

# THE WORDS WE USE MATTER

It's 1938, and 70 million people are tuned into the match. Joe Louis's muscles ripple as his fist makes impact with Max Schmeling's body. *Boom*. You catch the glint of his boxing glove before it strikes Schmeling's face again. *Boom*. "Louis measures him—right to the body! A left to the jaw," the commentator says, his pitch high, his words spitting out as fast as the punches. "Aaaand Schmeling is down! Five, six, seven, eight . . . The fight is over!"

Adjacent to Detroit's Hart Plaza, we were looking at an 8,000-pound, 24-foot-long monument of Joe Louis's fist. It was the meeting point for our tour.

"This," our tour guide, Kathy, shouted, gesturing behind her at *The Fist*, "was built in Venice, California. The monument's known as *The Fist*, and it belongs to our very own boxer, Joe Louis. It symbolizes to many people how Detroit is the *Comeback City*. You see, this city's getting much safer and cleaner than it ever was before. Our city's spirit is *strong*, just like Mr. Louis here!"

Priya raised her hand, squinting from the sun. "Why *Comeback City*?"

"Well"—Kathy's face scrunched up from distaste—"the city used to be very, very dangerous and—"

"Oh, well, after all, it was majority *Black*, right?" a visor-wearing tourist in the group said matter-of-factly.

Our eyes widened.

The group was silent.

"No, no, not like *that*," the tourist, Susan, stammered. She nervously adjusted her visor. "I'm *color-blind*, for Christ's sake!"

It was important to us to explain to Susan that being *color-blind* was nothing to be proud of—after all, if you can't see race, you can't see racism either. Instead, we cited Melody Hobson, and suggested she become *color-brave*. Or, as critical race theory calls for, we recommended "race-conscious" decision making. As we spoke, her eyes wandered and her body language seemed to say, "*Oh, boo hoo, stop being so picky about words!*"

Later in the tour, while crossing the street, Winona ran up to Kathy, notebook and pen in hand. "Hey, Kathy, I have a question about gentrification in the city..."

"Huh? Genti-what? What is that?"

We were surprised. We explained what gentrification was and how it impacts communities of color.

After the tour, we interviewed a student named Kasim at Wayne State University, who again showcased our point: "People here always say, 'Comeback City this and Comeback City that.' It just feels like a punch in the gut because it's code for gentrification. I was kicked out of my home. They upped the rent ridiculously on my family, like by four times the original rent, and I was homeless for a little bit. It's clear that all the Black people are getting kicked out, and all the White millennials are moving in. The city's getting safer, yes, but at what cost?"

The ignorance around "color-blind" and "gentrification" in Detroit was not an anomaly, and we quickly became exhausted. We didn't have the bandwidth, authority, or proper education ourselves to share with *everyone* what to never say, or what terms to know. Across the nation, we felt a gap between those with the "right" language to talk about race, and those without. We wondered whether it not only got in the way of talking about race, but our progress toward systematic equity itself.

The point of this chapter is not to provide you with a list of the "right" and "wrong" words, but to simply bring your consciousness *into* your words. The words we use matter. Words can show malice or ignorance. Words can make manifest dangerous ideologies and actions. Words—*your* words—hold tremendous power.

Traveling throughout the country, we noticed that because of generational differences and socioeconomic factors, the meaning of words is often contextual. At least five times, we were called "Oriental" by elderly folks. The term was once more commonly used, but now simply made us feel "exotic"—another Othering word we heard often. Another example: Martin Luther King, Jr., had said that he wanted a "color-blind society," but since then the phrase has transformed into a misleading veil, shielding people

who want to avoid talking about race altogether. So, to many people today, saying that you're color-blind, or that we live in a "post-racial" society, is like declaring, "Hey! I don't care about racism!"

Nevertheless, in Arkansas, we met an African-American civil rights activist who told us, "I just wish the world was a bit more color-blind, you know?" He was not actively racist, he just didn't have the updated vocabulary for talking about race. What we consider to be the "right" words is always evolving.

Whom we had less and less patience for, however, were the people who misused words, not because of socioeconomic or generational differences, but because they didn't *care*. Susan, the visor-wearing tourist, didn't believe that her words had impact, and ignored the complaints of people on the receiving end of them. "People are too sensitive," she had said, rolling her eyes.

Don't be that person. Recognize that the words you use matter. If a doctor walked up to a patient with a tumor and called it a bruise, wouldn't that drastically change the patient's treatment and likelihood of survival? Similarly, you must understand the weight of your words when diagnosing the racism in our nation. Ask yourself, "What's the history behind this phrase? Why do different words have different impact depending on the race of the person saying them? How might this word

minimize or invalidate another's experience?"

