

## CHAPTER 7.

# A LANGUAGELING OF COLOR

During the first half of the third grade, I idolized my White teacher, Mr. Hicks. He was kind to me. He'd pull me aside on days we had a party, like the Halloween party, and ask me, "We should make sure this candy is okay?" He talked like that, in questions that were statements. Then we'd eat a few pieces while everyone was at recess. I don't know why he was kind to me during the first half of that year. Maybe he saw something about me that seemed like I needed it. Maybe he did this for everyone. But I don't think so.

Looking back now, I can see how I was searching for a father figure, a male role model. Mr. Hicks was the first man I really knew in my life. My biological father was gone. I never knew him. My mom was raising my brother and me alone. The rest of my teachers and the grownups in my life were all women. Maybe Mr. Hicks sensed this absence in my life.

So, when Mr. Hicks found a drawing of what was supposed to be him that was not flattering and that had scrawled on it bad names and swear words, all naming him, he turned on me. My mom was called in for a parent-teacher conference. She asked me, "Son, did you do this?" I told her what I told Mr. Hicks earlier. No, I didn't do that. I wouldn't. It's not my picture. I knew who did it, because I saw him do it the day before, then shove it in my desk. I don't know why I didn't take it out or tell Mr. Hicks when it happened. Perhaps it was because it was the end of the day. We were leaving school. Maybe I didn't think it was that big of a deal or that Mr. Hicks would find it.

What I remember most vividly about the parent-teacher conference, the grilling and questions, was my mom's thumb on the picture and the swear words underneath it. I kept saying, I didn't do it. I didn't do that. It's not my paper. It's not mine! That isn't me! I remember the feeling of helpless misunderstanding, of neither of them really believing me or my words, that those were not my words. It felt like a pool of mud rising all around me that I could do nothing about. All I could do was watch the mud rise. I wasn't sinking into it. It was enveloping me, expanding around me, constricting me, holding me tight and still, getting higher and higher until I wasn't sure I could breathe. All the while, my mom's beautiful, delicate thumb was on that picture.

Eventually, I just stopped trying to convince them. I could see it didn't matter what I said. My words didn't seem to matter. It was those words on the page that mattered, someone else's words that were not mine and that now mattered because they were in my desk. It didn't seem possible that maybe some other kid,

a White kid, could have put them there, that this act didn't seem to be like what I was like, or did it?

They had already figured me out, and these were the grownups who were most on my side, the ones I loved most. What I was coming to understand, even as a third grade boy, was that words matter. It matters who others think said them. And these things are not always agreed upon by all parties. Surely, the White kid who actually did this bad thing couldn't have done it. It is more likely that the Brown kid without a father did it. It's more likely, isn't it? Isn't it? I looked like I did it, at least to Mr. Hicks.

I wish I could remember how my mom responded, whether she defended me or pleaded with Mr. Hicks, or whether she said something like, "I cannot believe that my son would do this thing. He did not do it. I'm sure of it." But I don't recall. Some people get to have more power to decide what the important words are, what they mean, and who is responsible for them. What I was coming to understand was the politics of the English language. I was coming to understand that race matters to language. We are always talking about race by not talking about it.

## LEARNING TO READ LIKE A WOMAN

I grew up in rooms filled with White women. Almost every significant learning experience I can remember from my childhood until deep into college—regardless of what it entailed, where I was, or what I learned—was an experience that involved a White woman, my mom, my aunt, my nana, a teacher, my first girlfriend. I had few significant exchanges directly with men through high school and none with a man of color. White men made me nervous, and men of color were a mystery. They were absent. I did not understand men. They were big, loud, brusque, and threatening to me.

So it should be no surprise that I associated the act of reading with the women in my life. Most of my teachers were women. All of my caregivers and family members who watched over me and taught me how to be me were women. I can recall many Saturday afternoons sitting on the floor in my mom's room in our trailer. I was maybe twelve years old. She would be lying on her bed, still in her nightgown, reading harlequin romance novels, a box of them at the foot of her bed. She would pick up a dozen of them at the library or go to used book stores or Goodwill and get a box of them for a few bucks, read them all in a weekend, then return them for cash back and do it again the next week. It was likely my mom's escape from our life. But I knew she loved reading and was good at it.

I would watch her read and eventually snuggle up to her, feeling the safety of her warmth. The rest of our life and the world would melt away lying next to

her. No more bills that could not be paid. No mean neighbors. No cockroaches. Just my mom reading, warmth, and softness. I liked to watch her read, her green-hazel eyes moving quickly back and forth across the pages, her delicate, graceful fingers turning page after page.

My mom's hands have always been beautiful. They are lean, graceful, and delicate. They have just the right amount of muscle over bone. Even her wrinkles in her older age are few and supple. These are the hands that loved me, fed me, took care of me. So even the sound of her turning the page with her delicate fingers soothed me. To this day, I love the sound of a page being separated from the one behind it and turned with a soft crinkle.

