CHAPTER 4.

RACE-JUDGEMENTS AND THE TACIT LANGUAGE WAR

By the sixth grade, we were living in Pecos Trailer Park in Las Vegas. We'd moved out of the ghetto of North LV into a White working-class area. I'd come back from an afternoon of swimming. The park had a swimming pool, one I'd eventually be banned from swimming in by the White trailer park manager, who didn't like us, my brother and me, called us "wetbacks." At this moment, we were not banned.

It was a fun afternoon. I made a friend at the pool, Chris, a tall, thin, White kid with family from the Buffalo area. He was French Canadian, smart and very White. He couldn't even tan. Just got red. I liked him. He was the only kid in the park who could officially be friends with my brother and me. His dad was rarely around, worked a lot.

After the pool, I went home. I was in the bathroom changing, and as I slipped off my swimming trunks, I stood in front of the mirror looking at a sharp tan line on my waist and thighs. It went from dark brown to what looked like a pale white, the kind of white I saw in Chris' face and arms. In that moment, I wanted badly to be White, maybe French Canadian. I made a face in the mirror, one of disgust. I saw my skin. It looked like dirt. I rubbed and rubbed and rubbed, then got a washcloth and washed and washed, but the dark Brown would not lighten. The dirt would not go away.

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In a very real sense, we are made up of the words we know, as much as those words are made by the material conditions we live in and through. As a boy, my relations to words, like everyone's, were cradled in my life-conditions, in my poverty, in my curiosity, in my love for my mom who I thought could do—and did—magic through steno pads, delicate scripts, and careful planning. And this is all to say that you cannot read a text without using the material reality of your existence to make sense of it as it makes sense of you.

Thus, when we have the ability to understand, manipulate, and question words, we read our world differently, perhaps better, because then the practice of literacy offers critical distance from our world as much as a way to make meaning out of it. In Freire's view, critical literacy produces questions the answers to which are about us, our material world, and the words that help us make sense
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of all three things. This arguably leads to liberation, if liberation means a critical view of ourselves, our world, and the words that mediate it all.

But wait. It's not that simple, is it? Literacy may be the key to liberation, but not all literacies liberate. Who controls literacy and its standards? Where do those things come from? Am I just trading one ideological shackle for another? Am I just choosing my oppressor by choosing the language I use or by accepting the language presented to me? Maybe there are no third-party oppressors. Maybe I am oppressing myself? Maybe literacy is just another way of saying I have been colonized.

Many people use critical notions of literacy and language against all of us for their own purposes. Consider Lee Atwater's language policy, one later called "the Southern strategy," a way of invoking race but never mentioning it because it had become taboo by the 1970s. It is racial language without using racial language, and it's still used today for a wide range of discussions and decisions. Atwater was a Republican political strategist and advisor to Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush. In a 1981 interview, he explains this language strategy (warning: he uses the N-word):

> You start out in 1954 by saying, "Nigger, nigger, nigger." By 1968 you can't say "nigger"—that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, state's rights and all that stuff. You're getting so abstract. Now you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things . . . you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is Blacks get hurt worse than Whites. And subconsciously maybe that is part of it. . . . But I'm saying that if it is getting that abstract, and that coded, that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. You follow me—because obviously sitting around saying, "We want to cut taxes," "we want to cut this," is much more abstract than even the busing thing, and a hell of a lot more abstract than "Nigger, nigger."[1]

The Southern strategy for politics was really a language strategy that maintained White supremacy. Its method was to get rid of explicitly racist language but keep racist outcomes. It avoided explicitly racializing the policies being promoted and ignored or denied their racist consequences. It's also a White

1 The Atwater interview is available in Rick Perlstein, "Exclusive: Lee Atwater's Infamous 1981 Interview on the Southern Strategy," *The Nation*, November 13, 2012, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/exclusive-lee-atwaters-infamous-1981-interview-southern-strategy/. A version can also be found in DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 33.

language supremacy strategy that HOWLs at its audience. The language stays abstract and nonracial by being unconcerned with the racialized and other political consequences of the things referenced, even though the consequences are quite racial in reality.

The Southern language strategy understood that hearing or reading a text and judging it to be a clear expression is not a neutral act. It is not an apolitical judgement. It is an exercise of a person's biases and politics—that is, an exercise of your own personal relations to power and language. Your ability to understand an instance of language as clear or persuasive—as meaningful in a certain way—is connected to where you have been, with whom you have communed, what languages you have used, and what languages were sung to you in the cradle of your mother's arms as an infant. And as long as your audience doesn't know this, you can manipulate them, get them to agree to things that they wouldn't otherwise agree to, things they may even disagree with if stated another way, things that may even work toward their own oppression.

The Southern language strategy worked from the critical assumption that language can mean different things to different people because we all have different relations to language and material conditions that create those relations and because these differences are patterned and somewhat predictable. It encourages the listener or audience to engage in fast thinking, namely the availability heuristic: I don't see cutting taxes as a racial issue or having any racist consequences, so it isn't.[2] If I see it this way, others can (or should) too. This is an unseen, universal, orientation to the world wedded to another, hyperindividualism. The Southern language strategy used fast thinking and HOWL to promote racist government policies, policies that seemed to be about other things, such as cutting taxes, fairness, a war on drugs and gangs, family values, or good schools.

This kind of language strategy can easily oppress or liberate. It is a White strategy for language mostly because it has been used to promote White supremacy. It is a primary strategy in the tacit language war. But anyone can use the practice to their advantage, convince people to agree on something that ends up having racist and White supremacist outcomes, yet never mention race.

Politicians are not the only ones who consider the ambiguity of language and meaning. We are always wondering if others are saying one thing but meaning other things, or if others hear something else in our words. This language

2 As I discuss in the Appendix essay to this book, the availability heuristic is a thinking process that our brains use to make fast judgements from information we have most readily available to us at the moment. It inadvertently tricks us into assuming that the available information an individual has is enough to make a decision at hand. It's fast thinking as described in Kahneman, *Thinking*, 80–81.

paradox is also what makes things like literature and poetry wonderful, interesting, and surprising. We don't escape the slipperiness of language and race by denying its ambiguity; we help ourselves and others by understanding it better.

