

The Ecology of Possession

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Anthropology

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Just like every good environmentalist, I want to believe that I am not really part of the problem. I get my clothes at the thrift store, buy most of my produce at the farmers' market, own a used Prius, recycle, and even compost. I am not materialistic, I tell myself. I hate *things*, I say. But after counting 36 penguin-themed items that sit collecting dust on an IKEA shelving unit in my childhood bedroom, I begin to question whether my possessions truly reflect my identity. Everywhere I turn, I see dozens more previously invisible items. There is a window screen in the corner with 18 pairs of earrings and 7 single earrings that I could not bear to throw out—and my ear piercings closed up four years ago. How can I reconcile this list of things I own with my sense of minimalism and passion for protecting vulnerable people and the environment? I cannot separate who I am from the possessions I own. The purchase of creating this list was to assess the psychological, ecological, and political dimensions of my belongings, all of which shape my identity in some way. In this essay I reflect on the realizations and negative emotions the process of creating the list evoked, and the environmental detriment of the items I buy new as well as the way I use the items I bought secondhand. I also examine my resignation to my own socioeconomic status, and the corresponding willingness to pay into an oppressive, capitalist global economic system at the expense of laborers abroad.

My ecological identity emerged as I catalogued my possessions, which are spread out between my Kent Crossing apartment in Chestertown and my parent's home in Baltimore City. I created two separate inventories in order to accurately assess how many items I own. This choice was difficult for me, as it seemed a lot easier to just pick one location and evaluate the items there. I did not really want to face the fact that there is a room in a city I do not live in that holds hundreds of items I own but do not miss. I started to try to cut corners—that is, differentiate between items I use or even possess but do not technically “own.” For example, all the furniture

in my living room is either borrowed from my parents or brought by my roommate. I assuaged my guilt by placing the burden of ownership on others.

The Chestertown list is more detailed and includes some information on where the items were made and how I came to own them. It turns out that I do *not* actually get all my clothes from the thrift store. In fact, in Chestertown alone I have 21 pairs of underwear, 21 pairs of socks, seven bras, and five pairs of shoes—all bought new. My thrift store clothes hang on 32 plastic hangers, most of which I purchased at the Dollar Tree. Considering the fact that I do not use lotion, it seems odd that I own 21 bottles of it (the result of a spending spree at the Bath & Body Works Christmas sale). I also own several collections of items, some more intentional than others: penguins (36 on the shelf alone), DVDs of romantic comedies (35, all tucked away in my parent's house), and condoms (40 from my sex education days); also tea light candles, lotion, earrings, nail polish, pens, 42 pieces of silverware I will most likely never use again, etc.

It was hard to not feel ashamed as I compiled this list. Looking at my purposeful and inadvertent “collections” evoked the most troubled feelings. Starting with the intentional items—the chick flicks, penguin-themed items, and condoms—I was struck by the fact that none of these serve any utility beyond defining an element of my past identity. For example, I used to work at the Maryland Zoo in Baltimore with the penguins. I developed a deep fondness for penguins as a result of this experience, and people began to give me penguin-themed gifts in response. I became easy to shop for: just get Emily something penguin-y. I have purchased less than half a dozen of the 36 items in the collection. But despite not liking penguins as much as my collection implies, I do not want to get rid of gifts, and I have embraced the collection as a relic of my high school self. Similarly, in high school I attended youth conferences on sex education and began to accrue a large, originally unintentional collection of condoms. My enduring connection to that

community means that even today, I'll still collect the occasional condom, which will sit forever in a box on a shelf. Chick flicks have a less deep meaning beyond accepting (or justifying) my love of romantic comedies in spite of myself (though it is hard to continue to justify owning DVDs when I have no means of playing them). So it is truly the inadvertent collections, which, with the exception perhaps of my mother's homemade hats, serve no purpose. Why do I own so many things that I never use?

