

The Skin That We Speak

*Thoughts on Language and Culture
in the Classroom*

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Ovuh Dyuh

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At her mother's insistence, coeditor JOANNE KILGOUR DOWDY learned as a child in Trinidad how to perfectly imitate British English, the idiom of the colonizer and of Trinidadian public life. The cost of acquiring this "skill" was alienation from her peers and also from herself; though "the Queen's English" won her a certain kind of social affirmation, it prevented her from relating to friends and stymied the expression of her vital, inner feelings. She bridged this divide later on in life through the creative medium of acting, which allowed her to legitimately occupy many different selves. One's "language of intimacy" must be validated in the public sphere, Dowdy urges, in order to eradicate the schism in colonized societies—and colonized individuals—between master discourse and the language of personal expression.

I want to blame it all on my mother. It is always easy to blame the mother, and more importantly, the dead cannot speak. So from the vantage point of age and the security from retribution, I want to lay down the beginnings of my personal angst over language. When we were growing up in Trinidad, my mother always reminded us that we needed to learn to "curse in white." By this she meant, or I believed that she meant, that we should always be aware that we had to play to a white audience. We could protest, we could show anger, but we had to remember that there was a white way, and that was the right way. I am sure that she had accepted that this would be the case for her children as long as the British imperial sun did not set.

Being middle class and black brought particular burdens and responsibilities. Especially since our great uncle had actually been a past mayor of Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad. He had met and sat with Queen Elizabeth, Her Majesty, and the Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia. If we were to continue this outstanding tradition of service in public life, whether political or cultural, we needed to have certain baggage. My mother plodded on unrelentingly in her effort to make us deserving vessels of public acceptance. To "curse in white" was the epitome of embracing the creed of colonization. One not only had to look the part, light-skinned, chemical curls for a coiffure, but one had to sound the part, perfect British diction. Maybe it was my actor's temperament that made

the language such a personal journey to me. I took on the project of "th"s and "wh"s with such devotion that I was given many opportunities to represent my grade school in choral speaking competitions and story-telling festivals.

Imitation is a grand play when you are young and impressionable. But I can tell you a very painful memory about discovering the edge between fantasy and reality. My friends were out in the middle of the street playing cricket, no less, when I decided to join them. I was never good at sports, my hand and eye coordination is more the product of wishful thinking than reality. But I ventured in, as a good sport, and also as a way to provide entertainment for the group. Again, having the soul of an actor can force you to put your personal image at risk for no good reason except that it gives you a chance to affect the situation to your advantage. Applause drives the reasoning of any self-respecting ham. In other words, anything for attention. So here we are playing cricket, looking out for the cars turning into the street and forcing us to scatter onto the sidewalks, and I hit a ball over the fence nearest my left. It's a miracle that my makeshift bat even made contact with the ball, and that I managed to direct it away from the pitcher. It's another miracle that in the scramble for the fielders to find the ball, I scream out "Over there." Note that the "th" was intact. My English, English teacher would have been proud of me, but more likely, my mother would have been even more excited by my "mastery of the language." The game stopped still for those few seconds while I spoke. Then the giggling and snickering began. Someone was hollering my phrase, "over there," in the most exaggerated British accent. Then the others picked it up. It sounded as strange as any foreign language sounded to me. Who could have said that phrase, was my question? Any sensible person in those given circumstances would have enunciated "Ovuh dyuh!" I was frozen to the asphalt. Should I run, should I stand and stare them down? What was the "right" way to deal with their scornful laughs?

In Trinidad, the sounds of the mother land, Africa, play in and out of the language patterns of Europe, India, and Asia. The Trin-

idadian who has not been made to subjugate her oral history in imitations of the most recent foreign television star, American or British, has a plumb line to the African West Coast. The spirits of her ancestors occupy a chamber in her consciousness that make it easy to reach back, unself-consciously, to the deeper inspiration of her linguistic culture.

I, however, was definitely a product of my mother's ambitions. In order for a Trinidadian to make progress on the ladder of success, she has to embrace the English language. If it means forgetting that the language of everyone else around you bears witness to two hundred years of cross-pollination, then so be it. Your job, as a survivor of the twenty-odd generations of slaves and indentured workers and overseers, is to be best at the language that was used to enslave you and your forebears. It is a painful strategy for survival, but maybe it is just another facet of the kind of transcendence to which the descendants of kidnapped Africans had to aspire in order to survive the very memory of slavery.

School children are not encouraged to write in Trinidadian. It is viewed, by our esteemed educators, to be a "dialect" not fitted to the expression of higher thoughts. Our writers have their books published by British publication houses. Our best student writing is designed to be read by foreign audiences, for example the board of the General Certificate of Education in London. We are supposedly writing so that our fellow Caribbean teachers can read our thoughts, and English is the best means of communication. Everyone who writes the language, knows that they have to translate their thoughts as fast as they can speak, if they are going to come across as more than morons attempting to speak "the Queen's English."

