# AN INTRODUCTION

Our language participates in racial violence. That is, we are all enlisted, whether we like it or not, into an invisible and very deadly racial war waged around us daily. That's too much to tell you this soon. Let me come back to this in a few pages.

Years ago, I was introduced to an elder's wife in a church that my wife, two sons, and I were visiting. We thought we might join that church. We had just moved to town. It was my first professor job after getting my Ph.D. We were in an unfamiliar place, southern Illinois. The elder's wife, an older, White woman who spoke loudly, was greeting us in the foyer. It was our first visit to the church. She asked our names. I said, "My name is Asao Inoue. This is my wife, Kelly, and my sons, Kiyoshi, and Takeo." She replied, "Well, you don't make it easy." I didn't know what to say, except to smile awkwardly at her and never go back to that church again.

In many ways, this anecdote is symbolic of my literacy journey, of what you may find in the following pages. I know that the elder's wife did not mean to be unkind or unwelcoming, but she was. She didn't mean to insult me or my name or my heritage, but she did. She didn't mean to open a wound of mine that was inflicted when I was seven or eight years old, but she did that, too. Should I have given her and that all-White church another chance? Maybe, but why is it that in such exchanges that involve race and language, it is the person of color who must always do the forgiving, who must always overlook the faults and missteps of the White people around them?

I don't mean to lay all of the blame on that White woman's shoulders. She wasn't trying to be mean or racist. She's really just a symptom of racism in our society, not the cause. She likely lived her entire life in the Midwest, in southern Illinois, in communities of mostly, if not completely, White people like her. She most likely had never confronted her own racial positioning or considered how her words were tied to the community she came from. Her environment never asked her to, never showed her clearly her own Whiteness. She likely was always an insider. She was a product of a culture that allowed her to think that making fun of someone's Japanese name was okay, that jokes are just jokes, words just words, that race and our histories of racism don't factor into her words or our names. She didn't mean to be racist in conditions that make racism.

Race is a set of structures that make up our lives. Language is one of those structures. Language and names are conjured in groups of people who use their language together. In this seemingly innocent exchange that was ostensibly about being welcoming and learning our names, this White lady could not see how salient race is to our use of language and the judgements that language is

interlaced with.[1] In one sense, this book attempts to illustrate just how salient race is to language, judgement, and our attitudes towards language and people around us who use it.[2]

Let me be clear. This book is for students of language. I don't mean just for school purposes, but for anyone who wants to learn about the connections between language and racism and who are not researchers or scholars of language, just regular people interested in this thing we do together, language, and in stopping the racial violence in our world. In many ways, I envisioned a first-year college student audience or a high school senior as I wrote this book. I try to open up the kinds of discussions about language, judgement, and racism that I have with first-year college students in my writing courses.

I am not offering a memoir. This book is not a straight narrative of a boy's coming to his own literacy. In fact, I resist rehearsing a coherent or chronological narrative of my schooling or of my learning to read and write, so you may resist how I've written this book. We have plenty of books about Brown and Black kids who made it or didn't. You don't get to pity me or be amazed at all that I have done. That's not my story here.

In my experience, those kinds of literacy narratives, as useful as they are in many ways, also too often are an excuse for White readers to wallow in the exotic, to feel pity and sadness for the poor Brown kid, then feel good about how they feel about racism because they felt good about sympathizing with the Brown or Black author. Those narratives often mingle the pathos of the writer of color with what that writer is offering as analysis, critique, or solutions to racism or White supremacy. And when it comes to race and Whiteness, White readers often have difficulty with all these things for some valid reasons, which I'll get into.

White readers too often act as if rooting for the Brown kid, being on his side, is enough. It is not. You must *do* antiracist work, as Ibram X. Kendi has explained.[3]

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1 I spell this word "judgement," realizing that the more common way to spell it is "judgment," with only one "e." I do this because, well, it looks better to me, complete. It's my languaging. It also preserves in a visual way the operative word, "judge," with the implications of an agent who has their own perspective, a judge with a singular view of things. Judgements do not just happen. They come from a judge who "judges." A judgement is the end of an action. I'm preserving the noun and verb in my word. I like to keep all of these meanings visualized and represented in the word on the page. And if it bothers you to read it this way, that's one of my points in this book. It should also be noted that this is the common British spelling of the word, but I'm not using this spelling to favor that standardized spelling over an American one.

2 I take this idea of saliency from Robin DiAngelo. She says: "We all occupy multiple and intersecting social positionalities. I am White, but I am also a cisgender, woman, able-bodied, and middle-aged. These identities don't cancel out each other; each is more or less salient in different contexts." See, Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), xvi.

3 Ibram X. Kendi, *How To Be An Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019).

It's not enough to just feel for others' misfortunes and abstain from racism. We must act in different ways and change the structures in our lives that enable us to act or stand by and watch. The structures I mean in this book are those that maintain acceptable language in schools and public spaces—that is, what we often call, "Standard American English," "Dominant American English," and what I call "Standardized American English." More on this later in the book, too.

