

How Do We Language So People Stop Killing Each Other, Or What Do We Do About White Language Supremacy?

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[slide 1] To open, I humbly make a land acknowledgement. I would like to recognize and acknowledge the indigenous people of this land: the Leni Lenape, Shawnee, and Hodinöhsöni (hoe-den-ah-show-nee) -- the six Nations, that is, the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca, Cayuga and Tuscarora (tus-ka-roar-ah). We are gathered today on Jö:deogë' (joan-day-o-gan't), an Onödowa'ga (ono-do-wah-gah) or Seneca word for Pittsburgh or “between two rivers”: the welhik hane (well-ick hah-neh) and Mënaonkihëla (men-aw-n-gee-ah-luh). These are the Lenape words for the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers, which translate to the “best flowing river of the hills” and “where the banks cave in and erode.” While a land acknowledgement is not enough, it is an important social justice and decolonial practice that promotes indigenous visibility and a reminder that we are on settled indigenous land. Let this land acknowledgement be an opening for all of us to contemplate a way to join in decolonial and indigenous movements for sovereignty and self-determination. Lastly, I am grateful to Melissa Borgia-Askey and Sandy Gajehsoh Dowdy for valuable etymological and pronunciation help. Also, I thank Andrea Riley Mukavetz and the American Indian Caucus for helping me with this land acknowledgement, and providing the convention with similar language for everyone to use in their sessions this year.

Now, I must prepare everyone for what I'm about to say. The message I offer comes from a deep sense of love and compassion for everyone who makes the sacrifices it takes to teach writing and rhetoric in our world today. I know you are good people. And because I love you, I will be honest with you, and it may hurt. But I promise you, it hurts not because I've done something wrong, but because I'm exposing your racial wounds. These wounds are the precursors to the killing referenced in my title. I also ask many of you to be patient as I first address my colleagues of color, **but the fact that I must ask for your patience to do this is evidence of the White supremacy that even we, conscientious teachers of writing, are saturated in.**

My colleagues of color, I wink and nod. We will break the steel cage of White supremacy, of White racial bias, of the many bars, [slide 2] like the physical

bars of the jails and prisons that house the 2.3 million U.S. inmates, 67% of which are our brothers and sisters of color, yet we make up only about 37% of the U.S. population (“Who’s in Prison”; “Incarceration”). I know, I don’t need to tell you this. You know it. With Black men being jailed at rates five times that of their White peers, and Latinos at twice the rate of Whites, it’s likely that some of us know friends or family members who have had physical cages placed around them. **We academics of color in this room have many things in common with the U.S. prison population, one being the steel cage of racism.**

[slide 3] The cages are also figurative, but no less real in their effects. Michelle Alexander recounts Iris Marion Young’s metaphor for oppression, applying it to the racism that causes such incarceration rates. **Among many other injustices, I add to this list the way we judge, assess, give feedback to, and grade writing by students of color in our classrooms. Yes, the ways we judge language form some of the steel bars around our students and ourselves -- we too maintain White supremacy,** even as we fight against it in other ways. We ain’t just internally colonized, we’re internally jailed. As Alexander reminds us, and we likely feel each day, the overdetermined nature of racism explains why we can change or eliminate one unfair thing in a system, or school, or classroom -- like our curriculum or our bodies’ presence -- yet still find that our students of color struggle and fail -- even when we are there to help them, showing them that others like them have made it. We hold up the flag of opportunity and say, “please, don’t give up. Follow me!”

