

CHAPTER 3.

RACIALIZING LANGUAGE AND STANDARDS

How could I have had so much trouble in school with language if I had so many language outlets at home? Couldn't a mage like me cast his spells in the classroom as well? What was happening? And what exactly does race—and its ugly offspring, racism—have to do with my literacy journey? The answers can be found outside of me and my habits of language. Yet paradoxically, those systems and structures are a part of me, and you.

Understanding the connection between language and groups of people helps with understanding the connection between race and literacy, between the standards typically imposed on everyone and White racial groups' control of those standards. We want to believe that social constructions like race do not have anything to do with language, that racism is just bad behaviors and not deeply ingrained in all standards of communication, that clear and compelling communication has only to do with using a neutral, apolitical set of language practices, but these beliefs are not true. If, as Freire says, reading the word and the world are simultaneous and “dynamically intertwined” practices, then language comes from communities of people who use language in their own contexts and for their own purposes.

Language standards do not come from grammar books or textbooks, nor from experts, tests, or standards. Textbooks and grammar books are really descriptions of language practices dressed up as prescriptions. That is, they're one group's language practices offered as universal English language rules. Language comes from people and their material conditions. English varies widely from place to place and group to group because language lives among people who live different realities. Their particular needs for the words they use in the ways they use them are responses to their environments. While race is not biological, it is a lived experience, a social, cultural, gendered, and economic aspect of our lives. Race is a set of structures that make up our lives and the histories we come from.

While we can say that universal standards are here to help people, to create safe industry working environments, or to help students become better communicators, that is not all that standards do, and they may not even do this much for everyone all the time. Take traffic and road laws. In a practical way, these are standards, too, standards for driving harmoniously and safely together in an

area. We take for granted that each state and city has its own laws for driving. There are a variety of reasons for this difference, and we all accept this.

In Washington, where I previously lived, typical speed limits for urban interstates and similar roads were 60 mph, while in Arizona, where I live now, they're 65 mph. In Georgia, Mississippi, and Michigan, it's 70 mph. In South Dakota, it's 80 mph.¹ The point isn't just that different states have different standards but that safe driving standards can be dramatically different a few miles away in another state. This should call into question the standard itself as inherently correct and universal. How was it determined, and who determined it? What does this standard produce in the environments it operates? Does going 80 mph become safer once you cross the border from Iowa to South Dakota, where the difference in speed limits is 15 mph?

Standards are decisions made by people for particular reasons, but they are not universal, nor are they infallible. This goes for language standards too. They may very well be capricious and cause some people undue harm. Thus, it's reasonable to think that language standards are not infallible rules for clear or effective language practices. They are just the rules we have inherited today, made by people who had the power to do so yesterday.

We might say that language *norms* bubble up from a community of language users and tend to be *descriptive*. Norms show us what we have done or do with language already. Language *standards*, however, are decisions imposed onto a community of users and so are *prescriptive* in nature. They describe what we should do according to some group of people who made the standard.

Norms are what happen in communities, while standards are agreements by a group of people for what should happen. But did everyone affected by the standards get a chance to make those standards? When we say standards of language help us communicate effectively and accurately, it's not completely true, but not entirely false either. When we say this, we are choosing to see only one side of what standards are and do. We accept the yang without the yin.

In schools and other places, then, language standards are created to make judgements and rank students. This condition mostly punishes, and teaches little. Teaching and learning are supposed to happen before one tests for adherence to a standard. Schools usually impose external standards of English out of necessity. They cannot use the local norms unless the local people write the rules, but usually that is not what happens. Schools use externally created textbooks, guides, and curricula, often created by language experts who come from some

1 To see all the state speed limits for highways, see the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) website at <https://www.iihs.org/topics/speed/speed-limit-laws>. More information about the IIHS, a nonprofit organization focused on scientific research about vehicular crashes and educational efforts to reduce such crashes, can be found at <https://www.iihs.org/about-us>.

other place. And because the assumption must be that the local students will not share these same English language norms with the experts, schools impose standards and test for them.

In casual conversation, the distinction between standards and norms often doesn't matter. We know what we mean. Parents aren't going to grade their children's language use (at least most do not). But we don't get this message from schools, jobs, or even the dictionary. Here's what Merriam-Webster's Dictionary offers as the definition of "Standard English":

the English that with respect to spelling, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary is substantially uniform though not devoid of regional differences, that is well established by usage in the formal and informal speech and writing of the educated, and that is widely recognized as acceptable wherever English is spoken and understood.²

So, according to Merriam-Webster, Standard English is regional, well established by formal and informal usage of educated people, and widely recognized as acceptable. I don't want to argue about whether this definition is true for most people. I think this is surely a way to understand how most people understand Standardized English. The problem isn't with its "truthiness," or whether this feels right to many people. The problem is with its accuracy as a definition for something we all use and are used by in our world.³

If there are regional differences in English, whose regional language users decide what is established usage and therefore *the standard* of English for all? What does "educated" mean here? Is it just those formally educated in colleges? What's the rationale for that? Can a person have read a lot of books and be "educated" even if they never attend any college? Does that person get to help decide language usage?

2 Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, accessed November 18, 2019, s.v. "Standard English," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Standard%20English>.

3 The word "truthiness" is a good example of the invention of a language norm for a particular purpose, political satire. It was coined on October 17, 2005, by Stephen Colbert on the opening episode of his show *The Colbert Report* on the Comedy Central channel. The word was meant to satirize the way politicians and others in the Bush Administration neglected facts and evidence in favor of their "gut" or their feelings about things. For a definition and discussion of the word, see, Sean Alfano, "The Truth of Truthiness," CBS News television broadcast, December 12, 2006, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-truth-of-truthiness/>; "'Truthiness': Can Something 'Seem,' Without Being, True?" *Words at Play* (blog), Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, April 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/truthiness-meaning-word-origin>; Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, accessed January 17, 2020, s.v. "truthiness," <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truthiness>.

Kenneth Burke, a renowned and well-published rhetorician (that is, a theorist of rhetoric and language), never got a college degree, yet he is considered one of the most important and influential theorists of language in Western traditions.⁴ Why does someone like him get to make language standards? Why not my best friend who never went to college but has read continuously for over thirty years? The point is, this definition is not terribly useful in deciding what standards of language are, where they come from, or what to do with them. It ignores completely the politics of language and standards—that is, who has made them and who benefits most from such making.

The sociolinguist Rosina Lippi-Green agrees with my criticisms of Merriam-Webster's definition. She says that the above definition assumes that the educated elite decide on standards and that those decisions are primarily based on written English, not spoken or both.⁵ This is because academics and the educated elite tend to work with the written word exclusively, so they think about language as mostly written. This is to say, the written word is important to the material conditions of academics and the educated elite. Professors, teachers, and editors typically relate to language as text, as written, but this is not the typical way everyone else relates to language. Most others use and think about language as spoken, perhaps like those ancient Greeks and their logoi. Now, if you have a hearing impairment, you might think of language as embodied, or coming from hand movements, and facial expressions, not printed or auditory words.

No one relation to language (e.g. text-based, speech-based, or embodied) is better than others. They are just different ways people tend to think about and experience language. You can imagine that if you are not accustomed to organizing your ideas in paragraphs and text—not accustomed to seeing your ideas and being able to move them around on a page or screen—you might have trouble meeting a standard for communicating that asks you to organize your ideas in particular ways in textual form. You might not know when it is conventional to make a paragraph break or think in terms of linear or topical organizational patterns. These kinds of habits of language come out of a text-based relation to language, from seeing it done in text, from thinking about ideas as textual artifacts, sentences, paragraphs, sections.

4 Among his many publications, Kenneth Burke wrote numerous essays, academic articles, poems, fiction, and twenty-five books of rhetorical theory. He was awarded the 1981 National Medal for Literature. For a full list of his publications, see <https://kbjournal.org/content/works-kenneth-burke>, a list kept by the academic journal created for the study of his work, *The Journal of the Kenneth Burke Society*.

5 Rosina Lippi-Green, *English With An Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2012), 57.

When I was writing my doctoral dissertation, a very intensive process, one that usually consumes the person, as it did me, I typically awoke at 5:00 a.m., started writing at 5:30, continued most of the day, even eating at my desk, and stopped at around 9:00 p.m. I kept this schedule for at least a good six months. By my account, I clocked in at least 3,000 hours of writing toward my dissertation. This is likely an underestimation, given that I'm not accounting for the three to four months before and after this intense period of writing.

Now, I needed to finish the Ph.D., get a job, and stop taking loans to feed my family. Because of these writing conditions, my relation to language was not only constant and intense, but ubiquitous. All I did was fuck around with words. I thought about words, read them, studied theories about words, and wrote them. I even dreamed in words. In fact, I wrote an important chapter almost entirely in my dreams. I'm not kidding. I dreamed (or is it dreamt?) the text, paragraphs moving, words being typed then deleted. It became so constant that I kept a pad of paper and pen on my nightstand so that if I awoke in the middle of the night, I could write down my dreams.

