

Doublespeak

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Doublespeak

by

JOANNE KILGOUR DOWDY

The Good Little Girl

It's funny how often they say to me, "Jane?"
 "Have you been a *good* girl?"
 "Have you been a *good* girl?"
 And when they have said I t, they say it again
 "Have you been a *good* girl?"
 "Have you been a *good* girl?"

I go to a party, I go out to tea,
 I go to an aunt for a week at the sea,
 I come back from school or from playing a game;
 Wherever I come from, It's always the same:
 "Well?
 Have you been a *good* girl, Jane?"

Sitting in yet another class, with still another white instructor before me, my minds rewinds to the ship that Equiano was held hostage on. The professor is transformed into the translator/captor who befriended the twelve year old boy. I am now in the hold of the ship leaving Africa with the multinational cargo strapped in spoon fashion below deck. The professor's mouth opens before me and the letters come at me, spewing forth as from a dragon's mouth, so many mangled bodies floating on a field of white. There is not much that I can do to defend myself. Words are your own worst enemy. Every letter falls dead, unresponsive and still, as the next letter takes its place quietly, orderly, like so many grave stones at the military cemetery. The sense of stifling oppression builds up after a very little interval.

All along you are talking to yourself, or rather, your self is speaking in the idiom of feeling, intuition and stomach contractions. The speaker continues to hurl black bodies, curled into letters, into the air. The hope is that you, the listener will swim upward from that lake of orderly black matter and respond in an 'intelligible' manner. All the while that you are swimming around in the sewerage, dead history, dead mothers, dead cultures, are all floating around your eyes and ears, threatening to engulf your throat and render you paralyzed on arrival at the "answer".

Can anyone guess what it is like to translate into a foreign tongue every blessed thought or emotion that ever crosses a person's consciousness? Is it any wonder that descendants of the slaves, all across the world, are struggling to hold on to their "native" languages so tenaciously? For all the promises of cultural advantage, technological progress and educational excellence, the colonized people of the world know that their very soul's survival depends on their never forgetting that they are the products of a cross-pollination of nations. Let the standard linguistic currency be English, but the truth of the history of imperialism will not be swept under the carpet of indifference by those who paid most dearly for the success of the colonial empires.

These descendants know that those of our ancestors who had the great advantage of speaking just as their fathers and mothers did, enjoyed the privilege of luxuriating in a community of fellow-feeling. Sight, sound and intuition had their representative sound symbols. Meaning floated on a sea of acceptance and ancestral intonation caressed the ear. The design of the "master" letters did not lacerate their tongues. They did not face the unending dilemma of choosing to be numb to the pain, as the words bumped and scratched over the insides of their minds and their tongues. The master's language did not inhibit the impulse to communicate in a form that was more kin to that of their preceding generations. Language did not conspire to leave them feeling that all of their history was being made into a bad foreign movie, with subtitles that had very little bearing on the truth of the pictures on the screen that was their lives.

We who have endured colonization know that life isn't kind, and we accept that the history of the prisoner is one of accommodation. The cell has to be made into a home, the guards have to be transposed into well-intentioned relatives, the harsh restrictions become just so many precautions that careful parents put in place to insure that their "children" do not come to harm. So the letters stand here on the page, sentinels keeping watch over the entire African diaspora. Every thought is monitored, every emotion is subjugated and slapped into submission, so that all the other listeners understand the translation of the lives that are rendered in subtitles.

Have you noticed how very few of the letters actually stand up? The "T" and the "L", have a good shake at independence. But the "b" and the "d" are pregnant, they are anchored by their swollen bellies, clinging to the general height of all the other young members of the alphabet. The "m" and the "n", the "a" and the "r" will never see life the way the other, naturally outspoken letters do, they will always be subservient. And this view of the world has become second nature to the point that there will never be another reality for the letters of the lower case! And similarly, the view of the world as presented by my pen is often very compro-

mised. I too, have been forced to genuflect before the tradition of the conquerors, feeling compressed into a language that has been forced on me.

I can already hear the defenders of the "Alphabet Republic". After all, the verbose will interject, there is great freedom in discipline. Look at how uniformly those letters line up. They don't have to be told to stand, stoop or crouch, spoon fashion, so that there is no space between each of them. And then when there is space, you have just a hair's breath, whatever that is, so you can squeeze yet another disgruntled word in next to the previous one. Of course, there is no protest from these words, they belong to the power of the inventor. The power that represents the intellects that have long since juxtaposed exclusivity with privilege.