The sheer number of unnecessary possessions I own spurred reflection on my desired ecological identity versus my true ecological identity. I own a used Prius, my paper towels are made from 80% recycled material, most of my furniture is secondhand, and the vast majority of my non-undergarment clothes are from the thrift store. But before even mentioning the negative impacts of the *new* things I buy, I can explain why all these aforementioned "environmentalist" behaviors do not make me an ecologically responsible individual. Even if I overlook the environmental cost of producing my car since I got it used, the CO₂ emissions that a Prius produces are very real. Every time I drive back and forth from Baltimore (2-4 times a month), I use four gallons of gas round-trip. Prius owners delude ourselves into thinking that we somehow drive magic, non-polluting cars, but the gas my car burns is no cleaner than anyone else's. As for my paper towels, they are still disposable and will still wind up in a landfill. And my thrift store clothes? The environmental cost of a pair of jeans is greatest during the "use" phase of its life. Our clothes need to be washed, and washers and dryers are not eco-friendly. Despite recycling and composting, I buy a lot of my food and other purchases in plastic packaging, which I promptly dispose of upon opening.

I cannot ignore the environmental impact of the things I buy new either. The reason why I noted where my new clothes were made is so I would be forced to confront the truth about

these items: they did not emerge from nowhere. “Made in Vietnam” means that somewhere (most likely China) there is a farm that uses highly toxic pesticides to grow cotton (an incredibly water-intensive crop), which is then harvested and transported to Vietnam, where underpaid factory workers dye the fabric with polluting chemicals before assembling it. Then, the clothing is flown across the Pacific Ocean, driven across the country, and shelved for my convenience in the Annapolis Target. Nowhere along the way am I asked to think about any step of this process beyond the last one.

But there is an exception to my willful ignorance: my identity as both a human rights activist and environmentalist is challenged every time I stand in line at the Dollar Tree. The majority of my kitchen utensils (spatula, ladles, chef’s knife, can opener, and vegetable peeler to name a few) came from purchases at the Dollar Tree. Even as I stand in line to buy these items, I try *not* to think about what I knew to be true: the price I pay does not reflect the true cost of production. I cannot find a single item in the dollar store made in America because nothing in America costs a dollar to make. By purchasing items at this price, I save money at the expense of environmental and human health. Looking at the company’s Sustainability Report, I am hardly comforted that starting in 2007, the company *advised* vendors to stop using lead paint and heavy metals in their products (Dollar Tree 2016). For this assignment, I looked a little more into what is in the cheap items available at the Dollar Tree, and according to a report by the Campaign for Healthier Solutions, 81% of their items contain illegal toxins—including a pair of earrings with lead levels of 6500 ppm (2015). These products are made by exploited peoples abroad (who have to handle these dangerous toxins), and then sold to disenfranchised Americans. The more I think about it, the less I can find justification for buying these products.

As a person with a strong self of self, I want my possessions to reflect my identity. But at the same time, I face inner conflict. The social justice world tasks the upper middle class with the responsibility of buying ethical products, while simultaneously shaming them for shopping at places that most Americans cannot afford. People like me cannot win because we already won. No matter what we buy, we will perpetuate inequality, as even the most socially conscious among us have resigned ourselves to holding a powerful position in society. If I shop at Dollar Tree, I feel ashamed because I have saved money at foreign laborers' expense. If I buy my groceries from MOM's Organic Market, I feel guilty for flaunting my class. My actions cannot reflect my identity as a socially conscious member of society because the power I hold in the global system grants me control over the disenfranchised, exploited peoples of the world.

A keyword that stood out to me in my discussion of ecological identity was "individual." My ownership reflects a level of individualism that I was unaware of. I have woven my sense of self into my possessions, connecting with them because they are *mine*. They became mine when I purchased them, or someone purchased them for me. My social class and wealth thus inevitably have been the true sculptors of my identity. According to the "global rich list" my family is in the top 0.06% of wealthiest people in world just by income (CARE International n.d.). I am careless with the things I own, knowing that if I lose something, I can just buy another (I imagine this is why I own so many pens). My mental disconnect from the ecological commons enables the perpetuation of global inequality. Living responsibly will not come easy, if it is possible to do so at all. The very least I can do for now is to limit my consumption and reassess what it truly means to "own."