Our habits are often strong, comforting, even when they hurt us, or do not help us. It's hard to give up a habit—say smoking, or eating too many sweets, or saying "like" in front of every other sentence, or smiling when you are nervous. In many ways, this book is about habits of language that become our ways of communicating and judging words and people. This book is also my literacy story. It describes some of the important things that made me into the languageling I am today.

But this book is not simply a story about a poor Brown kid from the ghetto who made it out and up. It cannot be. It is also about the ways we all participate in the White language supremacist systems and conditions that we work, live, and do language in. It is about our names for things and people, about the race-judgements we make in and through our language that we may not know we are doing. It's about the economics of race that affect our languaging. It's about the Whiteness in language and how I'm not a good example of how great our systems are.

This book will not give you a linear narrative or chronological story of my life or education, yet paradoxically you can find that chronology in these pages if you wish to piece it together. I will not always engage in the habits of language that you likely expect in stories like this one. Even if you can't say exactly what those expectations are, I guarantee that you will feel them when they are broken in books like this. I'm hoping many of my readers will notice this about their own expectations and habits of language. I hope you will feel your expectations broken. This is one small stone in the path to antiracist languaging.

For instance, I ain't gonna always write whatcha call Standard American English all the time. I will not always give you an experience about myself then interpret that experience or make sense of it for you. I may reverse that order or skip one part, or I may use it. I am not going to tell you a story about me only, as if doing that would explain my languaging.

These kinds of common expectations in books like this one are the habits of the English language that I'm trying to critique, trying to understand with you as I tell my literacy story. So I may use them, because that's my training in school, but that ain't the only way I language. Like you and many others, I too have a hard time imagining what language is like—or what it could be—outside of these standardized ways of doing it. I'm not above these common habits of

language, these habits of White language (more on that later, too). No one is. But I'm trying to work around them as much as with them.

So, what is my method in this book? There is a scene that I'm trying to show, one that has no central actor, and yet I am the subject of this literacy narrative. But it ain't just my literacy narrative. It cannot be. To understand my literacy, I need to drop myself onto a landscape with lots of other interesting people, ideas, and topography that I want you to know next to me. You should know about Freire and Western and Taoist dialectic differences in habits of language, know about the economics of racism, about textbooks and my experiences, about naming in other places I've never been, and about Horatio Alger. I want you to know all these things so you can simulate an orientation to language like mine, so you can come close to knowing me and my languaging as I do. You'll miss too much if you focus just on my schooling, or my reading history, or my story. Furthermore, why should I talk just about me, yet how can I talk about anyone else?

My opening scene above is a good example of this tension. It seems so natural to start a book about my literacy journey in this way. So many other books start in similar ways. I start with me and my name, an experience you, my reader, can see and connect with. A good way to start a story about literacy is with a story about names and language, right? Now, what I'm describing is a set of language habits that are so ingrained in English language users that they can seem natural and right. If I did something else, you may not find my book worth continuing past the first page. You may think I'm not a good writer. You may think I got bad editorial advice. You may wonder: How is this a story about this guy's literacy or education? These judgements come out of White, middle- and upper-class, monolingual English language habits that I want to call attention to in this book. Why? Because they make up many of our literacy stories and they hurt so many, particularly when they are used in society as universal standards and used to withhold opportunities and rewards.

So, part of my reasoning for how I have written this book is to help readers escape from a false sense of knowing about "good" language and its "appropriate" standards. Another part is about understanding our feelings about language that influence our judgements and expectations of people and their words. And another part is about understanding racism and the White supremacy in our literacy practices. What I aim to do is disrupt your expectations about how such stories of literacy like mine are told by disrupting what you think learning English means and what it takes to understand it in any of us.

In many places, then, my discussion will sound less like a story of my experiences and more like an exposition of other things, an argument. In those places, it may sound like a discussion of education, history, language, testing,

economics, or race in the US. And that is because it is. I don't think I can tell my story of learning to read and write without telling a larger story of language and judgement in the US, even if only in parts. Who I am, and how I use language, what I think of that language, is connected to many other things in the world, in my life, in history. And most of these larger things, I do not control. And for many of us, they are invisible. I want to make them more visible.

Some of these things, these structures, are economic and governmental systems. Others are narratives and ideas in U.S. culture that are interlaced with language and ideas about language, which often seem to be about other things, not race. For instance, the notions we have about how a smart person talks—that's a set of structures, narratives, and ideas that we use to make decisions about things and people. And those structures about what smart sounds like are connected to lots of other structures, like economic, geographic, and educational systems, all of which no single individual controls. So my literacy story, like everyone's, is also a story about larger systems in place that we all live in and shape us in different ways. My story of literacy, like yours, is really a story of structures, of systems that make me, and that now I try to remake.

It is often more comforting to believe that we are in full control of who we are and how we use the languages we do. This allows us, especially teachers and bosses, to blame others for not communicating in ways we think they should. Thinking you have full control of your languaging means that when someone else thinks you don't language well, it's your fault. And while I do believe we have a lot of control over who we are and what happens in our lives, I do not believe we control all of it, nor do I think just anything is possible for every person.

