

ALIENATIONS

UNDERSTANDING ALIENATION, ITS MECHANISMS,
AND HOW TO OVERCOME IT



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FREE READING EXCERPT

ALIENATIONS

Understanding Alienation, Its Mechanisms, and How to Overcome It

A child's name changes at a counter. An airport queue becomes a lesson in who deserves consideration. An inventor's achievement is credited to a race before anyone asks how it works. These are small scenes with enormous consequences.

A penetrating exploration of how domination becomes an internal standard of judgment—in family life, language, education, desire and institutions—and how that standard can be recovered and changed.

- Chapter 1 — The Displacement of the Center
- Chapter 2 — Culture, Name, and Transmission
- The reflex that calls whiteness competence (A selected passage from Chapter 5)

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Chapter 1 — The Displacement of the Center

The first surrender is often signed with a pen that belongs to somebody else.

The name at the counter

Picture a child standing at a registration counter. The form is complete, the documents are in order, and the mother has written the child's name as the family has always spoken it. The clerk hesitates, draws a line through the unfamiliar spelling, and proposes an easier version. The mother must choose between a small argument that may delay enrollment and a quiet concession her child will carry for years. No speech about racial superiority is needed. A pen, a queue, and the authority of the register have already made the hierarchy practical.

The alteration looks trivial to everyone waiting behind them. It may be the first of hundreds: a name simplified, an accent corrected, a family language confined to the kitchen, a child taught to pronounce a distant institution flawlessly while stumbling over the names of the people who raised him. Over time those concessions acquire the force of common sense. The child begins making them before anyone asks.

Alienation begins at that transfer of authority. Someone else's categories become the measure by which a person judges a name, a body, a language, a history, or an ability. Institutions give the measure practical consequences; families and individuals learn to anticipate it. Once anticipation becomes automatic, domination can reproduce itself through choices that appear voluntary.

The central struggle is over the right to evaluate. Who is believed without credentials? Whose mistake becomes a verdict on a whole people? Which language can define a scientific problem? Whose archives name the past? Which child grows up expecting to invent something, and which grows up expecting to receive it from elsewhere? Those questions connect intimate embarrassment to education, technology, economics, and political power.

Follow the chain from the intimate decision to the institution that shaped it. Parents make costly concessions to protect children; professionals trade their evidence for prestige; scholars find their observations suspended until an outside voice repeats them; ministries purchase capacities they might have cultivated. The decisive question is where the power to judge was displaced and what would be required to recover it.

Introduction — The center of judgment

The first power of a people is the power to name the world in its own words—and to make those words answerable to reality.

Watch how a judgment travels. At home, a family debates which name a child may safely carry. At school, the teacher reads the register as though one set of sounds were self-evident and the other a problem to be solved. Years later, the same child sits in a meeting where a proposal receives attention only after a visitor repeats it. The locations change; the direction of authority does not.

This is the book's line of inquiry: how a rule first encountered in a small exchange becomes an expectation, then an institutional criterion, then a limit on what people dare to produce. Every stage leaves traces. A form can be inspected. A classroom can be observed. A tender can be compared. A

research claim can be tested. The argument follows those traces rather than asking the reader to accept an inherited verdict.

The subsequent research brought the epistemic dimension into sharper focus. A hierarchy can control the questions a people thinks it is entitled to ask, the signs it thinks it can read, and the evidence it is allowed to produce. At that depth, the injury is generative: people cease creating certain kinds of knowledge because they have ceased imagining those kinds of knowledge as theirs to create.

A people may preserve its clothing, its dances, and a few ceremonies while already having lost what matters most. It may speak its language at home yet believe that language incapable of explaining science. It may honor its ancestors yet wait for a foreigner to tell it who those ancestors were. It may have universities while importing the questions, methods, criteria, and answers. It may have governments while no longer knowing how to imagine the state except in forms inherited from those who once dominated it.

Borrowing enriches a society when it can select, translate, contest, and transform what it receives. Alienation appears when origin and prestige replace examination, when the foreign is treated as presumptively competent, and when the local must receive its legitimacy elsewhere. The result is a disciplined flow of attention, trust, money, and authority away from the people who sustain it.

