

I was born and raised in the home of the Braves during their best years and peak of cultural importance. As a young child, I kept a huge poster of Tom Glavine on my bedroom door and a prized card deck of the '91 team tucked away in my jewelry drawer. Bobby Cox was always part of the family, like an ornery great uncle who swears too much. No one could calm him down though, so you just let him do whatever he wanted while trying to keep the younger children away. I learned how to lip read curse words from watching him storm out after a bad call.

I attended games regularly, and after the team moved to Turner Field I was able to watch post-game fireworks from my front porch. If you know anything about Atlanta's sports teams, you know that they're all heartbreakers. The Braves have most recently taken the cake, but their treacherous move out of the city won't be discussed here. Over the years, I watched favorite players leave but I remained a fan. The sting of poor stats is somewhat dulled when the team really feels like *your* team. Along with that devotion came *The Chop*. For years I never thought twice about it; "The Chop" was just something we all did, like the wave and rally caps.

Fandom and team loyalty takes individuals and tosses them into a state of passionate mob mentality. Activities influenced by team loyalties can range from the criminal to the just plain silly. Chanting, dancing, obsession with players and memorization of plays past and present are fair game. Like so many customs, when we are raised with it we rarely think of how it looks from the outside, and are even less likely to question our participation in it.

As I grew older, I became more and more preoccupied with issues of inequality. I grew up poor, and I always noticed how others treated me, and their money. I also attended an elementary school with a predominantly minority student body. For many years I was the only white girl in my class, but I was aware of the ways in which my classmates and I were similar. We were all broke with parents working long hours. Our lives consisted of surviving on food stamps and going without hot water at times.

I also noticed the ways in which we were different. Most of the teachers treated me as the most responsible student, putting me "in charge" when they had to leave the class unsupervised. They assumed that I wanted to be, or should be, hall monitor. And so I was. They assumed that I was smart and up to the task of being placed in advanced classes. While they weren't wrong, my first-ever best friend was looked over. She and I were inseparable in kindergarten. We read at the same level, her math skills were better than mine, and she was just as well behaved. However, it took an additional school year for her to be recommended for the advanced program. I suspect our teacher found that I was gifted because she looked for it in me while she did not look for it in Lakreasha.

Throughout my life I noticed a pattern. I met new people and made new friends, and I was repeatedly told, "you're not one of those white people". I knew exactly what they meant. I was not like my cousins, afraid to drive through downtown. I was not like my aunts and uncles who believed that most people of color lived like "Welfare Queens". My experiences had made me different. I was raised by and alongside black people, I understood from a very young age that minorities in this country are fighting an uphill battle for everything. Later I learned the term "white privilege" and saw all the ways my life was different because of it. Perhaps being told I was different went to my head. While the concept of white privilege came easily to me, uprooting it from my life has proven far more difficult. I'm afraid I have avoided admitting as much. So here is my confession.

My beloved Braves, like many others, have a racist history. Remaining silent won't change that. The Native American character you see plastered on Braves merchandise is named Noc-a-Homa. His name is a distasteful attempt at a play on words turning the phrase "knock a homer" into a token, "Indian name". Back in the day there was even a teepee set up behind the outfield, and Fulton-County Stadium maintained a resident Native American who would come out to dance and beat drums. While Noc-a-Homa was retired in 1986, the role of Native American culture in the franchise has persisted.

The arrival of Deion Sanders in 1991 brought what is now known locally as the "Tomahawk Chop", a rallying cheer adapted from the Florida State University war chant. The timing of "The Chop's" arrival is undoubtedly the reason for its ubiquitousness. Its presence is absolutely inseparable from the golden years of Braves baseball. "The Chop" is part of the nostalgia shared by fans everywhere, but that doesn't excuse its dangerously oppressive implications.

I didn't come to this realization easily, or all at once. It sort of crept up on me, like a cold with a slow onset. One day chopping just felt weird. I couldn't quite place it, but I knew I didn't feel right. Slowly I began to identify what the weird feeling was, but I chose to ignore it more often than not. For so long I didn't want to admit to myself that my beloved team was condoning redface. Recognizing it as such began my process of acceptance.

First I had to accept that I had been complacent in this institutionalized racism for over a decade. I had been ignoring that sickly feeling because I knew what I would find if I looked deeper. Over the past couple of years I had discussed the issue of Washington D.C.'s football team having a racial slur as their name, and I was adamant that the right thing to do was to change the name. I've even gotten myself into the habit of no longer saying that word. And yet I never outright drew any connections to my team. During those conversations I suppressed that sickly feeling.

