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Communicating with Community in Mind

New England Museum Association

Alex Kapitan

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Through language we transform reality.

We dictate what is real. This creates a responsibility to use language to describe and create the best, most radical reality we can imagine.

Language can hurt or heal; it can cause harm or create liberation—the choice is ours.

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The purpose of standards

Language rules and standards separate those who are right (educated, upper class, etc.) from those who are wrong (everyone else).

grammar snob

centers "correctness"
and elitism

Language rules and standards increase comprehension and help as many people as possible understand each other.

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centers understanding
and care

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The purpose of sensitive language

The goal of sensitive language is to avoid offending people.

“PC” mythology
centers being right

The goal of sensitive language is to avoid causing harm and perpetuating violence.

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centers care for those who
interact with your words

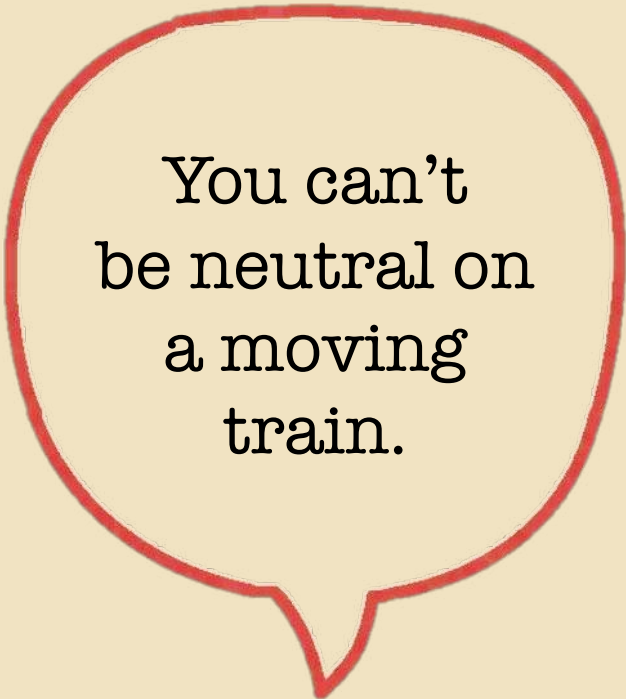
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The spectrum of language

- ❖ **Violent**: actively communicates hate, disgust, intolerance
- ❖ **Coded**: consciously or unconsciously communicates prejudice, disdain, or judgment in covert ways
- ❖ **Unquestioned**: everyday language with subtle cues regarding who and what is valuable, normal
- ❖ **Minimizing**: well-intentioned language that unconsciously maintains oppressive norms and supports the status quo
- ❖ **Liberatory**: affirms all life; communicates compassion, love, and nonviolence; imbues subjects with agency





You can't
be neutral on
a moving
train.

Howard Zinn

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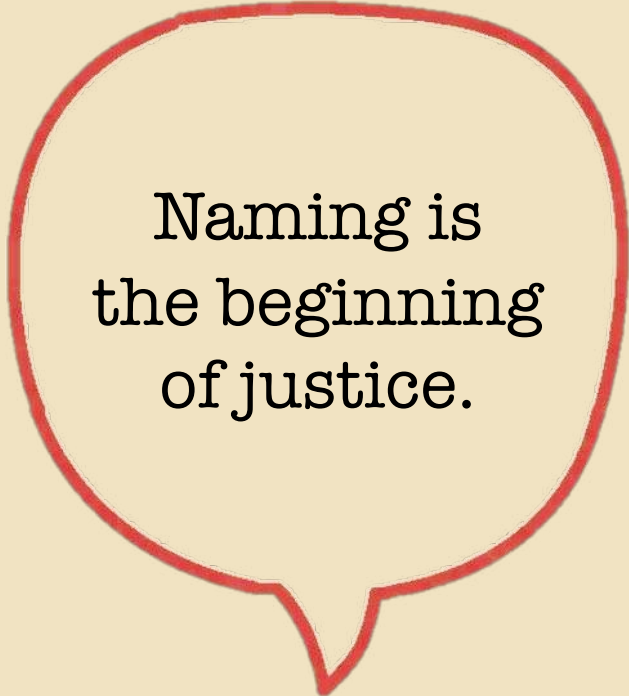
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“Objectivity” vs. care

- ❖ Museums are repositories of culture (and cultural norms)
- ❖ Striving for “neutrality” simply means communicating invisible, unquestioned cultural norms
- ❖ The etymological root of “curate” is from the Latin “cura,” which means **to take care**
- ❖ We must care for not only what’s within the museum, but also the people who interact with it

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Naming is
the beginning
of justice.