There are boundaries and limits to what we can do, and those limitations are not the same for everyone. I'm not saying that some people are inherently less than others. I'm saying people commune and live among other people in groups, and these groups have different relations to the systems we all work in. Those relations to systems matter because they create walls and doorways.

It is the systems in place, like schools, civic life, economic markets, governments, churches, even our systems of language and standards for language that make the conditions of our lives. These systems create and structure what is possible for us and how our own words will be valued or heard or understood by others. Thus, what is possible for any given person is not equal. That White elder's wife was a product of White supremacist systems just as much as I am, as we all are. And the question I want to ask through my own literacy narrative is this: *How do we come to understand the White language supremacist conditions in our lives in order to remake those conditions for a more equitable, antiracist, and better world?*

Now, let me come back to my opening statement. Language participates in violence. This is the reason I write this book now in this way. It's the exigency for this book. It's also a tacit argument for teaching languaging in writing classrooms in ways that matter to our lives, not just to arguments, to bodies in the street, but I won't make the explicit teaching argument here. Teachers will have to figure that out, just as other readers will have to figure out why this kind of book is important at this moment in our world. But in or out of the classroom, we all are fighting an invisible racialized war on the battlefield of words. And what's at stake is White language supremacy.

As I write this introduction, there are numerous protests, rallies, and activist groups across the US, even in other countries, demanding that police violence against Black bodies stop, that local governments defund their police departments, that they invest in community policing and programs that help and nurture Black people, not treat them as criminals first, which then justifies any violence done to them, including killing them. These widespread protests have come after the brutal and indiscriminate killing of George Floyd by a White Minneapolis police officer while other police officers stood guarding that officer as he slowly choked Mr. Floyd to death.

While Floyd was being killed in front of a group of people, some recorded it on their cell phones. One video captured Floyd begging in a weak choking voice, "Please, I can't breathe." The video quickly went viral and sparked the protests. It is traumatic for many Brown and Black people, like me, to watch. I have actually not watched it in its entirety. I can't. It's too painful. One reason is that this is just one of the many killings of Black citizens in the US by police for no reason. It is a synecdoche of many, many other police killings and violence against Black bodies in the US. It's one killing that reveals the many others before it. The protests wouldn't be so numerous, loud, and ubiquitous if this kind of racialized violence weren't a long, historical, and racialized pattern. It's one way White supremacy occurs.

How could a police officer, charged to protect and defend citizens, do such a thing? What conditions create such killing, such disregard for a human life? What orientation to the world and words must it take to ignore a begging, choking, dying Black man in front of you? How could his words not be heard by that White police officer, or any of the others? This book, my literacy story, aims to explain why. So I hope you will bear with me, sit in some discomfort (if you feel it at times), and take the full journey with me.

One of the central themes about language in this book is that words have real effects on us, emotionally, physically, even spiritually. They are more than logos, than reasoning, more than terms and ideas. The ancient, fifth century (BCE), pre-Hellenic (Greek) philosopher and teacher of orators, Gorgias, named this language phenomenon as magical. He said,

> Speech is a powerful lord, which by means of the finest and most invisible body effects the divinest works: it can stop fear and banish grief and create joy and nurture pity. . . . Fearful shuddering and tearful pity and grievous longing come upon its hearers, and at the actions and physical sufferings of others in good fortunes and in evil fortunes, through the agency of words, the soul is wont to experience a suffering of its own. . . . Sacred incantations sung with words are bearers of pleasure and banishers of pain, for, merging with opinion in the soul, the power of the incantation is wont to beguile it and persuade it and alter it by witchcraft and magic.[4]

I think it is important to notice how words work on us, how they make us and our emotional responses to others and their words. Because language can have such magical effects on us, like witchcraft, beguiling us in various ways, it seems prudent to notice, to pay attention when it happens and that it does. I offer a short appendix essay at the end of this book that discusses a method for reading that I think may help you see the magic in words as you read. I call the practice *deep attentive reading*, and it can be an antiracist reading practice.

Furthermore, our emotions and understandings have a relationship to one another, often in ways we may not realize or want all the time. In his Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *House Made of Dawn*, N. Scott Momaday speaks of a grandmother and her languaging: "her regard for words was always keen in proportion as she depended upon them . . . for her words were medicine; they were magic and invisible. They came from nothing into sound and meaning. They were beyond price; they could never be bought nor sold. And she never threw words away."[5] If you have magic, you don't throw it away. You pay attention. You respect it, tend it, take special care of it, perhaps give it as a gift to others. We all do word magic. We just don't always realize it. We have a responsibility to pay attention.

But if we aim to be antiracist and anti-White supremacist in our actions and words, if we hope to stop the racial violence around us, then we should acknowledge the magic in words, how they are also tacitly racialized, how they work on us in invisible ways, how they limit and bind us, how they do violence as much

4 Gorgias, "Encomium of Helen," in *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, 2nd ed., ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 45.

5 N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 95–96, quoted in Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 100.

as attend to us in loving, compassionate, and medicinal ways. And of course, no one is above the magic of words, no one is above their own language conditions. If these conditions are White supremacist, then we all have responsibilities to attend to and tear down these systems and rebuild better ones.