The format of words on paper brings back ancestral memories to the colonized "reader", a reminiscence of those who experienced the Middle Passage. She hears in between the lines, the echo of the holds of the slave ships that came from the west coast of Africa, and the tones of the linguistic history that was transported intact. She can envision in the ant's trail of the letters, the travellers on those ships coming ashore on the coasts of the American continent, and the Caribbean, to face a new world of chaos and anarchy. The still sensitive descendant of the slave can almost conjure up the sound symbols of the African continent, those that had once made sense to the minds of the slaves. The clack, clack, clack of the computer keyboard augments the new sounds of Europe which greet the weary travellers. The continents of sound crash about the air and shroud the immigrants' consciousness. The touch of the whip against the flesh makes indelible designs of meaning, imprinting sentences that can never be removed from the pages of the new nation's history, and forces itself into a subterranean language. These lashes have become the sounds that threaten to flood the silent spaces between all the words in our books so that they might be heard and accounted for. Lashes, forced penetration, cuts from iron chains and atrophied muscles from the cramp of immobility conspire to reach out from their lower existence, and like the imprisoned, throw out the sentinels who have diminished their existence to the mere anecdotal reference to "the old days".

English, Spanish, French and Portuguese words should have no monopoly in the transposition of Middle Passage emotion. Subjugated speakers, bereft of their Mother tongue, have to unearth a language system which represents their buried history. Remembered communal suffering has to transform the painful experiences that are our heritage. From the depths of the master's discourse a lost continent must drill its way up through the layers of linguistic history. Once forced to compromise or choose invisibility in the world of acceptable language, the sounds that were banished to that place must make a way through the spaces on the page.

It's always the end of the loveliest day:
 "Have you been a good girl?"
 "Have you been a good girl?"
 I went to the zoo, and they waited to say:
 "Have you been a good girl?"
 "Have you been a good girl?"

I want to blame it all on my mother. It is always easy to blame the mother, and more important, 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 co-ordination 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 make-shift 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's" were 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 in the most exaggerated British accent. Then the others picked it up. It sounded 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!".

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 "colourful" 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 the people that 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.

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 sound 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. After all, 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 judgement that we place on our indigenous language are the cultural workers in the field of poetry and playwrighting. When we represent Trinidadians in their natural speaking state, none of them sound like they are distracted by the sound patterns of the English language.

The sounds of the mother continent Africa, play in and out of the language patterns of Europe, India and Asia. The Trinidadian who has not been made to subjugate her oral history in imitations of the most recent foreign television star, 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, unselfconsciously, to the deeper inspiration of her linguistic culture.

So I want to go back to my point about 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 the fact that everyone else around you sounds like they have inherited the tones and diction of two hundred years of cross-pollination, due to the fact of the Middle Passage and all it entailed for the involuntary immigrants, 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 that the descendants of kidnapped slaves had to aspire to, in order to survive the very memory of slavery and its impact on the colonized psyche.

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 militate all the available supports to help her children access the power structure that several centuries of black, white and Indian 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 gave us 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.

My brother and sister ran into peer pressure and gave into it. They never perfected 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 criticising the continuation of British tyranny in the education programmes. 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 practise. 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 revert to 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 1950's.

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. 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, a low level representative of the principal's authority, I created history. I became the "good girl." The Head Girl and I chose to wear our hair natural, so that we resembled Masai women. We brought our Afro-centric identity to the attention of the school, and by so doing, encouraged other students to feel free to express their Trinidadian attitude to 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. Over dyuh was now, present, and centre stage for our generation.

Well, what did they think that I went there to do?
 And why should I want to be bad at the Zoo?
And should I be likely to say If I had?
 So that's why it's funny of Mummy and Dad,
 This asking and asking, in case I was bad,
 "Well?
 Have you been a *good* girl, Jane?"

A. A. Milne

A person gets tense when someone screams at her. Have you ever noticed how the eyes bulge and the breathing gets short, or completely stops? "Read" the signs of abuse that register on the respondent's persona. Look closely for those guideposts, the cracks in the mask, where the effects of domination register themselves. In those crevices you will see protruding the legacy of a nation's determined efforts to subordinate other countries. Peering back at you from the fissures, will be the rising steam of teeming blood that represents all the nations that have been indicted in the conspiracy to make Europe the only surviving nation in that war.

I contend that the issue is between the colonized and the colonizer. When the whole fruit is weighed, you must include the skin, the seeds, the pulp and the juice. So it is with the issue of language and the colonizer's intentions toward the colonized. The aim of the colonizer is not to have the colonized learn to appreciate her native language and to validate it as part of the currency of language. It must be, instead, relegated to things of little or no value. In so doing, the coloniser weighs the whole issue of the colonized's language, the history, the community experience, the codes that represent a level of "taken for granted" issues, and decides that the value is nil.

This is why it seems a necessary evil to develop a mask at a very early age. The colonized person understands instinctively, and with the help of 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. This reality becomes a fact when she begins to appreciate her place in the cosmology of the colonizer's world. Her lot is to act as a medium of languages, a channel, not an interpreter. The Head Girl must never remember the Masai. This is the reality that penetrates to 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.

Firstly, 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 she tries to negotiate the two worlds of language by building bridges from one side to the other. Think of Malinche, mother of modern Mexico, who bore the children of Cortes and acted as translator to the Spanish conquerors of her Aztec people. Her seeming betrayal of her people must really have been the result of having too many words to choose from. It must have also been the result of the soul escaping the articulation of its vision.