My relation to words and language was thoroughly textual, so much so that even in my dreams I saw text, imagined ideas and manipulated them as textual artifacts. I realize that my relation to language during the writing of my dissertation is a privileged relation. That is, while my family and I were technically poor (my TA salary was only something like \$14,000 a year), I still had the ability to spend just about every waking hour writing. That's a privileged relationship to language! Not everyone gets to have this kind of language norm. Do you think it is wise to use my relations to language, my language norms, as the standard for judging all language? Of course not. But unacknowledged privileged norms aren't the only problem with Merriam-Webster's definition and how we often think about standards.

The Merriam-Webster definition also assumes more agreement than has ever been established about things like "uniform" usage and grammar rules. Take the example of the plural pronoun, they/them/their. It is a surprisingly political and ethical problem of language, and has been for a long time, but it may seem quite simple.

At least as far back as the 1800s, there has been a popular standard for written English that says you don't use they/them/their as a singular pronoun reference. You use either he/him/his or one (if you're British), if you are referring to a generic, genderless person in writing. Today, many also use she/her/hers, but this is a recent phenomenon. In common, daily exchanges among many English speakers, the pronoun they/them/their has been used as a singular pronoun for a long time, and this is now acceptable in written usage.

It's the pronoun I use. This is language disagreement, a contradiction between language norms and expressed language standards. But really, it's just a difference in language norms between groups, those who make the standards and those who do not.

When someone in a car swerves into your lane and cuts you off on a busy street, you might say, "Hey, they cut me off!" perhaps with an expletive included. Or you might use the pronoun when you don't mean a gendered subject, just anyone, such as: "I get annoyed at the one person who is always running late. They hold up everyone in the meeting." The plural pronoun works in these cases, but apparently it isn't correct writing, or so says this long standing rule.

Paul Brians, former professor of English at Washington State University, gives this explanation for why the use of "they" should be avoided in many cases: "In many written sentences the use of singular 'their' and 'they' creates an irritating clash even when it passes unnoticed in speech. It is wise to shun this popular pattern in formal writing."⁶ It may be wise, if you care much about holding on to traditions of a particular language group, but this reason tells us more about the language tastes of White, middle-class, academic readers like Brians than anything else. I hear no clash when someone uses "they" in their writing. But Brians' explanation hints at why such norms are so durable. How do we change a clashing word practice if we don't make it clash, at least for a time, until no one hears the clash anymore?

Now, to be fair, readers are not going to Brians' book or website on common errors in English to learn about nuances in language norms. They want quick answers to their error questions. But these quick answers are fast thinking. And the real clashes are those between a local language norm and other groups' norms assumed to be a universal standard. The bottom line is: We shouldn't confuse language norms with standards. Norms do not cause White language supremacy, universal standards do.

What I hope you can see is that how we use language is a product of the communities we are a part of. Yet paradoxically, individuals in a community help make the language of that community. This means that language and people form a dialectical relationship, a back and forth in both directions. That is, the language that makes me is itself made both from the communities I am from and by my own language choices.

6 Paul Brians, "They/Their (Singular)," The Web Site of Professor Paul Brians, accessed February 26, 2021, <https://brians.wsu.edu/2016/05/25/they-their-singular/>. This website offers a version of Paul Brians, *Common Errors In English Usage*, 3rd. ed. (Portland, OR: William, James & Company, 2013).

WE ARE WHAT WE DO IN THE PLACES WE ARE AT WITH THE PEOPLE THERE

Where and when you live, as well as who came before you in the places you live, will determine a lot of your material conditions for acquiring language. This is why we have so many different versions of English in the US. It's a big place with lots of different living conditions and people. In some parts of the country, people refer to a group of others as "you," while in much of the Southern part of the US, it's "y'all." Meanwhile in Pittsburgh, folks say "you ones" or "yinz." In the St. Louis area, people often pronounce the "r" sound in the back of their throat, swallowing the sound a bit, and include it in some words that people in other areas of the US do not, such as "wash" (warsh).

Black English is perhaps the most obvious example of a fully functioning and widely used English that has different words, rules, and pronunciations from standardized Englishes. Most, however, judge this difference as deficit or substandard, but not being of a standard doesn't make something substandard, even if the politics of language make it subordinate to that standard. It is not hard to see how any standard for English will be closely connected to the group of people who came up with that standard. It comes from their unique material conditions. Those conditions are a product of the places in which that group lived, the people they talked to, the things they needed to use the language for, etc. In other words, your languaging—the way you know, use, and embody language—has relations to (is a function of) where and how you live (and have lived), who you know (and have known), and how you responded uniquely to all those material conditions.

A simple way to say this is: We are what we do in the places we are at with the people there.

What I mean is that language is something we do all the time, and the places we do that languaging affect us, define us, and make us, just as we affect, define, and make language in particular places. It's a kind of chicken-and-egg dialectic, in that language creates people as people create language. And we operate from this understanding intuitively. For instance, places in the United States, like "urban areas" and "suburban areas," have been racialized in the course of U.S. history.⁷ That is, particular bodies are associated with particular places.

Do you think mostly of White people mulling around an "urban" area or street? When someone says "urban youth," what is the image in your head? When I say "banker" or "stockbroker" or "lawyer," you likely think of a White

7 Insight into the racializing of space in the West and in the US can be found in Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 41–53; Craig L. Wilkins, *The Aesthetics of Equity: Notes on Race, Space, Architecture, and Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 3–61.

man, even though there are women, Black, Asian, and Latine bankers, stock brokers, and lawyers. I'm not asking you who you think is a possible or ideal banker or lawyer. I'm asking, who is the image that pops into your head when the word is spoken or presented to you. That tells you something of the racial and gendered associations—biases—with places and professions that circulate in our culture, often unconsciously. These biases are implicit biases, operating as fast thinking much of the time, and they inform our languaging.

Part of what creates these racial biases are the histories of the kinds of people not only who have been such people but who have inhabited places where such people frequent, like banks, stock exchanges, and attorneys' offices. These are White male dominated places. So all language practices are racialized because language comes from racialized people in particular racialized places. This is to say, race has come to be attached to or associated with particular places, the people who circulate in those places, and by default, the languages those people use together in those places.

The same kinds of racialized biases have affected schools and literacy classrooms too. The fact that I had no teachers of color in all of my public schooling is important, no matter what the politics or language practices of any of my teachers were. This racial pattern of teachers in Nevada and Oregon is a product of the biases in our educational systems and the racialized places that funnel particular kinds of people into professions like teaching.

Racial segregation is another way to understand why race and language go hand in hand. Historically in our society, racial groups have been segregated, sometimes by laws and social norms that demand such separation (despite it being unfair and wrong), sometimes by geography or topography, and sometimes by those in positions of power and decision-making ability. One way to see such disparate conditions between, say, White and Black people in the US is to compare the conditions in which each group tends to live. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services offers stark statistics.

In 2017 on every metric measured, Blacks fall behind Whites. Of those 25 years and older, 86 percent of non-Hispanic Blacks earned a high school diploma, while 93 percent of non-Hispanic Whites did. Twenty-one percent of Blacks got a bachelor's degree or higher, while 36 percent of Whites earned such degrees. Eight percent of Blacks earned graduate degrees, while 14 percent of Whites did. The median household income for Blacks was \$40,165 compared to \$65,845 for Whites. And poverty levels? Twenty-three percent of Blacks lived in poverty, while 9.6 percent of Whites did. And what of unemployment? Among Blacks, 9.5 percent were unemployed, compared to only 4.2 percent of Whites.⁸

8 Office of Minority Health Resource Center, "Profile: Black/African Americans," U.S.

I could continue with insurance coverage, health and death rates, obesity rates, diabetes rates, etc. But the point is, these statistics point to very different conditions for Blacks and Whites. We could look at Asian groups, Indigenous groups, Latine groups, and we'd find similar patterns. Different conditions mean that the groups live differently, meaning they are segregated in a number of ways, not just by location.

We know that we are a racially segregated country,⁹ but we do nothing about it. Or maybe it is that we don't know what to really do about it except set up hierarchies and blame individuals for the failures in their lives that are mostly a result of the conditions in which they live. This place is better than that one. The English in this place, of these people, is better or more professional than the English over there, of those people. So the typical solutions are to encourage Blacks or Latine or poor people to use the language of the people in so-called better places, White middle- and upper-class places. The problem is that the racial hierarchies in such distinctions are not questioned. And it ain't that easy to get to those other places, if you didn't start there.