I thought my mom was superhuman in her ability to read so quickly. She didn't even move her mouth. Today I still find myself mouthing words I read or write. I compose and read most everything out loud, even emails. I cannot help it. Reading just doesn't feel right if I don't feel the words being pushed by my tongue, sliding across my lips and out of my mouth. I need to feel and hear words in the air as much as I need to see them in front of me in order to conjure meaning.

As a languageling, words have always been a multi-sensual experience for me. They are auditory and tactile. Tactile. Now, that's a word that feels like its meaning when I say it, TAC-TILE. It's an onomatopoeia to me, which is another word that feels good in my mouth. ONO-MATO-POEIA. Words are vocal, visual, and even vibrational to me. Many words I can feel vibrating places in my head, face, ears, chest, or throat. Have you ever felt a word vibrate one of your sinus cavities, those open places hidden under your cheeks or in your forehead?

The word, "nana" does this for me. Nana. It means love, and warm hugs, and gifts, and smiles, and false teeth in a glass by her bed. It means being rocked in a green chair to the sounds of "Amazing Grace." It's like a soft, heavy, cool quilt, like the kind my nana made. Words have many dimensions for me.

Today, I realize that my mom just had a different relationship to words than I did. Her story of literacy is different from mine. And yet, hers helped me make mine.

"How long does it take you to read a book, mom?" I asked her.

"It depends on the book. This one? Maybe a couple of hours," mom said in a soft, gentle voice, one that still soothes me today. She doesn't even look up from her book.

"A whole book in a few hours?" I'm shocked. It takes me weeks to finish a book.

"They're just stories, son." A soft crinkle, turn. She doesn't say it with sarcasm. That's not my mom's way. She says that sentence with tenderness and nonchalance.

Just stories? There is no such thing as *just a story*, I think. For my mom, it seemed words were to be devoured, not chewed and carefully digested. At this moment in my life, I was discovering Greek and Norse mythologies, stories about gods and heroes, stories that made worlds. I loved the story of Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*. Our school library had a retelling of the epic poem in story form for kids my age. It was illustrated. I loved it, loved all the adventures, all the monsters. I loved that Odysseus was clever, that he outwitted his opponents with his mind, not muscles. I loved that it was a series of adventures in different places.

Later in college, I would learn in one of my English courses that this is an important element of his character. He is wily and doesn't give up. He is the only significant character of the Trojan War who survives and makes it home, even if it took him ten years to get home after spending the previous ten years at war—twenty years away from home! Talk about persistence and grit!

To survive and thrive in the world, it is not usually, nor even mostly, about how strong you are, I learned. If you want to make it home, you don't want to be an Achilles or a Hector. They die because all they have are their muscles and their masculine brutishness. There is always someone stronger or younger than you. That isn't a game most will win most of the time. Hanging your hopes on being the strongest or fastest or some other -est is foolish. Instead, you want to be an Odysseus, clever and wily enough to get home. You want to use your words to gain advantage, survive, and thrive. This was one of my first literacy lessons.

Around this time, I was also reading science fiction and fantasy novels. This is when I learned about Asimov, Clark, Heinlein, Brooks, Tolkien, Bradbury, Lewis, and a few years later, Zimmer Bradley and Le Guin. In my foolish youth, I didn't even realize that Bradley and Le Guin were women. I thought fiction like the kind I couldn't get enough of was written solely by men. I could not escape the chauvinism or masculine biases that travelled with my reading, even as I read in rooms filled with women.

And I'm sure I was a product of my patriarchal culture, one that could not let a boy like me imagine that some of his favorite storytellers were women. This would seem to be an irony given that I mostly related to women, felt most comfortable around them, not men. But it is not ironic if you consider the male-dominated material conditions in which young boys in the US in the 1980s got their literacy, a world with male role models like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, men of action, men who solved their problems through brute strength, men like Hector and Achilles, not Odysseus. And so, tensions existed for me.

Reading was understood to be a girl's activity. It was inactive, passive. It was a leisure activity, one that required no muscles. It wasn't macho to be smart or to read. Sports were what I was supposed to like, and I did like them, especially football. Reading and writing were girls' activities, weren't they? And yet, I thought

only men could write good stories. I wanted to write stories too, but I wanted to be a man as well. The world didn't seem big enough for a man who loved words, a male languageing who enjoyed the indoors and questions and football.

