

The 2009 Martin Luther King, Jr. Writing Awards

Monday, January 19th, 2009



**The 2009 Martin Luther King, Jr.
Writing Awards**

Acknowledgments

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2009 Writing Awards

Poetry

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Alex Kerestesi, *Junked* / 1
The Pittsburgh High School for the Creative and Performing Arts

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The Pittsburgh High School for the Creative and Performing Arts

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Winchester Thurston

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First Place

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Fourth Place

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Levon Tamrazov, “Silences” / 35
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Carnegie Mellon University Winner

Cecilia Westbrook, “Black Girls” / 39

Alec Kerestesi

Junked

Remember when they met me after school
at my bus stop where
I catch the T downtown,
and attacked me
with rocks,
fists,
and threw everything they detested at me,
right down to their last wad of spit that stuck in my hair
and stunk for days?

They threw my face into the fence,
and I felt my nose crack against the metal,
warm syrupy blood spilled over my lips,
and down the back
of my throat,
leaving a metallic taste
like I had inhaled rust.

I stumbled over train tracks, and onto
one of the crappy manila T's
that trip over brown steel rails
squashed under the weight of our city, complete
with its bridges that stretch over rivers
like staples over tears in paper or skin.
Everything is a Frankenstein Monster in this town.
I still think it was a miracle
that I escaped.
The conductor closing plastic doors,
shuddering...

You told me to go back and kick their asses.
You looked me dead in the eye
and asked me why I was scared.
It shouldn't matter how bloody I was, how big the rocks were.
It didn't matter if there were five of them.

Was I your fists,
born like the horse of Troy
to house your war, your rage,
born to strike with your righteous fury?
It was not your face they struck, your blood that I tasted,
but it was our color, yours mine, and his, that they hated.

Sometimes I hate both of you for giving me this curse,
this limbo of uncertainty.
How am I supposed to turn the other cheek
with every joint locked
into the warrior's shadow
of your existence?

Jesus heals paralytics sometimes.
Quick, before he's gone,
get me a stretcher and drill a hole in the roof.
maybe if he sees me,
our sins will be forgiven.

Jacob Minsinger

Sparrow Revisited through Mahalia Jackson

*Why should I feel discouraged?/ Why should the shadows come?/
Why should my heart feel lonely?/When Jesus is my portion/A
constant friend is He/His eye is on the sparrow /And I know He
watches over me*

“His Eye Is on the Sparrow”
written by Civilla D. Martin and Charles H. Gabriel
performed by Mahalia Jackson

Why should I feel discouraged
when I have a constant friend looking over me?
A friend who looks over all,
a friend to the young and old,
male and female,
a friend to all walks of life.

Why should the shadows come
when I let the light soak through me?
It reins supreme over the dark
influences of the past.
The light blankets us all now,
and the shadows have become smaller.

Why should my heart feel lonely
when all that I have longed for
has arrived?
The shackles of oppression
are dissipating.
Brother Martin tells me,
“We’re not alone,”
and I know He’s watching over me.

I hear the tender words
of the man who sits beside me,
and I drop my doubts and fears.

I see the clouds rise,
but I stay steady on the path.
The rain pours down,
and I cling to those close to me
leaning onto their kindness
for support.

I see the sparrow soaring over the skyscrapers
and pastures. She has been wandering
for decades, lost in the minds of the past.
But the sparrow mounts her perch again.
His eye looks down, smiling.

Rachel Rothenberg

Fayette, 1951

This is what my grandmother remembers:
equality came to town the same way
everything came there, slow and with great
suspicion. Six years before Arkansas
the Red Raiders (go team!) needed money.
They needed what every place struggling
with spirit needs.

Yes, they needed a High
School Musical, those pretty faces
in a land mythic. The Red Raiders blacked
their own pretty faces, shimmied to that
tribal beat beat beat their mothers never let them listen
to. Hey, jump, Jim Crow.

None of the black students came. The
Red Raiders wondered why.
Not one of them can take a joke.
Hey, slavery was years ago.
Their white-lipped faces broke into easy
laughter. Somewhere, a child
was being beaten.

My grandmother fixed her perm,
said wasn't it grand and give them polite applause.
danced across the stage and into the
ladies' room.

And there was Miss Lucy Long
dancing the cachuca, Johnny Roach
digging his way to freedom with hoe
and shovel, and Jim Crow himself,
not jumping, not even dancing instead crying

freedom, justice, liberty. He touched his face, showed her
his clean hand, and said, "What if it were you?"
Here is the part she never quite remembers.

The next day, the Red Raider
star quarterback (go team!) found
the house of one of those black kids
and punched him so he couldn't go to school.
His reason? *I wanted to teach him how
to take a joke.*

My grandmother remembers this
when she goes into the booth
on Tuesday morning. She thinks of the
song, the dance, the matted red blood,
how the kid said later that freedom
tasted just like honey.

Eliana Munro

We, The Burnt

We, the rust of thickset armor
are dropping off lightly from above
veins of indigo and muscles of scarlet

We, deteriorated chain mail,
diminished helmets
brush against each other.
We, together to pronounce ourselves
simply powder and the dry paint strokes of our years.

Black dust is white and black is gray
white dust is black and white is gray
still We, swept into our proper masses
by the blind prophets
our pleas hit them as
a soft last breath on an infant's cheek.

It is impossible to see only light
It is impossible to see only darkness
I try to pull apart the yellows
and oranges of the sun and I get
burnt.

Here comes the Doctor, oh
here comes our King!

All in robes of black velvet and
with grit of a thousand elephants'
ivory tusks.

With a scalpel of feathers in hand
he pulls back his own skin
and pulls back our skin

whether it be brown pink white red yellow black

With a scalpel of feathers
he gathers the collective red from
beneath our burns and scars in a jar
built from charred bone.

Juliana Collins

The Sore Thumb

'Do I belong here?'

Thin lips part and words fly out
of mouths all around the room.
My fuller lips are clamped shut,
wide brown eyes darting in every direction.
Shades of white skin come together to create
blobs of friendship.
My caramel figure stands alone.

CAS, or

Center for Advanced Studies.

Only thirty black CAS students in the whole school
and we stick out like the new kid.