This doesn't mean, however, that if you're Black, you use a Black English or African American Vernacular English (AAVE), or if you are White you inherently use a more standardized English. No. There are exceptions even to the patterns, such as the groups of poor, rural Whites in areas of the US who use various non-standardized Englishes. Or myself, who lived in predominantly Black and poor areas of North LV and spoke Black and White Englishes as a child. The point is that these language patterns are strong because we live in a segregated society. Race has been a characteristic of all communities. It is in the segregation, in the different places and conditions people live, that creates different needs for language.

Because it has been a White, male, middle- and upper-class group of language users who have made our language rules and standards, those language standards are connected closely to the material conditions of that group. This is why I often refer to such English standards as *White middle class racial habits of language*, or HOWL.¹⁰ There's no inherent biology to any language habits. Race

Department of Health and Human Services, last modified August 22, 2019, <https://www.minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=3&lvlid=61>.

9 To see just how segregated the United States still is by city and state, see Aaron Williams and Armand Emamdjomeh, "America is more diverse than ever—but still segregated," *Washington Post*, updated May 10, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/national/segregation-us-cities/>. Using U.S. Census Bureau data from as far back as 1990, the article includes an interactive, searchable map of the United States.

10 I offer six habits of White language and judgement in chapter 0, of which I'm referring here.

and language are not biological. They are social, structural, and experiential, just as the economics of groups are. But because accepted language habits—the standards—come out of a White racial group in history, *that group's* unique material conditions are assumed to be everyone's material conditions.

This dynamic is the same reason I use the term “Black English.” It's an English created and practiced historically by Black racial groups, even if today non-Black people use the language also. The racialized terms I use to identify White or Black English simply keep the racial histories and the power dynamics attached to those versions of the languages. Hiding or ignoring the racial references of our language practices and preferences means we can lose track of the racial injustices—the White supremacist outcomes—that too often follow.

In 1974, my mom moved my brother and me to Las Vegas, Nevada, from Dallas, Oregon. We hadn't grown at all in a calendar year, not an inch, and the doctor told my mom that it was the ryegrass in the Willamette Valley. Someone told me once that the valley has the highest concentration of grass seed pollen anywhere. It's where most of the grass seed is grown in the world. It's an industry that began in the early 1920s by a guy named Forest Jenks.¹¹ By the early 1970s when I was living there, it was a thriving and dominant industry. It still is today. If it hadn't been for Jenks and the ryegrass industry, I would not have come to my languaging in the conditions I did. I would not have gone to North LV to escape the ryegrass allergies. I would not be me in the way I am today.

In the Willamette Valley, there are grass fields everywhere. My brother and I were highly allergic to the pollen. We'd wake up each morning with our eyes swollen shut with a thick crust encasing our long, black eyelashes. The minute the door opened, we'd get strong hay fever reactions. Sneezing. Itchy eyes. Asthma. All of it. The doctor felt that our bodies were trying to fight the allergies so hard that we couldn't grow. My mom, ever-brave, always thinking of our best interests, decided to leave her home and family in Oregon and move to Las Vegas, a dry, desert climate. She had a cousin whose husband was in the Air Force, and they lived with their four young daughters in family housing on Nellis Air Force Base. We moved in with them for a short time, maybe three months.

While staying with my mom's cousin, Maisie, we started going to the nearby J. E. Manch Elementary school. We didn't stay the whole year, and over the next 16 months, we'd move three times, attend three different schools. The next one would be Oran K. Gragson Elementary, then Fay Herron Elementary, which I attended during my second and third grade years. All of these schools are in

11 Katy Giombolini, “Grass Seed Industry,” *The Oregon Encyclopedia*, March 17, 2018, https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/grass_seed_industry/#.XkwQIpNKiWY.

North LV, the poorest part of town. We moved because we had to. Rents go up. Jobs get lost. But my mom was persistent. She was like water, always flowing where the resistance was the least, where we could pool, save, and build a bit for the next move.

There isn't a lot I recall until Fay Herron, but there are a few things, vivid things. At Manch, I remember the classroom, the coloring of pictures, the playing of red rover and duck-duck-goose out in a bright lawn. I remember trying to learn letters and words, or recognize them. I remember being baffled and never talking. I remember my teacher, a White lady who was distant. The only memory of her that I have is one of her standing over my desk as I stared at a sheet of paper with bold, black letters on it. I looked up. She looked down. She seemed really tall and had a disappointed look on her face, as if to tell me, "You can do better. C'mon." My recollection is that I floated through the school, almost like a ghost, as if no one could see me. I had no exchanges with others I can recall.

Similarly, at Oran K. Gragson, I remember the classroom and drawing silhouettes of our heads on cardboard, the rows of desks, and the sterile neatness of the classroom. I remember the rows of seats and spartan blankness of the room. One morning on our walk to school across a big park, my brother found a cigarette pack with a silver dollar in it. We felt rich in that moment. On that day, the sound of the ice cream truck would not be a melancholy thing, a sound of yearning and ache only. It would signal a sweet taste of something soon, of desire fulfilled, a rare thing for us in those days.

I remember forgetting my new Raggedy Andy doll at school, a soft doll I loved, given to me by my nana who was still in Oregon and whom I missed greatly. I returned to school a few hours later to find the doll had been stolen. No one knew where it had gone. More floating. No interactions with anyone at school.

Some of my strongest memories of this time are deep, meaningful, and precious to me. I remember sunny, warm Saturdays when my mom would clean our small two-bedroom apartment, humming to Neil Diamond. To this day, I get a warm feeling in my belly when I hear "September Morn," "Cracklin' Rose," or "Song Sung Blue." In my mind, they are bright orange and yellow Saturdays, with the sun dancing on my skin and the smell of Pledge furniture polish in the air.

My mom had a metal stand with several shelves on it that she kept in a prominent spot in the living room. It was maybe five feet tall and had ferns and green plants all over it. I remember climbing it. I didn't weigh enough to tip it over. I didn't think much of it then, but now it is a beautiful memory of green and iron and my mom and the smell of metal and potting soil. I remember a Christmas with Six Million Dollar Man action figures and Maskatron, his enemy. It was a

time right before I would understand how poor we were, how dire our situation was, how Brown I am. I was blissfully innocent. My world at Oran K. Gragon was one circumscribed by my mom and my brother, Neil Diamond, Pledge, and warm, sunny Saturdays.

There were few language lessons during this period of my life that I recall. I just remember always feeling that I had no words. I was silent in school. My mom didn't have much time between her two or three jobs (depending on the time of year) to sit and read to me or help me read. So language and books didn't figure in my earliest memories of school or home. What figured most prominently was how loved I felt, how secure I felt, how joyful my life seemed, at least in retrospect. Part of this was me being too young to understand our circumstances, and part was that I'm sure mom sheltered me from the realities of our conditions.

At Fay Herron, my memories are clearer and more frequent, but still I was not a talker in school, not yet. I entered midway through first grade, but it is the second and third grades I recall most. I remember my mom going to a parent teacher meeting about me, about my lagging behind everyone in reading and language skills. I remember her being insistent about something, even upset in that dark room.

At that time, I still took allergy medicine. It made me drowsy. I was a small, slight child of less than 50 pounds. The medicine likely affected my abilities to focus and stay awake in school. I remember being startled awake, confused, disoriented by a water gun shot at my face. I had fallen asleep in class. I awoke to find the entire class standing around my desk laughing at me and Mrs. Whitmore's White face grinning from ear to ear, water gun still pointed at me. Perhaps it was things like this that made me hold on to that reading contest. I could beat them all, get them all back, by being the best at reading. There were not a lot of good reasons to communicate, to use language, in this period in my life, except at home. Language was a private, family affair and very different from the conditions of school.

Even at seven or eight years old at Fay Herron, I recognized the racializing of people and places, who was where. At school, language was a White woman writing words on the chalkboard. It was books I could not understand, words I didn't know, and commands I wasn't fully sure how to follow. It was a White place filled with kids like me, Brown and Black who usually spoke English differently than expected by the White teacher. School was where you were wrong about language, a place of silence and White noise.

At home in my poor, Black neighborhood, language was my twin brother, my mom, our love and closeness. It was a next door neighbor, Lester, a Black friend who had a younger sister. The two of them were always outside ready to play. It was my other Black neighbor, a tall, well-built man who would bring

out his bongo drums every weekend and play them. We'd sit and listen to him play, and talk, ask questions about where the drums came from and what song he was playing.

Language was also the Black couple in the first apartment on the other side of Lester's who didn't have any children, or if they did, I never saw them. But they would smile and say hi and talk to Lester's parents, sometimes ask us how our day was. At home, language was everywhere, and no one judged you harshly for it. This place, the place of home and the block, was a freer, more natural place of language. We exchanged it without consequences.