Robin Wall Kimmerer

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Tip #1: Be appropriately specific

- ❖ Latino or Hispanic vs. Puerto Rican, Brazilian, Guatemalan
- ❖ Africa vs. Morocco, Nigeria, West Africa
- ❖ Native Americans vs. Mashpee Wampanoag
- ❖ LGBTQ vs. lesbian, asexual, Two Spirit, genderqueer
- ❖ People of color vs. Black Americans
- ❖ People with disabilities vs. wheelchair users, autistic artists, blind and/or deaf visitors

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Tip #2: Take care in describing identity

- ❖ Always respect the language the people you're writing about use/used to describe themselves
- ❖ Don't make assumptions; if a person's self-identity can't be determined, use descriptive language
 - "The author was bisexual" vs. "The author had relationships with women and men throughout his life"
 - "The Mexican American artist" vs. "The artist's parents immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico"

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Tip #2: Take care in describing identity

- ❖ Avoid qualifiers that position white, straight, cisgender, male, nondisabled people as the “default”
 - “woman artist” “blind professor” “gay scientist”
- ❖ Discuss identity in ways that are relevant to the subject matter, not simply to highlight diversity
 - “She spent her life documenting and preserving Tamal Machchaw, the language of her Coast Miwok people”
 - “He designed the labyrinth-like concentric circles of the garden to reflect his experience of schizophrenia”

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Tip #3: Avoid euphemisms

“diverse” “minorities” “inner-city”

people of color
Black youth

“underprivileged” “disadvantaged”
“underrepresented”

historically oppressed
marginalized
excluded

“differently abled” “special needs”
“physically challenged”
“on the spectrum”

disabilities disabled
autistic

“discovery” “arrival” “presence”

invasion colonization
settlement

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Tip #4: Avoid dehumanizing language

❖ Avoid using adjectives as nouns

- X “Asians” “transgenders” “paraplegics” “the disabled”
- X “the poor” “the deaf” “the homeless” “the elderly”

❖ Avoid equating people with a condition or label

- X “schizophrenics” “addict” “convict” “high-school dropout”

❖ Avoid negative, stigmatizing, and pathologizing language

- X “victims” “suffering from” “stricken with” “afflicted with”
- X “struggling with” “mentally ill” “confined to a wheelchair”

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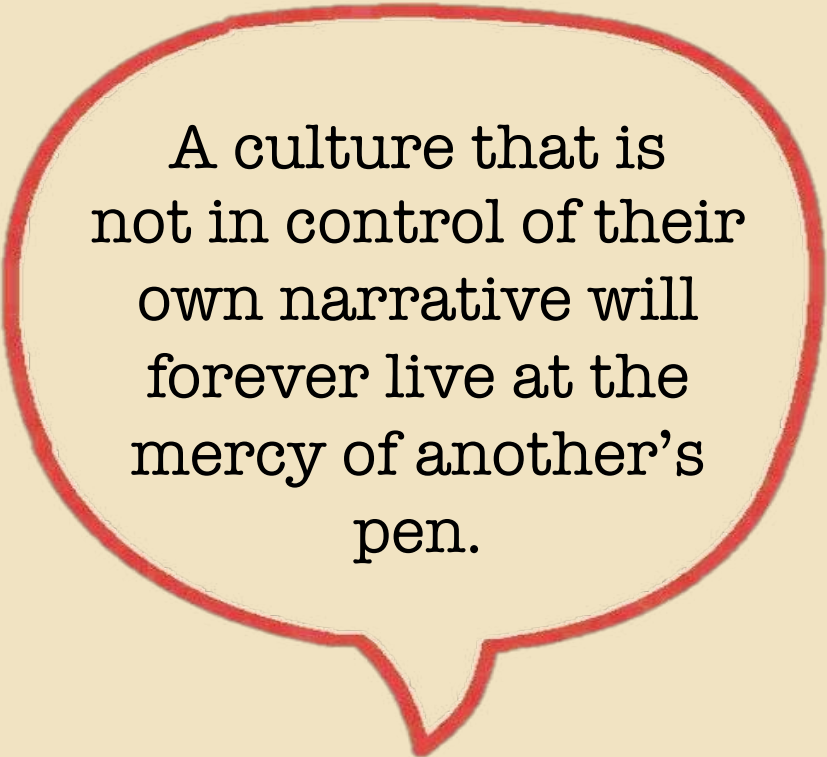
Tip #5: Follow leaders on the margins