Learning across borders gives us languages, techniques and allies. The injury begins where that learning acquires a one-way rule: an outside institution may judge ours, but ours may not judge it. Once the rule is learned, a proposal may be rejected in its author's own mind before it ever reaches a committee.

A person who has absorbed that rule can become its most diligent enforcer. He corrects the family language before anyone complains, treats a local error as a national defect, and accepts an external claim with less evidence than he would demand at home. His decisions feel independent because the old command now speaks in his own voice.

Rewards make that inner voice plausible. An accent opens an interview; an overseas certificate settles an argument; an imported product passes an inspection that a local one must repeat. Each decision makes the next one seem reasonable. Prestige is no longer only a belief. It is written into the conditions of admission.

Alienation consequently crosses psychology, culture, language, economics, politics, and epistemology. The epistemic dimension concerns the production and authorization of knowledge: who asks the question, designs the test, records the evidence, interprets the sign, and has the standing to correct an error. That final authority determines which capacities become visible to a society.

Conquest can seize land, labor, and resources. Its deeper afterlife may seize the means by which a people recognizes the value of what remains: a vocabulary, an archive, a practical skill, a research question, a child's ability to reason in the language of home.

Research on Kisingombe, Mandombe, and pedagogy opens this question beyond cultural symbolism. Living language can carry compositional rules, relations between sound and gesture, and categories for investigating signs. A word preserved through ordinary family speech may become a research instrument; a geometric operation learned in writing may become a way of organizing reasoning. Recovering these capacities changes who can participate in discovery.

The method demands explicit procedures: expose the signs before revealing expected readings; record all responses, including failures; identify independent controls; preserve the order of interpretation; and allow different teams to repeat the work. Knowledge grows stronger when its route can be retraced. The same principle applies to historical testimony, institutional decisions, and technological design.

Disalienation is the recovery of an active center of judgment: the power to observe, name, compare, test, correct, transmit, and build. It equips a people to engage others as contributors and interlocutors, rather than as permanent petitioners for recognition.

The inquiry therefore moves from the first learned judgment to its historical manufacture, from family and school to the contract and laboratory, and finally to the capacities that can be rebuilt. Each section asks not only what the hierarchy meant but what it caused people to do.

At the end of that path stands a practical measure: what can the child, the researcher, the family, the enterprise, or the state now do that it could not do before?

What is alienation?

Alienation is the learned displacement of judgment: the point at which a person comes to experience an imposed hierarchy as the natural measure of self and world.

The word alienation comes from the Latin *alienus*, meaning “other” or “foreign.” To alienate something is to make it foreign to the person who possessed it. In law, property may be alienated - transferred to someone else.

In social and psychological life, an alienated person becomes, in a certain sense, foreign to himself or herself.

Alienation can become severe without depriving its subject of intelligence or technical competence. A person may function admirably within a system while helping reproduce the hierarchy that limits his own people. The contradiction lies in the direction of judgment: familiar capacities are presumed deficient, while the prestige of an outside source is treated as evidence even before the work has been examined. A society can possess the knowledge to solve a problem and still organize its institutions to await permission from elsewhere.

The contradiction is visible in ordinary success. An accomplished professional can negotiate complex contracts and still distrust a local expert before examining the work. A parent can pursue every educational advantage for a child while teaching the child to feel ashamed of the language spoken by the grandparents. Social adaptation and intellectual independence must be measured separately.

Alienation is therefore less a total loss of reason than a distorted orientation of reason. The individual still thinks, but thinks through categories that place him below others. He still chooses, but his choices have been prepared by a hierarchy he no longer questions. He still defends values, but those values may have been constructed to make his own disappearance appear desirable.

Take a simple example. A parent gives a child a foreign name because the parent finds it beautiful. Taken by itself, that choice proves nothing. But if the same parent considers the names of his own people “savage,” “too complicated,” or “embarrassing,” while automatically treating foreign

names as modern and serious, we are no longer dealing with mere preference. A hierarchy has been installed inside judgment.

Another example: someone learns French, English, Arabic, Portuguese, or any other international language. That person has increased his ability to communicate; this is a strength. But if he forbids his child from speaking the family language, corrects the child's accent as though it were a moral defect, and believes that no science can be taught in an African language, learning has turned into submission. The problem is not the foreign language. The problem is the mutilation that accompanies it.

