

CHAPTER 1.

LITERACY IS (NOT) LIBERATION

When I was seven years old, I won my school's reading contest by reading the most books in the second grade. I set goals each week, read every night after dinner until I went to bed. For each book, I wrote a one or two sentence summary on a special slip of paper that my mom and I would sign, proving I'd read each book. I'd return to class each day with several of these slips in hand, giving them to my teacher, Mrs. Whitmore, a tall, husky, White lady with a gruff voice that softened at the corners of some words, especially when she asked questions.

Every book I read gave me more confidence to read the next one, to choose harder and longer ones. Engaging so intensely on this reading contest was a way I could escape the poverty we lived in. It came at a time when I was beginning to understand who I was, what was missing in my life, and what was present. It was also a moment when I realized that I loved words. Learning so-called "Standard English," reading and writing it well, symbolized to me what it meant to be successful, to be a man, and to be free from the oppressive conditions around me.

I don't want you to get the wrong idea. My growing up had lots of love and happiness in it, but there was also other not so great stuff. And that stuff got mixed up with my coming to my own literacy. It got mixed up with my understanding of myself as a boy of color in schools and public spaces. You see, during my elementary years, we were very poor, lived in North Las Vegas (North LV) in government subsidized apartments on Statz Street. Too often, there was more month than money, more days left until the first than we had boxes of macaroni and cheese or Top Ramen in the cupboard. And forget meat or milk, those were luxuries, like little food vacations—only the rich could afford those things.

Too often, I did not get new clothes or shoes for school. One year, I had to wear the previous year's shoes. My shoes had big holes right through the bottoms of them. They were brown sneakers with three yellow zig zag lines on the sides. They were an off-brand, Trax. I could feel the ground when I walked, the hot Vegas asphalt nipping at the balls of my feet with each step. I won't say that I was blissfully unaware of our circumstances, that the love in our home made up for the lack of most everything else. That would be a lie. I knew I was poor. I could feel it in our circumstances and on the bottoms of my feet.

At the time, North LV was primarily a Black city, a poor ghetto. It has changed since because of population increases in Las Vegas during the 1980s and '90s, but in the '70s, it was considered a poor and run down city. Of course,

now I see where this language comes from. It is racialized, or rather it is the way racism is voiced today. “Run down” cities are always pseudonyms for race, and serve as warnings to White folks and those who can heed the warning.

In the US, most people avoid speaking of race, or labeling people or ideas or language as racial, in polite company. The habits of the dominant group in the US today, their standards by which we all get judged in and out of school, dictate that race not be mentioned explicitly in conversations. The Whiteness hides. If you have to, you say it in hushed tones and whispers. But to say it out loud, explicitly, that would be rude, and even racist itself, or so goes the logic. But race is threaded into all of our material conditions. We don’t have to talk about it for it to still be integral to all that we do and say.

Such terms as “run down” are facially non-racial terms for where Black or Latine people live. It’s the same as saying, “the bad part of town.” Why is that area less desirable, and to whom? Of whose desire are we speaking? During the 1970s and ‘80s, the intersections of race, economics, and class coalesced in North LV around a mostly Black racial formation. And part of what made that Black racial formation and the negative image of the city was the redlining practices of banks in the 1950s and ‘60s, which allowed banks to refuse loans in the area. Banks drew red lines around areas on maps where people of color lived, and called those areas decrepit or run down, which gave them reason not to loan money to people or build in those areas.¹

This meant that over time, no new development, housing or commercial building occurred. This meant no jobs. No money circulating in that area. This meant that things got worn out. People had to figure out how to make a living or survive or escape the rundown-ness of things. Some chose drugs or gangs or prostitution, and some like me, chose reading. But all of these options were the ways of escape that were available to each of us. Language happened to be available to me more so than most of my Black friends and neighbors. And yet, I’m positive I was only one or two decisions away from prison, and not a professor of writing at a big university.

This racist history of a generation before me created the North LV I grew up in. It kept opportunity out and Black and Brown bodies in. It meant that if you wanted to work, you had to have a way to get out of North LV and to the place where the job was, either with a car, which meant lots of gas, or by bus, which

1 To read about some of the redlining practices in North Las Vegas, see Jenna Kohler, “The Other Vegas,” *Las Vegas Sun*, May 15, 2008, <https://lasvegassun.com/news/2008/may/15/other-las-vegas/>; or to see interactive maps of the US that show the redlining practices in many locations, see “Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America,” American Panorama, University of Richmond Digital Scholarship Lab, accessed February 25, 2021, <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=4/39.854/-101.679>.

meant lots of extra travel time. Bottom line, the history of North LV made conditions that kept everyone poor with little ability to create equity in homes or wealth.

