

***“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?



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