But we in this room made it despite the system, not because of it, yet we are part of the system now. We are the exceptions that prove the rule, as Victor Villanueva has told us. We are contradictions. Again, my colleagues of color, I don’t need to tell you this. You live it, but sometimes we have to remind ourselves of the magnitude of shit -- that we are not oppressed alone. We need to commiserate together here in this place because often we may be alone at our home institutions. We need to lament together. Of course, I commiserate with you today in the presence of White people, so there are other reasons I remind us of the steel cage of racism. **We should lament together. It builds coalitions among the variously oppressed, such as our LGBTQIA colleagues, many of whom are White.**

[slide 4] The metaphor of the cage of racism reminds me of the famous “iron cage” metaphor coined by Max Weber in 1905. The term in German he used was, “*stahhartes Gehäuse*,” which was translated into English as “iron cage” but has also been translated as “shell as hard as steel.” What Weber was describing was the way in which Capitalist societies, particularly in the U.S. with its strong Protestantism, **created conditions in which people self-govern their actions and beliefs, even their desires through overdetermined structures in the market**

economy. **This is due to the fact that no matter what you as an individual believe or do, you always are implicated and circulate in market economies that dictate the nature of the cage around you -- that is, dictate your own self-governance, your boundaries and desires.** You are always beholden to the market. The market I call your attention to today **is the market of White language preferences in schools**, although it is also not hard to find the connections between it and the flows of Capital.

I am overly simplifying Weber, but I call his ideas to your attention, my colleagues of color, because **many White folks wish to make the racist problems we experience**, like prison and educational racism, and the White bias of those systems, as about something else, **about mostly economics, laziness, or bad values.** But these are interconnected and intersectional dimensions. [slide 5] In fact, Ronald Takaki calls on Weber's "iron cage" metaphor to highlight both the steel cage of racism, and of, what he terms "republicanism," which is another way to say American whiteness. Even us academics and teachers of color are trapped in cages of such American whiteness.

And if we are going to talk about cages and racism, we should remember the first published instance of cages of racism. [slide 6] In Paul Laurence Dunbar's 1899 poem, "Sympathy," the bird sees the bright sun, the grass, the stream, but it cannot fly. It is caged, beating bloody wings against the bars, singing, not "of joy or glee," but "a plea." The poem's narrator, perhaps Dunbar himself, ends: "I know why the caged bird sings!" [slide 7] While they are both speaking of the Black experience in the U.S., Maya Angelou's famous poem, inspired by Dunbar's, explains the context for the cage of racism that we, all people of color, feel around us all the time but not in the same ways. That context is White bias, or Takaki's cage of republicanism, only Angelou's Whiteness is that which is not in the cage. It is the market that makes up Weber's *stalhartes Gehäuse*, his "shell as hard as steel."

The free bird thinks of another breeze
And the trade winds soft through
The sighing trees
And the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright
Lawn and he names the sky his own. (Angelou)

Who has been allowed to name people, places, things, the processes of writing and revision, theories of rhetoric? Who has named your sky? Who has named your writing, my friends? Who has named your pedagogies? Who has named your ways of judging language, my colleagues of color?

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom. (Angelou)

“A fearful trill” that is “longed for still” that is “freedom.” What does it mean for you, my colleagues of color, to sing your freedom in your classrooms, your scholarship, your pedagogies? Is it the freedom from the White naming that is such a thick part of our disciplines’ histories? **Is it freedom from the White habits of language that cover us all -- is it freedom from White language supremacy? [SO VIDYA’S ENGLISH IS WHITE? SOUTHERN INDIANS ENGLISH IS WHITE?]**

Again, I know, many of you are also doing this work, speaking these truths. I have heard and seen you do so. I have seen White people around you smile at your words, then not take them, turn and go on in their White world, a world that rewards their silence and hesitation. I thank you, my brothers and sisters of color. And I stand up here today asking everyone to listen, to see, to know you as you are, to stop *saying shit* about injustice while doing *jack shit* about it. We are all needed in this project, this fight, this work, these labors. But because most in the room, in our disciplines, are White, I have to speak to them too, many of whom sit on their hands, with love in their hearts, but stillness in their bodies.