LANGUAGING AS RACE-JUDGEMENTS

It's hard to explain to some, especially to White people who usually have never experienced racial ambiguity in social settings, just how difficult it can be, how unsettling it is, for others to constantly misunderstand you, to mistake you for Mexican, for example, when you are not, then act in racist ways on that mistaken judgement. Additionally, being perceived as racially ambiguous as I have been complicates one's English language learning because racial and gender markers often help people understand each other. We judge each other's words through a variety of bodily and other cues as well as what we see on the page or hear in a voice. This is why things like comedy, sarcasm, and satire are so difficult to recognize in a text. They are a lot easier to get in person when you have more cues to go on than bare words.

The term "race-judgements" makes explicit the association between our notions about race and our judgements of others' ideas and words that get wedded together, often unknowingly. That is, what I'm trying to identify are the ways that our own understandings of race are always already interlaced with our words, language practices, and judgements. Everyone has these biases, and we use them all the time. And if you think you don't have ideas about race, or particular races, or you think you don't use those ideas to make judgements, then you haven't systematically examined your own ideas or the ways you make judgements.

Just because you don't immediately recognize racial, gender, or other biases in your judgements doesn't mean you don't have those biases. It just means you don't recognize them. They are not immediately apparent. And we are not often in the habit of examining what we do not immediately see, feel, or hear. It's like looking for something lost and unknown to you in a room filled with things, except that you don't realize that you've lost that thing. You aren't looking for the thing you don't know you've lost in a room filled with things that seem not lost.

If you still don't believe that you have implicit racial biases, or you want to find out how strong your own biases are, you can test yourself online. Project Implicit, a nonprofit organization that started in 1998 and moved to online testing in 2011, offers free implicit bias tests on a range of social dimensions, one being race. The organization was founded by three scientists, Anthony Greenwald (University of Washington), Mahzarin Banaji (Harvard University),

and Brian Nosek (University of Virginia).[3] To date, they've tested millions of people's biases and found that everyone has them to some degree. No one gets to escape racial implicit bias.[4] We all have racial biases, and we use them because making judgements and decisions is a cognitive act that requires biases of all kinds. That is, to judge means to apply biases to a question or problem in order to come to some decision.

Even the idea that you don't think race affects how you judge language or people is an understanding about race that you use, but that claim doesn't hold up to the copious research that Banaji, Greenwald, and Nosek of Project Implicit, among others, have pioneered. Of course, race is only one social dimension that informs our judgements and language practices. There are many others, gender, sexual orientation, class, economic standing, religious status, to name a few common ones. I focus on race because that dimension has played a key role in my own literacy experiences—it has been most salient to me—and it is historically linked to literacy in the US. Furthermore, race's significance to language and its judgement goes mostly unnoticed by most people. And it does much harm. Just like the Southern language strategy, we should pay attention to our implicit racial biases. If we don't, we may be languaging in racist ways and perhaps contributing to our own oppression in the process.

Cheryl I. Harris, the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation Chair in Civil Rights and Civil Liberties at UCLA School of Law, has shown how U.S. law has historically understood Whiteness as property and acted on this premise in the courts.[5] This has direct bearing on literacy in the US as White property in the various court decisions about separate but equal accommodations and school segregation. When the very institutions that are charged with educating everyone conspire to preserve Whiteness as property with the institutions that are meant to safeguard everyone's liberties (the judicial system), it is very difficult for anyone to see what is happening. It is difficult to see that underneath what we are learning is enslaving us with new kinds of chains—chains of words welded by our race-judgements. It's internal colonization.

In *Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning After Brown v. Board of Education*, Catherine Prendergast argues convincingly that historically in the US the courts have worked from a fundamental premise that "literacy is first

3 To take any of Project Implicit's tests of implicit bias, go to https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/. The website offers several implicit association tests (IAT) beyond the Race IAT, including tests that deal with age, gender, disability, and more.

4 See Appendix A or page 47 of Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald, *Blind Spot*.

5 Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–1791, https://doi.org/10.2307/1341787.

and foremost White property."[6] She looks closely at the logics and consequences of Brown v. Board (1954), Washington v. Davis (1976), and The Regents of the University of California v. Bakke (1978), all of which demonstrate what Prendergast calls "the economy of literacy as a White property," or a dynamic rooted in figurative or literal "White flight" in places, like schools, where people of color begin to accumulate. She explains the dynamic: "Literacy standards are perceived to be falling or in peril of falling" when too many people of color, often African American and Latine, are included or present in the place in question, be it a school, police department, community, etc.[7] These racist biases of our past have submerged in many ways and become implicit biases today.

Now, I do not mean to suggest that we are all racist or prejudiced because we notice or use ideas about race in the judgements we make about people's language. I mean that, whether we recognize it or not, our ideas about race travel with our language and the judgements we make in language because that's how language and judgements are built. Judgement can only be built with biases. Judgement is the application of biases to something else, like a decision to cross the street or the many micro-decisions about what this text is saying as you read these words.

To see a stop sign at an intersection and recognize it as red in color is a judgement. You've applied one bias about what your brain decodes as the color red to what you see when you look at the sign. To further interpret the red stop sign as a signal to apply your brakes and stop at the intersection is another judgement based on your previous judgement about what you've understood to be the red sign.

Some biases are benign like identifying the color red. Some are poisonous, such as those about inherent attributes of African Americans or Asians because of how they use English. Some are somewhere in between, depending on the context. Biases are necessary and inherent, but they can also be harmful to us if we don't realize exactly the nature of our particular biases. If we don't understand them, then we don't get to choose them. We just inherit them uncritically, and they end up controlling us because they seem natural and absolute.

This gives us less power as languagelings and perpetuates lots of unfairness and, well, White language supremacy. While I didn't have the words for it at the time, I felt this problem of implicit racial bias all around me growing up because of how so many people confused me for someone else. My perceived racial ambiguity to others gave me some insight into what later would be termed racial implicit bias.

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6 Catherine Prendergast, *Literacy and Racial Justice: the Politics of Learning after Brown v. Board of Education* (Urbana: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 167.

7 Prendergast, 41.

Growing up on Statz Street, I was seen as not White and not Black. My brother and I were the only Brown kids in a neighborhood of almost all African American families. We used the Black English[8] of our neighborhood and friends, but not in school. And because I was not seen as Black or White, I often felt misunderstood since the discussions and representations of race in North LV and most of the US were Black and White. Framing race in this way left people like me out. People would often ask me, "Where are you from?" or "What is your background?" I could tell by the look on their faces they were confused by me. Even after I would say, "I'm Japanese American," they'd say, "Hmm, you don't look Japanese," skipping the American part—that was obvious. Or they'd say, "wow, you have good English." They expected me to have some kind of accent. They assumed my English would be "broken."