References

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Appendix

Baltimore Home Inventory

| General Household Equipment & Electronics | QTY |
|--|------------|
| TV | 1 |
| Misc. wires | 8 |
| | |
| Bedroom | QTY |
| Mattress (queen) | 1 |
| Box spring (queen) | 1 |
| Headboard | 1 |
| Pillows | 1 |
| Dressers | 1 |
| Mirrors | 1 |
| Mattress pads | 2 |
| Bottom sheets | 2 |
| Top sheets | 2 |
| Pillow cases | 3 |
| Fuzzy blankets | 3 |
| Comforter | 1 |
| Day bed frame | 1 |
| Mattress (twin) | 1 |
| Coffee table | 1 |
| | |
| Clothing | QTY |
| Boots | 8 |
| Hiking shoes | 1 |
| Sandals/Flip-flops | 2 |
| High heels | 2 |
| Socks (pairs) | 3 |
| Socks (single/unmatched) | 31 |
| Tights/leggings | 6 |
| Bras | 2 |
| Underwear | 2 |
| Shirts (winter) | 7 |
| Cardigans | 20 |
| Jeans (pants) | 3 |
| Scarves | 7 |
| Skirts | 4 |
| Hats | 22 |
| Winter dresses | 1 |
| Formal dresses | 3 |
| Wedding dress | 1 |
| Coats | 4 |
| Hoodies | 5 |
| Gloves | 3 |
| Clothes hangers | 11 |

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| Accessories | QTY |
| Purses/bags | 5 |
| Assorted necklaces | 7 |
| Religious necklace | 1 |
| Earrings (pairs) | 18 |
| Earrings (single) | 7 |
| | |
| Kitchen items (stored in bedroom) | QTY |
| Silverware -- knives | 10 |
| Silverware -- spoons | 20 |
| Silverware -- forks | 11 |
| Knife set | 1 |
| | |
| Bathroom | QTY |
| Towels | 2 |
| Lotions | 21 |
| Pain killers/medicine | 12 |
| Nail polish | 17 |
| | |
| School/Work | QTY |
| Computer charger | 1 |
| Pens | 38 |
| Pencils | 12 |
| Folders | 3 |
| Spiral bound notebooks | 5 |
| Binders | 3 |
| Books | 17 |
| | |
| Collections | QTY |
| DVDs (romantic comedies) | 35 |
| Condoms | 40 |
| Penguin-themed items | 36 |
| | |
| Random items | QTY |
| Piggy bank | 1 |
| Mugs | 4 |
| Small jewelry boxes | 6 |
| Picture frames | 3 |
| Reusable water bottle | 1 |

Chestertown Home Inventory

| General Household Equipment & Electronics | QTY | Description | Origin (country) | Origin (how I got it) |
|--|------------|-------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| Apple TV | 1 | | China | Inherited (ex) |
| Cell phone | 1 | iPhone | China | Bought new from Verizon |
| | | | | |
| Transportation | | | | |
| Car | 1 | 2011 Toyota Prius | Japan | Used car dealership |
| | | | | |
| Living Room/Den | QTY | | Origin (country) | Origin (how I got it) |
| Chairs | 2 | | China | IKEA |
| Books | 4 | | | Gifts |
| Lamps/Light Fixtures | 1 | Floor lamps | China | IKEA |
| Pictures/Other Wall Hangings | 1 | Buffy fan poster | USA | Bought online |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| Dining Room | QTY | Description | Origin (country) | Origin (how I got it) |
| Table | 1 | Large dining room table | | Inherited (parents) |
| Chairs | 2 | Bar chairs | | IKEA |
| Floor Lamp | 1 | Floor lamps | China | IKEA |
| Light Bulbs | 5 | LED bulbs | China | IKEA |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| Bedroom | QTY | | Origin (country) | Origin (how I got it) |
| Mattress | 1 | | | Craigslist |
| Box spring | 1 | | | |
| Bed frame | 1 | | | |
| Pillows | 3 | 2 normal, one "husband" | Both: "Shell" made in China, filled in USA | Inherited; Yogibo |
| Dressers | 1 | | | Gift (used) |
| Night Tables | 1 | Small (broken) | | IKEA |
| Desks | | | | |
| Mirrors | 1 | Door mirror | | Target |
| Clocks | | | | |
| Lamps/Light Fixtures | 1 | Floor lamp | China | IKEA |
| Pictures/Other Wall Hangings | | | | |
| Mattress pad | 1 | | | Craigslist |
| Bottom sheets | 1 | | | Target |
| Top sheets | 1 | | | Target |
| Foam bed pad | 1 | | | Craigslist |
| Pillow cases | 3 | | | Target |
| Bean bag chair/bed | 1 | | "Shell" made in China, | Yogibo |