Let us have tough compassion for our White colleagues. They don’t have the years of anti-White language supremacy training we do. They’ve been paid off too many times to even recognize the bribes. Many even think they *earned* the bribes they take. It is their wages, or as David Roediger says, it is the “wages of whiteness.” **They’ve never lived in the same worlds we have.** And it ain’t all their fault. But finding fault ain’t the point. Change is. Revolution. Reconciliation. Redemption. My colleagues of color, I hope I offer you fuel, words of charcoal and fire to go back to your schools and institutions and make things burn -- melt the steel bars of racism and White language supremacy in your places. So please know, I’m speaking *with* you, my colleagues of color. You are with me. You too are speaking, have spoken.

Now, let me ask the White folks in the room a question. When I addressed only my colleagues of color just a minute ago, how did you feel? How did it make you feel in your skin to be excluded? How did it feel to be talked *about* and not

talked *to*, to be the object of the discussion and not the subject? [slide 8] How does it feel to be the problem? How does it make you feel to be the one in the way of progress, no matter what you have said or what your agendas are, how hard you worked, or how sincere you are? It's unfair, isn't it? You are good people. And yet you are the problem, but you don't want to be. Think about that for a minute. You can be a problem even when you try not to be. Sit and lament in your discomfort and its sources. Search. If our goal is a more socially just world, we don't need more good people. We need good changes, good structures, good work that makes good changes, structures, and people.

Are you uncomfortable yet? Do you feel misunderstood? Are you thinking, he's not talking about me -- he's speaking of those other White folks, the less conscious ones. Are you thinking: I know, he ain't talking about me. I'm so woke, I use the word "woke." But I am talking about all of you. No White person escapes it. And because I am often racially ambiguous, I cannot exclude myself either. In the right light, I can be White -- even if I don't get all the privileges that *habitus*, or that set of dispositions, is meant to confer in our society. So, I'm not going to tell you that you are going to be alright. I'm not going to say that you -- you White folks in this room -- are the special ones. You thinking you're special is the problem. It always has been, because you, and **White people just like you who came before you, have had most of the power, decided most of the things, built the steel cage of White language supremacy** that we exist in today, both in and outside of the academy -- and likely, many of you didn't know you did it. You just thought you were doing language work, doing teaching, doing good work, judging students and their languages in conscientious and kind ways, helping them, preparing them, giving them what was good for them.

Just as it is unfair that in our world most indigenous, Latinx, and Black Americans will never get the chance to do what we do, to be teachers, or professors, or researchers, or something else that taps their own potentials because of the racist steel bars set around them, **it is equally unfair that you perpetuate racism and White language supremacy not just through your words and actions, but through your body in a place like this** or in your classrooms, despite your better intentions. Let me repeat that to compassionately urge you to sit in some discomfort: **White people can perpetuate White supremacy by being present. You can perpetuate White language supremacy through the presence of your bodies in places like this.**

That feels unfair to say so bluntly, doesn't it? You perpetuate White language supremacy in your classrooms because you are White and stand in front of students, as many White teachers have before you, judging, assessing, grading, professing on the same kinds of language standards, **standards that came from your group of people.** It's the truth. It ain't fair, but it's the truth. **Your body**

perpetuates racism, just as Black bodies attract unwarranted police aggression by being Black. Neither dynamic are preferred, neither are right, but that's the shit -- the steel cage -- we're in. The sooner we can accept this fact, the sooner we can get to cutting the bars.

Now, I'm not saying you need to leave. Far from it. We need you, my White colleagues. This is the elephant in the room. It's big and white and obscures everyone's view. And we all need to see it in order to see around it. And it gets in the way of understanding our practices of language as a weapon that we use against our students?