Later, we realized that Kathy was silent about *The Fist's* more—as she said—"controversial meanings." We learned that in the 1938 Louis versus Schmeling boxing match, Schmeling was supported by the Nazi regime. He was Hitler's poster boy, a glowing example of Hitler's theory of Aryan physical supremacy. And who was Louis? A Black man representing America. His right-hand knockout makes Schmeling, and the racism he represented, land with a *thud* on the ring floor.

To several of the Detroit locals we interviewed, Louis's monument doesn't symbolize the "Comeback City," which has become code for the rampant gentrification and displacement of Black families. Instead, Louis's 8,000-pound, 24-foot-long bronze fist also symbolizes a "tireless fight for justice." Furthermore, *The Fist* speaks to Detroit's rich, flawed, and resilient racial history—how Michigan Avenue is built upon the indigenous people's Great Sauk Trail, how Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech boomed through this city first, how Detroit was a major hub for the Underground Railroad.

Standing in *The Fist's* shadow, amid many ignorant remarks, we were reminded of something: intent should match impact. After all, whether you mean to or not, the words you use, and your silence, can both pack a mighty mean punch.

# LET'S ALL GET TO WORK

“Rocky,” Winona interjected, half an hour into our interview. “How do you know all these stories, if no one else in the community does?”

“Well, I do a lot of research, I read a lot of the old newspapers. People tell me things; I’m a local,” he responded. He uncomfortably rubbed his few remaining white hairs. “Well, I can’t say *local*, because my folks moved here in 1948, so I’m not *really* a local. But I want this museum to be very personal, a place for stories, not just a storage house for the artifacts. I want people to get the full story.”

Priya had frowned skeptically at Rocky’s resistance to identify as a local in Sundance, Wyoming, despite having lived there all his life. Although our two sets of parents did not know each other until a year into our friendship, they had moved, separately, from much larger U.S. cities to Princeton in 1999. Their jobs sent them, so they obeyed. Shortly afterward, we were both born in the same Princeton hospital, three months apart. Today, we’d unabashedly call ourselves Princeton locals.

We came to understand that Sundance culture is very different. Rocky didn’t consider himself *really* local because the “local” families had been there for *centuries*. Nestled in the northeastern hills of the least-populated U.S. state, the easy-to-miss town of 1,182 people rarely sees transience; most of the ranches have been run by the same German, Italian, and Scandinavian families since they chased out the “heathen” Lakota people after 1874. “The White families were taught to fear the Lakota, to hate them,” Rocky, the curator at

the Crook County Museum, told us. "That never really left . . . Sundance was built to be a wealthy, White town."

A historian by training, Rocky had spent the past few years digging up his town's racial history, an endeavor necessary because *no one* else he knew had even tried. One story from the late 1800s particularly makes him mad. Of the three Chinese laundries that used to be in town, only one stayed for a while. The owner was a Chinese man, and the White Sundance residents all agreed that he was making too much money. The Chinese man said, "I live here, I'm a good citizen, I'm giving it back," but they still wanted him to leave, and threw him in the middle of the streets, poured beer all over him, and called him a drunk. An article called "What Shall We Do With Him?" in the February 12, 1896, local issue of the *Crook County Monitor* wrote,

We fear that it has become a serious question as to what steps should be taken to permanently remove a crazy Chinaman from Sundance. Parties here have paid his transportation to Spearfish and Deadwood a number of times, in the hope that the people of his blood in those cities would care for him, but like a counterfeit coin the Chinaman invariably returns . . . The Chinaman is in a pitiable condition and should be sent by the government to his native land for treatment.

They eventually got rid of him by calling up an insane asylum in Denver to take him away, saying they were afraid "this gentleman gone mad" was going to harm somebody in town. "You know, the good ol' White supremacy thing," Rocky finished, sighing.

After leaving the museum, we picked up our lunch at Wild West Espresso, where the lady at the counter asked, by name, about the children of every passing customer. Two interviews later, we stomped our way through the snow to the medical clinic—which had slightly over or under ten employees "depending on the day"—and Priya asked the front desk where we could find a person of color to talk to. "Uh," the woman said, hesitating for a few seconds. "I believe the two Black people are out of town today."

Prejudice was not exclusively confined to race: a police officer we interviewed named Adrian told us that queer people were scared to come out after "what happened to Matthew Shepard," a gay University of Wyoming student who was brutally tortured and left to die in 1998. And in his experience, it didn't take much for hate to spread. His family had stopped talking to a cousin who unthinkably dyed her hair purple.