Alienation often begins with a rigged comparison. The dominant side presents its strongest institutions, best-preserved monuments, most famous scholars, and newest technologies. The dominated side is presented through wars, poverty, errors, and the ruins left by conquest. The child is then asked to compare those two images as though both were natural and complete.

The comparison is false from the beginning. It compares one side's showcase with the other's wounds. It erases the violence that produced the difference. It hides destroyed knowledge, prohibited languages, removed archives, dismantled institutions, and transferred resources. Finally, it transforms the result of domination into evidence of the dominator's superiority.

Alienation then performs a remarkable trick: it turns a consequence into a cause. The weakened people believe they are inferior because they are weak, without seeing that the weakening was organized. They may eventually admire the mechanisms that weakened them and despise the very elements that could help them rebuild.

That is why alienation cannot be defined simply as imitation. We all imitate. A child imitates parents in order to learn. A musician imitates a master before developing a personal style. A society may adopt a foreign technique and improve it. Imitation becomes alienating when three things happen together: we no longer understand what we imitate, we devalue what we already possessed, and we lose the ability to decide according to our own needs.

The alienated judgment reveals itself in a double standard. A local mistake becomes collective incapacity; a foreign mistake remains individual. A local discovery waits for external recognition; an external claim receives immediate attention. The rules change with the identity of the speaker.

Alienation also produces a double deficit of love: loss of self-regard and an inability to recognize the value of those close to us. That emptiness is often replaced by fascination. One becomes attached to the image of the dominant group, to its symbols of prestige, to its approval. One wants to be chosen, recognized, invited, cited, or rewarded by it. Even rebellion may secretly seek its validation.

Self-respect gives a community the confidence to examine its failures accurately. It permits the reform of harmful practices, the adoption of good outside ideas, and criticism of powerful insiders. Freedom requires the capacity to correct oneself without seeking permission to exist.

The serious questions are: Is the claim true? Is the practice just? Does it work? What does it preserve, damage, or create? Those tests apply equally to inherited institutions and imported models.

The discipline is direct: observe before ranking, understand before copying, test before believing, and preserve the capacity to correct whatever fails.

The four levels of alienation

To make the phenomenon easier to recognize, we can distinguish four levels that reinforce one another.

The first is alienation of image. A person learns to see his body, name, accent, family, and people through a gaze that devalues them. He constantly corrects himself in order to resemble an external model.

The second is alienation of judgment. He no longer asks whether an idea is true or useful. He first asks who said it, at which university, in which language, and in which country. Authority replaces examination.

The third is alienation of action. Even when a person understands that a situation harms him, he continues feeding the structures that produce it. He buys, votes, teaches, recruits, researches, and organizes against his own interests.

The fourth is alienation of knowledge. A society no longer knows how to produce its own questions, retain its data, name its realities, or validate its discoveries. It becomes a consumer of truths manufactured elsewhere about itself.

These four levels are not separate. A child taught that his name is shameful may later come to believe that his language is incapable of abstract thought. Someone who believes his language incapable of science will accept that all serious research must be conducted in a foreign language. A society that controls neither the words, nor the categories, nor the data will ultimately find it very difficult to control the institutions that organize its life.

That is how a simple laugh at a name can lead, many years later, to political or scientific dependency. Alienation looks small when it enters the home. It becomes enormous when it reaches the state.

Consider the long life of the mark made at the registration counter. In primary school, a teacher calls the altered name. At home, the grandmother uses the original one. The child answers to both, but the two names begin to live in different worlds. One appears on report cards, examinations, certificates, and eventually job applications. The other is spoken at meals, funerals, and family gatherings. The division becomes particularly costly when the child can no longer explain the original name to younger relatives. What began as an administrative convenience has become a question of transmission. The institution has acquired the power to decide which part of the child travels into the public record.

A single concession need not produce this outcome. Its importance lies in the pattern that surrounds it. The same school can accept the name and still prohibit the language; permit the language and still treat its literature as entertainment rather than knowledge; praise cultural diversity and still teach that scientific thought arrived from elsewhere. Each practice draws a boundary between what people may possess privately and what they may exercise with public authority. Alienation becomes durable when a child learns that the most intimate inheritance must be translated into somebody else's approved categories before it is allowed to count.