What does any of this have to do with answering the question: How do we language so people stop killing each other? I'm trying to set up the problem of the conditions of White language supremacy, not just in our society and schools, but in our own minds, in our habits of mind, in our dispositions, our bodies, our *habitus* [slide 9], in the discursive, bodily, and performative ways we use and judge language. This means, many of us can acknowledge White language supremacy as the status quo in our classrooms and society, but not see all of it, and so perpetuate it. I'm trying to explain the conditions in our classrooms that cause your judgements to be weaponized as a White teacher, or even a teacher of color who must take on a White racial *habitus* to have the job you have. **It takes conditions of White language supremacy to make our judgements about logic, clarity, organization, and conventions a hand grenade, with the pin pulled.** All we have to do is give them to another and let go of the hammer. These judgements, these standards, seem like their just about language, **just about communication, just about preparation for the future, just about good critical thinking and communicating. Here's a hint: when we start qualifying our ideas with the word "just," we are trying to convince ourselves of the lies we are telling.** We are trying to convince ourselves of a diminished sense of the power and significance of rhetoric, of words, of language.

[slide 10] So, back to my title. It comes from Mary Rose O'Reilley's invocation of Ihab Hassan's question. Hassan was an Arab American literary theorist, born in Egypt, which I believe made his asking of the question quite real, not figurative or imaginative. O'Reilley's short 1989 article in which she offers the question is a kind of rumination on her teaching life to that point, which began in the 1960s. So how do we language so people stop killing each other? The practices of languaging are fundamentally practices of judging. What is reading rhetorically or considering the rhetorical situation for a writer or speaker, if not a series of judgements? In a world of police brutality against Black and Brown people in the U.S., of border walls and regressive and harmful immigration policies that traumatize and separate children from parents, of increasing violence against Muslims and LGBTQIA, of women losing their rights to control their own bodies,

of overt White supremacy on U.S. streets, of mass shootings in schools, of the conscious poisoning of Black and Brown people's communities, of a complete disregard for indigenous people's rights to their lands and cultures, of blatant refusals to be compassionate to the hundreds of thousands of refugees around the world, where do we really think this violence, discord, and killing starts? What is the nature of the ecologies in which some people find it necessary to oppress or kill others who are different from them, who identify or think or speak or worship or love differently than them? **All of these decisions are made by judging others by our own standards, and inevitably finding others wanting, deficient.** People who judge in these ways lack practices of problematizing their own existential situations and lack experience sitting in the discomfort that problematizing brings. They lack an ability to sit with paradox, guilt, pain, and blame, and make something else out of it all.

Again, let me compassionately urge you to sit in discomfort: **If you use a single standard to grade your students' languaging, you engage in racism. You actively promote White language supremacy, which is the handmaiden to White bias in the world, the kind that kills Black men on the streets by the hands of the police through profiling and good ol' fashion prejudice.**

So, how do we, English and literacy teachers, judge language so people stop killing each other? I have argued that labor-based grading contracts explicitly address in writing classrooms the problem of grading locally diverse students (*Antiracist; Labor-Based Grading Contracts*), the paradox of teachers who are by necessity steeped in a White racial *habitus*, steeped in white language bias, while many of their students are not -- a White racial *habitus* that if you are White you cannot fully see, hear, or feel (the social world has trained you not to), **yet it is the source of your privileges**, likely part of the reason you are in front of the class in the first place. If we can confront such paradoxes in our judgements of language, in our *habitus*, then maybe some of the killing may stop. But first, we have to painfully reconcile our habits of judgement, and that means painfully reconciling the paradox between ourselves and our actions. As Bourdieu's term, *habitus*, makes clear, one's judgement is not simply one's own individual judgement of something. It is never simply an individual practice. It is consubstantial, interconnected, to the social world we live in.

[slide 11] As many of you know, in Freire's *Pedagogy of The Oppressed*, problem-posing education moves through a process of listening to the community outside of the classroom, identifying problems or issues, then dialoguing with student-participants using codes, or cultural artifacts that embody language, such as media, newspapers, articles, TV shows, movies, plays, etc. that represent many sides of the problem or issue (Shor 38), that reveal the problem as paradoxes. From these codes, participants again listen carefully to them in order to describe what

they see, hear, and feel, offering their own experiences that relate to those codes, questioning the codes, and of course, moving to articulate things to do as a response (Shor 39; Brown 40-41). This means that problem-posing is an ongoing process of interrogating the paradox of judgement, how we see, hear, or feel, how we language the world into existence, how we are simultaneously right and wrong, and how that languaging makes and unmakes us simultaneously.