Rocky seemed puzzled when we told him we were much more interested in hearing his story, rather than, say, the "marvelously infamous" local story of an

American criminal, the Sundance Kid. He was extremely proud of his hometown history, yet he was also honest, often brutally so. He wasn't perfect—for example, he commonly referred to local Natives as the "Sioux," while some Lakota people in nearby Rapid City had told us it was an offensive term meaning "little snakes," given to them by their foe, the Ojibwe, and normalized by European fur traders. He admitted without prompting, "I might still have blinders on." Nevertheless, the extensive information in the museum and walking tour brochures made it clear: this history buff was *extremely* determined to pursue truth and justice.

He had applied what we call a "Racial-Literacy Lens."

We hear this question all the time: *If I want to show up in this messed-up world as antiracist, what should I do?*

The world already bestows us with answers. Organize the walkout! Call your senator! Donate to a nonprofit! Importantly, VOTE! But, while inspiring and necessary, these models of activism also encourage us to ask: Is that *all* we can do? And even if we do join in and post emphatically on social media about how much we love *Black Panther* or Oprah's Golden Globes speech . . . is that enough?

A framework we propose: put on your Racial-Literacy Lens. In other words, look

at both yourself and the world through a racially literate filter, *self*-activating first to become a more effective activist for others.

The formula has three steps, or "the three Cs":

**1. Be Conscious.** *Are you actively aware of race's impact?* Rocky didn't realize until later in his life that Sundance had a racist history. He listened, and he learned. He thought about it often afterward. He walked through the same space and had a completely different experience, just based on his consciousness.

**2. Be Critical.** *What are the specific problems?* Rocky knew no one in Sundance had easy access to a presentation of the full history.

**3. Be a Contributor.** *What are the best solutions you can pursue?* Identify the skills and resources you can leverage for social justice, and do the work. Rocky was already a curator. He decided to reflect that full history in his museum. (With his friends, he also never talked about Sundance the same way again. Remember: Solutions can be big or small, innovative or preexisting. Small acts matter too.)

This formula also applies to us. We started learning about race in Princeton. We became conscious. We realized that

our teachers weren't given the tools to teach about race. We were critical. We created a story-statistic model and a textbook. We were contributors.

To recap: Racial-Literacy Lens = Consciousness + Critique + Contribution.

An important note on the formula—the term “racial literacy” can be misleading, perhaps implying that we must only *become literate about race*. We really think of “racial literacy” as shorthand for racial *and* intersectional literacy *and* leadership. As you read in “Our Richness, Race and Beyond,” race and other identities are deeply intertwined; our lens should not be limited to racism. And *literacy* is meaningless without *action*: remember, just *thinking* about cooking won't put any dinner on the table. However, if everything we just mentioned was in the formula, we bet you wouldn't remember it. Plus, we believe that the focus on *becoming literate about race* as a first step will more naturally lead to the rest.

Think about the stories that have impacted you most so far from this book. Maybe it's Claudette, who had to cook Mexican food on *Top Chef* with one spice bottle of “Mexican Blend.” Or Kao Kalia, who writes to write her Hmong people into existence. Or Butler, who taught us names from the Civil Rights Movement we should've known all along. How do they change your *consciousness*? Your *critique* and perspective—on textbooks, on

migration, on history? How will you *contribute* in your own community from now on?

The people you'll meet in this chapter have asked themselves the same or similar questions.

We can all apply the Racial-Literacy Lens to any space we inhabit. We need it in academic spaces, like classrooms or museums; we need to keep the lens on at our family dinner table, at the amusement park, and at the counter of our favorite small business. We're not asking you to completely change your life, but rather, reframe it. If every person used their Racial-Literacy Lens, imagine how much we could disrupt the injustice we see everywhere—together.

We *implore* you to turn racial literacy into a daily practice.

Make it a habit to ask yourself: *Am I applying my Racial-Literacy Lens?*

Using the Racial-Literacy Lens doesn't necessarily make you an “activist.” Many full-time activists command an awe-inspiring level of commitment, training, and knowledge (and this is just one proposed framework among the many solutions they and others are developing today). But options for everyone to engage in activism go past just career or side volunteer work. It's not like you're an activist *or* a dentist, an activist *or* a cashier, an activist *or* the president—activism doesn't have to be a prescription

for just a few or a title you assume, because to stand against all forms of injustice should be a human duty, no matter what your profession is. We can and should all work together to break down our

entrenched systems of racism. Ordinary individuals *just* like Rocky can be ears and microphones for justice.

Sharing our stories of race and identity can change the world. Let's all get to work!