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|--------------------|------------|---------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| | | | filled in USA | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
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| Clothing | QTY | Description | Origin (country) | Origin (how I got it) |
| Boots | 1 | | | Thrift store |
| Hiking shoes | 1 | | | Amazon |
| Sandals/Flip-flops | 5 | | | Costco, Amazon |
| Dress shoes | 1 | | | Stein Mart |
| Socks | 21 | | | New—Target |
| Bras | 7 | | Dominican Republic, Thailand | All new—Marshall's, online stores |
| Underwear | 21 | | Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, Vietnam | All new—Target, Victoria's Secret |
| Shirts (summer) | Thrift: 16 | | | |
| | New: 5 | | Guatemala, Mexico (2), USA (2) | |
| Shirts (winter) | 14 | | | |
| Dresses | Thrift: 18 | All summer dresses | | |
| | New: 2 | Both formal dresses | China, unknown | Consignment shop, Stein Mart |
| Jeans (shorts) | 6 | | | All thrift store |
| Jeans (pants) | 3 | | | All thrift store |
| Scarves | 3 | | Handmade (by my mother), Thailand, Cambodia | Gifts |
| Skirts | 11 | | | |
| | | | | |
| Kitchen | QTY | Description | Origin (country) | Origin (how I got it) |
| Chairs | 2 | | | IKEA |
| Pots & Pans | 3 | | | Inherited, Gifts |
| Bowls | 11 | | Thailand, China | IKEA, Dollar Tree |
| Dishes (large) | 7 | | | IKEA |
| Dishes (small) | 6 | | | IKEA |
| Glasses | 6 | | France | IKEA |
| Plastic cups | 4 | | China | Dollar Tree |
| Ladles | 3 | | China | Dollar Tree |
| Cutting boards | 3 | | | IKEA, gift |
| Vegetable peeler | 1 | | China | Dollar Tree |
| Paper towels | 6 | Recycled material | USA | MOMs |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| Bathroom | QTY | Brand | Origin (country) | Origin (how I got it) |

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|------------------------|------------|----------------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| Hair Dryers | 1 | | | |
| Hair straightener | 1 | | Korea | Bought online |
| Shower curtain rings | 12 | | | Target |
| Shower Curtain | 1 | | | Target |
| Towels | 4 | Land's End | India | Gifts |
| Shampoo | 2 | TRESemmé, Nature's Gate | USA | MOMs Organic Market, Giant |
| Conditioner | 2 | Pantene, Nature's Gate | UK, USA (made from "globally sourced" materials?") | MOMs Organic Market, Giant |
| Soap bottle | 1 | Dr. Bronner's castile | | Target |
| Box of tampons | 1 | | | Costco |
| Box of pads | 1 | | | Costco |
| Toothbrush | 1 | | Switzerland | |
| Toothpaste | 1 | | | |
| Hair brush | 1 | | | |
| Hair bands | 13 | | China | |
| Makeup (assorted) | 7 | | | Clinique, Walgreens, Sephora |
| Lip balm | 3 | | | |
| Makeup bag | 1 | Clinique | China | Clinique |
| | | | | |
| School/Work | QTY | | Origin (country) | Origin (how I got it) |
| Computer | 1 | | China | Gift |
| Computer charger | 1 | | China | Gift |
| Pens | 14 | | | Staples |
| Pencils | 3 | | | |
| Folders | 3 | | | |
| Spiral bound notebooks | 6 | | | Walgreens |
| Binders | 3 | | | |
| Backpack | 1 | | | |
| LED lamps | 2 | | | |
| | | | | |