[slide 12] Put another way: Our personal choices and judgements of our students are **[slide click]** both personal and a part of larger social and disciplinary structures that also form the boundaries within which we act and judge. Raymond Williams describes this dynamic as simultaneously a “setting of limits” and an “exertion of pressures” in a particular direction (87). So part of being a woke writing teacher, then, is a constant posing of problems about my own existential writing assessment situation, a continual articulating of paradoxes in my judgement that complicate how I make judgements, how I read and make meaning of the symbols my students give me and that I give back to them, **[slide click]** how White language supremacy places limits on and pressures me, despite my efforts to counter such things, just as they do my students.

[slide click] So to see such paradoxes in how we judge is to see through the natural, or to see things that are natural as paradoxes, thus not natural at all, but contrived by determined systems and choices (Villanueva 54). And in our classrooms, journals, committee rooms, and writing standards, what do you think the natural is? What have you left unquestioned about your ways of judging language or students? Do you think that White racial *habitus*, that the historical White language biases in our disciplines and lives, have affected these places, or the building of something like the “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing”? Or your own pedagogies? Or your own ways of judging student writing, what you see, and can see, as clear, effective, and compelling? Do you think you’re special, immune to the biases?

[slide 13] Let’s look at one sacred cow in our discipline. What do you think the habit of mind that the Framework calls “metacognition” is and looks like in students in your classroom? How do you evaluate it or grade it? Where did you get your ideas? Think of 2 or 3 writers or texts that have markers of such a habit of mind, perhaps ones you might show as examples of such a practice. Where did those writers and texts get their habits from, their dispositions to do this exemplary work? How might you characterize those writers or their texts’ performative, bodily, and discursive dispositions? Did they magically escape the White biases in their worlds or educations? Were they the exceptions? Are they special?

What I like about the Framework is its de-emphasis on hierarchy and ranking performances that would fall within any given habit of mind. But is that how departments and programs use the Framework? Do they use it to dismantle

hierarchies within student social formations? Or is it just a pedagogy and not an assessment philosophy, not a philosophy that structures the way you judge and grade writing in your classrooms, the way you dole out opportunity? Do you still have a standard next to the Framework? Is the Framework being used as method to get students to write White, but not used to attend to an ever-widening universe of reflective discourses?

But **White language supremacy has crafted the Framework in more insidious ways**. This makes the framework's presence still dangerous if we don't see it for what it is. [slide 14] As I'm sure most of you know, we live in a deeply segregated society. The *Washington Post*'s May 2018 story shows maps from demographic data, illustrating just how segregated by race we are. Here's the city we are currently in. [slide 15] The red dots are white residents, the blue Black residents. The downtown area where the three rivers converge is a White center of commerce and tourism, the business district, the heart of a White supremacy. That's where we are, the place where they make the steel bars. Let's not forget that. And when you go to dinner tonight, or as you move from session to session, notice who serves you. Who picks up after you, or fills water containers in this White center? How are we not in this "steel city" in a steel cage of White supremacy?

So the 23 good, smart members of the team that created the Framework were mostly White and were produced by such a segregated society. Let me dramatize this for you. Here's the Framework's task force. [slide 16] Where do you think these folks learned their languaging? Who do you think most or all of their friends were in school? What schools do you think they went to? Now, I don't know the answers to these questions for these individuals, but I do know the patterns in the U.S., which they cannot escape. **If you're White, you kick it with White people. If you're Black, you kick it with other Black people, but you may work with White people.** It may seem melodramatic to show all these White faces when I could have just told you that 18 or 19 of the members of the Framework's designers were White. It may appear that I'm pointing fingers at individuals unnecessarily. Calling out people for things they do not control. If you think that, you are missing the point. You are feeling your White fragility.