I was also just a year away from discovering the ultimate storytelling, language game, D&D, and that would change my literacy practices dramatically. It would combine words with action, language as adventure. Even at this earlier moment in my life, I knew a story was not just a story. The singular importance of words was always apparent to me, always. Stories made things. Our stories make us, as the native scholar Tomas King has said so eloquently.<sup>1</sup>

I got my mom's meaning in her casual reply to me, though. My mom meant that she didn't have to think too hard about her books, that what there was to get out of them was mostly apparent in the reading itself, not in the thinking about them afterwards. She didn't want to think in this reading moment. She simply wanted to revel in the story unfolding in front of her. For her at that moment, the point was the labor of reading itself. And this was the first gift of literacy she gave me, the gift of appreciating the labor of reading, the practice of it, of noticing how much fun and engaging it is as you do it. This I could hold on to.

For my mom, her reading labor was her break from all the thinking she had to do in the bank, a male-dominated world that never appreciated her in any real way. In all her years as an underpaid bank teller, my mom never got a raise nor a promotion; instead, she watched as younger, less experienced men did. Consequently, she was also a janitor and even delivered papers in the early mornings so we might have some school clothes or just rent.

My mom had to be an Odysseus in a world of men-monsters. No, that's not accurate. She was a Penelope, Odysseus' wife, waiting all those years faithfully for her husband to return. But that's not what makes my mom a Penelope. Penelope had to be wily and persistent herself, had to be smarter than all the men-monsters around her trying to marry her and take over her kingdom. She had to weave a burial shroud for Odysseus' father each day, then unravel it at night in order to keep doing it to avoid having to pick a suitor. It was a trick to stave off the suitors.

Penelope was a master trickster. She had to take care of the kingdom while her husband was away. She kept shit moving for 20 years, kept everything running and working, making "ends-meat" for her son Telemachus and her kingdom. Penelope was perhaps more wily and crafty than Odysseus himself. She had to do everything he did but do it with less social and cultural power. She had to do it as a woman in a man's world. She was the real fucking hero in that story. Odysseus doesn't get his belated happily-ever-after without her 20 years of hard, wily work. Thank you, Penelope.

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1 King, *Truth*, 2.

Ironically, much of my mom's wily ways and sacrifices were done to nourish and support me, a potential man-monster myself. I do not want to be a man-monster who makes only demands and underappreciates the women in his life, the women who make his life possible, who love and cherish him, who sacrifice for him, who deserve their own stories. To be a man-monster would insult the love and labors my mom gave me. So, for my mom, this reading time was not a time to think, but a time in the week when she could take the luxury not to think about being clever, or how to get home in one piece to her family, or how to both weave and unravel her own funeral shroud in order to stave off the man-monsters in her life. It was a time just to read for reading's sake.

For me, however, there was always thinking after reading. Words usually beget thinking, questions, ideas. As a languageling, I need and thrive on language. I am made of it. Often, it is all I can see or hear or feel. Language. Words. Everywhere. This is my male privilege, a privilege bestowed upon me in part by my mom and her wily ways. I get to feel words around me without having to worry about all those man-monsters. I'm grateful to stand on my mom's shoulders.

## HUSTLING AND LOOKING FOR DAD

At this time in my life, I was not old enough to get a job. Paper routes, which paid good money, were hard to come by. So I hustled. Most of the time, I would sell my free or reduced price lunch tickets at school and not eat lunch. After a week, I might have five or even ten dollars saved. This is how I paid for books that would come each month through my fantasy and science fiction book club membership. I literally starved myself for books.

At a time when food was still a bit scarce in my life, I exchanged eating for reading. That's how important reading was to me. I could survive on language. Without constantly being fed words, I knew I'd die. But the book club was a scam, really. Each month, I'd select the books I liked, then the next month they'd mail them to me for free. If I liked them, then I paid for them. If not, just return them. No charge. Of course, it is harder to return a book once you've received it. It's more hassle. So I ended up with many books I didn't want. The next year, when we discovered D&D, well, that's what I spent my extra money on.

Of course, there were more paradoxes. Despite the fact that White women taught me almost everything of consequence in my early life and that I associated them closely with school, reading, and even my own literacy, I cannot recall a time in my life when I didn't yearn deep down for a male role model, for a man in my life whom I could look up to, a father figure to emulate, someone to tell me how to act and feel, how to be in the world. I did not get to have this.

So if my mom was Penelope, the struggling but crafty single parent, I was Telemachus, the boy who spent the first four books of the *Odyssey* searching for his father. I never knew my biological dad, and my mom purposefully stayed away from relationships until I was almost into high school—more of my mom being the Penelope.

At that time, my mom married a White, working-class diesel mechanic from New Jersey with flaming red hair, a former Navy mechanic, a good, hard-working man, a man I loved, who died of cancer this past year. They were married for over 35 years. His name was Bill Peterson. He had worked full time since he was 14 years old, mostly to escape an abusive father of his own. Later, because he and my mom needed money, he spent several years as a civilian diesel mechanic in Iraq and Afghanistan working with the U.S. Army. He was close to the fighting and came home with PTSD. For years afterwards, he had difficulty sleeping, had nightmares. It was the shelling and explosions that did it.