Our language was economical too. I remember, even at seven or eight, when grown-ups and teachers were not around, we used curse words. It was just normal. We talked with our bodies, and if you were a boy, you grabbed your crotch a lot. It was like an exclamation mark, although now I realize it was also how we were working out our masculinity.

"Hey, whatchoo do?" Lester asks me as I come out of the front door to our apartment.

"Notin'—you?" I give my head a slight nod upward at him.

"We goin' the Circle-K. Gettin' some candy, dude." He extends the vowel in "dude" just a half beat longer. He grabs his crotch, and cracks a slight smile, like he's gotten away with something.

"I ain't got no money." I extend the "o" sound in "money" back at him. I'm emphasizing it. The morning sun cracks through the big tree in the courtyard behind Lester. It's the tree we play in. The raggedy rope we swing from dangles in the sun from a thick branch. The light is bright and yellow, like butter.

"Shi—I found some food stamps, dude. You can use em fo' candy!" He says the last sentence almost like a question, as if he just discovered this fact, raising the pitch of his words in the middle of the sentence.

"You sharin' ma-fucka?" I give him a flat smile and grab my crotch. I lean slightly back and raise my eyebrows.

"Stch, I gi' you some." The sound that starts his sentence is a sucking sound from the sides of his cheeks, which means, "Please, homie. I gotch you."

"Ahight, let's go!"

Even today when I read those sentences out loud, I get a warm and comforting feeling in my body. The sentences sound soft and right in my mouth. It's like putting on an old sweater you've hung up in the back of the closet decades ago and now discover it. Does it still fit? Will it be snug in the wrong places? You put it on, and the contours and form of it still hug ya right, soft and comfortable. And the way it feels on your shoulders, arms, and back is like your nana's arms

around you. I wanta go back to my nana’s hugs, back to that soft-in-the-mouth sweater, but of course, I cannot.

ENGLISH STYLE GUIDES THAT DETERMINE STANDARDS

Now, I see that the language of school, the one so initially off-putting to me, was dictated by another world, another place and a different people—that is, White places and White people, all of whom I simply had little experience with up to that point, except for my mom. Historically and still today, White men control the standards of English taught in schools and judged to be “correct” or “professional.” Consider grammar textbooks and writing style guides. These are the kinds of things that often caused me the most trouble.

Look for an English style guide not written by a White man or woman from a middle- or upper-class economic background. It will be almost impossible to find. Doing a quick Amazon search for the top college English style guides sold today gives these results:

1. *The Elements of Style*, 4th edition by William Strunk and E.B. White
2. *Dreyer’s English: An Utterly Correct Guide to Clarity and Style* by Benjamin Dreyer
3. *Um . . . : Slips, Stumbles, and Verbal Blunders, and What They Mean* by Michael Erard
4. *Other-Wordly: Words Both Strange and Lovely from Around the World* by Yee-Lum Mak and illustrated by Kelsey Garrity-Riley (not a grammar book)
5. *The Only Grammar Book You’ll Ever Need: A One-Stop Source for Every Writing Assignment* by Susan Thurman¹²

Of the six authors (and one illustrator) represented in Amazon’s most purchased English style guides, four are White males, one White female, and one Asian female. And really, number four, by Yee-Lum Mak (the Asian female author), is not an English style guide or grammar book. It’s a book that offers interesting words and their definitions from all over the world. Thus, most of the writers of the top four English grammar books and style guides sold on Amazon are White males. These authors come from the typical places that have historically made rules and judgements about English language standards and practices in the U.S., namely elite families and schools on the East Coast.

¹² The Amazon page is titled “Amazon Best Sellers” and states it is “updated hourly.” You can find this page at <https://www.amazon.com/Best-Sellers-Books-Grammar-Reference/zgbs/books/111981>.

The number one book above is the oldest, most influential, and arguably the archetype for all style guides after it. It still influences classrooms, teachers, students, and literacy standards today. It was first published by William Strunk in 1920, then expanded and republished with E. B. White in 1959. William Strunk was born in Cincinnati. His father was a teacher and lawyer. Strunk got his Ph.D. at Cornell, then taught there for 46 years, where E. B. White met him as his student.

White may be the one person you recognize in the above list of authors. He was born in Mount Vernon, New York, to upper-class parents. His father was the president of a piano firm, and his mother was the daughter of the famous American painter, William Hart. After graduating from Cornell University, White wrote *Stuart Little*, *Charlotte's Web*, and was a writer for *The New Yorker* for almost six decades. He is considered by many to be the father of the modern "essay," the kind most college students have to write.

I remember reading some of White's essays in my first-year writing class in college. His essays are personal, ruminating pieces that inductively move from his experiences in the world to reflecting on them and coming to ideas that sound universal. Taken by themselves, they often suggest that truth about our existence can be understood almost universally from within. That is, his essays imply that truths can be found by thinking objectively and carefully about our experiences.

White's essays are a demonstration of three habits of White language, which makes them literally habits of *White's* language (HOWL). The three most conspicuous to me are "hyperindividualism," or an over-reliance on the individual as most important in understanding and making knowledge or truths; a naturalized orientation to the world that assumes everyone has a similar orientation and access to ideas and things, which is often discussed today as unacknowledged White privilege; and a stance of supposed neutrality, objectivity, and apoliticality, which suggests that an individual can see things, judge them from a neutral, unbiased position, one unencumbered by one's position or politics in the world. These qualities have come to be understood by many as markers of an appealing, authoritative writing style and surely were a big part of what made White's writing so popular.¹³

On Goodreads.com, *The Elements of Style* has more reviews than any other grammar or style guide I can find, way more.¹⁴ As of this writing, it has been reviewed or rated 78,590 times, with an average rating of 4.15 (out of five). It receives on average an additional hundred ratings each month. Nearly half of all the ratings (46 percent) give it five stars. As a way to compare those ratings, the

13 I discuss the six habits of White language and judgement in chapter 0.

14 To see the list of English style guides that have been rated on Goodreads.com, see <https://www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/style-guide>.

next closest style guide of English in terms of numbers of ratings is Steven Pinker's *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*. Pinker's book has an average rating of 4.06 by 7,092 readers.

By these measures, Strunk and White's guide is by far the most influential English style guide in the last 100 years. But Pinker, a White, middle-class academic, is not that dissimilar to Strunk or White. Pinker is a Harvard cognitive psychologist and linguist, who was born in Montreal, Canada, and received his PhD. at Harvard. His father was a lawyer and mother was a vice-principal of a high school, while his grandparents owned a small, Montreal necktie factory.

The others on the above list are much newer, with less known publicly about them. Benjamin Dreyer's book was published in January 2019. Dreyer is a White, middle or upper class American writer who lives in New York and attended Northwestern University. He is the Vice-President, Executive Managing Editor and Copy Chief at the publisher Random House. His book received an average Goodreads rating of 4.36 from 6,130 raters.¹⁵

The number three book was published in 2007. Its author, Michael Erard, is a White, middle-class American journalist and writer who earned his master's degree in Linguistics and a Ph.D. in English from the University of Texas at Austin and lives in Portland, Maine. The final book in the Amazon list was published in 2003 and again in 2012. Susan Thurman is a White English teacher at Henderson Community College in Henderson, Kentucky. While it is less clear of the backgrounds of Erard and Thurman, from their college pedigrees, where they live and work, and what they do now, the habits of English language that they embody and promote match closely those of White, male, middle- or upper-class English language users of elite families of the East Coast.

This isn't to say that what these guides offer isn't good, helpful, or interesting if read in careful ways. There is no evil conspiracy here. My point is that the language practices that get published and taught in schools, that readers find worth buying, that publishers—which, by the way are mostly located in New York City—find worth publishing, reproduce a monolingual, middle-to-upper-class, White racial set of language habits. This is a White supremacist outcome achieved by people who are not White supremacists, but surely are White. This pattern exclusively places a White racial set of English language habits as the standard by which everyone is measured. This standard is used to determine who gets scholarships, jobs, and other opportunities in society, including who gets published more often. It has a lot of consequences.

15 You can find the ratings for Dreyer's book at https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/40063024-dreyer-s-english?ac=1&from_search=true&qid=LqsS8dTIOv&rank=1.

I'm nineteen. I've returned home from my training in the Oregon Army National Guard. I trained at Fort Dix, New Jersey, then Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. I'm a Technical Drafting Specialist, 81-Bravo. I left in September and returned in March of the following year. I tried to begin classes during that spring quarter at Oregon State University, but I couldn't do it. It was all too much. I withdrew from all of my courses. I spent the summer and fall thinking I was not going back to college. I had washed out.