Words that I didn't know exist in the English language
fly off of tongues into the center of the room
and glide in circles around my head of curls.
Big words don't make you sound smarter...
they just make you harder to understand.

I'm afraid to give an answer in class.

Intimidation rises and drips over
the brink of my pride.

My hand reaches into mid-air,
my finger slightly coiled.

Another student is called on before me.

My ears perk and listen to the answer given.

My hand falls down and slaps my thigh.

Maybe on the next question...

The second day of school
and no one else is in the classroom
except for my teacher.

"This is CAS. Do you belong here?" Yes

I answered confidently.

Her forced grin makes me laugh.

I took a seat in the third row
and waited for the rest of the class to arrive.

'I belong here.'

Katie Bouvy

Daycare

I watch them hit each other with pillows—
not bricks or bombs or bullets—
and steal hugs, not life, from each others arms.
What they have is a friendship, not a war.

Two blissful, bouncing heads of hair,
one dark and thick with soft black waves
to match the soft black eyes,
one lighter blonde than Iowa corn silk.

Two religions, groping with sticky hands on couch cushions.
An Allah-worshipper, born submissive to balance five pillars.
A Jesus-believer, unflinchingly American,
raised not to trust anyone who wears headscarves.

Named after an Islamic prophet, with skin like burnt nutmeg,
the little boy presses a pillow to the face of the girl,
freckled and with coral lips, named after a late great-aunt,
and they both tumble forward, tiny tummies collapsing with mirth.

And I wonder if they see that they are different,
remembering when naivety left me, too, color-blind.
And I recall liking it that way, when I didn't know discrimination,
when we all fought ignorantly on both sides.

Noah Gup

Slipdown

My teacher is talking about polynomials
and my mind is talking to the snow.

The snow lives so silently
little protest as it tumbles
down,

down to the street below.
It does not care.

I think of hate
to the simple snow.
The dictionary definition
is nothing to the truth.

Is it a mouthful of maggots
or a stinging glare?
Is it thick tar
consuming the throat?
Is it small speckles
sprinkled out gently?

Is it Kramer
or is it a little
of all of us
just falling in pieces,
gravity forcing apart.

The snow does not answer
but I continue to watch.
as if its ignorance
will end my own.

fall,
 fall,
 silence.
 hope?
 Perhaps it's just another flake
 slowly slipping across my window....

Karyn Varnay

Anger	Jealousy		y	C	?????????	
green	red	orange				
			J	t	h	?
Hatred				i	a	?
	PREJUDICE	o		n	o	?
	BLACK					
Love				U	s	?
purple						
			Y			?
Hope	Sadness		m	Order	E	?
brown	pink	violet				
			B	o	q	?
Elation	l	d			u	?
			i	e	SEGREGATION	a
						?
	WHITE					
Kindness	s	e			l	?
magenta						
			s	r		?
Happiness			F		t	?
lavender	coral					
						yellow
					y	?????????

Fog.
 It is not Black or White
 But such a shade of Gray
 It takes a bite,
 It covers the city, then disappears.
 Fog.
 It does not care about Prejudice or Segregation or Black or White,
 It is fused, amalgamated.
 Fog.
 It does not disturb, but is simply an insignificant aspect.
 Segregation and Prejudice are far from insignificant.
 They are not a shade of Gray.
 They never disappear.
 But after a while, Segregation and Prejudice just become words,
 All reasoning is lost as to why these words obtained such power
 The Fog diminishes and the words take their place.
 No longer standing out,

Ben Kline

A Casual Conversation

My father will not go to Germany. He tells me this on a brisk December day, while we are walking uphill over cracked sidewalks. These are our regular walks, the hours when we can let loose our thoughts about the world at large, the split seconds when we need to stop ourselves from screaming at each other in public. This is almost one of these times.

“I don’t know, it would just give me the creeps,” he says. “At every street corner I’d be expecting some Gestapo agent to jump out and say *‘May I pleez see your paypahs, Mr....Kline.’*”

This last part he murmurs in his post-War German accent, the one he acquired from endless childhood hours of black and white classics like *The Longest Day*, *The Dirty Dozen*, and *Combat!* (As a child, he would force me to watch them with him, shouting “*komme sieh heen!*” and condemning me to an afternoon of bad acting and worse special effects.) His was a generation raised on World War II. Everyone’s father was GI Joe, and everyone’s mother was Rosie the Riveter. These fighting genes produced a multitude of 100% Yankee Doodle Dandies who did their duty by replacing backyard games of ‘Cowboys and Indians’ with ‘GIs and Nazis.’

My mother is not this way at all, but my father attributes her softness to being born during the Eisenhower Administration rather than during the Truman Era (as well as being from a ‘totally’ different Jewish section of Pittsburgh.) She, on the other hand, spent a year in college living in Switzerland, crossing the German border almost at whim. She, being a pretty American girl in 70s Europe, had a much different experience with the German border police than Steve McQueen did in *The Great Escape*. According to her, it went something like this:

“Haben Sie Marihuana?”

“Nein, mein Herr.”

“Haben Sie Kokain?”

“Nein, kein Kokain.”

“Heroin?”

“Nein.”

“Ja vol, Fraulein.”

My mother was also the one who decided to trade in her 90s era Subaru station wagon for a millennial Volkswagen. I bring this up to counter my Father’s argument:

“You let Mom buy the Passatt, didn’t you?”

“Well, I didn’t *let* her. It was her choice. And anyway, that’s *her* car.”

“But now you’re going to buy a Ford?” I ask.

“So?”

“Ford actually *was* a Nazi! He forced his dealers to distribute his anti-Semitic newsletter.” I smirk. Trivia often pays off on these walks.

“That’s different,” he says. If he were one to roll his eyes, he would probably do it now. “You’re talking about Henry Ford. The company isn’t anti-Semitic anymore.”

“Neither is Germany, Dad.”

He looks almost incredulous. “Are you saying that you’d buy a German car but not a *Ford*?”

Ford: Ten dollars an hour, American Dream, steel-buying Ford. To oppose the continuation of such a great National tradition is almost anti-American. In that case, hatred of vanquished enemies *is* an American value.