The pattern can also be interrupted. A clerk can register a name accurately and document the pronunciation. A school can teach the local language in subjects that require precision rather than reserving it for ceremonies. A university can ask students to construct and test original hypotheses using the intellectual resources available to them. These actions are not gestures of

sentiment. They change the institutional conditions under which children and adults can remain themselves while acquiring new capacities. A center of judgment is recovered when a person can bring an inheritance into a demanding public task without first treating it as an obstacle.

The ordinary machinery of displacement

Return to the registration counter years later. The same child is applying for a scholarship. In the first essay the student writes the family name in its inherited form, then changes it to the official spelling because the application portal recognizes only the recorded version. Neither choice is dramatic. That is precisely why the mechanism travels so far. The first alteration occurred under an official's gaze; the second is performed alone. Between the two, institutional compulsion has become anticipation.

A person can know that an imposed standard is unjust and still organize daily life around avoiding its penalty. This distinction matters. Alienation is not measured by the number of foreign objects in the home or the fluency with which one speaks a prestigious language. The turning point is the source of judgment. When a family changes a child's name for an administrative requirement, it may be meeting a coercive constraint. When the family later teaches every child that the ancestral name is inherently embarrassing, the constraint has been adopted as value. The original decision was not the final injury; the instruction attached to it was.

The relevant unit of analysis is the chain, not an isolated expression of taste. A clerk alters a spelling; a school makes that spelling compulsory; an employer treats the original as evidence of unsuitable presentation; a young professional begins correcting relatives without being asked. Every stage can appear reasonable in isolation. The sequence reveals who imposed the first

penalty, who learned to anticipate it, and how the burden of correction passed from the institution to the family.

Consider the questions that reveal the chain. Who could refuse at the first desk? Who paid for that refusal? What alternative was available? Which rule was written and which was simply assumed? At what stage did the imposed compromise become a story about the inferiority of the original? Follow the answers, and the apparently trivial correction becomes a history of authority. The questions also prevent the convenient habit of blaming the individual who bears the cost rather than the institution that made the cost predictable.

Chapter 2 — Culture, Name, and Transmission

A child can inherit a name and spend the next twenty years apologizing for it.

At a birthday gathering, a relative asks a young mother what she plans to name her baby. The mother says the name slowly, as her own mother taught her. A cousin laughs: the child will spend a lifetime spelling that. Others nod, with the practiced sympathy of people who believe they are helping. By the end of the meal, the mother is considering a different name. No office has refused anything. The family has performed the refusal in advance.

That anticipation matters. A child can inherit a family's memory, but the family may also hand down the expectation that its memory will be unwelcome. A nickname proposed in kindness becomes a school registration, then an examination certificate. What was presented as convenience becomes the official identity through which the next generation must recover its own past.

The comparison is measurable in the reactions of the same people. Do they laugh at an unfamiliar African name while patiently learning an unfamiliar European one? Is a local colleague's lapse explained as collective incapacity while an outsider receives the courtesy of an individual explanation? The hierarchy lives in this uneven generosity.

Clothing, vocabulary, or travel alone reveal little about a person's independence. A speaker of Kikongo can adopt an imposed hierarchy, while a speaker of French can recognize and contest it. The revealing difference lies in judgment and conduct, especially where doing so has a cost.

The employee whose foreign colleague misses a deadline may call it an exception; the same error by a local colleague becomes “how our people are.” A local engineer’s achievement is attributed to an outside education, while the foreign engineer’s achievement is credited to innate capability. Repeated attribution builds the illusion that prestige follows merit when prestige was granted in advance.

The household is where an administrative expectation acquires affection and authority. Children learn which jokes are permitted, which words must be translated, and which resemblances adults celebrate. By the time an institution issues its judgment, some children have already been trained to agree.

Cultural alienation

“Culture does not feed you,” someone says while a family decides what to teach a child. But culture shapes which foods people buy, which farmers they support, which professions they admire, and whom they trust to produce the things they need. Its effects enter the marketplace long before economists begin counting them.