I didn't look American, but I sounded like it. What is a Japanese boy supposed to look and sound like? What is an American supposed to look and sound like, for that matter? We know the answers, but we can't say them in public. Which is another way to say that we know our racial biases, the image and sounds of an "American" that pops into your head when you hear the word, and we hope that one day that image and those sounds will change, be broader, more racially ambiguous, more open to regional dialects, more gender fluid perhaps. But what exactly are we doing about changing that image or those sounds?

I don't mean what do you change in our head or heart. I mean, what are you *doing* to create those changes? What language structures are you changing? Changing language structures in schools and society starts with understanding our biases, questioning our judgements of language and people as race-judgements, not to beat ourselves up or blame people, but to do better tomorrow, to take responsibility, to recognize that implicit biases are working. Ultimately, it's a systemic answer to racism, at least to the race-judgements we all make with language.

8 This version of English has been called "Ebonics," but that has become a negative term today. It is also called African American English, or African American Vernacular English. I use both African American English and Black English to refer generally to the version of English that is associated with African Americans in the US today. A lot of research validates Black English as a rule-bound, complex language. To read more, see Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin*; Geneva Smitherman, *Word from the Mother: Language and African Americans* (New York: Routledge, 2006); John Russell Rickford and Russell John Rickford, *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2000); John R. Rickford, "Geographical Diversity, Residential Segregation, and The Vitality of African American Vernacular English in Its Speakers," *Transforming Anthropology* 18, no. 1 (April 2010): 28–34, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-7466.2010.01067.x.

RACE-JUDGEMENTS EVERYWHERE

I'm a teenager, a senior in high school in Corvallis, Oregon. I'm with my girlfriend, who is White (Irish mostly), born and raised in Oregon. We are shopping at a local clothing store. I have a question. We both walk up to the register where the attendant is waiting. The attendant, who is a White woman and appears to be in her late 20s or early 30s, addresses my girlfriend, "how can I help you?" I ask my question. The attendant answers but looks at my girlfriend, as if she had asked the question. The attendant glances at me a few times during the exchange, as if she could be nervous. She never speaks directly to me. I'm used to this in groups, people talking away from me yet to me. It doesn't seem unusual, even if it annoys me.

Around the same time in my life, I'm in a department store, one of the big ones. There are only White patrons in this store. It's Oregon, so this is normal, but obvious to me. I'm just browsing, killing time. I can swear a man is following me. I go down one aisle. A few seconds later, he turns into the same aisle. He is older, White, and dressed in business casual. I leave that aisle and turn down another a few aisles away. A few seconds later, he's there again. This occurs several more times, but he never approaches me. He's always just looking in the same aisle. This is not the first time this has happened to me, the feeling that others are watching me shop, wondering why am I there, what am I up to, following just a few paces behind. I think that maybe I'm just being paranoid. But I can hear the words of the trailer park manager of my youth echo in my head, "you are a troublemaker," "go back to where you came from, Spic." I leave the store feeling guilty for something, but I don't know what.

I'm in college at Oregon State University in the same town. I am a senior, an English major. I recently found my calling, language and rhetoric. My class, an advanced writing course, is having a discussion about language and identity. Who belongs in the club and who doesn't. How do we decide? In the class discussion, I say it's often hard to separate our language practices from who we are, from our identities. Today, I'd qualify this. We are fragmented, have many identities, some social, some personal or understood by ourselves alone. I'd also say we focus on particular social dimensions in order to purposefully make ourselves. I'd say that race, language, and judgement are symbiotic. We don't just make judgements with language. We make language with judgements. And we are made by judgements and language.

Erik, a friend I admire because he is a year farther along than me in grad school, is sitting next to me in the class. Erik always has something smart to say. He seems to have read everything. He is a new grad student that year, got his B.A. at Berkeley, where his dad, the corporate lawyer, and his grandpa did. He

was a legacy. Erik is White from a Norweigian background, took private guitar lessons as a teenager. He is firmly middle class, likely higher, always casual about his money and spending, or the vacations in Norway to see his mother's family. I admire this about him, his ease with everything, how he wears his privilege with such unassuming grace.

In the conversation, Erik says to me, "I consider you like any other normal person here. I don't think of you as Brown or Asian." He means I belong in the club, the English language club. He means I fit in. The comment feels like other things White people have said to me, like "your English is really good," or "why are you here?" I feel my friend's unexamined biases in his words, biases he's never had to question because his life, his material conditions, up to that point have not presented him with such contradictions. I know he has good intentions. He's not a bad guy, quite the opposite. And yet, his words feel like a hard, stinging pat on the back, one that thumps you and jolts your body forward. Race travels with our words, with us. For some, the connection is more salient.

I think: if I'm *like normal*, then I'm not normal, right? The comment makes me feel abnormal. It makes me feel my Brownness while denying my own feelings about such matters. Always the Brown spot in the educational bowl of milk. I smile, knowing he is meaning to be complementary, but the pat-wound stings. I have no words after that.

That spring, between graduating in the winter quarter and starting in the same department as a grad student and new teaching assistant (TA), I am working at a coffee shop. I'm a barista. I love the job. It's a good local company. They treat their employees well. We get vacation, summer BBQs, good hours, and a 401k. It's where I learn what good coffee is. I'm working a rare afternoon and evening shift. I usually work the early morning shift.

I can see the sun going down through the front windows. Shadows on tables are getting longer, as I recognize another new grad student walking in. She's a few years older than me, Cecilia. She's White, and conducts herself in a way that assumes a lot of things. I think of the Simon and Garfunkel song when I say her name in my head. She has much White skin privilege. I don't think she knows it. I read her as arrogant. I don't know her that well, but I had a few classes with her the previous year. She is a good student, but not as good as she thinks she is. She works hard though, has a child, is a single-parent. She feels her class and gender mostly. Those dimensions seem most salient for her. We both finished the B.A. at the same time.

I'm at the front counter. It's just her and me. We say hi to each other, and she asks, "did you get one?" She's meaning did I get a TA spot, would I be teaching First-Year Writing in the fall while also taking grad courses. It takes me a second to realize what she's asking about. I get excited.