The truth is, I was fearful of what people would think. What would I say if a friend asked why I wasn't chopping? Answering with "because it's racist", could easily be misinterpreted as me calling that individual racist. Saying that I don't want to talk about it, or "it's complicated", are equally as awkward. I know that I look at things more critically in part because of my education, and I worry about seeming condescending. This concern developed soon after earning my bachelors, and I know now that it is one shared by many first generation college students. As much as I want to be an agent of change and inform friends and family of my concerns, the top of the seventh inning with a beer in my hand just isn't the right time. In the meantime I have said nothing, and luckily no one has asked. I have been living a life less authentic.

And there I sat in a state of cognitive dissonance and discomfort. I know that American Indian and Alaskan Native (AIAN) communities continue to suffer. The Western Hemisphere fell victim to genocide and cultural devastation, and AIAN have yet to recover. Suicide attempts among AIAN are double that of white U.S. citizens (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2013). Sexual assault occurs in disgustingly high rates, with one in three AIAN women experiencing such attacks almost exclusively at the hands of non-Native men (Tjaden, & Thoennes, 2000). Within the United States alone, the federal government recognizes more than 550 tribes, while state governments officially recognize an additional 325 (U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs, Office of Federal Acknowledgment, 2007). Despite the grand diversity of the tribes, our nation's shared narrative continues to reduce them to abject

relics. Meanwhile, the visual aspects of their culture continue to be exploited. Their customs are haphazardly used as inspiration for high fashion, and a cartoonish representation continues to make an appearance every Halloween. As long as we treat these nations and tribes like costumes and mascots, we will continue to ignore their plight.

My time at the University of Miami was one of growth and reflection. During that time I realized just how hypocritical it is of me to fervently defend the importance of a movement like Black Lives Matter, and then turn around and do “The Chop”. My strong personal connection to the Braves is exactly why I tried to avoid making a stand. I didn’t make excuses, but I certainly listened to them, and I allowed them to go on without contest in my presence. Avoiding taking a personal stand simply to ensure the comfort of those around me supports white superiority by not challenging it. While not a deliberate support of white superiority, demanding that people of color simply ignore or move past the continued oppression of their communities promotes the idea that white comfort takes precedence over justice and equality.

This was an issue that was quite literally thrown in my face during class. On more than one occasion I found myself enraged with classmates who continued to make excuses for the the killing of unarmed black men, legal discrimination against LGBTQ, and just showing resistance when faced with an oppressive system they themselves had never experienced.

Then one day, my behavior was called into question during class. The issue that identified by my classmate was that she felt I had misdirected my response in a situation, and missed a chance to use my white privilege in a way that may have been more productive. Being someone I had great respect for, her critique of the situation echoed in my mind. Why did I react the way I did? Maybe all those years of being told I was different had hindered my growth, causing me to assume that I had less growing to do than others. I suddenly saw myself the way I had seen so many others. Overconfident, unknowingly clinging to a flawed paradigm, and developmentally stagnant under the guise of progress.

This realization was followed by a period of searching. I read everything that I could about being a good ally, most of which was in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement. I listened deeply, and looked for opportunities to listen. Around the same time a good friend came out to me as trans, and throughout our conversations I expressed my willingness to learn and be corrected. This felt good, and it felt like progress for a time.

I believe it is human nature to seek validation, and so in some ways this knee jerk reaction felt superficial at times. Was I doing this just to avoid further criticism; was I looking for first prize ally recognition? Becoming critical of myself briefly caused me to second guess my own intentions. This was undoubtedly a little frightening, but luckily I had unintentionally prepared myself for this moment. I had managed to surround myself with friends of different perspectives, many of whom were more than happy to explore these ideas with me. They remained encouraging of my efforts, and assured me that this exploration indicated growth in their minds.

Paulo Freire states in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “No one can be authentically human while he prevents others from being so” (Freire, 1970, p. 85). I’ve learned I can never be my best self, or an authentic self, while remaining complicit in the face of injustice. Participating in the Community and Social Change program made the following truth inescapable: you cannot pick the injustices that you oppose. You’re either working against injustice or you aren’t. To rail against anti-black racism, but remain silent in the oppression of AIAN, only furthers the dehumanization of AIAN while removing all value from my claims.

Additionally, I learned that talking about these issues in the relative protection of my home or classroom does not constitute “work”. In the same vein, no number of volunteer hours or credits earned could ever equate living a life based in rallying against oppression, not so long as I was silent in the moments when it is toughest to speak up. Being part of the program and sharing that experience with my cohort members pushed me to this point of critical personal reflection. More importantly, they both gave me the confidence to live it. That being said, I will never Chop again.