

Maria Fonseca Morales
Professor Stabrowski
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From Around the Block to Around the World

At the risk of ruffling some feathers, I must admit that seeing the likes of Kendal Jenner, Karlie Kloss, and Gwen Stefanie, to name a few, wearing Timberland boots in temperate Californian weather while someone else holds their bag or pumps their gas is quite cringeworthy. The same cringe goes for New York City-dwellers who wear their “Timbs” to the beach or during the summer with shorts that reach their ankles and a “wife-beater.” Growing up in New York City, I typically commuted forty-five to sixty minutes, five days a week, to get to and from school: no matter how inclement the weather. Keeping my feet warm and dry from door to door was a crucial objective. I do not remember ever asking to own a pair of Timberlands, but I clearly remember always having them, and so did my brothers and most of my friends. Some of us had the basic (and less expensive) version, some had the premium version, and some just had knockoffs. At first, most of us wore them because we had to and eventually because we wanted to. They were stylish, comfortable, rugged, and having a fresh, creaseless pair of “Timbs” meant you were on top of your game and had everything you needed to thrive in the concrete jungles of America.

As a relatively sheltered New York City school-kid I associated Timberland boots with New York City's mastery of street style, sweater weather and icy winter commutes, but it turns out that Timberlands are something of an internationally revered American cultural icon, and

fashion accessory with a rich and complicated (albeit relatively young) history, replete with impassioned debates about who the boot belongs to; is it the shoe of New England's, blue-collar working class; is it the boot of inner-city youth trying to survive brutal winter commutes to school; is it the boot of Hip-Hop culture; or is it the boot of the wealthy who feel entitled to appropriate urban culture and its use of workwear? Or could it be a boot for all? Timberland boots have taken on a life of their own that transcends borders, classes, and identities while the company itself sold out the blue-collar industry worker they so fiercely claimed as their “core consumer” by outsourcing their jobs, hiking their pricing while focused on increasing profit margins.

A Timberland Factory Disclosure list issued on September 30th, 2019, comes with a disclaimer of sorts and claims that “although our supply chain source may change...[this] list represents our best attempt to disclose all of Timberland’s active factories as of that date” (Timberland, 2019). The list catalogues over 450 factories in 30 countries, including 8 factories in my birthplace; Managua Nicaragua. In 2018 there were only five Timberland factories in Nicaragua, demonstrating the continued growth and expansion of American interests facilitated by exploitative neoliberal ideology and capitalist practices of American corporations that allow companies to extract labour and resources from anywhere they lay claim. Timberland boots are produced in countries spanning the globe including, Argentina, Bangladesh, Brazil, Italy, Japan, Mauritius, Mexico, South Korea, United Kingdom, United States, and many more (Timberland 2019). The pair of Timberlands I currently own were made in the Dominican Republic. China, India, and Vietnam are Timberland’s top suppliers. The factory disclosure list is comprised of footwear and apparel manufacturers, leather suppliers, direct sourced accessories, producers, distributors, and licensees. Timberland began outsourcing production in the 1990s (Pederson

2003, 377) and coincidentally the company's "sales [grew] smartly from \$690 million in 1996 to 917.2 million by the decade's end, more importantly, Timberland increased its profit margins during that same period" (Pederson 2003, 378). As they increased profit margins the American working-class was being decimated.

Nathan Swartz, a skilled Jewish shoemaker bought half of Abington Shoe Company in 1952 for twenty thousand dollars in Abington, Massachusetts (Pederson 2003, 375). He and his sons Sidney and Herman Swartz "produced and sold handmade footwear to discount outlets and stores that put house labels on them" (Pederson 2003, 375). Then in 1965, the "Swartzes purchased an injection-molding machine—a new [shoe] binding process that chemically folded and attached soles to uppers" (Pederson 2003, 375). They did not know it yet, but this was the conception of the classic yellow, waterproof, wheat nubuck, Timberland boot. Finally, "after persuading Goodyear to design a synthetic rubber sole capable of withstanding the harshest elements, the Swartzes used injection molding to bond the polyurethane soles to genuine blond leather uppers" (Pederson 2003, 375). They created the Abington Shoe Company's first-ever thoroughly waterproof boot and called it "Timberland" in 1973. The company's targeted consumers were working-class industry workers, and the boots were sold at "army-navy stores" and were being worn by students in campuses throughout New England. The new boots sold extremely well and in 1978 the brother's rebranded the Abington Shoe Company and called it The Timberland Company (Pederson 2003, 375-76).