Of course, this didn’t stop my parents from sending my siblings and me to the local public school, which was a magnet school focusing on the German language and culture. (Interestingly enough, this conversation took place as we were passing the very building.) Apparently, the new Yuppie parents thought the handful of local private schools to be too racist, spacey, and/or Wasy. They had no problem, however, with allowing us to be taught by buxom women who would occasionally dress in Lederhosen and having us coming home to insist that “*Kommen Sie Hier*” was what the S.S. was actually saying in the World War II movies. There was nothing wrong with us marching throughout the neighbourhood on Faschingfest, singing songs about a drunkard named Augustine who

probably went and killed some Jews after a long night in the beer garden.

They even sent us to *German Camp* during the summers, a week-long stint in a rural area called *Grünwald*, where we were called *Bernhard* and *Katerina* and would wake up every morning and trudge through Appalachian mist to the flagpole, where we would sing the National Anthem (formerly “Deutschland Über Alles”) at the top of our lungs. Then an imposing blond man named Johann would shout at us in German and force us to do push ups. Later in the day, we would experience first-hand the living conditions in East Germany and re-enact the Germanic victory at the Battle of Sedan during the Franco-Prussian War with dodge balls.

I always felt a sense of pride in those days, that I had such an insight into a culture that I had somehow felt a part of. At Grünwald (whose facilities were also shared by smaller French and Spanish speaking contingents), I would taunt the “foreigners,” blaming their poor archery skills on the fact that they could not speak German.

I remember when, in the midst of that chaotic Battle of Sedan, I encountered a boy sneaking by the edge of the field, away from all the action. He was wearing a blue bandana: a Frenchman.

“*Hier! Hier!*” I shouted, calling my Prussian comrades over to pelt the prisoner with those stinging rubber balls. I felt victorious, heroic, a good German soldier.

Of course, the odds were rigged anyway. The Prussians were guaranteed a victory, and we were only throwing dodge balls anyway. No harm done.

My parents were sending me to Hebrew school at the same time, where every day seemed to be *Yom HaShoa*, Holocaust Remembrance Day. I somehow never made the connection that the smiling cut out children named Ingrid and Hans who decorated my German classroom’s walls had anything to do with the turtle helmeted Nazis from the black and white movies that rounded up and shot Jews for fun. Despite the fact that not many of the teachers at my school were actually German, they all awkwardly avoided the subject, as if they did not want to disillusion us. Their version of

German history more or less skipped from the construction of the fairytale Neuschwanstein Castle in the 1870s to the triumphant fall of the *Mauer* in Berlin in 1990. Our Germany was almost spotless. Almost.

After elementary school I made the big decision not to continue my German studies, opting for music instead. Whatever German I had at that point soon faded away with three years without language study, and when I reached high school, I chose to study Spanish instead. I embraced it, and was almost fluent within two years. My parents took this with pride. Never did they point out that Ferdinand and Isabella, who had ordered the Inquisition and Expulsion of Jews and other “heretics”, were Spanish speakers. Or the Generals Franco or Pinochet. Besides, in those cases the Spanish speaking leaders were oppressing the entire Spanish speaking *populace*. It wasn’t like in Germany, when an entire country—dictator, soldier, and citizen alike—united to annihilate an unwanted minority. Though my father never attempted to impart his prejudices to his children, I was still perplexed as to why adults of his generation were capable of clinging to antiquated stereotypes. I soon realized, however, that I needed look no further than my own surroundings to understand how the cycle of intolerance could repeat itself, albeit in a different setting.

In 2007, the Khalil Gibran International Language Academy opened in New York City. A publicly-funded middle school, it is the first of its kind in the country to devote much of its teaching to the study of the Arabic language and culture. Not surprisingly, many islamophobic pundits protested the school’s existence, contending that it is nothing more than a front for the indoctrination of radical Islam. This is clearly not the first time foreign culture has been vilified in times of war and fear; German-Americans, among other ethnicities, were stigmatised during both World Wars. In fact, my father’s own father changed the spelling of his name from *Klein* (the German spelling, meaning “small”) to *Kline* when he came to this country in the late 1930s.

I ask myself how my generation will view Arab cultures in thirty, forty, fifty years, when peace has come and our present-day

wars seem unbelievable in retrospect. We will share the attitudes of our fathers, who cannot throw off prejudices not even based on personal experience? Or will we, the future of America, take the great leap away from projected hatred towards that seemingly unattainable goal of tolerance and brotherhood? I can only hope that one day the prospect of learning Arabic will not be looked down upon and that a vacation in Iraq will not be unthinkable. As Khalil Gibran, himself an immigrant, wrote: “Let us teach this miserable nation to smile and rejoice with heaven’s bounty and glory of life and freedom.

Isabel M Zehner

Maps

I watch too much TV, and although CSI isn’t one of my favorite shows, I’ve seen enough episodes to know that all CSI Investigator Gill Grissom needs to do to match a suspect’s DNA to the DNA at the crime scene is rub the inside of his mouth with a little swab thing. So when I got a pair of swabs in the mail, I didn’t expect to doubt the process so much. After all, if it works on television, I shouldn’t worry. Nonetheless, I found myself extremely nervous about these little cotton-tipped wooden sticks that had been mailed to my home. The instructions I received with the swabs indicated that there was one swab for each cheek. To my anxiety, this left me with no room to make any mistakes. But eventually I swabbed. I waited. My father put them in the envelope as instructed—naked. It bothered me a bit that my DNA would not be protected by anything but a thin paper envelope on its way to the lab. I’ve gone sixteen years with anonymous DNA, and now all that’s between identification and contamination is a thin envelope. What if some careless mail carrier sneezes onto that precious package? But I had to trust the lab.

It’s been about a month since my dad placed that much-too-thin envelope in our mailbox and flipped up the little red flag. I’ve been told it could be up to five more months for the results to be returned to me, but to be honest, I’m not too anxious. I’ve been playing the guessing game my whole life. I’ve been an Eskimo, Hispanic, Italian, Indian, Greek, Chinese, Egyptian, Middle Eastern, Native American, Black, White, and most recently, Other. When our class had to take the PSATs one Saturday several weeks ago, we were asked our name, grade, sex, and, yes, race. And because I didn’t know, and because my race has been too ambiguous over the years, I put down Other.