Consequently, it is no easy feat to leave Statz Street because you also have to get out of debt and accumulate some wealth. My mom did it by working three jobs and getting help from her sister's husband, my uncle Bill, a university professor in another state who married my mom's sister. He was a working-class White man from Iowa who became an internationally known microbiologist with hundreds of patents under his name, mostly for processes that made cheese. And even with his help, our leaving depended on my mom finding another roommate to live with us and share the rent. So while we were poor, we had some privilege, some help, some friends, and some way out. We had some chances to get out and up. We took them.

At the time on Statz, our poverty affected the way I heard words, too. This is the time I can remember my mom talking about "making ends meet," scraping by until the next payday. But what I heard was "making ends-*meat*." I thought the expression was one that used the metaphor of food, of preparing the ends of meat, the leftover parts, perhaps the grizzly sections that might get thrown away in good times, but one could eat them in lean times to get by for just a bit longer.

Today, I still visualize in my head making ends-*meat*, because making ends meet doesn't make any sense to me. It just sounds like circular logic. What ends meet and where? Why are they meeting? How is connecting two ends of something a metaphor for getting by in tough times when you don't have much food in the cupboard? How does that feed a hungry belly? The contexts for getting by in my life's formative years were driven by hunger for anything to eat as well as a hunger for words. But in those early years, food was always on my mind. We were so poor that we didn't have much of it, and I was always hungry. So it makes sense that I'd hear a food metaphor in these daily conversations around survival.

So that second grade reading contest was important to me, even though I didn't really understand why at the time. I'm not sure why I wanted to win so badly; maybe it was because of the poverty; maybe I wanted to have something that others didn't. Maybe I thought it was a way to get some favor from a teacher who seemed to have none for me. It was a time when I was just discovering my love for words and language. It was an escape.

Words seemed like something I could control. Maybe this contest cultivated my love for language; maybe that love was already there, inevitable. I don't know. What I do know is that I thought about that contest every day for most of my second grade year. I hate to think what would have happened had I lost. But I didn't. Losing at words would not be my destiny, not then nor later, at least not when it really counted.

I still remember the ceremony. An administrator, perhaps the vice principal, came into our class, called me up to the front of the room, and presented me with two trophies, one for the most books read in our class and one for the most in all of the second grade classes. I was very proud, but the whole affair was tainted. After I got the awards, I was escorted, as was the daily custom, back to my remedial reading classroom for reading lessons. I was a remedial reading student through most of my elementary and junior high years.

It didn't matter how many books I'd read or what reading contest I'd won. It didn't matter that I loved reading from that point on, that I spent much of my spare time reading at home. I always had a stack of books checked out from the library. It didn't matter that my brother and I wrote stories to each other on my mom's Montgomery Ward Signature typewriter, just for fun. It didn't matter that in the cafeteria and on the block no one would verbally spar with either of us. We were just too good at words, too good at put-downs, at capping, at talkin' bout "ya mamma." We could quickly undo your logic, tangle and reshape your own words, and use them against you—and strangle you with them.

Words were weapons and medicine that made my life better, that made me a king outside of the classroom and protected me or soothed my wounds in quiet moments. And yet in the classroom, my grades, while not bad, were not great either. I often teetered on the brink of failure in those early years of elementary school. And to make matters worse, during this period and throughout the rest of my schooling, I was constantly confronted with my racial identity. I would learn later in college that English language literacy and racial identity are closely related, wedded, in the US.²

Much later in my life, in graduate school, I'd learn about educators and language scholars who talked about how we make meaning of the words and other symbols in our lives from the material of our lives, from what we already know, experience, and read. We understand, hear, and see what we are prepared to understand, hear, and see. We recognize the things we have names for.

We see a dog because we have a name for such a creature, and that name helps us make sense of how to relate to this creature. Is it a pet or a guard dog? We see round objects because we have a concept and name for such an occurrence, an

2 There are lots of resources one can read to understand the connections between race and English language literacy. See, for example, H. Samy Alim, John R. Rickford, and Arnetta F. Ball, *Raciolinguistics*; Vershawn A. Young, *Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy, and Masculinity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007); Suhanthie Motha, *Race, Empire, and English Language Teaching: Creating Responsible and Ethical Anti-Racist Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2014); Morris Young, *Minor Re/Visions: Asian American Literacy Narratives as a Rhetoric of Citizenship* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004); Victor Villanueva, *Bootstraps: From An American Academic of Color* (Urbana: NCTE, 1993).

object without straight or flat sides, no angles. These words help us make sense of what is otherwise meaningless and reveal patterns in the chaos of life.