The Timberland boot began its global takeover when in 1979 Italian goods distributor and president of Ritz Forma, Giuseppe Veronesi visited the Timberland factory and ordered 3,000 pairs to have shipped to Italy, where he predicted they'd become the "perfect fashion accessory

for well-heeled Italians.” Veronesi’s company oversaw brands like Louis Vuitton and Ralph Lauren’s Polo line, and he tested the boot’s marketability in the "haute couture shops [of] Milan and Rome” (Pederson 2003, 377). Clearly, affluent fashionistas and well-to-doers from around the world were loving the boot, and Timberland worked very diligently to meet their demands with zero protests about the boots original design and targeted core consumer: the working-class, blue-collar worker.

Brothers Sidney and Herman Swartz laughed aloud when in 1985 Fox Butterfield, a New York Times journalist, told them an article published in an Italian newspaper reported that "hoodlums" in Milan, Italy, were robbing the shoes off people's feet, instead of the wallets out of their pockets. Though not just any shoes, these troublemakers were targeting Timberland's Original Yellow Boot. The Swartz brothers hesitated on marketing strategy, as they were committed to the original design: a revolutionary, fully waterproof leather work boot intended for New England's blue-collar industry workers. But the Swartz brothers were convinced by their hired marketing firm that not tapping into this new consumer demographic would cost the company revenue, and just like that, The Original Yellow Boot was being marketed to "affluent urban backpackers" (Butterfield 1985), being sold in Saks Fifth Avenue, Bergdorf Goodman, and other cash-rich stores, and was reaching consumers in France, Germany, Hong Kong, Switzerland, and Turkey and sales in Italy continued to grow (Pederson 2003, 376). It was clear the Swartz brothers were willing to go wherever their active consumer was, regardless of their new and evolved use for the boot. The boot was no longer just for the working-class but also for the chic and “affluent urban backpacker” --whatever that means.

Eight years later, in 1993, Jeffrey Swartz, son of Sidney Swartz, was not laughing as hard when Michel Marriott of the New York Times once again wanted to discuss the growing

popularity of Timberland boots as a fashion item being worn as an accessory to urban streetwear. This time, black and brown urban youths emulating Hip-Hop culture and seen strutting up and down the concrete catwalks with "Timbs" on their feet in cities across America. The New York Times article cited Jeffrey Swartz's dismissive attitude towards the urban youths and Hip-Hop customer base. He disagreed that inner-city urban youths and the hip-hip consumer represented a viable market worth investing the company's advertising money into. Swartz claimed this consumer base only accounted for 5% of sales and said he would build his business on "smoke" saying, "[w]e are cutting back the number of doors we do business in...[so] if you want to buy [Timberlands] and you are not our target customer [and] we do not have a point of distribution that speaks to your lifestyle, [w]e are making hip-hop [consumers] come to our distribution." To clarify he gave an example of two "inner-city youngsters" he observed in a Dillard's store in Little Rock, Ark., going straight to the Timberland section. He acknowledged that Dillard's and other high-end department stores were "making an extra profit" every time black and brown urban youths had to travel out of their neighbourhoods in search of goods not made readily available to them. Essentially, funnelling their working-class dollars out of their lower-income communities and pumping them into communities where Timberland's more dignified core consumers shopped.