Bill was loving and kind with a deep sense of duty to his family, and he had his own problems, too. But he was good to my mom, and we all miss him. But Bill came at the tail end of an important part of my literacy story. I was already a languageing in the ways that would matter. I couldn't call him dad or father, even though he was that to me. I called him Bill because I didn't know how to relate to men or to a patriarch.

I wish I could have called him dad just once to his face. I wish I could have told him that he was all I really needed in a father, that I was young, and stupid, and ignorant, and so interested in not being poor or even working class that I couldn't see his divinity much of the time. I wish I could have told him that I didn't know how to relate to men until it was too late for us. I was too interested in what I thought literacy would give me and make me into, so I often turned away from my own working-class roots and him, who was the epitome of that.

I turned to visions of who I thought I wanted to be, my mom's sister's husband. I idolized this man because he was not working class. My uncle Bill was a college professor at Oregon State University, the only university I applied to and eventually graduated from. Uncle Bill was my only model for what a college graduate and successful man was. I idolized him throughout my childhood and into college.

He was a microbiology professor, seemed to know everything, worked in labs, and travelled all over the world. People asked him for his advice. He was exotic, successful, rich, and smart. He made important decisions. He took his family to faraway places, New Zealand, Florida. He drove a Jaguar and a Cadillac. He lived in a two-story house on a hill outside of Corvallis, Oregon. He was White and upper middle class. He was everything I wanted to be and everything I knew I'd never become.

For several years, he came to Vegas for conventions, I think. When he visited the first time, he gave my brother and me each a dollar bill. We called them our “Uncle Bill dollars.” Putting aside the fact that we rarely ever had as much as a dollar in our pockets, having such a thing given to us was an amazing and extravagant occurrence. That dollar was valuable in a number of ways. We saved that dollar in our wallets for the entire year until Uncle Bill came back the next year and gave us a new one. We were seven and eight years old.

There are lessons in those dollar bills, I know it. And if I could give my own sons one gift, it would be to know the feeling of possessing an Uncle Bill dollar, saving it for twelve months, even as you want so badly to spend it. However, my sons have grown up in a home with more privilege and money than I did. I’ve been lucky enough to give that to them. And yet, I’m to blame for their inability to see the value in such consequential things. Still, I would not trade it for the poverty that revealed the lessons in those Uncle Bill dollars. More paradox. I cannot give my sons this gift of delayed satisfaction or the value of a single bill. I’m lucky I had two Bills in my life. My sons will have their own lessons to learn and share, their own Bills, perhaps.

Uncle Bill was special to me. He was the vision of prosperity. I associated college and the language of school and books with my uncle’s success, with that kind of manhood, with being a professor in a university, with exotic adventures in faraway places, with being smart and rich, getting out of poverty, having the means to give others a dollar for shits and giggles. These were the things that I wanted for myself, the things I thought delivered people. These were the signs of thriving. Even Odysseus was a king.

What I wanted was to be White in the ways Uncle Bill was. This meant that I didn’t want to be White in the ways that my mom’s husband was, the other Bill, the one man who was really the only dad I’ve known. It was a form of colonizing that I did to myself, but it was the only option I could see in the ghetto of my youth. Classrooms and books presented this to me. It’s the rules of the racist, sexist, and classist game. You don’t strive to be a diesel mechanic who travels around the world to dangerous places. You strive to be a college professor who travels around the world to exotic places. Now, I’m not sure I see the differences.

I would not be able to admit this until I was in graduate school at Oregon State University getting my master’s degree and writing a thesis on identity and race. I had been searching for a male role model my entire life. I was a Telemachus without realizing it. I felt unmoored, like if a strong current came along, I’d be taken out to sea, lost, wrecked on the rocks. All the loving and caring women in my life simply could not save me. They could all be standing on the sandy shore calling to me, but I would be in my dinghy looking the other direction



with my hand shielding the sun from my eyes, scanning the far horizon, hoping to see a glimpse of a ship called dad.

My master's degree at OSU was a time of deep reflection and problem-posing for me, a time of discovering myself as a languageing and becoming more self-aware of my own insecurities and needs. It was also the first time I had a significant male role model in my life who shared the same passion for language that I had. He was my thesis director, Chris Anderson.

Chris was the director of composition, so he was also the first person to teach me how to be a writing teacher. This was at a moment when he was training to be an ordained deacon in the Catholic church. He was White with working-class roots from Eastern Washington. Chris was not what I thought an English professor was supposed to be like. He was self-effacing and unassuming. He was gentle, kind, and encouraging as a teacher, rarely lectured; instead, he would ask us to write, and write with us. We would read our words, and Chris would engage us by speaking in soft, almost quiet tones, yet with lots of authority. Sometimes, he'd even curse, say "fuck" and "shit," not a lot, but enough to show us that he was real and not stuffy or prudish. I admired everything about him, especially his writing. I had read his beautiful book on living near the McDonald-Dunn forest in Oregon, called *Edge Effects: Notes from an Oregon Forest*. It was what I thought I wanted to do, too. It was a book about him, about a managed forest, and writing. In some ways, this book you're reading now is a reflection of him and that book.