Cultural alienation progressively weakens the power to select. A society can exchange with the world and enrich its repertoire; it can also replace its own capacities before examining them, until prestige rather than need determines the direction of imitation.

The mechanism appears when a person feels compelled to distance himself from familiar people in order to appear modern. A borrowed expression becomes a credential; an inherited expression becomes an embarrassment. The emotional reward lies in being recognized as an exception to the people one came from.

The result is often an assortment of objects and habits that function as badges of escape. Yet the wearer remains anxious about being recognized. Cultural consumption has become a daily rehearsal of social distance.

The remarks are recognizable: “I don’t speak that village language.” “Natural hair is not professional.” “We can dance; thinking is another matter.” “I want a normal name for my child.” Their familiarity is part of their power.

The irony is that a demand to examine the hierarchy is often met with a caricature of backwardness. A proposal for local-language scientific education is mocked as a plan to abolish modern technology. Criticism of unfair procurement is described as hostility to imported goods. The caricature prevents the institution from having to answer the actual question.

A country may import a phone, write valuable software for it, control the data it creates, and negotiate the standards it follows. Those are different positions in the same global economy. The question concerns the capacity to shape technology, not the purity of its birthplace.

The useful debate begins with specific functions: who designs the interface, owns the account records, can repair the device, audits the algorithms, and retains the customer relationship? Cultural confidence becomes productive when these questions replace the performance of prestige.

Culture therefore acts on the economy through the judgments it trains. It influences aspiration, purchasing decisions, occupational status, risk, and trust. A people that learns to rank its own competence last will eventually notice the pattern in the balance sheets of its schools, businesses, and institutions.

The pattern has three linked movements: local capacities receive less examination and investment; external prestige gains authority before evidence; and those judgments redirect action in ways that reproduce dependency. Each movement can be observed, compared, and changed.

The name, language, and body are early sites of that process because children encounter them before they can name the system. They learn which sounds make adults proud, which appearances make adults nervous, and which forms of belonging may need explanation at the next door.

The name: the first transmission

“My children will have normal names, not those strange names from your side.”

Who has never heard an African mock another African’s name? The scene is so ordinary that it barely shocks us. A name from Europe, the Middle East, or America often passes without explanation. An African name is immediately placed on trial: “What does it mean? How do you pronounce that? Why is it so long? Don’t you have a shorter, easier name?”

Notice the inequality. Nobody asks every Peter to present a study of stones before entering the room. Nobody asks every John to defend the full history of his name. The foreign name enjoys a right to exist without justification. The African name must prove that it is not ridiculous.

The decisive fact is the double standard: imported names are often received as naturally respectable, while names drawn from African languages are asked to justify their sound, length, meaning and professional suitability. A family may cherish a name inherited through faith or migration. That history can enrich the child. What must be confronted is the learned

expectation that a Kongo name will obstruct success and that abandoning it therefore demonstrates responsible parenting. When a society penalizes an inheritance and the family anticipates the penalty, what is called taste is already entangled with the institution that trained it.

In many African traditions, a name is not merely a label selected because it sounded good on television. It can be a compressed sentence, advice, memory, blessing, warning, the account of a birth, an answer to hardship, or a hope placed in the child.

Among Kongo families, a name may preserve the circumstances of a child's arrival, words spoken around the birth, a difficulty survived, a relationship between houses, a social function, a moral debt, or an orientation for life. It does not only say, "this is what we will call you." It may also say, "this is what we lived through; this is what we pass to you; this is what you must not forget."

Consider a family preparing for a school registration. At home, a grandmother pronounces the child's full name and explains the event it remembers. At the office, the parent anticipates that an unfamiliar spelling will slow the queue and quietly writes a shortened version. Years later the child knows only the abbreviation. The practical decision was made in seconds; the cost emerges when the family tries to recover the meaning that was never transmitted.

That is why some names look long to someone who does not understand them. The outsider thinks he is looking at many syllables. He may in fact be looking at a sentence. What appears complicated may be a remarkably economical way of preserving several pieces of information at once.