- ❖ Capitalize **Black, Native, and Indigenous Peoples**
- ❖ Avoid gender binary language (“both genders” “boys and girls” “the opposite sex”)
- ❖ Avoid “he or she”; use singular they
- ❖ Understand “person-first” vs. “identity-first” language
- ❖ Seek out scholars, activists, and other leaders in your field who have marginalized identities, follow their work, and learn from them—also, hire them as staff/consultants!

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A culture that is
not in control of their
own narrative will
forever live at the
mercy of another's
pen.

Mark Gonzales

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How you write

- ❖ Is it intelligible to people of all ages and all educational backgrounds? People who speak English as a second language? People who are new to the subject area?
- ❖ Consider these various motivations and how they inform how you write:
 - Justifying the value of an object/exhibit to funders
 - Impressing fellow experts in the field
 - Creating a conversation between the visitor and the object/exhibit

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How you write

- ❖ Language choices carry unquestioned cultural norms
 - Word choice: “art” vs. “artifact”; “fine art” vs. “folk art”; “American Art” vs. “African American Art”
 - Using past tense to refer to Indigenous Peoples
 - Passive vs. active voice: “the Native population decreased” vs. “settlers introduced diseases that killed 75% of the local Wampanoag people”
 - Humanization: “slaves” vs. “enslaved people”; “master” vs. “enslaver”; “he had two slaves” vs. “enslaved two people”

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What you write

- ❖ What stories are being told, and what stories are being ignored or erased?
- ❖ From whose perspective is the story being told?
- ❖ Who is missing from the story?
 - Whose invisible labor contributed to the objects or knowledge on display?
 - Who was exploited or oppressed by the primary people involved?

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What you write

- ❖ Whose version of the story is being told?

In 1602, the explorer Bartholomew Gosnold led the first English expedition here and named this land Cape Cod. In 1620, the *Mayflower* arrived in Provincetown harbor.

The earliest inhabitants of this land were Paleoindians who arrived more than 12,000 years ago. By the 16th century, it was home to the Nauset, fishers and farmers who lived here in a village they called Meeshawn.

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What you write

- ❖ What stories are ignored or erased?

In vitro fertilization (IVF) was invented by Robert G. Edwards in the 1970s and led to the first “test-tube baby” in 1978. An estimated five million people have now been born this way.

Edwards was a leader of the eugenics movement; his invention was motivated by prejudice against people with disabilities and his belief that increased control over human reproduction would allow for “selective breeding” in humans.

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What you write

❖ Who was exploited or oppressed?

The paintings on view in these galleries celebrate an American story of mercantile exchange, rational thought, and military prowess. As with most portraits, however, these paintings depict the sitters as they wish to be seen ...

Yet a great deal of information is effaced in these works, including the sitters' reliance on chattel slavery. Many of the people represented here derived wealth and social status from this system of violence and oppression, which was legal in Massachusetts until 1783. ...

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Further resources

- ❖ Radical Copyeditor: radicalcopyeditor.com / @ZrAlexKapitan
- ❖ Conscious Style Guide: consciousstyleguide.com
- ❖ The Diversity Style Guide: diversitystyleguide.com
- ❖ APA Style's Bias-Free Language guidance: apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language
- ❖ Mass Action: Museum as Site for Social Action: museumaction.org
- ❖ The Inluseam: inluseam.com

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