The problem was more profound than I wanted to realise. This issue is deep-rooted and woven into American culture and has racism, capitalism, and consumerism written all over it. By this time in the 90s, Timberland was a publicly traded company whose boots were sold and marketed in countries around the world. Why then was Jeffrey Swartz refusing to meet Black and brown American urban consumers at their convenience? Although Jeffrey Swartz has flatly denied icing out minority youths and Hip-Hop culture, he was still refused to acknowledge the

impact Hip-Hop and urban culture had on the boot's popularity claiming that "the urban market constitutes less than 5 per cent of the company's domestic sales, which account for 60 per cent of Timberland's global market" (Marriott 1993) but acknowledged that "their money spends good". The interview made me uneasy, and I found myself wondering why we, the black and brown urban youths and working-class, continue to have to prove our worth? Our dollars matter and "spend good" but in some kind of twisted, real-life plot everything we do, and wear is considered "hood" or "ghetto" until it is appropriated by some rich white person who grabs at our culture as their coloniser ancestors once grabbed at our lands; unapologetically and audaciously. Swartz would later accuse the New York Times of "character assassination" in an op-ed published by a black-owned newspaper called the New York Amsterdam News (Webb 2020). Swartz claimed the NYT was sensationalising racism to sell newspapers. I claim Swartz was in fact disrespectful to the Hip-Hop and the Black and brown community.

Jeffrey Swartz sold the company in 2011 to retail conglomerate VP Corporation, and since then, I have noticed a shift in how the company interacts with the minority consumer. I have seen collaborations with brands and celebrities that speak directly to the Hip-Hop and urban communities, but the trust has been lost, and if you ask me, it is all political and strategic. Recently, I showed one of my peers a video I found published in November 2021 on the Timberland Facebook page. The video starts with the words "the conversation," written in white letters across the screen, the narrator begins with the words "we're sorry." It was unclear who they were apologising to, but Hip-Hop music played in the background as images of the Brooklyn Bridge and New York City neighbourhood barbershops flooded the screen. My friend who, like me, grew up in NYC and was bullied relentlessly because her family could only afford knockoff Timberland boots was offended to the core by this apology. She said, "my farts are

more sincere” and recalled how the kids in her school roasted her because she wore knockoff versions of a boot whose company refused to respect or acknowledge the contributions of Black Americas to their brand. It is a hurtful irony that we got made fun of while wearing a knockoff version of a boot company that did not want to credit the impact Black and brown youths have on their profit margins, American style, and culture. The strength of the Black and brown dollar has proven its worth, and now that inclusivity is a national trend, this Facebook apology is just too little, too late.

I had not owned a pair of Timberland boots in about a decade. I stopped wearing them when my parents stopped buying my clothes, and I did not care to afford the upgraded version I eventually owned as our lives as an immigrant family began to settle down and stabilise. I thought I had outgrown them. My feet were ready for something a little less rugged, a little less heavy, and a little more feminine. The pair of Timberlands I currently own was a Christmas gift in 2019. They were on my Christmas wish list for a couple of years before I decided I wanted them. As I reflected upon why I decided to return to Timberland as a consumer, I simply remember loving the way they looked on my feet. The flawless nubuck grain and the solid weight of the shoe give the impression that you will have them forever. I thought of them as classics, and I felt connected to my roots as representative of urban culture. Timberland boots have many claimants and an abundance of stories to tell. They have walked a billion miles around the globe and will continue to pound pavements; adorn the feet of wealthy cultural and class-appropriators; make cameos in hip-hop videos; and survive the grind of industry workers, brutal wintertime city commutes, and the test of time. In retrospect, I wish I had never owned a pair but that reflects the lack of options the working class has when putting their consumer dollars to use. Had I done this research three years ago, they would have never made it onto my

Christmas wish. As a person of colour, I have become exhausted by the double-edged sword of American curiosity and its insatiable thirst to grab from what little culture has not destroyed or stolen by American exceptionalism. With all its street credit, working-class ruggedness, and boundless reach, the Timberland boot is also a symbol of capitalism, racism, appropriation, excessive consumerism, and the globalisation of unregulated free markets. When I started my research for this project, I thought I knew where it was going to take me, and although the journey turned out to be a complicated one, my research confirmed that the Timberland boot is a hard-working American cultural icon tainted by racism. It is a highly distinguishable shoe with a built-in versatility that will continue to inspire copycats for decades to come. What started as a small "Made in the U.S.A." shoe company whose identity was heavily reliant on its American artisanship and handwork is now turned into a production Goliath with factories all over the world, busying unskilled workers, and increasing profit margins while its "core consumer" --the blue-collar, working-class fades away in despair.

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