Linguistic and historical inquiry makes the point concrete. Names, titles, house names, and old place names are useful far beyond genealogy. They can preserve roots, functions, movements, relationships, and classifications that disappeared from written archives. Studied with care, they give researchers hypotheses to test against oral history, material traces, archival variation, and living usage.

Carefully is the important word. A resemblance between two names does not automatically prove migration, dynasty, or kinship. We have suffered enough from fabricated histories; we do not need new ones. A name must be studied together with its language, older forms, tone when known, family context, variants, territory, and other available evidence.

The method is simple in principle. Do not begin by deciding what an old name must prove. Gather its forms, pronunciation, transmitted meaning, variants, the families who bear it, places connected to it, and independent stories that accompany it. Compare only afterward.

A name is therefore a small archive. And like every archive, it can disappear without being burned. Parents only need to stop transmitting it. They only need to become ashamed of it. A clerk can shorten it. A teacher can refuse to pronounce it. A form can reject its characters. A child can adopt a nickname simply to stop people laughing.

The destruction of a name does not always require a whip. Sometimes an embarrassed smile is enough: "That is his real name, but at school we call him..."

At the registration counter, a clerk says that the Kongo name will be difficult for teachers. The parent remembers applications rejected without explanation and interviews where a surname was repeated as a joke. Nobody

orders the parent to change the name. The pencil pauses; the parent writes an easier version. Years later that small gesture is repeated in school certificates, identity documents and the child's own introduction. The child's future is said to have been protected, yet the original pressure was never removed. It was merely delegated to the family.

The distinction between pressure and preference is empirically important. Bertrand and Mullainathan's randomized résumé study found that otherwise comparable applications assigned White-associated names received substantially more interview callbacks than applications assigned African-American-associated names [Ei]. The study does not establish how every particular family chooses a name; it establishes that employers can make a name economically consequential before meeting the person. Once that is understood, advice to parents to choose a “better” name must be analyzed alongside the market that gives the advice its power.

A society that celebrates a child only after a family name is disguised has not become more welcoming. It has trained parents to do the excluding on its behalf. The test of progress is visible when a child can carry the full name through school, employment and public life without paying an arbitrary price for the sounds that connect generations.

Colonial administration made naming a tool of legibility and control. Official registries, missionary schooling and employment records could elevate an authorized spelling or personal designation above the family's own account. Later generations encountered the official version as an apparently neutral fact. The mechanism persists whenever a form accepts one naming structure without question but treats another as an error, when a teacher substitutes an easier name without asking, or when a parent preemptively changes a child's name to avoid anticipated ridicule. The

institution's earlier judgment has been smuggled into the parent's idea of what a loving decision requires.

The real question is asymmetry. Why should an African's faith need to be demonstrated by erasing an African name when other peoples integrate the same faith into their own languages and histories? Why does the "universal" so often resemble the identity of the people who control the institution? Why is it so often the same member who must undress culturally in order to enter the community?

Imagine someone claiming to love you while rejecting your name, your language, your family, and everything through which you recognize yourself. The person insists that the love is universal, provided you resemble somebody else. That sounds strange because it is strange. There are not many more elegant ways to tell someone, "I accept you, but not you."

A child may inherit several names, languages and faith traditions. Each can become part of a large and coherent life. The critical measure is whether the family can tell the child what every name carries and whether one inheritance is consistently treated as a burden that must be hidden to secure respectability. The child deserves the history before being made responsible for its disappearance.

And let us be fair: we Africans have sometimes shown impressive creativity. Two syllables from a film, three letters from a brand, the name of a singer - shake vigorously and the result becomes a child's name for life. Then we laugh at Nsimba because it is supposedly "strange."

Laugh if you want. Laugh quickly, because the subject is sad. The problem is not that an invented name is automatically bad. All languages create names. The problem is that foreign invention is treated as modern while

creation from our own languages is treated as primitive. Sometimes even our imagination needs a foreign passport before we accept it.

Names belong to persons, not to the vanity of institutions or parents. A person may eventually reject a painful name, repair an abusive history or invent a new designation. Such choices acquire depth when the inherited record can first be recovered and understood. Erasure disguised as sophistication denies the child even the knowledge from which a later independent choice might be made.