"Yeah, I got one." I smile, thinking she'll say she did too. I received my letter that same week. In my naivete at that moment, I assume every grad student got a TA position, but no. Not every grad student gets one. They are a recruitment tool and a way to support some grad students in their education. Each TA position is coveted because it pays for your tuition, gives you a monthly stipend, and offers valuable teaching experience. "Did you get one," I ask.

"No," her face turns on that word. "*You* got one?" she asks, cocking her head back a bit, scrunching her nose as she says "you." She is clearly shocked. "Why would they give *you* a position?" Again, she emphasizes "you." It is a mystery to her. Somehow the TA position is not in her grasp. It is not as close to her as she assumes it is. At this moment, I doubt myself. Did I get a TA spot because I'm a minority? Am I a token?

"I don't know," I say, and turn to my work, feigning business, as the stings of her "yous" are still in the air between us.

I'm now in a Ph.D. program in Rhetoric and Composition at Washington State University in Pullman, a college town on the East side of the state right on the border of Idaho. I have to take a second language for the degree. It's a requirement. So I choose French. I took two years in junior high, three in high school, and two more as an undergrad at OSU. While it's been years since I thought about it, I've been studying and brushing up on my French for the last six or seven months. The test is a translation test. I submit something from my field originally written in French to the French professor in charge of the proficiency exams. He chooses a section from that piece for me to translate in his office, then determines if I pass.

I come into his office. I meet the French professor. I'm a little nervous. This is high stakes. He's an older, tall, greying, White man with big rough hands, like he's known work in his life, but a long time ago. He has lots of Japanese paraphernalia on his walls, kimonos, paintings, pictures, little things in frames. He's been to Japan every year for many years. He tells me this. I'm really nervous now. If I don't pass the test, I cannot get my Ph.D. He holds the keys to that gate. Why is there so much Japanese in this French professor's office? Shouldn't it be pictures of Paris or Nice?

He recognizes my name as Japanese. He talks and talks about Japan, how much he loves it and the people. This is not helping me, I think. Get out of your own skin for a minute, man. I feel like we've been talking for twenty minutes about a place I've never been. He asks me if I know Japanese. Is that required here? I'm getting more nervous and intimidated. I wonder, does he ask this shit of every grad student who comes in to take a French translation exam? I feel like I'm supposed to cradle his White ego, make him feel like he's okay because he loves Japan so much, like I'm a tool for his validation. I give short answers to his questions.

I take the test. He looks at my translation of the section and tells me, "well, this could be right, but I don't really understand the rhetorical theory. So I'm not sure if it passes. You'll have to take it again." Fuck, I think. I gotta bear *this* again? No benefit of the doubt here, White, Japanophile French professor? It feels like another hard slap on the back by someone who thinks they are doing me a favor.

Years later, I live in Fresno. I'm a professor at Fresno State. My wife and I just bought a house. It needs a permit for an addition to the garage, my office. I go into the permitting office downtown with my contractor. He is Mexican, has dark skin and a thick Spanish accent. We apply for the permit, and the White man behind the desk says, "it will be about two weeks." He's firm about this. I'm upset because we planned on starting the addition that week. I go home, tell my wife, Kelly, who is White from a middle class family in Oregon. Her grandma on her dad's side is Welsh, one of the original settlers of Monmouth, Oregon, where her mom and dad still live.

We met at OSU, where her father and grandmother had graduated. Her grandma was a professor at Western Oregon State College (now Western Oregon University), up the road from OSU in Monmouth. Their family several generations back was one of the original families who donated land from their land claims so that Monmouth College, a normal school, could be established, which is now WOU. That same day, Kelly goes into the same Fresno office, talks to the same White guy in her Whitely Oregon standard English inherited from her family in Oregon, and leaves with the permits to begin work immediately. No problem.

There are a lot of ways to explain my experiences. Maybe that store attendant just liked my girlfriend, maybe business casual guy was just shopping, maybe my college friend was really being nice, maybe Cecilia was just upset at herself, maybe Japanophile French professor was trying to soothe my nerves or make a connection with me, maybe something happened in the Fresno City office in the two hours between my visit and Kelly's that opened up a spot for a new permit? Maybe I'm just too sensitive about this stuff.

What makes race-judgements so tricky to see or understand, however, is how all people of color experience them in our daily lives, how often they happen, how they can seem so normal, natural, harmless to White people, how they seem like other things. And how quick many White people want to downplay them, or brush them aside, tell us that we are too sensitive, that we are seeing race in everything when it ain't there.

It is very difficult for any of us to separate our own words, or those of others, from the feelings that travel with them, feelings that may have started somewhere else, somewhere earlier in a government subsidized apartment building on Statz, or in a third grade classroom filled with unknowable words, or in a

department store, or in the questions of others about where you are from, or why you are there in that place. Our feelings that we carry like luggage through countless airports halo onto our judgements about people and language around us. We keep opening our luggage unknowingly, letting its contents spill out, but we don't notice. My language is me and how I know much of myself. It's also you and how you know yourself. It's how I tell me to others. It is how others make sense of me, even if I think it is the wrong sense to make, yet it is also their sense they make to get them through their airports.

This isn't, however, just a matter of knowing our own biases. There are larger structures operating beyond individuals. Most of the time in the U.S., Brown equals not American, and that equals not worth responding to, not the correct person to address, even when I have asked the question. Brown means I'm a possible thief, even though I've never stolen anything from any store in my life. But I look like I have. Brown means I'm not supposed to take a teaching position from a White woman. I'm not supposed to teach English to college students in Oregon. Brown means I don't get the benefit of the doubt, my words are suspect despite my Japaneseness.