The book's discussion of writing as a forest still strikes me as an appropriate way to understand my own literacy experiences, my life with words, and the words that have made my life. Near the end of the book, Chris writes:

Essays grow from careless seeds, from the varieties of life, slowly accreting, nourished by the matter stored in the mind, and gradually, intuitively, expand into flowers and fruit—or grow up into the canopy, their crowns bristling like imperfect bottle brushes. All the dead and dying ideas, all the ideas abandoned or modified in the course of the writing, are left lying on the page, not revised away, the tentative conclusions rising up from that previous thinking. The levels are there. Gaps open.<sup>2</sup>

In one sense, this literacy narrative, this book in your hands (or on your screen), is a collection of careless seeds sown, the imperfect flowers and fruit of my literacy life, fed by my life's material conditions, by the many forests of my

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<sup>2</sup> Chris Anderson, *Edge Effects: Notes from an Oregon Forest* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), 160.

youth that have nourished this made-forest in front of you. The flowers and fruit here have been fertilized by my poverty and want, by a second grade reading contest and racist words thrown, and fists shaken in my direction, and my mom's beautiful hands, and her fast moving hazel eyes. And in the act of putting these words down about my literacy journey, I have gradually urged them into something that may be meaningful to you, even though they have always been meaning-filled to me. These words are magic and forest.

Literacy as forest, as ecosystem. Literacy as an organic organism. I like Chris' metaphor and how he offers it in a generous way in the book. It is so like him in real life. It does not feel masculine to me, not in the toxic ways that I felt uncomfortable with growing up or that I embraced as a young man. But maybe I read his words in this way because by the time I'd read Chris's book, I already knew the author. He was my professor. I was his graduate student. I could hear his real voice, soft, gentle, speaking these words in a generous fashion.

This did not feel like language from the working-class, White men I knew growing up, not the mean ones who accused you of things you didn't do, the racist ones, the ones with shaking fists, the ones who would hurt you with their words or hands. It wasn't like the ones yelling, "Go back to where you came from, you fucking Wetback!" This was a more feminine voice. It felt like my mom's hands, soft, warm, offering me tentative questions and turned pages. It was like Nana's "Amazing Grace," soft sweater language. Chris' voice asked me about myself, language that begs language. The book read like an invitation to write, and I did.

The summer I read the book, I wrote Chris a letter, thanking him for writing such a beautiful book. I told him in the letter that the book made me want to write, that his words invited me to my own page. I sealed the letter, put a stamp on it, and mailed it. I don't know why I started doing this, writing to authors I admired or found wonderful. This was the first of many letters I'd write over the next 25 years.

It is a custom that I enjoy mostly because I know as an author the value of words given to others. I know that when you put down words on a page, little pieces of yourself, proclaiming yourself as a languageling, then send those words out into the world, what you really want is for others to read them and respond in some meaningful way. You hope they smile, or laugh, or feel that deep moving sense of goodness in their bellies when they read your words. Or maybe you hope they get excited and move to some action. Maybe you hope they change their minds or the world.

Words given are rarely a one-way exchange. And giving thanks to someone for their words is a deeply joyful act that can complete the exchange, showing the writer that there is a willing receiver who is changed. You give joy to the author, and you get it as a giver. I like doing this because I think of my wife and

partner Kelly, my mom, and her sister—my Aunt Sue, all deeply giving White women. Their lives have been filled with days of giving to those around them. I have received much of that giving. Their words have fertilized my literacy forest, and I am so grateful that I can sacrifice a few in their honor.

And maybe this is what I love about that metaphor of a forest as literacy. Forests give us much. From my vantage, forests are the picture of living compassion. Usually, we humans only take from forests, take their trees and their inhabitants, which we call lumber or food. Conversely, forests give fresh air, and green beauty, and clean waters freely. They ask for nothing but time and place, perhaps some respect.

As ecosystems, they are incredible generators of life on the planet, necessary, vital. They are creative places. But walk in one for a spell, and it can feel as if you are the only one left in the world. There is a quiet, low vibration in a forest that when I pay attention, I can feel. It wakes me up and calms me down at the same time. Maybe it's the seeming absence of life in a place so filled with it, or maybe it is the silence, the slowing down, the stillness. Some, like Chris, might call it its sacredness.