I think: I'll work. I can do that. I was an exterminator and a vacuum salesman, the door-to-door kind. In the fall, I settled on a job I liked. I'm working at a bookstore in the Clackamas Town Center Mall. I receive shipments of books, then unpack and load the books onto carts in the back supply room. The front sales folks, all twenty-something White women and one White man (the manager), take the carts and shelve the books. I rarely go out on the floor. It is just me back there for four or six hours at a stretch with a radio and boxes and boxes of books.

The best part of the job is that I can "check out" any of the books we have on the shelves for free, read them, and return them. I just have to be careful not to damage them. That is the rule. I read mostly physics books, the ones for popular consumption. The theories about life, the quantum world, and the stars are interesting to me. I feel smart. I like Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*. I read John Gribbin's *In Search of Schrodinger's Cat: Quantum Physics and Reality*, then Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. Hawking's book has just come out. It is a treat to read it so soon. It feels extravagant. Only people who could afford to buy a book new, the hardback kind, get to read books as soon as they come out. I satisfy my hunger for words silently in the back supply room of a bookstore in the mall.

At this time, I'm living with my mom and stepdad in Oregon City, Oregon, near Portland, in a spare room. I decide I should give college one more try. I can't live with my mom forever. And my job just doesn't pay enough to do anything else. I attend Clackamas Community College. I'm in my first-year writing course, the second time around. The teacher is a White lady who never seems to come from behind the desk in the front of the room. She's always seated at that desk. I don't even know if she's thin, tall, or short because she never stands up, never isn't seated at that desk.

This is around the time that the Exxon Valdez oil tanker hits an iceberg and spills almost 11 million gallons of crude oil in Prince William Sound, Alaska. The reports and news about it and the alleged drunk captain are everywhere. Turns out: No drunk captain. It is Exxon's fault. The company knew about the faulty equipment meant to detect such icebergs and a lack of communication among ships that had long since stopped running in that area. I am trying to write about this story for the class. I have no way to do it. I just feel the injustice

and shame and failure of it all, the damage to the coastline and its ecologies. I turn in something incomplete. It seems all I could do. I accept my failure at school writing, again. The Valdez seems really important, worth writing about, so I hold on to that. It's my failed writing of an ecological failure.

I am in that writing class. We're reading from Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*. This appears to be her teaching method: Someone reads out loud. We all follow along. We then do some writing. That's it. It isn't something I find engaging. I'm sitting alone at my table, one with two chairs. It's meant for two people. One chair is empty.

Page seven of Strunk and White, item six: "Do not break sentences in two."¹⁶ Perfect, I think to myself. I have this problem. This is what I need. It has something to do with what my teachers keep telling me. All those red marks on my papers. What's it called? That thing on my papers? Comma-splices, maybe? No, that's ma problem too, but it ain't that. I start to feel myself moving back into the language of Statz, even if much of it is gone, meshed into my White English.¹⁷ This meshed English is a surer way I can think through things, get stuff straight in my head, and feel like I'm in control. Fragments! That's it. You break something in two and ya got two fragments of it.

The text says, "Do not use periods for commas." Okay, so when I can use commas? Now I'm not sure if I'm using periods right, either. I'm feeling more confused. How this explanation help anyone? This tells me the rule, but not in a way I understand. I tell myself to think like a White kid. Things start to get shakier for me. When the hell I use commas and periods? I can feel the anxiety rise in me. This school-shit feels so arcane, I think. Yeah, *arcane*, that's the word, like in D&D. This is motha fuckin' Black magic. Hexes! The editors offer two examples. Perfect! Examples should help.

The first example: "I met them on a Cunard liner many years ago. Coming home from Liverpool to New York." What the fu—. Jeez. "Cunard," what the hell is that?

Wait, I can figure this out. Liverpool, that's where the Beatles came from. So that's England, and New York is America, so Cunard must go with "liner"—what the fuck is a liner? Like a pencil line? That's stupid. Stop being stupid, I tell myself. Think White. Think right. It's gotta be a plane or a boat or something

16 All quotes in this section come from William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 7.

17 To read about code-meshing, see Vershawn A. Young, *Your Average Nigga*; Vershawn A. Young and Aja Y. Martinez, *Code-Meshing As World English: Pedagogy, Policy, Performance* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2011); Vershawn A. Young, "Should Writers Use Their Own English?" *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12.1 (2010), pp. 110–118, <https://doi.org/10.17077/2168-569X.1095>.

like that, something people are on. Why would something like that be called a liner? More frustration, mostly from translating my mind's language into White language. It's like putting on and taking off clothes you didn't fully know how to wear yet. On and off, on, off.

How these sentences wrong exactly? Wait, maybe this an example of how to put the period in correctly? I breathe heavily on my book. Slow down, I tell myself. I try to blink the anxiety away.

The second example: "He was an interesting talker. A man who had traveled all over the world and lived in half a dozen countries."

More travel sentences. What's that about? Who the fuck travels and meets talkers? Wait, the rule is not to bust a sentence in two. So maybe these examples of the problem. But they sound right. I mean, I can read em and I understand exactly what they mean. Don't errors cause readers to not understand shit? The periods must not belong there. But why? There is a pause where the period is in each one. That's right, right? Fuck.

The internal pressure grows in me. The right White language is elusive. I'm trying hard. I can hear the other students read past this part. They are moving on without me, as usual. I'm stuck in this one rule, stuck at the periods. Commas. Pauses. Breaking things. Cunards and liners. Travel. Anger and confusion rises up in me. I grit my teeth. Breathe through it all.

I realize I've not heard the following explanation when it was read. I was too busy figuring out what kind of examples we were reading. The explanation is: "In both these examples, the first period should be replaced by a comma and the following word begun with a small letter." Strunk and White continue, "It is permissible to make an emphatic word or expression serve the purpose of a sentence. . . . The writer must, however, be certain that the emphasis is warranted, lest his clipped sentence seem merely a blunder in syntax or in punctuation."

Wait, I think, so not a rule? Or I should know when to break this rule that ain't no rule? These examples, why are they not examples of emphasis? What's "warranted" mean? Crap. I'm losing more control of my language, of language. But the examples still seem okay. I need different examples. Maybe then, I understand. Double-crap. That second sentence in the first example, it emphasizes when he met em, right? So there's a period, right? No? Ya met em on a fuckin' liner on yo way to New York, right? I've never been to either of these places, man. Is that important? Arrhhh. The second example emphasize the interesting thing about talker-dude. He everywhere in the world. Still, these seem okay to me. Breathe. Calm down, man.

I look one last time at the page. Both of these examples still feel right to me sitting in that class at a two-person table alone. But the book, its White authors, one who is named literally "White," seems to be talking to someone else, not me,

not the Brown kid from North LV. Apparently, I ain't never gonna escape that place. It's like these authors are talking to someone who already fuckin' knows this answer. The class moves on. I finish the course barely getting a B grade, or maybe it was a C, mostly for trying hard, and feeling lucky to survive.

THE WHITE HABITS OF STRUNK AND WHITE

In my English classes in school, I got language norms as standards, especially through grammar books and style guides. These books are how my teachers and professors got their language norms as standards. It's typically how we all get them or know where exactly we can find them. This may be why so many people feel they are not good writers or communicators. The formal systems that help us shape our language practices work from a flawed assumption: There is one standard for good writing, and you can find this standard in grammar books and style guides or in your teacher.

The flaw in this systemic assumption is that it quietly reproduces White language supremacy, all in the name of teaching people how to communicate well. Let's return to Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*. The rules for good and clear writing in this book are presented as universal ones, even though they come exclusively from Strunk and White's own monolingual, White, upper-class, masculine language group. They enact an orientation to language that universalizes their language conditions. That is, they take their own language norms as universal language standards. Strunk and White HOWL like no one can.

The authors offer a rule that demands the singular pronoun *he/him/his* be used exclusively. They tell us to avoid the pronoun *they/them/theirs* in cases where gender is not important, otherwise your prose may sound "general and diffuse." They open this entry with an explanation of the written norm, which is stated as a standard:

They. Not to be used when the antecedent is a distributive expression such as *each, each one, everybody, every one, many a man*. Use the singular pronoun.

Every one of us knows
they are fallible.

Every one of us knows
he is fallible.¹⁸

They offer two example sentences to illustrate. The one on the left shows an allegedly incorrect use of the plural pronoun, while the right is the correct use. The confusion here is of the same nature as Merriam-Webster's confusion

18 Strunk Jr. and White, *Elements*, 60.

between norms and standards. Part of the problem is that both examples are grammatically accurate and communicative, but this is only part of the underlying issue.

Accepting the grammatical correctness of the right example does not make the left example grammatically incorrect, nor any less communicative. The norm governing the right side example as correct is one that says that the singular noun “every one” agrees with its antecedent, “he,” which is supposed to be another singular noun. But there is nothing inherently grammatically or communicatively better or clearer about this norm of agreement by number. This is why it has been common for many to use a sentence like the one on the left side.