Brown means I must wait. White people have to go first. White people get the benefit of the doubt. They get the permits to start work immediately. Brown folks get our benefits in two weeks. And Asians, well, we are the good ones, the "model minority," the model that artificially makes other people of color look like slackers, even though this hides a lot of problems—and it ain't true.[9] Hang us on a wall or use us as exotic stories to tell others, but that's it. We are supposed to validate White peoples' sense that they are not prejudiced or racist. My yellow parts can cover enough of my Brown parts, assuming that I sound White, so that I'm *like normal*, and I can punch a White man's ticket to ride the antiracist bus. I get to be in the club, but I don't get to determine my membership. White people do. My membership ain't a real membership. It's not based on merit or

9 Studies have shown that Asian Americans with similar educational levels as White Americans have higher rates of unemployment. See Marlene Kim, *Unfairly Disadvantaged? Asian Americans and Unemployment During and After the Great Recession (2007–10)* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2012), https://www.epi.org/publication/ib323-asian-american-unemployment/. Furthermore, the category of "Asian" or "Asian American" is quite complex and diverse, not simply in the cultural and linguistic backgrounds that this term references, but the vastly different living conditions and lives that are typical in such various groups. For instance, in the US, those of Indian descent have an average household income of $101,591, while those from Bangladesh earn an average of $51,331. Asian American poverty rates (13.8%) are higher than that of White Americans (10.9%), with Hmong (37.8%) and Cambodian (29.3%) the highest in poverty. For more on these economic nuances, see Sammi Chen, "Racial Wealth Snapshot: Asian Americans," *Prosperity Now Blog*, May 10, 2018, https://prosperitynow.org/blog/racial-wealth-snapshot-asian-americans.

my inherent worth. It's contingent on the gracious attitudes of White people around me.

These race-judgements are difficult for anyone to admit, because they feel damning. We are supposed to be better than this. Still, the image and sounds of an "American" in most people's minds is clear. A bias for a White man as an American is, of course, not something you admit to if you don't want to be called racist in today's society. So we say an American can look like anyone, sound like anyone, but our race-judgements betray this wishful thinking. We say that we do not see race. We are beyond it. We're post-racial. We say it is just the rules. Permits take two weeks. Most Asians have accents. We say there was probable cause to think he was going to steal something. We say we didn't mean to . . . fill in the blank. Halos over all our words.

Perhaps this is because the racial biases in the standardized Englishes of civil society have not changed over the last two hundred or so years. Structures are durable. Maybe it's because our relations to people and languages that are different from the White, middle class standard have not changed. Maybe those who make the rules haven't changed. Maybe the training in language and our attitudes about language haven't changed. Maybe the same White, middle- and upper-class, monolingual, masculine habits of English continue to be the only standard against which everyone is judged. Maybe all we've done is stopped talking about the differences. Maybe we talk about our similarities as if that negates differences. Maybe we all use the Southern language strategy in our daily lives, talking about racialized things without mentioning race. Maybe we just stopped admitting that we see and hear differences, allowing our biases to run implicitly wild.

The absence of racial talk in society has meant we have not critically read our own words, and the relations they create with our world and others. Our inattention to race-judgements in our English languages has been a recipe not just for the denial but the reproduction of racial problems. How do we get to hard solutions about racism and White supremacy if we have no language for them, if we have no questions about them that we all can discuss? Yet sometimes, I admit, language is too magical to talk about. It has too much historical power. We don't always know how to proceed, how to untangle or unbend tangled and bent words. But we have to.

In Mrs. Whitmore's second grade class, the same class that I had won the reading contest, one of my Black classmates called me, "honky." We were casual friends, or friends at school. I don't recall his name, but I don't think we were arguing or fighting either.

The word was so loud that Mrs. Whitmore heard it about twenty feet away, or maybe she was listening for it. I don't remember our exchange. I

just remember standing in front of Mrs. Whitmore next to my friend, feeling guilty, the class behind us supposedly working. This White teacher looked down at us with stern eyes, wagging a finger in one hand, the knuckles of her other on the corner of her desk. "Do you know what that word means?" her eyes darting between him and me. Her silence and waiting for an answer hurt. I mean, my skin burned.

I didn't expect such harshness from her. Her words had hard intonations, "what that word means." The T's and D's had something extra in them, like stones. I felt assaulted, hit by little word hammers in the face. I thought she might actually physically hurt me. I didn't really know how she wanted us to answer her question, even though I'd heard that world a lot around school and on Statz. It wasn't usually thrown at me, so I was shocked because it just seemed like we were talking, nothing to get upset about. But she was clearly upset.

"Honky is a mean word. Can you think of another word just as mean?"

Mrs. Whitmore looked right at my friend. He lowered his head and brushed his hand along a table near him that had art supplies and stacks of construction paper on it. Another long, burning pause. More stones and hammers. I just stood there, silent. I knew the word she was wanting us to imagine in our heads. The word was too magical, too powerful, too heavy. I could not say it.

I wish that I could say that I was righteously mad at her, asking us to conjure that word in our heads, as if a word for a word was the appropriate response here, but I wasn't that keen. I wish I could say that I understood how unfair and badly she handled this incident, but I didn't know. I wish I could have just thought: "Go ahead, say it, say the fucking word! You want to square things? As if that word will square it. So square it, angry White lady! Show us how wrong we are!" But I was frightened and confused. I was seven. I was not that righteous. I was silent.

What was equally confusing and disorienting to me in all this was that I knew that the word honkey was really about her, not me. I'm not a honkey. I'm Asian, and to some Mexican, but Brown for sure—that was in my head. Maybe that's why I didn't take offense to the word. I knew this, and even if my friend didn't, he knew I was Brown. No one mistook me for White.

Now, I see unexamined implicit racial biases circulating in that moment in all three of us. The bias of race as only a binary. I had to fit into that binary somewhere. The bias of being outside of race, of thinking that others' ideas of who I am did not matter or were wrong. I stood aloof, outside of the word honky, even though my mom is White. The bias of assuming everyone must be treated exactly the same. It is a language stance of false neutrality, one that ignores history and context in the name of fairness. You cannot ignore so many structures that make you.

All words are not created equal. The two words in question were not equal in power. And yet, the one with the most power got to act on her biases, act as if they cause the same damage, act on her halo of feelings.

RACE-MIXING AND LANGUAGING

When race is a mixture, or when we mix up race, mistake it, race-judgements also get mixed and mixed up. My mixed race background has often created problems for most people around me, particularly when they first meet me. My father is Japanese from Hawai'i, two generations removed from immigration to Hawai'i. This makes him Sansei, and my brother and me, Yonsei. Everyone on my dad's side is Japanese from Japan. My mom is a mixture of a number of ethnic heritages: English and maybe Scottish, likely Irish, and either Greek or Italian. But much of that history is fuzzy. Her family migrated a generation before from Oklahoma and Arkansas to California and finally settled in Oregon.