Although the PSAT people will only know me as Other, the circumstances of my adoption placed me with White parents. So, I was raised in a White family, and for a long time I considered myself White. Because of the circumstances of my adoption, a closed adoption, that’s all I could do—*consider* myself. But more and more,

people asked me about my ethnicity and all I could do was to tell them, “I don’t know”, which usually warrants a further explanation, “I’m adopted.” So I found that I could take on any race I want, and when my ethnicity was confronted, I could completely avoid the topic of my adoption. Of course, all my friends know that I am adopted, and if they forget, the lack of any resemblance between me and my parents should be a reminder. But among other people, I used to considered myself the ethnic chameleon, and have found myself in many awkward situations.

One of these awkward situations came about when I went to a YMCA camp in Ohio with my cousin, Robin. We had three other bunkmates, two of whom were also already friends, Lauren, and Amber, who would be the only Black girl in our cabin. Later, our third bunkmate joined us, Allison. By the end of the first day, I had made friends with Amber and Lauren. None of us had really got along with Allison, but we made an effort to make her feel comfortable because it was her first time at an overnight camp. On the second day, several of us were walking through one of the grassy lawns that made up most of the landscape of the camp. We were all grateful for the beautiful, sunny, warm weather that we had been looking forward to. While we were walking the lawn, Allison told Lauren, Robin, and me that she felt awkward around Amber because her family didn’t like Black people. They were Catholic and, therefore, didn’t like Black people, and she told us that her mother put her on birth control in case a Black person raped her. These comments took an otherwise enjoyable day and turned it into a tense, uncomfortable situation for all of us. Of course, Lauren told Amber about this, and by the time we had finished dinner and were walking to our evening activity, Amber confronted Allison. The colors of the grassy lawn had disappeared with the setting sun, but the intensity of the situation still remained. We were all together; Amber explained that she, too, was Catholic, and she then asked Allison if she thought a white person could ever sexually assault her. I was shocked when Allison said, “No.” Needless to say, it was hard to get along with Allison for the rest of the week.

I hadn’t thought about Amber and Allison until recently while taking a bus ride with my friend, Jimyse. We were riding to my

house and, both loaded with a ton of gear, grateful to find two open seats upon boarding. At the next stop, an elderly Black man got on, loaded with several shopping bags, and took the seat next to Jimyse causing us to make an effort to cram closer together. The man asked us about our strange looking sticks that we were toting, and we explained that we had come from lacrosse practice. He asked where we went to school, and we politely answered, “Winchester Thurston.”

Despite our exhaustion from practice and irritation from the bumpy bus ride, we felt obliged to answer his questions. We were sure to address him as “Sir” and smile when he complimented us. We reached the next stop, and a line of people formed to de-board. One hite woman armed with a purse bumped the elderly man’s knee and rustled his grocery bags, temporarily distracting him; suddenly his tone changed. He turned to us and began to swear, saying, “Get off of me cr---r!” Jimyse and I turned to each other, our eyes widening. “Excuse my language ladies,” the man pardoned himself. “Will you excuse me? But you know, White people.” His words trailed off as though both of us understood. He then returned to our conversation as if nothing happened. Once he de-boarded, it was our natural reaction to laugh. It was one of the most awkward situations I had been in since I had been at camp with Allison and Amber.

I have, since then, concluded, that the girl the man saw on the bus and the girl Allison saw at Camp had two different races. Both with Allison and with the man on the bus, I was assigned a race. Because the color of my skin could be interpreted in a thousand different ways, and because I don’t know the ethnicity behind my skin, I am allowed the perspective to see how I am perceived; everyone knows as much as I do. Allison assumed that I wouldn’t be offended by her racist comments just as much as the man on the bus assumed his wouldn’t offend me. But they both did. If I had not arrived at camp with my white cousin at my side, or boarded the bus with my Black friend, would either of these people have felt so comfortable using such offensive language? I’ve learned that I am not the chameleon. Everyone else is. Who I surround myself with influences the way other people see me.

Although people who don’t know me well enough to know I am adopted rarely address the topic directly and ask what my

ethnicity is, every once in a while people will ask me about my race. These days, I just tell people that I don't know. Soon enough though, I will receive the results of the DNA test that was shipped away nearly a month ago. I am anxious to see what the cotton swabs will tell me, but I know that even when I get the results back, people will still assume what they want. Knowing my race will not change my outward appearance, and I certainly will not be introducing myself as "Isabel the Native American", or whatever I may be. The results of the test will only give me information that I requested, and once I know, I will be able to tell people when they ask me.

Because I have never known my ethnicity, it has never been able to define me. My race has never held me to certain expectations, and neither have I held my skin color accountable for anything. If my race is not something I, myself, can decode, how important can it be? I have no choice but to rely on the results of a Lab Test that was ordered from the Internet. It requires no testing to tell my gender, my eye color, or my hair color. I could even tell you my favorite meal without sending for an expensive experiment.

The thing is, the people who made assumptions about my race weren't the people who *asked* me about my ethnicity. If I had known, they still would have acted the same way. I hope that knowing my race will not change the way I interact with other people, for the perspective that being devoid of race has given me the opportunity to realize that race is not definitive. We regard race as a characteristic of such great importance, but it is a part of us that, at times, is so ambiguous that people with such strong feelings on the topic make false assumptions that divide us more. We define each other by race too freely, and don't recognize that the color of our skin does not coincide with individual identity. I struggle with the idea that people with whom I am close might treat me differently if the results of that DNA test are not what they expect. I can expect nothing. I can hope that the results of this test will not adversely affect the way I am treated. When it comes to race, we should expect nothing. When it comes to race, we should hope.

Teireik Williams

Bus Stop Racism

The cold surrounds me as I stand waiting for the early morning bus. I repeatedly check the clock on my cell phone, and then the bus schedule that I hold in my gloved hand. 6:03 the schedule reads, ten minutes late, I stand waiting for nearly 30 more minutes until I hear the mechanic whirring of the bus from around the corner. I am ready with my bus pass in my hand. The bus comes roaring towards the stop, as my brother Elfonzo quietly whispers "not again" as he realizes that the driver will not stop for us. "Wait! Wait!", we scream as the bus speeds past us; we follow quickly along the side of the vehicle. People on board the bus look out the windows at us running. It appears as if they ask the driver to stop, but he continually refuses and keeps going. We stop, tired and short of breath. The driver has a look of satisfaction across his face. "Damn!" I scream, "When does the next bus come"?