There is always more than one way to do anything, but Strunk and White see only their way. Seeing two norms that are different doesn’t have to mean that one must be right and one wrong. If norms are meant to help us understand an expression or idea—that is, communicate with each other—then the real test is: Do you understand both of these sentences? Is there unnecessary ambiguity? If not, what is the *real* problem with “they” in the left example? What is really going on? It is just something Strunk and White and people like them do not do in language.

Strunk and White assume a naturalized and universal orientation to the language. It’s how you can think your norm is everyone’s standard. To accomplish this, there is a slight-of-hand maneuver done. They disregard everyone else’s contexts, purposes, material conditions, and language customs. But their left example sentence works just fine. There is no missed communication, no confusion about meaning. To my ear, it is no more “general” or “diffuse” than the right example.

In fact, the left is more accurate than the right. By definition, “every one” includes men, women, and non-binary individuals, so it is difficult for me as a contemporary reader to not hear the exclusionary nature of the singular pronoun, he, in the second example. And the fact that in other cases “he” is used as a masculine gendered pronoun makes this use potentially ambiguous. This makes the second weaker for me, unnecessarily exclusive, or to use their term, “diffuse.”

The authors make the argument that the singular masculine pronoun, “he,” “has lost all suggestion of maleness in these circumstances.”¹⁹ They offer no evidence of this, only their word. They assume that how they hear the pronoun is the way everyone hears it, or maybe everyone who knows better. As gentlemanly as they may be, their word is not sufficient for such an argument, especially since so many people do not agree. Why do all those other ears not count in this instance? Besides, why have a gendered pronoun if we are going to disregard

19 Strunk Jr. and White, 61.

the gendered-ness of it? Another rule that is not really a rule, and someone like White or Strunk has to tell the rest of us when to break it.

To counter such concerns, Strunk and White make the argument that using the feminine pronoun *she/her/hers* is ridiculous and will not be very effective writing: “No need fear to use *he* if common sense supports it. The furor recently raised about *he* would be more impressive if there were a handy substitute for the word. Unfortunately, there isn’t—or, at least, no one has come up with one yet. If you think *she* is a handy substitute for *he*, try it and see what happens.”²⁰

The misogyny in this passage is blatant by today’s standards, and it’s casually justified by the authors in elitist terms through their habits of language. They HOWLing. They appeal to “common sense,” which for them is dominated by a monolingual, White, male-centered, educated world, the one they come from and exist in. This is how most appeals to common sense work. They assume authority to dictate a common logic or a central, common view on the subject, despite there not being one. It’s their feelings about language stated as fact, their ideas of clarity, order, and control that are universalized. Common sense, then, is the “truthiness” of things. The language norm is a standard because, well, it feels right in *their* guts.

Much like Paul Briens’ sense that the use of the singular “they” can “clash” in a reader’s ear,²¹ Strunk and White also assume that their ears are the same as mine, that we all hear these words in the same way, or should. To be fair, I hear Briens offering more room to hear the use of the pronoun differently. But Strunk and White confuse their own language norm with an illusionary standard for all. They justify this use from their own sensibilities, ones they’ve cultivated in their social and material conditions, which are assumed to be accessible to everyone.

They also discount quickly “the furor” of concerns about gender inclusive language practices by saying that these concerns are not a problem, because, well, there is no better solution out there (from their view, of course). A problem without a solution does not make the problem not a problem. Not having a “handy substitute” is not an argument for falling back on flawed practices. Their book is all about making such language practices common, so why not offer a few here? Why not offer some handy substitutes?

In fact, there is at least one handy substitute right in front of them, the pronoun *they/them/theirs*. Why not use this, especially since so many others around them clearly are already doing so? If they weren’t, the authors wouldn’t need to make this admonition. Furthermore, if a woman or someone else feels excluded or hurt by my use of language, do I not have an ethical obligation to

20 Strunk Jr. and White, 61.

21 Paul Briens, “They/Their.”

listen and change my practices? Is it not insensitive and callous to brush these concerns aside with a few words?

Strunk and White cannot see their own perspective on language as a perspective. They see it as the rule. Their view seems universal and natural to them, but it is a god trick played not simply on their readers but themselves. In their world, Strunk and White are never ignored. They have always made the rules from their common sense, from their norms of behaviors. Those rules have always benefited them and people just like them. Their truthiness can be stated as fact, and few resist it. They've likely not been confronted by others with contradictory language norms. They are used to ignoring the perspectives of others and demanding that others see things their way. Their world has rewarded them for HOWLING, which has made language standards.

As referenced in chapter 0's discussion of the first and most common White habit of language and judgement, Strunk and White embody Sara Ahmed's idea of Whiteness as a universalized orientation to the world, as a kind of habitual way or seeing and experiencing the world that is taken as reachable to all. They think and speak—make decisions—as if most everyone else thinks like them, sees things as they do—or can do so. Ahmed says that “we inherit the reachability of some objects, those that are ‘given’ to us, or at least made available to us, within the ‘what’ that is around.”²² Common sense is what is reachable here, at least for Strunk and White. It's their common sense in their textual world to not include women and non-binary individuals in this way. Doing so is unreachable for them.

This White habit of language is also a version of what Ruth Frankenberg reveals in her studies of White women and their own complex and contradictory ways of understanding racism and their own Whiteness. Her study reveals how difficult it is for White women to recognize racist ideas and White supremacist orientations to the world, even when the person has expressed antiracist views. She quotes one of her participants in the study as saying, “Whiteness: a privilege enjoyed but not acknowledged, a reality lived in but unknown.”²³ I cannot think of a better way to identify the stance that Strunk and White take.

If you think I'm being too hard on Strunk and White, then consider their last sentence above about substituting “she” for “he.” It is a snarky, “I dare you,”

22 Ahmed, “Phenomenology,” 154. For an older but still significant discussion of Whiteness, see James Baldwin, “On Being White . . . And Other Lies,” *Essence*, April 1984, repr., Antiracism Digital Library, accessed January 15, 2020, <https://sacred.omeka.net/items/show/238>.

23 Ruth Frankenberg, “Growing up White: Feminism, Racism and the Social Geography of Childhood,” *Feminist Review*, no. 45, (Autumn 1993): 51, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1395347>. To see further evidence of the way White people have a hard time seeing the racism in their own attitudes and words, see, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*.

statement. It's what a bully would say. They are intentionally flexing their authoritative muscles, their power. If we accept that they have come to this language norm like everyone else, through the communities they practiced language in, then we must accept that there is no inherently correct English norm—no universal standard—since lots of contradictory norms are developed in communities for the same linguistic and rhetorical purposes. This then means that Strunk and White's parting shot illustrates just how well they understand the politics of language.

I'm not the only one who finds Strunk and White and the English language style guide tradition to be White supremacist. Laura Lisabeth, a Lecturer at State University of New York at Stony Brook, argues that the tradition of style guides in the U.S. was a part of a larger White supremacist project in which particular habits of language have been promoted and protected. She explains that style guides and etiquette handbooks started to become popular just after the Civil War and have continued through the twentieth century. All conceived of the English language as White property. Lisabeth connects Strunk and White to the more recent style guide by Benjamin Dreyer (mentioned previously). She explains: "Like E. B. White before him, Dreyer promotes a historically classed, racialized and gendered code, that of the privileged White man alert to dispossession, who patrols the boundaries of a White system of knowledge production."²⁴

You might feel that you can discount Strunk and White as two archaic authors of yore, ones we all can safely ignore today. But Strunk and White's guide is still the most popular one around. They are not ignored. According to the Open Syllabus Project's website, which gathers millions of syllabi from a range of college courses from across the country, Strunk and White's text is the most common textbook assigned of any kind of textbook—that's all courses, all disciplines.

As of this writing, it has 15,533 appearances in over seven million syllabi.²⁵ The next closest competitor of style guides is *On Writing Well: An Informal Guide to Writing Nonfiction*, by William K. Zinsser, with 2,925 appearances.²⁶ It's not even close. So Strunk and White's book is important because it embodies the structures that make standards of English in all kinds of classrooms and editorial offices. In many instances, it is the structure. The book, if read in the critical way

24 Laura Lisabeth, "White Fears of Dispossession: Dreyer's English, The Elements of Style, and the Racial Mapping of English Discourse," *Radical Teacher* 115, (2019): 22–23, <https://doi.org/10.5195/rt.2019.673>. For another critique of Strunk and White, see chapter 2 of Stanley Fish, *How to Write A Sentence and How to Read One* (New York: Harper, 2011).

25 See "Most Frequently Assigned Titles," Open Syllabus Project, accessed March 27, 2021, <https://opensyllabus.org/>.

26 Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference* (St. Martin's/Bedford, 1989) is referenced in 14,931 syllabi on the same website; however, Hacker's book is a grammar and writing reference book, not a style guide.