## INESCAPABLE WHITENESS IN OUR LANGUAGE

And yet, I have misgivings about Chris' words now, 27 years later. His language habits are those of a Western, Whately, masculine voice in many respects, a voice that has hurt me and my students of color, and paradoxically, a voice I know I have taken on to some degree. If a reader isn't careful, the "I" in Chris' words can sound like a universal "I," like an objective "I" who makes sense of the world as if there is but one sense to make. His exposition often proclaims from nowhere, objectively, as if he is not *subjectively making* that sense from his unique position in the world, constructing, picking and choosing details that he is uniquely qualified to find from a universe of other details.

I'm being unfair to him. I know Chris does not believe this—he certainly does not live or teach in ways that suggest it—but his language habits betray this intention. That's how White language supremacy works in systems that make it almost exclusively. We all live in paradox. Chris is no different.

Chris draws on the traditions of Michel Montaigne and Henry David Thoreau, White, male writers who proclaimed the subjectivity of their ideas in contradictory ways. Thoreau begins *Walden* with, "I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body [sic] else whom I knew as well."<sup>3</sup> But he doesn't

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3 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government*, 2nd ed., ed. William Rossi (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 1.

speak just about himself. Thoreau offers universal truths from his experience, even if qualified. He says, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” and “while civilization has been improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them.”<sup>4</sup> Thoreau acknowledges his subjectivity only to continually take on an authoritarian and objective sounding stance, making claims as if we all believed them already, as if they were self-evident. Nothing can be self-evident inherently, can it?

Don't get me wrong, I love Thoreau. He's taught me much. But Thoreau and Montaigne are White, European men of considerable means. Montaigne was a Lord, born on his family's estate in the south of France. Thoreau was born in a more modest family from Concord, Massachusetts, but a family who had relatives who also, like him, graduated from Harvard. Chris comes from a masculine, White, European literary tradition, but we all do if we've been trained in U.S. schools and colleges. I don't blame Chris for his training, but we must pay attention to the effects of our languaging and where it comes from, especially because we all, no matter who we are, teach others language in our daily exchanges. What do I have in common with Thoreau or Montaigne? If I am to take something from their words, it likely needs to be extracted with tweezers, not dug up with a shovel.

Donna Haraway, a White, feminist scholar researching science and technology, calls this kind of orientation to the world a “god trick,” or the trick of “infinite vision” where one's vision of the world and science is disembodied, or ignores the embodied and situated nature of all knowledges.<sup>5</sup> It presumes we can know things from a perspective outside of our gendered and racialized bodies that manufacture that very knowledge. For writers, it is a stance of supposed neutrality, objectivity, and apoliticality that then produces objective knowledge from only one's own experiences. These experiences are recollected from inside the writer. It's also the habit of hyperindividualism that extracts universal truths for everyone. Haraway, however, counters this objective knowledge with “situated knowledges,” an orientation to the world that remains embodied in people and their material conditions that make that knowledge possible.<sup>6</sup>

Like many places in Chris' *Edge Effects*, the above exposition also assumes that the reader is in the same proximity to the details and ideas that the writer, Chris, is. This orientation is similar to the proximity assumed by E. B. White, who mastered the stance well in his essays for the *New Yorker*. That stance is a Whitely stance that not only assumes that any knowledge can be discerned

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4 Thoreau, 5, 23.

5 Haraway, “Situated,” 581.

6 Haraway, 579.

through one's hyperindividualistic experiences in the world but that all readers have the same access or proximity to that knowledge or world, an unseen, naturalized, universal orientation to the world.

Drawing on Franz Fanon, an influential French West Indian scholar of color from Martinique, Sarah Ahmed offers a compelling way to understand the phenomenology of Whiteness as an assumed universal orientation to the world that is made by its own proximity to things, ideas, people, and places. Whiteness in this way is inherited, an inheritance of proximity. It comes from our access to things around us, language, people, spaces, money. Ahmed is worth quoting at length to explain this:

Such an inheritance can be re-thought in terms of orientations: 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. I am not suggesting here that "Whiteness" is one such "reachable object", but that Whiteness is an orientation that puts certain things within reach. By objects, we would include not just physical objects, but also styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, habits. Race becomes, in this model, a question of what is within reach, what is available to perceive and to do "things" with.<sup>7</sup>

But this is what academics are supposed to do, right? Professors are trained and required to profess and offer knowledge to the world, aren't we? We can reach certain ideas and things, which we then offer to those who cannot. It's what I'm doing in this book, isn't it? But am I being paternalistic? Am I being snobby in the way Strunk and White seemed to be? Do I acknowledge the multiple ways that knowledge exists and gets created in the world? Or am I just professing so-called universal truths? Ahmed warns us to be careful that we do not assume that our proximity to things, to habits of language, for instance, are assumed to be universally reachable by all. We should be careful of our HOWLing.

Chris' habits of language were very attractive to me as I entered graduate school. I tried hard to emulate them in those early years, some of which I've kept. I like these habits of White language. Just as Chris sounded both masculine and feminine to me, I have HOWLs myself that make these same moves, but I also have habits that ain't so fuckin' White nor classy. And I ain't never been mistaken for a White person, White writer, White teacher, or White academic.

