass of organic pomegranate juice with acai across your IKEA-furnished living room, just know that Lander has the heart of a humorist. What he's really doing is holding up a mirror, at times, a pretty funny one, to what he sees in the circles he's traveled in, which are largely circles of white people. And his observations have obtained a white-hot popularity. His first book, "Stuff White People Like: The Definitive Guide to the Unique Taste of Millions," enjoyed a healthy life on the New York Times Bestseller list. Perhaps the same future will arrive for the just-released "Whiter Shades of Pale: The Stuff White People Like, Coast to Coast, from Seattle's Sweaters to Maine's Microbreweries." (Random House, \$15)

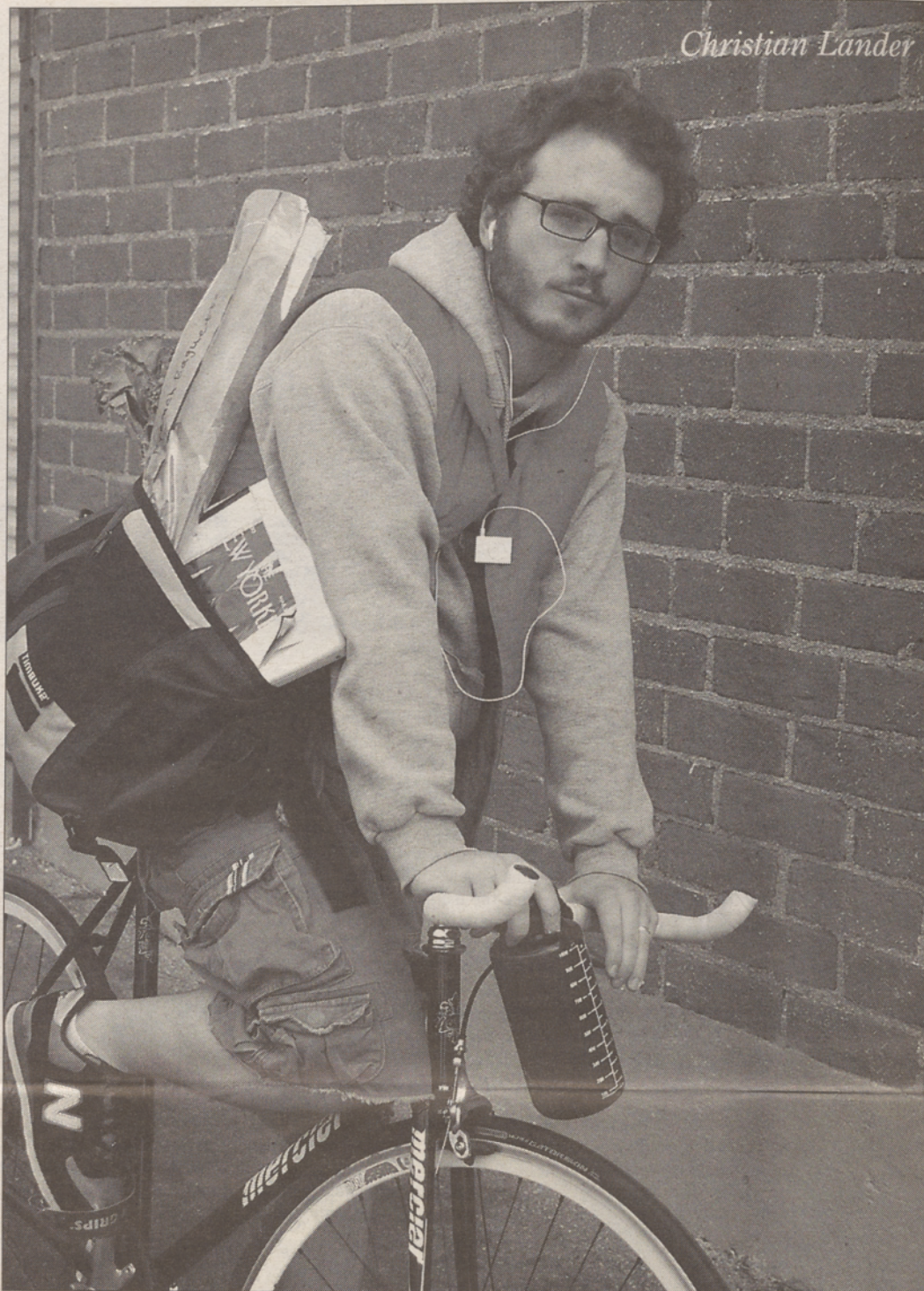
In a little afternoon study session at the Alexis Hotel in Seattle, Lander and I got down and dirty on the notion of whiteness. I learned a lot from his ethnographic research, as we touched upon topics ranging from the humorous (over-priced sandwiches, anyone?) to the serious (why is the progressive class so, well, white?). Field notes from our conference follow. But politically correct students should be forewarned: References to the "w-word" abound.