I have in this chapter, shows us the politics of language and its judgement that influence millions of people. It suggests why I, an avid reader from an early age, still had trouble with such standards in my college writing courses.

Also according to the Open Syllabus Project website as of this writing, considering all texts assigned in college syllabi, the first author of color doesn't show up until the 17th spot; that's Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter From the Birmingham Jail." But the list goes on with exclusively White authors of textbooks for math, anatomy, more grammar books, and history. The next author of color appears at number 40, Chinua Achebe. Paulo Freire shows up at 49. All three of the authors of color in the top 50 textbooks of syllabi are dead men. No women of color. No Asians of any kind. No Mexican. No Muslim. Just a sea of White authors. This is White language supremacy.

We don't escape our language history nor the past's White supremacist structures simply because we think we know better today or even because we haven't used Strunk and White to write in school. My point is, even if you haven't used the book, even if you didn't know about it, you have been judged by its standard. You are a product of Strunk and White's language habits as standards whether you know it or not.

Now today, the use of the plural pronoun "they" is mostly acceptable in writing.²⁷ No one bats their eye at its use. But don't let this inclusive change fool you. This practice isn't new to English; even Paul Brians acknowledges this, yet it's been debated for some time. The practice goes back at least to the 1500s CE. There are instances of singular-pronoun-they usage in Shakespeare, the Bible, among other English literature.²⁸ And Strunk and White ain't complaining about Shakespeare.²⁹ Why has it taken over 500 years to change the practice? Politics. No group willingly gives up power.

27 To read a good article on "they" pronoun use as inclusive practice, see "Does Traditional Grammar Matter When it Comes to Singular 'They' and 'Themselves'?" Thesaurus.com, accessed March 1, 2021, <https://www.thesaurus.com/e/grammar/they-is-a-singular-pronoun/>.

28 Wikipedia actually has a good page with several references to English uses of they as a singular pronoun. See Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, accessed March 1, 2021, s.v. "third-person pronoun," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_neutrality_in_languages_with_gendered_third-person_pronouns.

29 For example, in *The Comedy of Errors*, act IV, scene iii, Antipholus of Syracuse says, "There's not a man I meet but doth salute me / As if I were their well-acquainted friend;" and the eighteen stanza of his poem, "The Rape of Lucrece" contains "Now leaden slumber with life's strength doth fight; / And every one to rest themselves betake, / Save thieves, and cares, and troubled minds, that wake." There is a good argument for the grammatical correctness of the singular pronoun "they" at Geoffrey K. Pullum, "Shakespeare Used *They* with Singular Antecedents So There," *Language Log* (blog), January 5, 2016, <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languageblog/archives/002748.html>.

And in fact, the word didn't start as an English word. The pronoun "they" actually was not a part of Old or Middle English. Those languages did not have a third-person pronoun. Apparently back in the day, it was not a practice to reference a third person who was not named. Eventually, speakers found a need for this and began borrowing, among many other words, a third-person pronoun from a nearby source, Scandinavian.³⁰

Scholars have found a use of the word "they" in a homiletic poem from 1175 CE called *Ormulum* by a Scandinavian guy named Orm.³¹ This language borrowing came about likely because of several intersecting factors: geography, migration patterns of Scandinavian peoples, and likely the intermingling and marriages of Scandinavians with the Angles, Jutes, and Saxons inhabiting the British Isles at the time.

I offer this because it makes my point that language travels with people. In those travels, it changes, picks up other words and ways with existing words from various material conditions, all of which are uneven or inconsistent over large expanses of geographic space and time. Language is antsy, dynamic, and always in the act of becoming something new. Language standards, then, are seemingly antithetical to language norms. Standards are treated as static. Norms are understood to change.

Even Strunk and White acknowledge this and suggest that they are not guarding gates. They argue that good style in writing is individualistic and often breaks well established rules as well as works clearly inside of them. In their final pages of their last chapter, "An Approach to Style," they explain,

The language is perpetually in flux: it is a living stream, shifting, changing, receiving new strength from a thousand tributaries, losing old forms in the backwaters of time. To suggest that a young writer not swim in the main stream [sic] of this turbulence would be foolish indeed, and such is not the intent of these cautionary remarks. The intent is to suggest that in choosing between the formal and informal, the regular and the heretical, the beginner err on the side of conservatism, on the side of established usage. No idiom is taboo, no accent forbidden; there is simply a better chance of doing well if

30 To read about some of these language adoptions from Scandinavian to Old English, see David Crystal, *The Stories of English* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin Group, 2004), 73–76.

31 To read more about the English borrowing of "they" from Scandinavian, see Philip Durkin, "Middle English—An Overview," *OED Blog*, August 16, 2012, <https://public.oed.com/blog/middle-english-an-overview/>; OED.com., s.v. "they," updated September 2013, www.oed.com/view/Entry/200700.

the writer holds a steady course, enters the stream of English quietly, and does not thrash about.³²

Is this bad advice to a young writer? Is it wrong to say that English is like a living stream, constantly in flux? Of course not. This is, to my view and many others who study language, accurate. It's what the story of Orm illustrates. And yet, there is no better recipe for maintaining control of the standard that their language group set up than to ask new writers to err on the side of conservatism, err towards the *status quo*, to wade into the waters of the English language cautiously.

I say, splash around. Get drenched. Find out how far you can take your language, especially when you are learning it in school. Where is it safer to do so?

What Strunk and White might have included in their advice to younger writers is that these observations about English are paradoxical. They might have mentioned that such observations and advice reveal the politics of English and how it is judged in the world, that to err on the side of conservatism means to accept their authority and their language group's ways with words over perhaps your own. It means it can take 500 years to stop being exclusionary in pronoun practice. To shift or change the river of English in some way is to buck a power relationship with a dominant group of English users.

I don't think we should overly blame Strunk and White for contributing so greatly to White language supremacy. They too are fighting the stream of their lives with the English language they know. They are not evil racists. It's just that the current they swim in has always been in their favor, always taken them exactly where they wanted to go. So their advice makes perfect sense to them, and they've not had to think of anyone else's experience but their own. It's hard to hear language we are not used to hearing as anything but incomprehensible babble, or general and diffuse.

I do believe they are trying to help people be better communicators, but their ideas stated the way they are means they remain the experts. It means that if we use their book as a standard, we privilege the same privileged group's language that we always have and disadvantage everyone else's ways with words. It means that those not from material conditions that lead to using an East Coast, middle-to-upper-class, monolingual, IV (or Ivy) League English will be harmed, will not be heard as communicative, or smart, or coherent, or clear. They won't get the higher grades in school or the jobs in life. This also means you won't find a style guide from a Black author, or a Latine one, or an Asian or Indigenous author.³³

32 Strunk Jr. and White, 84.

33 Recently while visiting Indiana University, a participant in a faculty workshop I was leading gave me a reference to a grammar book written by an indigenous author of the Opaskwayak

THE TACIT LANGUAGE WAR

In my view, the systems in which we teach and judge English language amount to a tacit language war, one that most of us have already conceded because we've put up our hands and accepted the sole authority of people like Strunk and White, often out of necessity. I'm guilty of this in my life. My edition of Strunk and White comes from my college days. I, too, used it. It was my style guide bible for a time.

Is this language war a race war, or a class war, or a gender war played on the battlefield of language? Perhaps, but more likely, grammar and style guides taken as standards are just one battlefield in a larger war for White racial supremacy, one that arguably started in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with treatises and arguments for eugenics and White world supremacy written by people like Francis Galton, Karl Pearson, Lothrop Stoddard, and Hans Gunther.

Their arguments and logics are the same because their HOWling ends up producing in history the same results, White supremacy. All the while, no one today is consciously fighting language race battles, so the race war goes on. People get hurt. We, people of color, blame ourselves for being lazy, or stupid, or slow, or just not having "what it takes" to make it, to succeed.

Keep in mind: There are no bad people fighting good people in this war. We all think we are fighting on the good side, and from one view, we are, even those who, like Strunk and White, argue for clear and unambiguous universal standards of English. There is room for Strunk and White as a particular norm, but not as the standard of all good writing.

The actual war is against larger systems, structures, histories of norms taken as standards. It's a political war, a war of power. And again, this isn't an explicit war like Neo-Nazi or White Nationalist groups proclaim. This war is a tacit one, one that goes by other purposes and names, like a concern over the illiteracy of our youth or a push for standards in English language use, or anxieties about how our kids don't read enough good literature anymore, or how our nurses and other professionals need "good communication skills."