I ask you compassionately: notice your own White fragility. The point is the inevitable and embodied Whiteness. It can be very visceral, thick in the air, for us people of color. **I need you to feel how Whiteness in good-hearted, smart people, like these folks, who do great work, can fill a room with their Whiteness to the point that the one or two people of color in the room can feel suffocated.** I want you feel how a good group of folks like this can silence the few bodies of color in the room, and never examine their own White habits of judgement, then canonized those White habits as simply habits of everyone's mind.

I want you to see how this steel bar is installed in the cage of White language supremacy that imprisons us all.

But there's more. White language supremacy also looks like this. [slide 17] The four authors of the article in *CE* that explains the process and the Framework were all White women. To the leaders of the task force's credit, who are the authors of this article, they point to a place one can find all the task force members and their bios, a website.¹ The paradox in this is that, Peggy, Linda, Anne, and Cathy, do not control their Whiteness. But they do control how they deploy it, how they make it visible and the privileges of leadership it conveys to them. This is not to say they have not worked hard, or deserve credit for their work, or even that the work they did isn't good work. **It is to say that problematizing their own Whiteness should reveal this kind of painful paradox: that good work, done by conscientious White people, can still kill people of color by codifying White language supremacy. The presence of their White bodies perpetuates historical racial injustices.** Damned if they do, damned if they don't. There are no easy way outs of the steel cage of White language supremacy.

[slide 18] How do we check this in our lives? One key practice in problematizing is *deep listening* -- it anchors everything in the process. We cannot problem-pose without deep listening. [slide click] Krista Ratcliffe named a similar cross-cultural practice, "rhetorical listening," as a response to Jacqueline Jones Royster's CCCC chair's address (1). Royster asks us: "how do we listen," how do we do more than "talk back," how do we exchange, negotiate, and collaboratively create perspectives, meaning, and understanding (38)? Ratcliffe offers a way that centers on acknowledging Whiteness and listening deeply to others, or "consciously standing under discourses that surround us and others . . . letting [them] wash over, through, and around us and then letting them lie there to inform our politics and ethics" (28). These listening practices are important, but let's not forget that Ratcliffe is a critical, White academic who realizes *she* must listen likely because that is not the habit of language most White academics practice, particularly White males. The "we" and "us" is White teachers and academics. The other side to this practice is the body of color talking, being heard by the White listener -- Royster being listened to by Ratcliffe.

Ten years after O'Reilly wrote the article from which I derived my title, she revisited her teaching in *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*. [slide 19] In that book, she describes the practices of deep listening in her classroom, concluding that "One can, I think, listen someone into existence, encourage a stronger self to emerge or a new talent to flourish" (21). It's attractive,

¹ The Framework's task force members and their biographies are listed on the CWPA Website at, <http://wpacouncil.org/framework/taskforce>.

isn't it? But wait, doesn't it reenact a whitely stance of control and agency? Who's doing the making here? The teacher listens her students into existence? It's Pygmalion all over again. It's the Whitely Rex Harrison languaging Audrey Hepburn into existence when we know, ain't nothin' wrong with Audrey but Rex's judgements. This isn't quite what Royster had in mind, I think.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese monk and long-time social justice activist, bases most of his teachings about peace on a kind of deep listening, or as I prefer to think of it, a *deep and mindful attending* to the other in our presence. This reveals "listening" as limited, as it is only an auditory metaphor. Attending is more holistic and embodied. Hanh reminds us that every person has a "suchness" that can be understood and attended to, on the other's terms. He explains, "[i]f we want to live in peace and happiness with a person, we have to see the suchness of that person" (68). We have to understand others without trying to control or change them. **[slide 20]** In fact, love and understanding, or deep attending, are the same for Hanh, and to practice it, one must ask the other for help. We cannot do it alone. I am taken particularly by his suggested practice. Hanh says, "sit close to the one you love, hold his or her hand, and ask, 'do I understand you enough? Or am I making you suffer? Please tell me so that I can learn to love you properly'" (80). Imagine this kind of assessment practice in your classrooms with your students. Assessment might be a problem-posing process that continually attends to questions like: "Do I **understand you enough? Am I making you suffer? Please help me to read your languaging properly.**"