Not for a while my brother answers with a confused look on his face. "The bus was full anyway", he said."

I know he's lying for this happens everyday. As I turn my head toward the stoplight at the bottom of the hill, I spot the bus that passed us moving at a slow crawl. "TRAFFIC!" I scream and take off down the hill towards the bus, seconds later my brother catches on and followed me. We meet the bus two blocks later at a stop in front of a church. Tired and frustrated I tap on the bus door, signaling for the driver to open. He looks down through the windowed doors, rolls his eyes then, hesitantly opens the doors. As I show the driver my pass and begin to walk towards the back of the bus, I hear him yelling, "Hey You! Get Back Here!" Confused, I turn around only to see the driver pointing directly at me. "What's the problem?" my brother asks the driver. "This one didn't pay his fare" he quickly responds. As I grab my brother's hand I take my pass out of my pocket and show it to the driver once again. As we turn and start back to our seats I heard the driver's harsh whispers, "*Go back where you came.*" This stirred my insides, but I keep walking, and look down to my younger brother. He doesn't hear the driver's terrible words, and I

wouldn't want him to. I like to think that maybe he wasn't talking to us, but to someone on the road. However I know that it wasn't true, and still I keep walking taking my seat on the back on the bus.

Christopher Morris

Finding Martin

The Martin Luther King, Jr. depicted in history textbooks and mass media is not the Martin Luther King, Jr. who pervades strata of black metaphysical manumission. In recent times, even as Americans profess a profound political maturity, the image, memory, and conception of King has vitiated from beacon of American transcendentalism to consumerist commodity. The manner in which the name of King has been invoked for political peddling and idealistic vacuousness is equitable to the stench of a long-rotting corpse. A 2008 Chicago Sun-Times article entitled "Obama draws parallels to Martin Luther King Jr." proves this point, reporting: "Embarking on the final leg of his historic presidential run, Barack Obama on Thursday invoked the promise of Martin Luther King in a pledge to end 'the broken politics in Washington and the failed presidency of George W. Bush.' Before nearly 90,000 flag-waving supporters in an open-air NFL stadium, Obama accepted his party's nomination in a quest to become the nation's first African-American president -- 45 years to the day after King delivered his iconic 'I Have a Dream' speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Introduced by Sen. Dick Durbin, Obama spoke sweepingly about the plight of the working class, of waitresses surviving on tips, of families awash in credit card debt and coping with \$2,000 a year less since the beginning of Bush's presidency. 'Tonight, more Americans are out of work, and more are working harder for less. More of you have lost your homes, and more are watching your home values plummet,' Obama said. 'These challenges are not all of government's making. But the failure to respond is a direct result of a broken politics in Washington and the failed presidency of George W. Bush,' he said. 'America, we are better than these last eight years. We are a better country than this.' Interrupted dozens of times by applause as flash bulbs flared, the 47-year-old U.S. senator from Hyde Park resurrected King's memory and quoted from his 1963 speech to draw a modern-day parallel. ' "We cannot walk alone," the preacher cried. 'And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead.

We cannot turn back,' Obama said. 'America, we cannot turn back. Not with so much work to be done.'" Not to be the confirmed as denigration of Obama's victory in the presidential race, the greatest fallaciousness in perpetuating and defending the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. is constructing his significance in regards to blacks as primarily political and civil as opposed to its true significance which is primarily internal and metaphysical.

In order to establish a present context, a historical context must be established. Many equate King with the Civil Rights Movement which has its roots in the latter of the 19th century and whose initiation is thought to be black discontent with constitutionality. In reality, there was not one black member of Congress during the Civil War, the enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation or the ratification of 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments and Abraham Lincoln, whom King alluded to repetitively in his lifetime, said, " I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races, that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people ... I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race." Although King, in his "I Have a Dream" speech pled for black and white unity, integration has and never will be King's main personal ordinance of action. If integration was the best and lasting solution to 400 years of sweltering black internal turmoil, why did the Bureau of Labor Statistics report that the number of jail inmates per 100,000 blacks was 815 in 2007, up from 550 in 1990 and nearly 7 times that of whites, non-Hispanic? If integration was the best and lasting elixir to the pain of a snapped neck thrown over the branch of a tree or a swollen back bombarded by a whip, why did U.S. News and World Report reveal that "among black women, the incidence of HIV was 14.7 times higher than for white women" and "among black males aged 13 to 29, the incidence of HIV infection was 1.6 times higher than that of whites and 2.3 times higher than for Hispanics?" And finally, if integration was the best and lasting justification for the blood shed by both blacks and whites in defense of natural liberty, why did King not mention once the term "integration" in his last

speech that took place, not in the halls of Congress, but in Mason Temple (Church of God in Christ Headquarters) in Memphis, Tennessee?

King did not have a desire to defend the Constitution or to right America's political system. He was fueled by a spiritually moral conviction that obligated him to seek out injustice and extinguish it wherever it bred. Freedom of speech was not a concern for King; he made a multitude of speeches. Freedom of religion was not an issue either; he obtained his doctorate in systematic theology. King's greatest concern and the unbinding sinew of black American hope is freedom of happiness. Aristotle said, "To live happily is an inward power of the soul" and as long as a any man, black or white, is held against his will, forced to reject his native language and his native religion, whipped, raped, beaten, malnourished, and subject to continual attack because of aspects over which there is no control, there is no happiness and therefore no soul power.

I can attest to this on a personal level. My grandmother, who was raised in southern Alabama during the Great Depression, is an example of black longing for freedom of happiness. Having been subject to racism, unemployment, and social stagnation in the South, she migrated to Pittsburgh in search of freedom from these inhibitions. But in Pittsburgh, she found more despair. On a national scale, she saw her heroes Dr. King and John Kennedy slain and riotous violence exploded in her own racially segregated city. She saw her children become slaves, not of the fields, but of the streets as they were betaken by alcoholism, drug addiction, and crime. She past away before Barack Obama was elected as President of the United States, confined to a coma, her eyes and skin discolored by blood irregularity. But does this mean that her memories of King are lacking in significance because they were not "fulfilled" in politics until after her death? The answer is no. Her memories carry greater significance because they matter not to politics but to her inner peace in knowing that she was not alone in her struggle for happiness, which is more difficult to sustain and cultivate than any political ideology or outcome.