What we've managed to do, as a nation, is to relegate our language to the back room of "other." Our calypso singers, politicians, and television stars are allowed to speak Trinidadian. But our daily newspaper is produced in the best English this side of London. I suppose it is important that Her Majesty can read our daily goings-on, regardless of the fact that we became an independent Republic some twelve years ago. So who are we playing to? It seems the

only people who get to question the value judgment that we place on our indigenous language are the cultural workers in the field of poetry and playwrighting. When artists represent Trinidadians in their natural speaking state, none of them sound like they are distracted by the sound patterns of the English language.

So here is the situation that my mother finds herself in: she is very light-skinned, she comes from a politically privileged family and she is bright and ambitious. She has children who are light-skinned, they do not necessarily have to use chemicals in their hair to look "good" as in "white-derived," and they obviously have a talent for imitating language. What good mother would not marshal all the available supports to help her children access the power structure that several centuries of black, white, and Chinese intermarriage delivered to their generation? My mother made every effort to have us learn ballet, take piano lessons, join the choirs that our school formed, and dress in the best representations of British fashion that she could afford. My grandmother was an excellent seamstress, and a co-conspirator in this upward push, so the burden was not entirely on my mother.

Through my mother's and grandmother's tutelage I was on a journey to becoming the "good girl" according to the colonizer's belief system. The more I succeeded in this role, the more I felt segregated from my peers. I used the Queen's English to please my mother and my teachers, and my friends used Trinidadian to express their innermost thoughts and desires. We lived in two different countries, separated by our ambitions for our lives. They were "ovuh dyuh," and I was "over there." I was driven to please, especially after my mother died and I was left with my grandmother's even more restricted value system. My desire to fit in so that I would have a home to come to after school, or ballet lessons, or a game of cricket in the street, did not figure into the world of my classmates or neighbors. We struggled to achieve different goals for separate reasons and thus, I was left defenseless against the accusations of trying to sound "white."

My brother and sister ran into peer pressure and gave in to it. They never bothered to perfect the tones and diction of the ruling

class. In fact, they spent the better part of their adolescence conspiring to pull down every vestige of British domination in their lives. They joined the national student movement and marched in the street carrying placards that protested the black government's involvement in oppressing their people. They painted slogans on walls criticizing the continuation of British tyranny in the education programs. They were both forced out of high school before they completed their education. My sister went to secretarial school and my brother went to work as a counter clerk at the national airline's main office.

I went to one of the prestige schools that was run by nuns. Their claim to fame was the level of academic performance that they managed to cultivate in the all-female population. We were all expected to be bright, and speak "right." No Trinidadian in the school rooms. To speak English, one had to practice. We were given all the latitude in the world to suspend our reality as Trinidadians, the proud survivors of three hundred years of British, French, and Spanish domination, and to perfect the one language system that we should have ripped from our throats at the earliest age possible. Instead, we made our throats moist and forced our tones up an octave so that our voices matched the quality of the few expatriates who had survived the independence movement of the 1950s.

I think that I survived my high school years by assuming the best mask ever fabricated: the mask of language. I invented a character who wanted to please her teachers and her dead mother. I engaged a form of thinking that never appeared to question authority and also never let slip any knowledge of an alternative identity. My role was to survive, and to do it with the same finesse that millions of black people had done over the centuries. Yet I was determined to beat the system that had been working to eradicate all vestiges of black genius, through its autocratic approach to education. When I was chosen to be the assistant Head Girl, or prefect, a low-level representative of the principal's authority, I created history. I had been officially appointed to the role of "good girl." But, instead of fulfilling the role as my mother would have

hoped, the Head Girl and I chose to wear our hair natural, so that we resembled Masai women. We brought our Afrocentric identity to the attention of the school, and by so doing, encouraged other students to feel free to express their Trinidadian attitude toward their education. We did not privilege light skins, as was the custom among prefects before us. We were outspoken about our concern for the student population that had previously been ignored or disenfranchised in the school community. Ours was a new kind of leadership, and our fellow students seemed to warm to the challenge of forging a new identity outside of the colonial models that we had been given up to that time. The continental shift from Europe to Africa was evident in our new black pride. We could switch from English to Trinidadian as fast as radar could sound the ocean depths. Ovuh dyuh was now present and center stage for our generation.

By the time I graduated from high school—rather, secondary school, to use our preferred label—I had the privilege of claiming to be a member of a television production company, Banyan Television Workshop. We wrote short skits about local people who were “colorful” because of their use of the Trinidadian language. In other words, you could find these people anywhere we looked. The few people who spoke British English were in positions of authority and they made an effort to impress their power on the people who they were addressing.