I never really knew my dad. By the time I started school, my parents had long since divorced, and my mom was a single parent living far away from her family in Oregon. Our dad didn't pay any child support until I was deep into high school, but my mom was ingenious, smart, and hard working. She worked two, sometimes three jobs, all low-paying, most menial. During my time on Statz Street, I didn't feel rejected and shunned by my friends and neighbors. I just felt different, but not in a bad way. I wasn't ostracized, or put down. It was school that gave me most of my trouble.

Once we reached junior high school, we had moved to a primarily White, working class trailer park on a different side of town, near a working class Latine neighborhood. No one in Pecos Trailer Park wanted us there from the first day. There were petitions to get us kicked out and lots of complaints about us, the two Brown kids. When my mom signed the lease originally, my brother and I were not with her—she looked White—so when we showed up, everyone freaked out. My mom had to call an attorney to threaten the park to leave us alone. You can't kick people out because they are Brown. That's essentially what the attorney had to say.

The Vegas sun darkened my skin considerably, so much so that I was usually mistaken as Mexican, called "wetback" and "beaner" every day by those neighbors and others at school. I can remember the awful, guilty feeling in my skin that I'd feel in every room I entered, every social situation. I could see their stares of disgust or disdain when they looked at my brother and me. The racism and resentment toward us was explicit. I can remember the feeling of cold dismissal by the White working class parents of my friends living around us in the

neighborhood. It was a cold stare from their porch, a slow turn away. No words. No smile. No "how are you." No "good day," just silence and stares. We'd gotten out of the ghetto, I'd thought, but had we gone up? It often didn't feel like it.

At park get-togethers, someone would inevitably ask me, "why are you here?" It wasn't an existential question, but one about "going back to where you came from." I was told that many times too. Once my brother and I crouched beneath our front window, hiding alone in our trailer, as a middle aged White man from down the street yelled at us from outside with his fist in the air. "Your days are numbered!" he said to us, with a crowd of White kids around him.

We couldn't figure out what the hell we'd done, but that guy was really mad, demanding that we come out and pay the piper. Keep in mind, I'm a child of 12 or 13, not an adult. He, the White man yelling at us, was the adult. Needless to say, I did not feel at home or welcome most of the time in that trailer park. It seemed pretty clear. No race mixing.

It wasn't just our neighbors that made such race-judgements. It was the park management too. My brother and I were often stopped while walking around the park by Fred, the park manager, who would ride around in a golf cart each day. He'd stop us, ask us in an accusatory way, "What are you doing? Someone was throwing rocks at a trailer down the street. Did you do that?" This was not a question he asked any of the other numerous kids in the park. Just my brother and me. I know this because I asked the other kids, and I knew Fred's grandkids, who also lived in the park. They told me in no uncertain terms that their grandfather, Fred, did not like us. He was looking for ways to get rid of the two beaners in the park.

Of course, we never did any of the stuff they accused us of. Mom was explicit about us always being "on our best behavior." The family had two strikes against us, one more and they could kick us out for real. That threat was in an official letter from the park management. Forget the fact that there was no reason for the two strikes in the first place. The lesson I learned was: Some folks only get one pitch at the plate. Others get more. Life is not generous or understanding when you are Brown.

My mom lived her life by this creed: You get one swing at the plate. Don't fuck it up. But Fred and the other White, working class adults in the park didn't care about any of this. Their racism was obvious, even to a child. They weren't trying to be fair. They were using their race-judgements to preserve the world they knew, only they called those judgements about behavior and wrong-doing. It was a kind of Southern language strategy, with actual racist language bursting out at times. They never would have said they were racist. But their world didn't have Brown kids playing with their kids in it, or dating their daughters. That was always off limits. Their world only understood Brown people as beaners and

trouble makers who resided on the other side of the trailer park wall. No place for Japanese nuance. Go back to where you came from. We don't want you here. That was always their implication.

From my perspective, I hadn't done anything wrong. I was a good kid. My favorite hobby was reading and writing stories for god's sake. How was I so bad? We couldn't leave our trailer after school because my mom didn't get home from work until after 6 pm. How could I get into any trouble? I didn't even like doing any of the things that they accused me of constantly, throwing rocks at trailers, chalking up sidewalks and streets, vandalizing soda machines. I was not a risk taker. I wanted people to like me. There was too much at stake. Only one swing. I had to make every at-bat count.

None save Chris, my French Canadian friend, was ever allowed to socialize with us in public. That friend, whom my brother and I still know today, lived with this dad, who was a no-bullshit guy. He drove a truck and was gone a lot, so he had no time for trailer park politics. Outside of that one friend, we had to have the rest of our friends in secret. We, the Brown kids, were off limits. Chris did not fucking care about the others, and he didn't like the trailer park management either.

What may have helped at this moment, the transition from junior high to high school, was that I was starting to do well in school. The three of us took classes in school together, some honors classes. Chris was really smart, likely had a near photographic memory, spoke French, English, and some Islandic. He respected others who were smart. The other kids in the park didn't seem smart to him, or to me for that matter. They weren't in our classes in school, and they didn't do things we did, like read for fun.

There was likely a class thing going on too. Chris always had a thing about class, that is, him not being working class or lower class. He had lived in houses in nice neighborhoods before this. He could afford things like new clothes, albums, and video games. His jokes and digs made fun of the people around us in the park. How they talked, what they looked like, how they dressed. But this gave us, Chris and me, a common enemy, the racist, White working class people around us. We just had different reasons to hate them. Looking back now, all his comments and digs at Fred and his grandkids and the others in the park were likely his way of saying, I'm not like them. I'm not "White trash." I'm better. Chris was the one who introduced me to this racialized socio-economic term, White trash. It was his demon, likely one that followed him from his Buffalo roots.

So when at thirteen, the girl across the street and one trailer down from us had a crush on me, told me several times, I was conflicted. She wanted us to be boyfriend and girlfriend. She was persistent. I refused her many times. I kind of liked her, didn't mind hanging out with her, but her dad would throw rocks

at me when I walked home from school past his trailer. Can you imagine that, a grown-ass man throwing rocks and racist insults at little boys walking home from school? "Go back to where you came from, you fucking beaner!" he would say. That is a direct quote. I would purposefully walk the long way around, taking a different street than my own, so that I could avoid walking in front of his trailer. That route took me past most of my friends' trailers. Their parents' mean stares and cold shoulders were better than dodging rocks and insults.