In fact, even today, I get wounded by racialized slights that colleagues slide into our conversations. Some call these slights microaggressions, but if I'm being

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7 Sara Ahmed, "Phenomenology," 154.

honest, they don't feel micro. Most do not mean anything malicious or racist, but they cannot see through their own Whiteness to stop doing them. They cannot see that their own proximity to things, to words, is not universal nor should it be. Besides, "not meaning to" don't make it hurt any less.

Recently, I was in a meeting with a colleague who holds the same position I do, an associate dean of another college at the university where I work. She was probably ten years older than me. She is White, travels abroad every year to exotic places, with pictures and mementos on the walls of her clean and neat office, pictures of Greece. She tells me about a few of her trips to Athens. I tell her about my trip to Greece, how Kelly and I worried about a member of our touring group, a young woman who hadn't brought any sunscreen to Delphi. She wore a thin shoulderless top, no hat. She was very pale. She was gonna get sunburned that day. We gave her our sunscreen. I said, "She was young, maybe late 20s," suggesting that she was just being young, not thinking ahead.

And with a chuckle, my colleague says to me, "You're not *that* much older than her." I brushed it off with a laugh. I didn't want to have to explain to her that I'm almost twice that young woman's age, that I could be her father, that I have a son who is almost her age. When the hell I do get to be respected for my years on the planet? This isn't an isolated incident. It happens all the time, the small comments about my youthfulness or being mistaken for a college student.

A White, male colleague who is my junior in every way, from age, to rank in the institution, to position, in passing tells me casually, "You're young; you've got lots of energy." The implication is that I'll learn what he knows already. I've got the time and energy. I know these White people would not say these things to White colleagues. Their memberships give them more respect than that, more respect for a colleague (a superior even) than to brush away years of experience and wisdom with a clause that begins a diatribe on what he is doing in his academic unit, Whitesplaining to me about shit I've been doing for two decades.

I know this seems like it's about age, not race. But how do you separate those two things? Our perceptions of age are connected to racialized bodies in time and space that each of us are in contact with. Aging and its markers are not separate, or separable from, the gendered and raced bodies that age around us. Aging never happens in the abstract. It is often a Whiteness orientation to the world, an assumption of a universal proximity to the markers of age. It's assuming that all people age like White people do. The sayings like "Black don't crack" and "Asians don't raisin" refer to the ways many African Americans and Asians seem to age well and not have many of the hard age lines as they get older that mark older White folks.

Some dermatologists and scientists have attributed this phenomenon to the increased amounts of collagen and melanin in the skin of people of color.<sup>8</sup> Melanin protects the skin from UV damage. Collagen keeps it firm. Furthermore, a longitudinal study by Rutgers Medical School showed that many African Americans have denser facial bones, which can help maintain facial structure longer in life.<sup>9</sup> This means that older Black people can look more like their younger selves longer because their facial structures stay the same longer than White people's can generally. My doctors and dentists have told me for years, "You have such dense bones. Your jaw is very dense. You are a good candidate for the tooth implant. There's plenty of bone to anchor the titanium screw to."

Using a White racial standard for beauty and age is no different than using a White racial linguistic standard for everyone's languageing. We are all languageings. We are all racialized. We also all live in systems that have an orientation to the world that uses an unspoken White standard for age or language as universal ones. This means those systems often take Whiteness as objective, neutral, and universal. "You look young" is relative to what youth looks like, to a White, European standard assumed in the statement.

And what youth looks like is tangled in the physiological markers associated with race and gender. It only seems that I'm being paid a compliment, but that compliment comes at the cost of disrespecting my years and ignoring the wisdom that goes with them. I get infantilized. And again, I feel like the little Brown boy who must go to his special reading classroom. One day I'll grow up or catch up with the others.

This false universal White orientation to the world has other aspects to it, all of which have hurt me as a languageing of color in rooms filled with White languageings. Several years ago while I was the director of university writing at the University of Washington Tacoma, I was in a meeting about student success. I was the only person of color in the room, which was typical. Despite the fact

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8 To read about how melanin and collagen affect the aging of skin, see Charlie Brinkhurst-Cuff, "A Dermatologist Explains the Science Behind the 'Black Don't Crack' Stereotype," VICE, February 19, 2016, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/mgmzva/a-dermatologist-explains-the-science-behind-the-black-dont-crack-stereotype>; or Soo Youn, "Black Don't Crack? Asian Don't Raisin?: The Truth Behind the Clichés," AARP, October 23, 2017, <https://www.aarp.org/disrupt-aging/stories/ideas/info-2017/cliches-that-are-true.html>. To read about the unfair pressures this stereotype places on African American people, see Patia Braithwaite, "'Black Don't Crack' Is Stressing Me Out," Refinery29, August 7, 2019), <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/black-woman-aging-black-dont-crack>.