This opportunity, to write and act these familiar characters, gave me a new lease on life. The chains fell from around my tongue, and my brain began to feel as if it were oiled and moving along without hiccups. I had been granted the supreme opportunity of an actor's life, my quest for legitimization was answered. Now I could be any number of people from my environment, simply by changing my persona. Even more exciting than that freedom was the fact that I would be shown appreciation for my facility to slip from one mask to the other. I could travel up and down the continental shift, moving from Caribbean to English intonations, without anyone being offended. All the shades of my existence could

be called into the performance medium, and I, at last, could feel integrated.

The advent of the television workshop during my high school years meant that I had found the real life flesh to put on the sharp-edged bones of the skeleton that was the English language. Now my soul could find its way throughout my body, and I could feel at one with my inner reality. No more the hesitation of translating Trinidadian to British idiom, no more the self-doubt associated with being perceived as a second-language speaker. But now, at last, I had the dignity of shaping my world as I saw it and the ability to name the world in the way that I experienced it. I now had a choice between the “th”s and the “de”s.

That creative work in the television workshop made my life as an actor very different from my life outside of the theater. In the “real world” I was forced to experience life in two languages: my inner language and the English through which Trinidad's public life was conducted: the news, the foreign television programs, and formal education. The colonizer's language, English, continued to set up a force field against which I had to do battle for my soul. As a result of my acting life, I came to understand and be able to talk about the conflict that I experienced when I had to communicate in the larger world. I now saw that the linguistic tension that I lived every day was the result of a war for the minds of the colonized. I came to understand that the colonizer only valued the native language of the colonized in the realm of entertainment. In so doing, the colonizer weighs the whole issue of the colonized's language, the history and the community experience that it represents, and decides that the value is nil.

The “successful” colonized person understands, with the help of her family's and her community's experience of colonization, that the survival technique for the subjugated group involves double realities. She must be in two places at the same time, ovuh dyuh and here too, and not give any indication that her attention is divided. She must operate from behind the mask of the “white” language. Her lot is to act as a channeler of languages, a mere

imitator of the sounds and belief systems, not one who makes sense of the ideas. The Head Girl should never remember the Masai. This is the reality that divides her soul when she attempts to slip from behind her mask of "acceptable" white language and begin to engage a conversation in her own tongue.

There is mental conflict about the priority that should be given to the mother tongue over the master discourse. In the public life, the value given to the patriarch's tongue, the master discourse, always supersedes that given to the matriarch. The "language of intimacy," as Richard Rodriguez calls it, has no place in the public arena. In other words, soul and reality occupy separate linguistic spaces. This conflict duplicates itself in every aspect of life, when the colonized tries to negotiate the two worlds of language by building bridges from one side to the other.

At a loss for words really describes the feeling of the soul in the "white" language world. Thoughts come into her head in her family's intimate vocabulary, and she strains to translate those ideas into the acceptable form expected in public conversation. She expects that her usual facility with language will be available to her when she begins to speak in public. Instead, there are cold, metal sounds bouncing off her teeth, the act of translation cooling the passion of the thought. Where she expected to create an easy access to her listeners' acceptance, she finds that her efforts create a glistering wall, icy with dangerous foreign sounds and echoes of the unfamiliar tones of strangers.

The continual disappointment with the master discourse creates a shroud that covers every utterance with a doubt about its worthiness. The voice in her head does not match the tone in her throat. She sees and hears herself becoming a tape played at the wrong speed. Unless she can reconnect with the sense of familiarity of using language that she grew up taking for granted, she loses all ability to integrate the dominant idiom into her language system and she is rendered voiceless.

So, for the colonized speaker, the issue is not really about whether she has a language or not. The issue is about having enough opportunity to practice that language in "legitimate" com-

munications. The central concern is about having the freedom to go back and forth from the home language to the public language without feeling a sense of inferiority. The issue is about letting colonized people communicate in their many spheres of communication, and not limiting them to jazz, reggae, samba, calypso, and zouk. Let the Head Girl be a good Masai and the cricketer hit the ball beyond the boundary ovuh dyuh.

The war will be won when she who is the marginalized comes to speak more in her own language, and people accept her communication as valid and representative. Her need to communicate, formerly unhappy forays into the unfamiliar territory of alternate language discourse, will blossom into the flowers that had been dormant in the arid land of the desert of master discourse. The status quo that assured her that no one would listen, or that they would complain that her enunciation was incomprehensible, will disappear in an ocean of sound.

In such a time, mothers will no longer have to force their children to act like strangers among their elders. They will hold hands with generations and celebrate the community experience that makes language sensible to all those who are members of the group. Their children will join them in their quest to preserve the ancestral tones and images that represent centuries of love, hope and success. This is when we will all be able to speak "clearly," not just enunciate, and put our soul's reality out in the open.