

“Speak Proper English”, “In a Nutshell” & “Saying No”

By Mellissa Gyimah-Concepcion

Speak Proper English

Speak English they say. Like the words
I uttered
to part the sea of my
understanding
is not enough.
Will never be enough.

Like the multiple Englishes I move
back and forth through,
over and under,
do not suffice.
Or the three other languages I speak
have no value because
it's not, well, English.
Those languages are not the currency of this land,
and yet I'm rich elsewhere.
But they will never understand what it means
to think in four languages for one word.

The languages I've stored up tumble through me
when asked a question
and I sift through my mind
to put some fragmented translations
together to speak this English.
Like they say.
I dream in French, German, Twi,
British and American English.
They all follow me to school,
threatening to escape my lips when asked
to speak “proper English”.
All of them stand up in the fore of my mind
saying “pick me!”

And my heart palpitates...
And she waits, eagerly. Disapprovingly.
For me to get it right. Or not.
I pick one that seems the least familiar to me.
Roll it around my mind, my tongue, then my cheeks.
I whisper the word, my mouth unsure of itself.
Unsure of this foreign language. Unsure of it all.
We all wait.
Unblinking, not breathing, yet hoping.
“That is...correct!”
She says, both joyous and surprised.
She moves on to another,
more familiar with the shapes
and movements English makes on their lips.
I let out breath that I didn’t know I was holding.
The whole room sighs. The walls sigh.
My heart slowly thuds.
I wipe a droplet of sweat off my brow.
Braue.
Le sourcil.
Ani ntɔn nwi.
They all speak at once.
Wanting to be heard. By me, at least.

I guess I’ll have to do this again tomorrow.
And the next.
Until this foreign language feels like
my mother tongue.

In a Nutshell

All the readers, writers,
listeners, and speakers in her
are tired.
Tired of being misunderstood. Tired of the restrictions.
The labels. The assumptions.

The impatience.

The insistence. Persistence
and resistance.

The ignorance. This nonsense.

The overall lack.

The lack of acknowledgement. Of Acceptance.

Of understanding and appreciation

of

her Black Girl Magic.

Saying No

What if we all said no?

To worlds and classrooms that colonise
And eradicate our languages? Our humanity.

Our beauty.

What if more countries returned back to
their mother tongue in school curriculum
forcing English-language colonisers to feel like foreigners?

And immigrants? Not expats.

Tribal languages lacking instruction, books
And your children and their children's words?

What if we saw the beauty in those tonal languages
And decided it should be a language learned in addition to English?

What if we didn't care about globalisation and being marketable?

What if there was no taxonomy on language?

That we placed the same level of prestige on
all languages spoken, so all people would be
seen as equal?

What if we allowed English language learners to
translanguage until they created a new language? Or, in their own
time, embraced the fullness of both languages?

What if every tribe and tongue were able to confess
That they are enough?

And everyone else just had to deal with it?



Dr. Mellissa Gyimah-Concepcion is an assistant professor of literacy in the Doctor of Literacy Education and Research at Judson University. She is born and raised in England to Ghanaian parents, but resides in the U.S. Her research interests include dialogic literacy experiences, Black boys and texts, positioning theory, and Black immigrant pedagogies. Being a Ghanaian British immigrant in the U.S., Dr. G-C is also interested in the lived experiences and stories of Black immigrant educators across the Diaspora, focusing on how their multiple identities impacts their instruction, pedagogy, and students. Dr. Gyimah-Concepcion can be contacted at mellissa.gyimah@judsonu.edu.