9 David Buziashvili, Jacob I. Tower, Neel R. Sangal, Aakash M. Shah, and Boris Paskhover, "Long-Term Patterns of Age-Related Facial Bone Loss in Black Individuals," *JAMA: Facial Plastic Surgery* 21, no. 4 (2019): 292–297, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamafacial.2019.0028>.

that at the time most of the students on that campus were students of color, there were few, very few, faculty or administrators of color there.

I suggested that we might gather data on the racial identities of student respondents to a survey we were discussing. We might add a few questions about the racial climate in classrooms. We might even ask about Whiteness, about students' perceptions of it on campus. I brought up the fact that in classrooms with White teachers, many students of color who have travelled through classrooms with mostly or all White teachers may find it difficult to confide in the well intentioned White, liberal college teacher in front of them. Racial trauma follows you. The survey could be a good opportunity to understand the ways Whiteness is experienced on campus by our students of color.

As my voice was slowing down, pausing, one of the meeting's attendees, an older, male, graduate student from Ireland spoke up—rather, he interrupted me. We all knew him. He was very involved in several committees and other activities on campus. He was liberal, kind, and had a wonderful Irish sound to his words. He was doing an interdisciplinary master's degree that was social justice oriented. He had a previous life in the tech sector, owned a business that he sold for a lot of money. He'd lived in Washington for over a decade. Now that he wasn't running a business, he had time to go back to school and get a graduate degree.

In the meeting, he reiterated what I had just said and suggested the survey questions. He even re-explained what I was saying just moments before, as if I'd not said anything. He looked right at me, as if he was teaching me things about being Brown in an all-White school. I remember his passion and my own anger at his racialized mansplaining. No one seemed to notice that he had just taken my idea and my rationale with no reference to the words I had just spoken. He was robbing me of my words, and the White people in the room were not noticing, just nodding in agreement. I said nothing.

I offer this kind of interaction, which has happened to me on several occasions in different ways, as a version of Whitesplaining. Usually, folks refer to an incident of Whitesplaining as one in which a White person condescendingly explains to a person of color how their complaints of racism or White supremacy are unfounded, how the person of color is too sensitive, or sees race everywhere. In this case, the Whitesplaining that my Irish colleague engaged in was a kind that I see happen with liberal White academics and others. It's where good intentions are not checked by context and who you are talking to. It's the White person thinking that expertise in a subject like racism can be purely academic, that you can learn enough of its depths in a book alone, or by mouthing ideas that you heard from someone of color without acknowledging that.

This White man had never been in any situation where he felt threatened by the Whiteness of an authority figure, like a teacher, in front of him. But



because he read about it, or had just been told about it, he took ownership of the ideas because he agreed with them. And as White people in authority have done throughout history, he assumed authority on the subject at hand, assumed an authoritative posture. His orientation was one that said authority and expertise on a subject is abstract. It's all about knowledge possessed. It is not about a body experiencing it.

At best, he acted on the idea that his expertise and authority on racism and White supremacy was based on the interchangeability of abstract knowledge and experience. His habit of language, a common Whiteness one, was that you can have either abstract knowledge or experience of racism in order to speak in the way he did, in the presence of a body of color, even after that body had just said the same thing.

What made this meeting difficult was that I didn't want to embarrass this man, who was technically a grad student and my junior in authority, even if he was a few years older than me. Despite him slipping into a White authoritative stance, one I've seen many times in my life, ones that always infantilize me, I did not want to wound him in such a public way. We were both trying to do right by our campus' students. I was trying to be nice to him. I was doing what people of color, and many women of all kinds, do out of habit and necessity all of our lives, softly cradle the gentle egos and brittle spirits of the White people, or men, around us. It can get exhausting.

This, over time, is at the cost of our own egos and spirits. I didn't want to have to be the Brown guy bringing up racism again—too much responsibility, too much burden, day after day, even for a guy like me. Calling it out in a meeting where everyone was trying to solve this very problem on campus just felt like I would be read as the bad guy, making everyone feel bad for nothing. I didn't want that fight that day. And yet, I should have. That would have been the compassionate thing, the antiracist thing, to do, but not the easy thing.

Even back at OSU, I knew my lack of Whiteness was a problem in school. I knew that no matter what I did, I was not really in the club. I knew that my membership had restrictions. I cannot pull off what Chris did as a teacher or writer. But given my history with language and others' judgements of me that never squared with my own views of myself, I knew then, as much as I admired, learned from, and loved my first mentor in school, his mentoring was incomplete for me. I just didn't know how to articulate this yet. I didn't realize that the material conditions that travel with racialized bodies really mattered to the man I could be mentored by. I needed a man of color who could understand my journey and struggles, but I was still in love with the idea that I could be White, that I could take on the master's language so well that he would accept and reward me.