I'm positive my neighbor knew nothing of his daughter's feelings for me, but even then I wondered if she was trying to get back at her dad for some reason. She didn't seem to like him, and would tell me so. "My dad, oh, he's an asshole," she would say flippantly. Huh? That made no sense to me. Kids were supposed to love their parents. At least, you gotta dad, I thought to myself. That's a precious thing to throw away. While I agreed with her—her dad was an asshole—I surely would not tell that to anyone. On top of this confusion, I remember wondering why would she want to be my girlfriend? I'm trouble. Her dad hates me about as much as anyone can hate anyone, so I thought. But she clearly did not hate me, or did she? Maybe she just hated her dad more than she hated me? I could not tell.

In her trailer, we would play her Atari video games when her parents were away, Frogger, Asteroids, Space Invaders, Pitfall. It was fun and thrilling, yet scary at the same time. What if her dad or mom came back and caught me in their home? We were both taking risks, and maybe that was the excitement in it for us. And there was always this undercurrent of sexuality between us. Maybe it was her open nature, her willingness to just ask me to be her boyfriend out of the blue, I'm not sure. Maybe it was her constant flirting with me. She wanted to show me her body, and me to show her mine.

We never had sex or did anything like that. It felt too dangerous to me, but we were both just becoming teenagers, learning about ourselves and our sexualities. We did talk. And yet, as exciting as all this was, as much as I wanted it and didn't want it at the same time, as much as I hated her dad but enjoyed her company, I wanted to leave the trailer park, leave her and her racist dad behind. I wanted to walk down my own street without being accosted by adults and their words. I wanted to not be in the middle of a daughter's disagreements with her dad. I wanted to be more certain that when a girl said she liked me, she really did like me, and I wanted her dad to like me too. I didn't want to be the only Brown kid around, the outsider.

I have always had lots of reasons to leave the places I've lived, the first reason was poverty, after that, it was usually racism.

It didn't help matters that my physiognomy seemed to match my mistaken identity in the park. My Black hair, Brown eyes, dark skin, and short stature confirmed to everyone around me that I was Mexican. It has never mattered what

my English sounded like, and it really doesn't. That's not a clear indicator of one's cultural or racial heritage. But it matters just enough to be ignored and not enough to make things fair. I've often been stopped in stores or on the street and had a question asked of me in Spanish. But I don't speak or read Spanish. I just look like I do. I get why the mistake happens. It's understandable. Race-judgements.

Because we avoid race talk so much in the U.S., our language is usually ill-equipped to articulate race and language together. We don't know how to understand the social phenomenon of race and of language as paradoxical, as both and, as both important and unimportant, as vital and something to put aside. We think that mentioning race is racist, that noticing it and talking about it is racist. We don't have ways to cleanly and compassionately talk about race as a way to make decisions that are not about being racist. Part of this problem is due to the fact that racism is an almost inevitable outcome of most language-judgements baked into our systems, society, and the ways we communicate.

We usually don't mean to be racist, but it happens as a matter of course. Mrs. Whitmore, my trailer park neighbors, Fred, my college friend Erik, Chris, even me, none of us meant to be racist most of the time, but we all worked from the same kinds of race-judgements. We were trying to be good, trying to do what we understood was good for each other and ourselves. Our conditions didn't quite allow this. Our intentions didn't matter. We are all, whether we admit it or not, fighting in the tacit language war.

The racist insults and aggressions toward my brother and me were so frequent that I cultivated a racist hatred for Mexicans myself that would take many years to shake. I couldn't see how such racism around me was not only infectious, like a virus, but pitted similarly oppressed groups and individuals against each other. I had more in common with the working poor Mexican kids in the nearby areas—just over the trailer park wall, in fact—than my working class, White neighbors. But the messages that surrounded me, many of which came from the books I was reading and the language practices that were reinforced in school, as well as others' misunderstandings of who I was, moved me to reject this kinship and seek White acceptance. Or rather, I sought acceptance by taking on White racial habits of language—by being literate in so called standard and conventional ways with words. I knew, even back then, that my languaging would not be enough. I was trying to jump to the winning side of the war, not realizing that winning ain't the point when you're in the middle of the war. It's making peace, and how you fight it, and how you stay alive, not just that you do.

The keys to the gates of success and acceptance were, I thought, in mastering standardized English, in being smart. In reality, this kind of impulse divided me from my brothers and sisters of color nearby and conquered us all, either by keeping us in poverty or colonizing our minds and tongues. It is

hard to fight a revolution against an oppressor with their own gun, a gun that only shoots at you.[10]

This psychology is deceptive and enticing because there's some truth to it. There is an element of truth to the argument that someone like me would improve himself, could get up and out, if he learns to HOWL, if he learns a standardized English. I certainly have done this, but this ain't completely true. We can fool ourselves into believing that our best option is to learn standardized English, to be on the White winning side of the war. But that ain't fully true either. It ignores structures that need changing. It ignores the harm done to those who do not live in conditions that allow them to survive and thrive in school or other White places. It ignores the vast numbers of people who cannot jump sides in the war. And it ignores the fact that being a winner in an unfair and racist system means you lose the ethical fight for your own soul. You are a bad guy who won. I'd rather be a good guy losing than a bad guy winning.

This psychology of White acceptance through taking on habits of White language divides those of us who do not inhabit the world already using such an English. It creates tremendously difficult obstacles to success in school or elsewhere for those who do not fit into the stereotype of what an English speaker is supposed to look like, or who a "real American" speaking English is supposed to be. To see HOWL as the only way to conduct business, logic, school, learning, whatever, is misguided and promotes White language supremacy. This was easy for me to feel growing up, but not understand.

In my first semester as a Freshman in high school, I was determined to get all A's, to be smart, to study hard every day, so I did. I made lists of short, medium, and long term goals and connected them to my path, a narrative, to college. I was thinking about college, getting in, and getting out of this place. It's a pattern I'd keep for the rest of my life. Make goals. Always be looking for a way out of this place. That year, I wrote my goals out on paper, put them in my school binder to look at each day. I worked at school harder than I ever had before. It was all I thought about.