What a name actually transmits

A name can transmit at least five things. First, memory: an event, a person, a movement, a trial, or a victory. Second, relationship: the child's place in a family, house, lineage, territory, or network of obligations. Third, speech: a name may answer doubters, thank supporters, preserve a promise, or condemn an injustice. Fourth, orientation: it can leave the child with a lifelong question - what were they trying to remind me of, what did they hope I would continue, and what should I correct? Fifth, linguistic data: sounds, grammatical forms, and meanings that ordinary use may later weaken.

To lose a name, then, may mean losing far more than a word. It can break five threads at once.

Try a simple exercise. Ask the meaning of your name, the names of your parents, and those of your grandparents. Record every version, including contradictory ones. Ask who chose the name, under what circumstances, and why. Do not correct older relatives too quickly. Differences between their accounts may themselves preserve history.

When people begin questioning the meanings, genealogies, and social uses of their names, they reopen archives that have often been carried orally across generations.

The name in three rooms

At home the grandfather says a child's full name slowly. He knows which part refers to an ancestor, which part records a circumstance, and which part places the child in a line of relations. In the classroom the name is shortened because the register has too little room. At a job interview the shortened name is pronounced in a form that sounds familiar to the panel. Three rooms contain one person, but only the first room can explain what has been lost.

This is more than sentiment. Names are a social record: they may encode kinship, geography, praise, grief, or a promise. Once institutions erase distinctions, people must reconstruct their genealogy from fragments. The injury is cumulative because a later official treats the earlier transcription as the only authentic evidence. Administrative convenience becomes an archive against the family that supplied the name.

The experiment discussed above has a consequence that reaches beyond hiring. Once a parent knows that an unfamiliar name may affect the first reading of a résumé, the parent can begin censoring the name before the child has made any decision. Discrimination has then acquired a second workforce: the people trying to protect those it injures. Correcting the hiring rule and preserving the person's chosen name must be parts of the same remedy.

The practical answer involves institutions as much as parents. Records should preserve the chosen form of a person's name, support diacritics and

linguistic distinctions, and permit corrections without making the applicant prove that the original family designation deserves respect. Teachers can ask pupils what their names mean without turning children into representatives of entire cultures. A society that lets a child explain a name and then uses that name accurately has done something small and precise: it has made the family a legitimate source of knowledge.

A selected passage from Chapter 5

The reflex that calls whiteness competence

A society is deeply ill when it repeatedly teaches its members to diminish themselves and to admire, without examination, the culture of the powers that have subordinated them. The injury is visible when admiration becomes a reflex: before a person has spoken, before a machine has been tested, before a claim has been checked, its supposed foreignness already counts as evidence of superiority. The most revealing moment is often the one nobody in the room finds strange.

Picture an airport departure hall. The queue has barely moved. African passengers wait with tired children, checked documents and the same obligation to reach their flights as everyone else. A group of non-African passengers approaches the counter. An agent waves them through. Another employee murmurs the explanation that makes the scene devastating: ‘They are white; we can wait in the queue, but they cannot.’ In one sentence, a public servant divides human time into categories. His own people must wait; the others must be spared the inconvenience.

Nothing in that sentence concerns flight safety, disability, an earlier appointment, or the priority printed on a boarding pass. The privilege is inferred from appearance. The agent does more than give preferential service. He trains the waiting passengers to accept their own lesser claim to consideration. He may even consider his action professional, courteous and sophisticated. The person who objects is then made to feel crude, jealous or provincial. The person who keeps the queue obedient is praised for knowing how to treat important guests.

At that point the hierarchy has crossed an important threshold. It no longer needs an outsider standing behind the counter. Local hands apply it, local voices explain it, and local institutions finance it. We might ask who taught the agent that courtesy belongs more naturally to a foreign-looking traveler. But the more urgent question is who rewards him for acting on that belief, who remains silent, and what the children in the queue learn from the scene. They learn who must apologize for taking up time and whose time may be taken from others without an explanation.

Now move from the airport to a demonstration of an unfamiliar invention. A working device is switched on. A new method solves a difficult problem. Before anyone has asked how the mechanism works, somebody exclaims, 'Mundele!': 'The white man!' Sometimes the exclamation arrives with delight, genuine fascination and a half-admiring joke. Yet it performs a precise substitution. A discovery becomes the property of a racial category. The engineer disappears into the imagined genius of a people. The materials, experiments, technicians, failures and collective effort disappear with him.