My grandmother is only a microcosm in a macrocosm; a single cog in a vast machine of black advancement toward to a

greater good. Some cogs are bigger than others and are more valuable to the function of the machine. Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of the big ones. In 1984, Mario Cuomo, in an address to the Democratic National Convention, spoke of two cities that exist in America. One was of affluence and aloofness, referred to then as a “shining city on a hill.” The other was one of destitution and depression, the city at the foot of the hill. Dr. King’s relationship with black America can be compared with those two cities that Cuomo illustrated. King and others (Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, Malcolm X just to name a few) sit atop a hill in a shining city, looking down upon those at the bottom of the hill, fighting to climb (black children with no heat or food, single mothers struggling to make rent) and emanate calls of hope: “You will be free at last.”

Chris Schmidt

Beyond Race

It was the day before Thanksgiving and the Jubilee soup kitchen was in need of volunteers. I had never worked at a soup kitchen before and had no idea what to expect. My mother dropped me off at the entrance to the kitchen and told me she would return to pick me up in several hours. The kitchen was spacious vertically but cramped on the ground as large groups of people moved about. The area was devoid of anything unnecessary and space was filled mainly by counters and tables. But I didn’t have long to take in the scenery, for as soon as I entered the kitchen, a tall African American man came up to me, introduced himself as “John,” and asked if I had come to volunteer. I said “yes,” and he immediately began showing me the works in a fast and business-like manner. Not long afterward, I was led past several elderly ladies preparing lunch to the back of the room where a sink and dishes lay waiting for me. I was assigned to dry the dishes in a small circuit where I soon met the staff.

To my dismay, when I had first entered, I had noticed that the vast majority of those waiting to be fed were African American. However, I was pleased to see that the staff was much more ethnically diverse. The staff comprised of African American men and women, white men and women, Asians, elderly ladies, and young college volunteers all working towards the same goal of feeding those in need.

I worked on drying dishes along with two students from Carnegie Mellon, Ken and Nick. It had hardly been a minute after reaching the sink when Ken struck up a conversation with me, asking me about where I went to school and what my plans for college were. Soon after, his friend Nick noticed my shirt, which sported the Outward Bound logo, and immediately began happily interrogating me about what my experience of the summer program had been. I chatted casually and contentedly as I worked. The conversation flowed easily despite never having met either of my co-workers before.

We continued to work hard for several hours, but as the lunch hours came to an end the college students departed leaving me alone with John and the lunch ladies. At this point I worked over time. Instead of just drying dishes, I washed and rinsed and dried the incoming dirty dishes. After I had finished, I began sweeping the floor and gathering all of the litter that had reached the ground into a small pile. I bent down as low as I could in order to sweep the entire area under the sink and counters. It was only after I had straightened up that I noticed an elderly African American man watching me. When I rose he looked me sincerely in the eye and said, "Your mother raised you well." I could tell he was impressed by my work, and I was grateful for the compliment.

I had not expected to be addressed by anyone who had come to the soup kitchen for food, so many people are afraid of those they aren't familiar with and racial prejudice only adds to this. However, this man had not done the average thing of remaining silent; he chose to break the silence between us in order to show the respect he had for my work. Though race becomes a much touchier subject in poorer areas, it meant nothing in that moment. I had worked hard and he had complimented me for it: my labor had no color. In the words of Booker T. Washington, "there is something in human nature which we cannot blot out, which makes one man, in the end, recognize and reward merit in another, regardless of colour or race." That something is the understanding buried in all of us, that no matter what skin color we have, we are all human.

After the man left, I worked on whatever John needed me to do at the time. He became more and more friendly with me in the last bit of time that I worked there and came to address me as "my man." The elderly ladies who had served the food also warmed up to me, smiling as I cleaned up the last little bits of dirt around the work area before my mother picked me up.

When my mom picked me up she asked me: "What was it like? What did you get out of it?" At the time I, was so full of my day's experiences that I wasn't sure how to respond. How could I sum up such a full day with so many tasks, conversations, and interactions? Now I know exactly what I would have said. I would have said it was like freedom, the ability to talk so easily with

someone I had never met before, to share a common goal, and to bridge gaps with people whether they were age-related or racial. I gained the insight into what I'm capable of: colorless labor. Work has no race, no age, and no upbringing. Its quality isn't determined by or demeaned because of an ethnic background, and it is accepted and appreciated by all. In short, I gained the capacity to think beyond myself, and in doing so go beyond what I thought possible: beyond the norm, beyond me, and beyond race.

Levon Tamrazov

Silence

*“In the end we will remember not the words of
our enemies, but the silence of our friends”
-Martin Luther King Junior*

What a sad thought it is that after the defeat of Armenian Genocide, the Holocaust, the KKK, our world in the age of democracy still has room for those, who through the act of racism, wish to strip others of the rights and liberties which are believed to be the very foundation of our co-existence. It makes no difference whether you are Black or Middle Eastern, Latino or Asian; racism targets all. The sick feeling of fear eating your body, mind, soul, as your rights are ignored, your voice resonates into emptiness, your dignity is stomped upon, and your mere existence is neglected, that feeling does not distinguish, it simply occurs. I have heard of those who experienced it, and not to say that I did not believe what I heard, but I simply could not imagine it. “Stories are exaggerated,” I thought. That thought changed one day when I had a car accident in Moscow.

Since I was ten, my dad implanted within me a desire for driving. Starting off on his lap in the fields around our cottage, by the age of fourteen I was allowed to drive on my own in the streets of Moscow. Frequently, my dad and I would go out in the evenings to a movie, or simply to grab a cup of coffee.

The reader must know that my family’s Middle Eastern descent made us a minority group in Moscow, and that our dark physical features easily distinguished us from the average white Russian. However, I did not understand the impact it had on our lives and believed my Grandma’s stories regarding racial attacks to be untrue. My attitude changed one night when my father and I decided to go for one of those coffee runs.

As usual I got to drive the car. Drowning in chatter with my dad, I forgot to glance at my side mirrors as I was switching lanes and

as a result ended up cutting off a passing car. Fortunately enough the driver reacted quickly, which was quite surprising considering his soon to be revealed state of mind, and pushed on the breaks; what could have been an accident was avoided. Slowly I started to gain back my breath – as one could imagine, I was quite shocked and scared – and continued driving, thinking all was behind. I was wrong.