The words we have also are keys to our liberation from oppressive systems. And this is what I subconsciously grabbed onto as a young reader of English. There are many examples today of the liberatory value of literacy and of those who have proclaimed such ideas: Henry David Thoreau, Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, Margaret Fuller, Malala Yousafzai, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, Maya Angelou. Another was a mid-twentieth century Brazilian educator named Paulo Freire, who described the process of acquiring written literacy as a liberatory process, one that gives people power over their lives, power over the conditions that oppress them. Literacy gives people control of their lives' conditions, in part because it allows us to name them, abstract them, restructure them. Freire explains the connection between the written word and the material world: "Reading the world precedes reading the word, and the subsequent reading of the word cannot dispense with continually reading the world. Language and reality are dynamically intertwined. The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context."³

Key to Freire's ideas about literacy and its attainment is the term "critical" in "critical reading." He means something very particular. It's not a deposit or "banking model" of literacy where the teacher deposits learning, ideas, or words into the student's brain, then that student uses that understanding to decipher text. This would ignore the fact that we have histories with words, objects, places, people, and ideas. Words have relations to us. They affect us, our thinking, and our views of the world and those in it. And these relations and consequences are different depending on who you are and where and how you live. It assumes people don't have prior or ongoing relations to the world and words. In fact, it ignores these relations completely.

To Freire, critical reading, on the other hand, is a process of what he calls "problematizing" one's own material and existential situation.⁴ If we are being critical in our reading practices, Freire says, it should lead to our asking questions about our reality and about how it makes us and we make it. Our reading of words leads to rereading the world, and our experience of the world should

3 Paulo Freire, "The Importance of the Act of Reading," trans. Loretta Slover, *The Journal of Education* 165, no. 1, (Winter 1983): 5–11, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002205748316500103>. To read more about Freire's position on literacy, see Paulo Freire and Donald P. Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word & the World* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1987).

4 In case it helps, "existential" simply refers to the nature of one's existence. If our material lives might be questioned by asking, "what makes up my existence," then to question our existential lives, we might ask, "how do my material conditions make up my existence."

help us read words. The kinds of questions Freire urges are ones that help us pose problems about our world and the degree to which we control it and it controls us.

Critical reading, then, is a practice of reading words and pausing to pose questions about our relation to our material situation, our reality in those words.⁵ Freire implies that the words we use can tell us a lot about who we are and where we come from. Critical reading urges us to do more reading, find out more information about our world and thus ourselves.

My hearing “ends-meat” was about more than a boy being hungry all the time, hearing what he needed to hear in words. The words that were important to me at that moment of my life when I heard my mom talk about the rent and what was left in the cupboard were usually about basic needs: food, shelter. They were never abstract. There were no metaphorical ends of something that needed meeting. The end was always food, at least in my mind. And I can see now that my rendition of that euphemism was not a mistake. I made the meaning I could, and those words made me as much as I made them. It was me languaging through my material conditions. Freire helps me see that my literacy is both my liberation and my oppression and many other things.

We live on Statz in a small, two-bedroom, white brick apartment. My mom sits at our small kitchen table, a wobbly, spindle-legged thing with a plant at its center. She always loved plants. She’s got a pen in her right hand, even though she is left-handed. Her older sister, my aunt, trained her to write with her right hand when she was little, telling her that people don’t write with their left hands, not realizing that one can write with either hand. So my mom is ambidextrous.

I walk up to the table and crane up to see what she’s writing. It’s interesting to me. There are papers and envelopes in neat piles. Her checkbook lies open in front of her. She has a worried look on her face, like she’s trying to put together a puzzle without some of the pieces. She cocks her head one way, then another, trying to find another perspective on this problem. She mouths something. She’s talking to herself silently. I’m watching her and hungry since it’s close to dinner time, but I’m curious when I see the pen and papers.

“What’s that?” I point at her familiar green steno pad. The pad has a hard, cardboard back and front, with a wire spiral binding at the top of the pages, allowing it to open like a sandwich board. Mom always had a number of these all over the place. Open any drawer in the apartment, and there were likely several

5 To learn more about problematizing and Freire’s dialogic teaching methods, see chapter 3 of Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000).

of them in there. Even today she keeps stacks of them. My mom likes to work in steno pads, saving them as a way to remember things years later.

She told me once that she'll pull one out and reminisce. It's like a history of that year or that time of her life. She dates pages. When one is filled up, she writes the date on the cover. Each pad shows the trials, the worries, the things needing money, things paid for, stuff she was thinking about or working out at that time in her life. Her steno pads are part of her memory and her relations to the world.

"Just trying to pay bills," mom says. I look at her list in her steno pad and I admire her handwriting. My mom's handwriting is delicate, not precise, but her letters have an ornate look to them and are smooth and flowing. I've always loved her handwriting. It seemed to me as a seven year old boy that her handwriting, those hands, could fix anything.

"What's that?" I point to the list she's making in the steno pad. I touch the green paper. I'm curious about the words and numbers. What do they mean? What do they do? The words and numbers seem arcane, magical even. They are conjuring something, I just know it. This is something only moms can do, I think.

"Trying to make ends-meat, sugar plum. We gotta make ends-meat." I'm immediately reminded of my belly. I want dinner, and I think somehow mom is making dinner there at the spindle-legged table with the plant on it, somehow, between her steno pad and check book, somehow the ends of meat are made.