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. If she is confident about the tones and melodies that language can convey, because of her heritage, she can listen for a melody beyond that which is the scraping cacophony of the outsider's language. Her expectations of language become her enemy.

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 to fall between herself and her listener. The act of translation cooling the passion of the thought, sends up a mist of miscommunication. Where she expected to create an easy access to her listeners' acceptance, she finds that her efforts help to create a glistening wall, icy with dangerous foreign sounds and echoes of the unfamiliar tones of strangers. The result is the fate bestowed on Malinche: you are christened "*chingada*" or bastard.

The continual shock of miscommunication serves to dismantle the speaker's notion of language, how it works and the ways it can be used. The mask becomes secure, refusing to let the soul take its place in the eyes. No light emanates from within the colonized speaker. The continual disappointment with the master discourse creates a shroud that covers every utterance with a doubt about its worthiness. Where there are statements, she hears questions. When she needs to ask questions, they turn into statements that misrepresent her thought. The familiar vocabulary, now devoid of meaning, bewitches the effort to make sense. 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 that she grew up taking for granted, she will lose all ability to integrate the dominant idiom into her language system and she will be rendered invisible and inevitably 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 practise that language in "legitimate" communications. 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 main agenda concerns this right to experience all the levels of language planes that have been created over four hundred years of colonization. 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.

A great deal is at stake if the dominant culture continues to ignore the presence of the army of black slave descendants who do not have spaces to speak and hear all of their ancestral languages. For the dominant society which operates as if it does not have to engage in any dialogue with these languages, representatives of the accretion of many tongues, thinking that they have the absolute power to wish things and people away by ignoring them, will find itself demoted to the base level of the next wave of the majority population. In the twenty-first century, four years away, the 42% non-whites will form a wave that threatens to break with a crash.

Thinking that the only language genealogy that will ever be investigated is the one belonging to the power brokers, the old guard will be taken unaware by the new majority. Manlinche's grandchildren will appear, Nanny and Cudjoe's children will join ranks, and Chaka's descendants will enlist in the movement. Previously relegated to the fringes, the voices of the twenty-first century will find themselves communicating with each other, creating a new form of discourse. This discourse will embrace the layers of linguistic history that are presently denied a place in the language of power. The faultlines of history will disclose new meanings and with those plates exposed, people of colour and black people, will enter into the universal dialogue in their own tongues. Theirs will be a language that lets the soul back into the throat. While they have an understanding of the language of their "superiors", they will not remain outside of it, feeling that they are neither friend nor foe to the language system. They will practise using the correct verbs, or finding the objects and subjects in sentences, and learn to stand within the creation of meaning. Their imagination will be engaged, the similarities between their private language and the master discourse no longer battling and the idea of belonging to an inferior language group discouraged.

Where the present power brokers in the society can begin any discourse by taking for granted that they will be understood, and accepted, the "minorities" who approach their immediate attempts at communication from a position of deficiency, will see a revolution take place. The marginalized speaker who knows

that she will not be heard when she speaks in her first tongue, the home tongue, will come to see that she can say more in her language, and that other people will 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 they did not understand her enunciation, causing frustration and exacerbating the pain of crossing over to the other language world, will disappear in an ocean of sound.

For many of the colonized, after ten to fifteen years of the cold reception of our home languages in the world of master speech, we throw our hands up and return to the safety of our home tongue. Not only is it safer, nurturing and meaningful, but it now includes words and descriptions that denote the experience of isolation from the language world of the powerful. We feel safe to hear our own thoughts examined in discussions about the master discourse, as we begin to reflect on the value of having a means to make sense of the experience with our community. So rather than live with the idea that language is useless, since the experience with the master tongue is continually frustrating, she begins to realize that there are far deeper underpinnings in the value of community language and the issue of voicelessness and power.

The pursuit of the understanding of this value for language and community and the access to power within the society, will probably bring us closer to the acceptance of our multiple language inheritance. We may begin with the notion that everyone wants to communicate and that language is a repository of the lived experience of a community, but when we emerge from the interfaces with outrageous displays of domination and issues involving the use and abuse of language, we will feel the necessity of making a way through the surface of our language habits to the deeper core of our language world. We will want to be people of the subterranean continent, locking for the very centre of our beings beneath the fathoms of historical sift.

There will be no more castigation of the dominant language, but an insistence that the subjugated speaker's language be accounted for and given equal value in the currency of communication. The faultlines will widen under the pressure of the moving, subterranean energy. The soul, pushing through layers of solidified experience and forgotten language patterns, will force and push its way through the years of denial and burst into the mouths of the forgotten multitude like hot molten lava escaping from a volcano. Out of the depths of the Middle Passage will come the Ashanti, Swahili, Yoruba and Mende tongues. As these push up, into the light, they will be pulling the tones of Europe and melting them into a hot molten fluid, which will be cooled as it takes the shape of the new vocabulary. Language,

once the domain of selective references and particularly Eurocentric expressivity, will course towards the sky flinging its verbiage against the walls of tradition and forcing the brick to come down and melt into the new diaspora of communicaton.