What strikes me about deep attending is its compassion and its potential for growing the patience in all of us that is needed when we confront students who are different from us, who do not look or sound or come from the same places as we do. Deep attending also opens space for those of us who have only been listening, but would like to speak, and be heard. But I'm sure all of us would say that we listen or attend to our students carefully. **[slide 21]** So I reiterate and reframe Royster's questions: *How* are you attending, exactly? What are the markers of your compassionate attending? How is your attending a practice of judgement that your students can notice? How is it a practice that recognizes their existence without overly controlling them?

I hope you can hear the structural in what I'm asking. How do we language so people stop killing each other? Part of my answer is that some must be silent, leave enough space between utterances, so that problematizing can happen. I'm not saying we have to change our perspectives, soften our hearts. Our hearts are not the problem. In fact, I'm actually saying the opposite, that we cannot change our biases in judging so easily, and that your perspectives that you've cultivated over your lifetime is not the key to making a more just society, classroom, pedagogy, or grading practice. **[slide 22] The key is changing the structures, cutting the steel**

bars, altering the ecology, in which your biases function in your classrooms and communities. I'm saying, we must change the way power moves through White racial biases, through standards of English that make White language supremacy. We must stop justifying White standards of writing as a necessary evil. Evil in any form is never necessary. We must stop saying that we have to teach this dominant English because it's what students need to succeed tomorrow. They only need it because we keep teaching it!

I'd like to end with a parable.

You are tired and starving, on the verge of death, needing any kind of sustenance, walking on a road in a land of plenty. You've been walking for weeks. You come upon a house, with a lush garden next to it, full of fruits and vegetables. You knock on the door. A man answers, and you beg, "please, can you help me? I'm dying. I need some food, anything you can spare, please, help me. I'll tend your garden if you'll share the food with me."

Now, the man has lived in this house his whole life. He inherited it and the beautiful garden, from his parents. In fact, he made it bigger and more fruitful. He worked hard at it and in it. He has so much now that he sells the excess. His house has become bigger. The man has lived his entire life with this beautiful, fruitful garden, tending it carefully, working hard in it. It is his, even though one cannot really own earth, or its products. Who can really own earth? It was here before the man and will be here after he is dead. But the illusion of possession is there because the garden has always been there for him, always served him, and he has watered it with the language of possession. *This is my garden*, he says. I tend this garden of mine. I own this garden. I have worked this garden. It grows for me. Its bounty is mine.

So when you come to his door, and ask for his food, he feels uncomfortable - he's never really had to share. In fact, he kinda feels that sharing may not help you. How will you know the benefits of laboring in your own garden? Charity won't get you your own garden, will it? So he says, "I'm sorry. I really do understand how hungry you are, how tired, how much you need food to live right now, but I don't feel comfortable giving you my food. I've never done that before. I want to help you *in the right way*, and that takes time for me to know. It will take time, so please, come back tomorrow, and maybe then I'll be ready to share my food."

What a sense of blind privilege it is to tell a starving person at your doorstep, in your house of plenty, in a land of abundance, that you just don't yet feel comfortable enough to share your food. It isn't just that in the fable the man's privilege allows him to make a decision based on his own selfish sense of

comfort, his selfish sense of readiness, or that he feels he knows the best timetable for helping the other in his midst. The deeper, more galling problem here is that his comfort comes at the cost of your pain. The deeper problem is that you, the starving person at the doorstep, cannot wait -- you are fucking starving. And the man with plenty asks you from his privileged position to wait, come back tomorrow. Please, my comfort and readiness to give, he implicitly says, is more important than your safety or health.