The double judgment becomes even clearer in the familiar remark: 'The white man's witchcraft produces wonders; ours brings only harm.' The speaker has already classified the unknown according to the identity of its supposed owner. When an impressive device comes from abroad, unfamiliar knowledge becomes evidence of intelligence. When an unfamiliar claim arises nearby, it may be dismissed as sorcery, backwardness or danger before its procedure can be examined. Wonder has been distributed unequally. So has permission to be inventive.

This is a catastrophe of attribution. The individual achievements of some Europeans are expanded into a collective racial faculty; African failures are

expanded into a collective African deficiency. Meanwhile, African successes are made exceptional, accidental, borrowed or dependent on a hidden foreign hand. The scale of credit and blame moves in opposite directions. The dominated group must account for every failure; the prestigious group receives the proceeds of every success. One man's invention becomes 'their genius'; one local error becomes 'our nature'.

A teenager listening to such exchanges receives an education more durable than a lecture. She can say the names of global inventors but cannot name the mechanic who keeps her town supplied with water. She learns the European laboratory as the natural habitat of discovery and the African workshop as the place where imported equipment is repaired. If she later develops a promising design, she may seek an overseas signature before allowing herself to believe in it. By then she may speak of this dependence as ambition and of her hesitation as realism.

The psychology is recognizable. Frantz Fanon examined how the colonial order enters language, desire and the need for recognition [E12]. Jost and Banaji describe system justification: the processes through which people accept explanations that legitimize an unequal social order even when they are harmed by it [E4]. Subsequent research reviewed patterns of explicit and implicit favoritism toward higher-status groups under particular conditions [E16]. Their findings illuminate how a scene such as the airport counter can feel ordinary even to the people reproducing the inequality.

Denial completes the circuit. Ask the agent why one traveler was allowed to bypass everyone else and he may answer, 'I was only being respectful.' Ask why an inventor's skin color was shouted instead of the inventor's name and someone replies, 'It was only praise.' Ask why a local expert needs an international sponsor before being heard and the committee answers, 'We

care about standards.’ Each answer describes a socially valued virtue: respect, admiration, rigor. Each conceals a different distribution of those virtues. We know the hierarchy is active when the same rule changes with the person’s origin.

The damage accumulates in institutions. A hotel trains its reception staff to relax its voice for foreign guests and harden it for local ones. A hospital treats the wealthy visitor’s impatience as urgency and the local patient’s distress as noise. A university accepts a fashionable overseas label while asking a locally named theory to prove that it deserves a hearing. A company pays for foreign advice, dismisses the same analysis from its own technicians, and later calls the resulting dependency a shortage of national talent. Each decision appears small. Together they teach an economy where competence must arrive with an external seal.

A society cannot regain its judgment through slogans of pride. It must expose the operating rules. Place identical technical proposals under anonymous review and measure how judgments shift after the names and institutions are revealed. Record who receives an exception at the airport, who must produce extra paperwork, how long each queue waits and what reason was entered in the system. Compare procurement outcomes against demonstrated performance, total cost and the capacity retained locally. Listen to compliments spoken around children, and ask which human qualities are actually being celebrated. When a rule is genuinely universal, its application survives the removal of status markers.

This is also how we distinguish respect for a real achievement from the worship of an imagined racial essence. An invention should be studied, reproduced, improved and credited to its contributors. A language should be assessed by what speakers can make it express and by the opportunities

they have been allowed to develop. A traveler should receive the service to which the actual rule entitles the traveler. A scientist should face questions worthy of the work, whether the address on the paper is Kinshasa, Paris, Johannesburg or London. The test is the same; the freedom to apply it is what domination has obstructed.

The deepest sickness is not that a person notices another people's accomplishments. It is that someone has learned to look at those accomplishments and see proof that his own people are naturally less capable. He then uses that belief to arrange the queue, educate the child, allocate the budget and interpret the next invention. What was imposed has become administration. What was repeated has become instinct. What is called instinct can still be examined, measured and changed.

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