The car which I cut off, all of a sudden sped up, passed me on the opposite lane, and stopped in front of me forcing me to pull over. Both my dad and I were sitting silently trying to anticipate what was going to happen. I was nervous. Cold sweat began dribbling down my forehead as I all of a sudden realized that I was an under-age driver. However as I soon found out that should have been the least of my worries.

Three doors of the car swung open, and trembling out of them were three pretty big men, around the age of forty. Their faces were red and filled with anger. I was shocked, lost, and scared. Following my dad’s instructions, I sat still as they suspiciously limped over to our car. Still, I sat waiting for the events to unfold. The next move caught both my dad and me by surprise. The driver approached my door and opened it, reaching for my collar to pull me out of the car. I was stunned and scared, but there was one particularity which especially gave me goose bumps: he reeked with alcohol.

My dad sprung out yelling and swearing at the men. He pulled the drunk off me, and was attempting to calm him down. The man swung fist after fist at my dad who in his turn, ducked and dipped to avoid the blows, refusing to exacerbate the situation by striking back. Meanwhile the other two – who were as drunk as the driver – attempted to catch and beat me. This catch-me-if-you-can fight lasted until it got the attention of the passing police car. “All is over,” I thought.

The policemen, who I hoped would arrest the drunks not only for assault but for drunk driving, got out of the car and to my surprise did quite the opposite. After they pulled us apart and without giving my dad and me an attempt to debrief them, they brusquely commanded us to get back in the car, and engaged in a conversation with the drunks. My dad and I tried to intervene, as the three men we got into the conflict with accused us not only of causing the car

accident (in the heat of the moment I forgot to put my car in “park” and when the maniac pulled me out, our van put a nice dent on their car), but of assault. My dad and I tried to intervene, tried to put sense into the cops, but it was like we were ghosts. Our pleas went unanswered and accusations ignored. Then I realized that this wasn’t about the accident, or the assault; it was about who was Russian and who was not.

The three men from the car were drunk. No, they were wasted, and furthermore they were driving. No evidence was needed to prove that. They were wrong, but we were the ones who were silenced. I sat in the car watching the cops and the men direct their condescending grins at us, deigning us with their eyes, humiliating us by joking and laughing, destroying our dignity, our pride. However what hurt me the most that day, were not the jokes or the laughs, not the fact that after a brief talk the cops let the drunks not walk away, but drive away, not their ignorance and straight-to-the-face bias, not the fact that our voices cried out into the abyss, no. What I will remember forever is the woman who stood on the side observing the events in their real occurrence, and who when the cops approached not only did not intervene on our behalf, but voluntarily started yelling “Arrest them! Arrest the dark ones! They are crazy!”

She was the only witness, the judge who saw everything, from the unsuccessful lane change, to the beating. She was aware of who was drunk, and who was sober. Unfortunately she was also aware of who was Russian and who was not, and that made the final judgment. She was not my friend. In fact, I have never met her in my life. Nevertheless, I still hopefully expected her to be the voice of justice, to be our support. One does not have to be a friend to help out those in need, and when that help is not provided, one’s actions, whatever they may be, are equivalent of silence, for the expected voice of justice, the voice which protects the innocent, does not sound. That silence Martin Luther King described as “more memorable than the words of our enemies”; he was right. The cops, the yells, the fight: to me all that is nothing but a vague, nebulous picture of a car accident.

But the woman’s silence concerning what was right rests in my mind. That silence supported the cops, cleared their conscience and justified the grounds upon which they let the four drunks go.

That silence hid the truth, exposed me to the abusers, and allowed my father and me to be stripped of our dignity and pride. That silence I will never forget, for it engraved in me that feeling which so mercilessly shredded me to pieces.

Cecilia Westbrook

Black Girls

I grew up in a neighborhood on the south side of Chicago known for its diversity, and for its university. It was a little bastion of liberalism bordering on socialism, a crucible of free thought where all creeds and colors mixed. A Baptist university where atheist professors teach Jewish students, as my mom used to joke. It was a place where the exchange of ideas so valued seemed also hard-won, surrounded as it was by neighborhoods we didn't want to venture into at night, and prey to occasional burglary and bank-robbing.

My brothers and I attended the upscale private school there, along with the other children of the staff and professors. My classmates were from all different backgrounds, were all different colors. It was the kind of school founded on Principles, and conducted according to them; a place where everybody was equal and they made sure we knew it. Racial and cultural equality were unquestionable. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day was celebrated with a great gala each year, an assembly and a parade and a play. But it was not a forward-looking celebration—not filled with the rhetoric of hope and change and the continued progression of our nation. To the children of the Lab School, it seemed like a backward holiday, a reminiscence and a disavowal of the strange, crazy people who used to live in America. One year my friends and I got in trouble for hiding under the bleachers and gossiping instead of paying attention. We were much more interested in the boy, Spencer, that Diana had a crush on.

I had a lot of friends growing up. I had white friends, Hispanic friends, Jewish friends, Indian friends, and Asian friends. Of all the classmates I would see on the yard at recess, the ones I remember most were the black girls. I was so jealous of them. I loved the way they tied their kinky hair back with the hair-ties with colorful beads on them. They knew how to dance, and all the best jump-rope games, which I was mostly too uncoordinated to participate in. They had a way of saying their t's which I could never quite imitate; when they

talked it was with an intensity and a fearlessness. The words just rolled out of them, with a rhythm and a grace.

The year I turned twelve, my mom changed jobs and could no longer afford to send me to the hoity-toity private school. We moved to the north side and I was enrolled in the best public school in the neighborhood. It was a place that rested proudly on its test scores, that lauded itself in school newsletters and assemblies and parent-teacher conferences, congratulating us students on being among the best-performing public school students in Chicago. When I got to my classes, I discovered I had already learned most of the material years before. I settled into a steady stream of A's and consigned myself to long afternoons of finishing homework early and reading a book instead.

There were black girls there, too. More of them, in fact. But most of them were not in my classes anymore. Our school was stratified by "gifted" level, with students divided into classes by performance level. I was near the top, and I remember seeing fewer and fewer black girls in my class each year. I would see them in the hallways, talking in their rhythm, carefully adjusting their elaborate, beautiful hair-do's. They weren't my friends. This was not a place with Principles. My friends there were white kids.