Now, my fable isn't meant to offer a lesson in helping others, or being compassionate -- although, one could hear those lessons. It is meant to be an allegory for how we make decisions as writing and literacy teachers, particularly about classroom grading and assessment practices, about how we use a particular dominant, White standard. It is about our decisions to continue to reinforce White language supremacy in our classrooms that give many of us power over students, while we tell our students how much right they have to their languages, how much we care and embrace the diversity of languages that they bring and use, yet we tacitly contradict these messages by asking them to wait just a bit longer for us to feel comfortable enough to change our classroom practices, to change the way standards work against them, despite the linguistic truths we know about the communicative effectiveness of all languages.

We delude ourselves by saying that it's what others less enlightened than us will judge their languaging on, so we must use these dominant standards today, thinking that our soft words and kind eyes and good intentions will salve the pain and harm and erasure that the use of a single, universal standard inflicts. We act as if we have no power whatsoever in changing such language judgement practices -- us, language teachers and researchers, have no power with language?

Our decisions to NOT build more radical, antiracist, and anti-White language supremacist assessment ecologies in our classrooms often are based on our own selfish sense of comfort, selfish senses of not being ready to share our gardens. I cannot tell you how many times I've heard writing teachers, ones who are conscientious, critical, and experienced, say to me, "I'm just not ready . . . I don't feel comfortable yet, maybe next semester." What a blind sense of privilege! What a lack of compassion -- if compassion is more than feeling empathy, but a doing something, a suffering *with* others. What a lack of asking the deep attending and problematizing question: Am I causing you to suffer? Many of your students of color, your students who do not embody enough of the White habits of language that make up your standards, stand at your classroom doors and die for your comfort, die as they wait for you to be ready.

I realize that it may sound as if I'm being overly dramatic and using a flawed metaphor. Our students of color, for instance, are not linguistically starving. We need nothing given to us to be effective language users. We

already are and always have been. We are Eliza Doolittle speaking well. Food is not a metaphor for language in my parable. It is a metaphor for power. People of color have never controlled the standards in schools, or disciplines. Standards of English have never come from us, unless we allowed ourselves to be colonized -- and let's not fool ourselves, all teachers of color are colonized to some degree. Even for those who resist that colonizing, being colonized is how you get to be teachers of color, that's why "color" is added to the term. It's a shitty compromise to make, to sacrifice some bit of your body, to cut out a part of your tongue, to let some of your soul wink out of existence, in order to live, prosper, or make change in the world for those who come after you.

So, don't get hung up on the nuances of the allegory. Food in the story is not language. It is power, the power to judge, and make or control standards. The point is a Marxian one. **Who owns the means of opportunity production in the classroom?** We all may hate it, but most of us are still required to give grades, and those are the keys to opportunity. Just because our students of color are linguistically rich does not mean **that by default those riches can be exchanged in your classroom economies if the economy is not set up to accept those riches.** Some of your students may be starving with pockets and purses full of useless coins in the bustling market of your classrooms, because you don't accept their money, even though you tell them how valuable it is. Hold on to it, you say. It's your identity, your heritage. But everywhere we go, those heritage coins ain't worth shit in the White economies of the academy and marketplace. So, you tell them, you gotta exchange that currency, code-switch. But we tell you, I don't have access to the money-changer, and he charges interest that I cannot afford -- there is value lost in the exchange. And you say, try anyway.

Am I being overly dramatic with this parable, with this talk? Are your students really dying in front of you? Do we, students, teachers, and academics of color really cut out a fleshy chunk of our tongues just to have the pleasure of pretending to be the equal of Whites in the academy? Do the vast majority of you do harm by using a single standard of English to assess and grade in your classrooms, all the while patting yourselves on the backs for how much good you are doing, how much you're helping your poor students of color? Does your dominant, White set of linguistic habits of language kill people? **Is your body in the places you circulate part of the problem of White language supremacy? This is the problematizing we must all do.**

Thank you and peace to you.

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