Rosette Royale: *Do you remember the first time you saw a white person?*

Christian Lander: Yes. I was just out of the womb and I saw my father. I believe that was the first one. But the first time I really remember meeting a white person was when I got home from the hospital and I met my next-door neighbor. And from there, my brother. So I've been noticing them for quite some time.

R.R.: *Did you know that you were going to be doing this kind of work?*

C.L.: No, no. I was literally born into the field. I was under the impression that I was



Christian Lander

PHOTO BY JESS LANDER

going to grow up and follow a typical white career: documentary filmmaker, journalist, nonprofit administrator, possibly some sort of fundraiser for an opera company. Little did I know I was heading toward this anthropological study of this world. And I don't think I can escape it. I'm like Kurtz (in Joseph Conrad's "The Heart of Darkness.") I'm in "The Heart of Whiteness" here.

R.R.: *Well, Seattle is sometimes known as a heart of whiteness.*

C.L.: Yeah, I've noticed that. Although I've recently been to Portland, which might have taken over.

R.R.: *So why do you think it's important to understand white people?*

C.L.: They're very difficult to understand. They do things that don't make a lot of sense. One of the examples I use is Moleskine notebooks. White people, they're all creative and need places to write down their ideas and they like to carry it wherever they go. Now, they could get notebooks, such as that (points to my reporter's notebook), which are very inexpensive, that provide all the functionality of Moleskine notebooks, that are 1/20th the cost. Yet white people will pay a premium for binding and the ability of other white people to see them carrying a Moleskine notebook. Because ultimately, you need these signifiers that you are creative. This helps the Apple computer company stay in business. Why would you ride a bike with no gears? We spent all this time inventing gears to make it easy to ride around the city. Why would you make it harder on yourself? Because ultimately you want to be recognized as someone who's better than the person riding the bike with the gears.

It's just such a challenge to get it across,

that people understand this isn't some sort of mental disease: This is just how white people operate.

R.R.: *Now, no offense, but you're white. Or at least you look white.*

C.L.: I am white. I don't deny.

R.R.: *Are you like the white people you find yourself studying?*

C.L.: Yes. I mean, I ride a fixed-gear bicycle. I'm an idiot. I wait in line: I went to Salumi (the Seattle artisan meat restaurant and deli) today for lunch and I waited in line to get my sandwich. The joke I have in the new book is that white people like waiting in line. In most other cultures when you see people waiting in line for food, something horrible has happened, like a dictator has taken over or a natural disaster has struck. But for white people, a new bakery has opened. And so I was right in there, all excited, couldn't wait to eat my sandwich. So I'm a part of it.

I think that I wouldn't have the ability of observation if I weren't really examining and making fun of myself. Because if you do these observations without a kernel of truth, they fall flat. And so the fact is that I'm going after the pretentiousness of me, of what I do that's pretentious, ridiculous, my need to be recognized as progressive. I'm just attacking it viciously. And I think that's what connects with people. If I wasn't going after myself, it wouldn't nearly have the same power.

R.R.: *Is it upsetting to skewer yourself? Or humbling?*

C.L.: What's more humbling is I thought I was making fun of myself, I think I'm the only

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