In junior high, we all slowly grew up together. We grew breasts and facial hair, our voices cracked. I got dumpy and unpopular and even better at school. I did the history fair and the science fair and I almost went to regional one year. As the black girls grew up, the rhythm of their speech began to change; it became faster, angrier, more grating. Infused with slang to a point where I, the girl reading *Moby Dick* for fun, could no longer understand them when they talked. Not that they talked to me anyway.

I remember seeing them lean up against the lockers in the hallway, laughing to each other. This was the only time I saw them—they were not in the history fair or the science fair. One of them, in the year above me, got pregnant, and was expelled for stabbing somebody. When the bell rang they would be leaning against the lockers in the hallway, and I would be headed home, carrying *Moby Dick*.

And when I went to public high school I experienced racism directly for the first time. I had a friend, David, who was Hispanic but jokingly called himself a white kid. He was a hard worker, and smart, and popular, but when we were outside of classes he would say things like the n-word. I was at first appalled, but he shrugged it off. He said he hated black people because they were gang-bangers, and drug-dealers. David came from a working-class family; his father was a mechanic who ran a successful business that he'd built from the ground up in a deplorable neighborhood. Their family had spent many years dealing with racial tension, and with gangs. David was one of the best students in our grade. And the thing is, David was right—many of the black people in our school were in gangs, dealt drugs, and brought guns to classes. But then, many Hispanic people did too. And David had words for them which were just as intolerant.

The great melting pot was high school gym class. It was not a class I liked much or did well in. I was still dumpy and bookish and my first semester I got a C. Our gym classes were segregated by sex but nothing else, which meant there were many black girls in mine, as well as Hispanic girls and white girls. We were united by a desire to skip out of as many activities as possible, and since our gym teacher was male some of us spent as much as a quarter of the class sitting out, feigning “woman problems.” It was in those long periods sitting on the bench, or sometimes sneaking up to the locker room to smoke cigarettes, that they taught me some of their slang. I would ask them things like what “boojy” meant, or what it means when somebody asks you “what it is?” and they would laugh and call me a funny little white girl.

But our friendship waned during the second semester, which was health class. This was a setting I was familiar with: a classroom, and a textbook, and facts to learn and recite. There was no skipping out to smoke. Like I did in all my classes, I raised my hand frequently, aced the exams, and generally knew all the answers. When the teacher called on my classmates, they would shrug and look unconcerned. They didn't know or care about the cardiovascular system, or VO₂ max. The one time he was genuinely able to connect with them was when it came time for sex ed. This was one topic the other girls in my class had a lot more experience with than I did: I

was the only girl still a virgin in the class, and at least one of them had been pregnant once before. Confronted with this information (which was readily admitted the first day of the unit), our young teacher scrapped his planned abstinence talk, and instead one afternoon he passed around an empty Kleenex box and we had an anonymous question-and-answer session. Allowed now to speak in their own language, the girls asked serious questions using slang terms like “boofoo.” Our teacher answered them frankly, blushing occasionally, and all the girls in the room listened in rapt attention.

As I sat there, for once uncomfortable and with nothing to contribute to the class discussion, I realized something about this speech, this language that the black girls had. I had always found it interesting, but over time I had found it more and more of a barrier between them and me—less understandable, more intimidating. It was like a verbal confrontation; in a world of things that made sense to me, things that I understood and understood how to understand, this was something I did not understand, and had no headway into. It had frightened me.

But for the first time I realized what it must have felt like to them, the black girls. How they must have spent so many years sitting in classes taught in an incomprehensible language, confronting them with what they did not know. Watching the white kids around you understand it and succeed and be consistently rewarded. And, when you are marginalized like that, how enticing—or perhaps simply *necessary*—it must be to create your own language, something that *you* have that the *white kids* can't understand. This was not just the language of the black girls, it was the language shared by the Hispanic kids, and the working-class white kids. It was the language of the undereducated. Of the underrepresented.

Now I'm in my last year of college, here at one of the most elite universities in the country. There are a lot of black girls here. They are in my classes; they have been my students, and my tutors. They are bright, and enthusiastic, and friendly, and wonderful. They, like me, like the Hispanic kids and the white kids and the Asian kids and the Indian kids and everybody, we have all worked hard to get here and we are all on the same playing field. They speak with a

rhythm, with an intensity and a fearlessness that makes me jealous of them, once again.

But by and large, the black girls here are not the ones I met in high school gym class. Neither are the Hispanic kids or the Asian kids or the Indian kids—or the white kids. Our school had a 60% graduation rate (which was pretty good for a public school), and most of the graduates did not go on to college. I myself was forced to change schools by my parents, as they saw me slipping down into academic mediocrity. When I went to a magnet school, I met the black girls I would go to college with. Many of them had grown up in schools with Principles; some of them had also transferred out of terrible public schools after working extremely hard. These girls knew the language that I didn't understand, but when they spoke to me, or to their teachers, they spoke my language—Standard English. So did David, one of the few people I knew in public school who ended up in college.

This year, we elected our first black man for President. Across the nation there is the rhetoric of hope and change. This is an election I am proud of, and excited about; yet to me it raises a different point entirely. Our President-elect comes from the same neighborhood on the south side of Chicago where I grew up. He even used to shop at the same grocery store as us—what my mom used to jokingly call the Communist grocery store, since the lines were always long and the shelves were mostly empty. He and his family are black, and his daughters currently attend the same upscale private school where I spent the first twelve years of my life. When they move to Washington, they'll be about the same age as I was when I moved to public school. They are bright kids, and they will have a great future, without a doubt. But I wonder how much they know about the language of the black girls. That language is spoken all over the country, all the time, by people of all different races and creeds—but it was not spoken in the Lab School.

I think if he were to see our world today, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would have mixed feelings. Our nation now is one still deeply divided, and the division largely follows racial lines. But the line itself is not a racial one: it is a line of undereducation, of marginalization, of poverty. Nowadays, anybody can be successful,

can have any job they like, can be involved in politics and shape the national conversation, but only if they speak our language. To all the people who were never taught it—no matter what race they are—those doors are largely closed.