When report cards came out, I had achieved all A's and one B. I was taking mostly honors courses, French, Biology, Algebra. And the class I got a B in? English, not honors English, regular English. How is that possible? I was a voracious reader, loved writing, did it all the time at home. I studied every day for several hours. The only game I played was a reading and writing game, a language game, D&D. I had explicit goals about my grades and learning, read

10 I take inspiration for this analogy from my reading of Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984; repr., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 4th ed., ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), 94–97).

them ritualistically to myself every morning. How could an English teacher give me a B in the only non-honors course I took? Now, I think, how could I have gotten anything else? English and the body go hand in hand. We don't just write or speak our languages. We embody them. English is racialized. Brown kids don't get A's in English.

I was coming to understand this insight, but I didn't have it yet. Instead, I took the B in English as a personal failure. Just one more pothole in the road, but I'm still on the road, at least. I must not have worked hard enough. I didn't put all the clues together. Our judgements of language are also about people, bodies, and places, which makes them also about misplaced or displaced people and bodies.

I could discern the broad brushstrokes, the racism, the unfairness, the misjudgements, the pain, the anger, the disappointment, the yearning. I could feel the paradoxes in my situation, in my own languaging and how people judged me and my language, how they judged me out of place, but I couldn't see how it was all connected to bigger systems, like school and the English I loved playing with. I couldn't see that if we could just stop seeing the world of language as an unordered world in need of ordering, as tangled tongues in need of straightening, then we might do better.[11] We might see or hear difference not as a threat but as an invitation.

But the system had another answer to fight this truth, an answer I accepted for a long time. The system got me to tell myself that my initial kind of English was not even a kind of English, but a deficit, a substandard, flawed English. I could shoot the gun back at the oppressive system, say in school by using my first English, the language of Statz, but I knew I'd get hit instead. I'd be the one hurt. I'd get bad grades. I'd stay remedial, a label that took up to ninth grade to shake. Like Chris and his needing to not be White working class, I too didn't want to be remedial, to be stupid, to be stuck in such places as I was for the rest of my life. I wanted to live in a house, not an apartment or a trailer. I wanted that home to be clean. I wanted to live without cockroaches. The English of books and school seemed to be the pathway to that better place.

But the main reasons for why this strategy seemed to work for me was not because I worked hard. It is because I have some racial privileges that my Black friends on Statz didn't have. Race ain't a toggle or an either-or thing, it's a sliding scale of color. The darker you are the worse off you are, the steeper the climb, the more obstacles there are in front of you on the road. Because I had an advantage over my Black peers in school, the advantage of Brown and not Black skin, the

11 I draw inspiration for the metaphor of tangled tongues from Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999).

advantage of a White mom who spoke a dominant English, the advantage of model-minority Asian-ness, even if ambiguously and contingently Asian. My hard work in those remedial reading classes over time paid off because my racialized conditions allowed my work to pay off. Maybe not in A's, but in B's.

Don't get me wrong, a B ain't bad. In most cases, it's very good, but I now see that it exists in a linear judgement system, one that takes a multitude of Englishes and ranks them on one scale. That scale requires a single standard, and that standard has to come from somewhere, a place I was not from. Like the A or F, the B grade is a symbol of a flawed system for judging language. And I could feel even then that it meant I was "like" normal but not, like my White peers but not, like Chris who always got straight-As but not.

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On the first day of my Freshman year in high school, the teacher, a kind White lady from Boston asked my brother and me to write something on the board. My teacher would say "bah" for bar, and "cah" for car. And yes, my brother and I were in all the same classes together that year. We walked up and wrote the answers on the board. Some students laughed. I don't know why they did. Maybe because we were twins. Maybe we looked funny to them. We were short and slight of build. Maybe they didn't know how to react to twins like us. The class was a mix of White, Black, and Latine students, but mostly White. It was an advanced course, so while we were freshmen, most in the class were juniors and seniors. The teacher interrupted their laughter.

"Don't laugh at em," she said with a half-smile in her Boston language. "They're likely smata than you ah." The reference was to our Asian-ness, our being only Freshman in a class taken mostly by juniors and seniors, our being small and young in an Algebra class meant for older students. She was assuming a lot. She didn't know us yet. She was trying to help though, but such help also hurts everyone. It's a mixed up and mixed race-judgement.

PASSING IN THE TACIT RACE WAR

I'm in Corvallis, Oregon in college with friends. It's the first days of spring and the sun is out. In Oregon, when the sun starts to come out and the grass dries up, and the air is warmer, everyone wants to go outside, to feel the sun's rays bathe them. It makes sense after so many months of clouds and drizzle. The sun makes you feel good. On this day, there are lots of students out in the MU lawn, on rooftops, in front yards sunbathing. They are all White kids. It is Oregon State University. It is not a place known for its color. No one notices this, but me.
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I'm with a few friends (all White) who suggest we get some towels and blankets and find a warm sunny spot and take advantage of the sunny afternoon.

"You go ahead," I say. I'm not interested. In my head, I think that I prefer rainy days. I'm not melancholy. I just enjoy the smell of wet asphalt. A cloudy day gives me a comforting feeling like a cozy blanket. It offers a gentle mood to me. It clears my mind, lets me think. An overcast day feels like the world is slowing down and hugging me. I also like to feel water from the sky. I think how amazing it is that a drop of water can travel so far, from the Pacific Ocean up into the sky tens of thousands of feet, then back down to hit me on the forearm or tongue. Or maybe, I think, it is growing up in Las Vegas, too much sun and other things. I'm done with the sun and all that.

"Why? C'mon, we'll have fun. We're all going. It's so nice out," a friend says cheerfully. She's really excited about it. She's White, speaks Spanish, did a few semesters in a South American country. She always seemed extravagant and elegantly oblivious to her privilege.

"No, thanks. I have some homework to do inside. You have fun." I leave. They go to lie in the sun. And as I walk away, I know why I don't like sunbathing for sunbathing's sake. Browning for Brown skin's sake. It's the same reason I've been afraid to go to Mexico—still cannot go today. I have an irrational fear of not being let back into the U.S. once I cross the border. My home will be denied me because to others I don't seem to be from my home. They'll tell me I have to go back to wherever I came from.

After a few years in Oregon, my skin has begun to lighten up. I think that my wish is coming true. I look White. I'm passing. I am becoming Encyclopedia Brown. I have all these White friends. I don't want to look Brown. I want to look White. I think, if I get too much sun, I'll look dirty. I ain't dirty. Ironically, this too, the need to stay out of the sun, separates me from my White friends. No race mixing in a race-mixed world.