Cree Nation in Canada. Greg Younging, *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples* (Alberta, Canada: Brush Education, 2018). Younging was the managing editor at Theytus books, Assistant Director of Research for the Canadian government's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada, and Professor and Coordinator of the Indigenous Studies Program at the Irving K. Barber School of Arts and Sciences at the University of British Columbia, Okanagan. He died in 2019. The style guide offers several principles for publishing as or about Indigenous peoples but is non-directive in what it offers writers. And perhaps this is the kind of style guide that is preferable to the more directive, "how-to," kind that seem steeped in their Whiteness, which tend to assume the author's orientation to language is the best way to use language. This is not Younging's orientation in his noteworthy style guide.

One way to measure how this battle is fought is to consider who is enlisted in the fight and what are their dispositions in language. Who are the examples of good style and writing that are used in classrooms and style guides? Of the identifiable examples of external authors used by Strunk and White in their book, I count sixteen. Of those sixteen examples of good writing, fifteen are White men, one is a White woman, six are from the UK, and five are from the Northeast US.³⁴

Because authors who HOWL are used most of the time as examples of good writing, White language supremacy is maintained in this mostly invisible way. Usually this is done with no reference to race or to how historically those habits and features in the examples are associated with White racial formations in the US or Western English language traditions. No alternatives are offered, even as abstract ideas of language as a living stream with thousands of tributaries feeding it are given. Apparently, the tributaries only come from one direction, one kind of White place.

In that same final chapter cited previously, Strunk and White offer a comparison of two passages about “languor” from two very different White writers, Faulkner and Hemingway, two tributaries. They are demonstrating style as an individualistic feature of writing. They note that style can look and sound like a wide range of things. They say, “style not only reveals the spirit of the man but reveals his identity, as surely as would his fingerprints.” They explain that both authors use “ordinary” words and constructions that are not “eccentric.” I’ll put aside whether I or other contemporary readers would find such phrases like “supremely gutful lassitude of convalescence” or “mendicant” to be ordinary or not eccentric. Instead, listen to the way they explain these styles of writing: “Anyone acquainted with Faulkner or Hemingway will have recognized them in these passages and perceived which was which. How different are their languors!”³⁵

Apparently, Strunk and White are speaking to a certain class of people, a certain group who have had material conditions in their lives that have granted them an “acquaint[ance] with Faulkner or Hemingway.” Is that too presumptuous? What if someone has not read Faulkner or Hemingway? What if they cannot recognize the differences? What if they don’t see or hear differences in the two passages? It’s quite possible.

34 The identifiable authors and pages where I found them in Strunk Jr. and White’s *Elements* are Jean Stafford (21), Herbert Spencer (23), George Orwell (23), E. M. Forester (26), the Bible (26 and 59), William Wordsworth (37), John Keats (37), W. Somerset Maugham (60–1), Thomas Paine (67), Thomas Wolfe (67), William Faulkner (68), Ernest Hemingway (68), Walt Whitman (69), Robert Frost (69), William Allingham (73), and Wolcott Gibbs (83).

35 Strunk Jr. and White, 68.

From my experience, there ain't no Faulkner or Hemingway in the trailer park or in the ghetto.³⁶ This short explanation of the two quotations is all they offer. They move on, expecting that we, their readers, can follow their view, their reach of things. Again, they mistake their own sensibilities cultivated in their reading and conditions for larger, abstract rules about language and style in English that anyone can see and hear. They assume that a good writer will be able to recognize the differences in these two White male authors.

Strunk and White cannot notice that all of their book's examples are White men (except one, a White woman). I suppose it makes sense that they'd not see why there is a need for a gender inclusive third person pronoun. Their use of "he," as in their explanation of style, is really referring to men, like Faulkner, Hemingway, Strunk, and White. It's about *their* identity as White men, their habits of language. It's about *their White spirits*. And so when men like these get together and create a style guide like this one, this kind of obvious example is agreed upon. It's obvious and natural to them. And if you haven't read Faulkner or Hemingway, well, shame on you. You should.

And if you think that today there are more contemporary style guides that avoid most of these problems of unexamined Whiteness, uncritical elitism, and unconscious misogyny, you'd be wrong. They all follow a similar template. Why? No one escapes history or its influences on us. We don't leave our language habits, ideas about language, or notions of who can make the rules behind just because we openly claim to have a more egalitarian and fair society. The structures, the systems, already in place make us. The pull of people like Strunk and White is strong in the living stream of language, especially when too many people tread into the current carefully and their first impulse is not to make waves, especially when too many think we are just talking about how to be clear communicators, especially when we ignore the racial and gendered politics of language and its historical impulse to maintain White language supremacy.

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I'm sitting at my desk in the third grade, Mr. Hicks' class. We are taking a vocabulary test. A list of words is introduced on Monday. The practice test is on Wednesday, and the real one is on Friday. This is not a time that I enjoy. I have not done well on these spelling tests. I sit with my head down and look at the strip of paper that is four and a quarter inches wide, with twenty numbered lines on it running down the page, and a line at the top with "name" next to it. It's

36 I take this expression from a colleague of mine in graduate school at Washington State University, Dometa Weigand (now Dometa Brothers), who, when asked by a professor, "Have you no Latin?" replied, "There ain't no Latin in the trailer park."

the spelling test sheet. Every week, we do this dance. Usually, I might get one or two of the words spelled right on Wednesday, and I often double that number correct on Friday, but that's only four or six out of twenty words. I want so badly to break the halfway mark, get ten words right. That's still an F though.

I'm failing this part of the class. I know it. I see it. I don't know what to do. I do what Mr. Hicks tells us all to do. I write each word ten or twenty times. I read them over and over each day. Those things don't seem to help. The spellings seem to slip out of my mind as I try hard to hold on to the order of the letters. When I try to phonetically sound out words, I don't have better luck. I must be pronouncing them wrong.

I give up somewhere in the middle of the year, not with the trying but with the expectation of anything else but failure. I say, I'm not a good speller. Words are for speaking, hearing, and feeling. I don't pass one spelling test that year, and I am trying hard. It's on my mind a lot. It's why I can still remember the spelling tests. Still, despite all this, I love words.

This is early on the road, the academic road lined with my failure at words, a road that would get straighter and flatter later, but not for a while. At this point, it's got lots of rocks, branches, and twisted snags in it. It's not a road you can jog on easily. And in some places, you have to get down on all fours and crawl with blood on your hands and knees, pull sticks and twigs out of your hair, or pluck gravel out of the palms of your hands. Everyone around you tells you it's worth it, and you believe them—rather, you have to believe them, otherwise . . . You believe you can do it, make it farther, or further (whatever), down the road with a bit of your nana's amazing grace.

Things feel bleak that year, third grade. But as was the case in many points in my life, something wonderful happens. I find a smooth, level part in the road. At the time, I find a collection of books by Donald J. Sobol that I love, *Encyclopedia Brown*. They are books about a boy, Leroy Brown, so smart that they call him Encyclopedia Brown. His dad is the Idaville, Florida, Police Chief, and Encyclopedia Brown helps his dad solve crimes and mysteries. The books are written so that the reader can solve each mystery or crime along with Encyclopedia Brown. These are the first books I yearn for, savor as I read them.

The words seem much better than the spelling test words. They are more alive to me. They make me solve mysteries. I am the hero in these words. I am part of the telling of the story because I get to solve the mystery with Encyclopedia Brown. The words are incantatory, magical. I cannot wait each day to get back to the books. They make me feel like I felt as I read for the second grade reading contest, hungry for words, only this time I am not chasing a trophy, or first place, or validation from a teacher. I am chasing words themselves, words that make me something. I gobble them up each afternoon after school, reading

out loud as I walk home away from school with its White rules for spelling and language, and judged numerically on thin, white sheets of paper.

But these words in these books are medicine for the cuts and scrapes caused by spelling tests at school and by teachers who misunderstand me. I swallow spoonfuls of vowels and consonants daily; soon it's ladles, then buckets. I start to feel better on the way home back to Statz. The cuts and bruises of the road begin to heal. I feel I can walk, continue along the road. I walk away from school, homeward, toward real language, soft sweater language, reading along the way about a smart kid, Encyclopedia Brown, who makes a difference in his town, a boy who can't be put down.

I think: Leroy Brown, you gotta be ghetto. You ain't White. Wit that name? C'mon. The cover and pictures make him look White. And I guess he talks that way in the book. Still in those moments walking home and reading, I want so badly to be a smart Brown kid, not a spelling flunky. I wanta be Leroy Brown. Somehow both Brown and White. That cat solves crimes. People like him. He got a dad, and nat dad listen to him. They partners. I know I can do that. It's just all this school shit, the language of school, White teachers and they White rules and White language that come from they White world. Imma play both parts. Imma be Brown and White. So I put the darker language of Statz in a closet in my mind and lock it. I tell myself: Imma —no—I'm *gonna* be Encyclopedia Brown. I'm gonna make a difference in my town. No one can put me down.