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## The Grammar of Complicity

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## The Grammar of Complicity

### Keywords

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### Disciplines

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### Comments

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# The Grammar of Complicity

December 12, 2017    Howard Schaap

Silence is complicity, I realize that. Sometimes, however, as a white man, silence is all you feel you can manage. (I don't mean to use the language of management, it just seems to happen; and by "you," the presumptive collective, I mean "I"). Silence, I tell myself, is better than \_\_\_\_\_. Better than "I don't know" or "I'm sorry," both lines containing politics: "I." Maybe "I am the problem," but even that—

Maybe, "Listening," with an implied "I'm." Maybe: "That"; "Her"; "Listen."

In short, I don't want to begin anything that begins with "I."

Recently, by way of domestic example, my wife, from Southeast Asia, said to me, "That was good thinking, [using the crockpot to warm up the meatballs to feed our family]. I wouldn't have thought of that." This, a ridiculous compliment that sets the bar so low, humbles me by which I mean embarrasses me, she who works, cooks, fights the power.

I pull the outrageous crock pot move so I that I can take my son hunting, on the land my family owns which we got as part of the systematic displacement and removal of the Dakota. It is not a direct line. (I do not mean this as self-defense, even though the passive voice gives away the fact that I do.)

In class I teach Juan Felipe Herrera, a poet recommended by a black former student, now an MFA candidate and poet, who visited last week and said to our all-white English department, "What it will take is for you to give up your seat at the table."

Now I say to students about Juan Felipe Herrera, who buckles my knees, "Teach me," and the lone Langston Hughes in the class (not to pigeonhole him, a student from PG County, only on my map because of Ta-Nehisi Coates) more than half a century from "Theme for English B," speaks up. And by my nodding I hope to say, "Listen to him" (implied "you," aimed at more than a dozen white women, one other white man, a second white man absent).

And when the time comes, I am willing. I don't mean to hide behind a dependent clause—the time could be tomorrow. And the infinitive phrase, which I've hidden, meaning implied, in case you've forgotten is “to give up my seat”: I am willing to give up my seat.

An Indonesian woman in my office. She says, “How do I talk to my white friends?” I remember the time—all the times—when my wife said, “You don't—” “You can't—.”

For years I said, “But I—”

Now: nods; silence; listening.

I tell the student, “You—”

Try. Love. Repeat.

And then this: That it's always you, laying yourself down.

Which is why sometimes you won't, you shouldn't, you shouldn't have to.