
Chinks in My Armor: Reclaiming One's Voice

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Though I was too young to grasp shame in all its shades and magnitude, my early English transactions can only be described as humiliating, isolating, and fraught with cultural dissimilitude. At a tender three years of age, I was transplanted from rural China to the more urban United States and my nascent literacy was abruptly, vertiginously redefined. After twenty years of persistently conditioning my English writing and speaking, I developed an armor around my person to facilitate my integration and educational advancement. Though restrictive and unnatural at first, it became more fitted and authentic with time. But there remain chinks in the armor even now: eccentricities in my speech that I can't iron out, or certain idioms and pronunciations that continue to elude me because they were unheard-of in my ethnic household. Though unapparent, the chinks glare egregiously once noticed. When I bumble, it isn't absolved as a momentary slip or attributed to mild illiteracy. Rather, it's tantamount to being *un-American*. Even after forfeiting my mother tongue and spending two decades ostensibly assimilating in English, I still can't assume the American psyche of being an unequivocal, unified whole. My early Chinese socialization continues to frame and disrupt my literacy.

When learning English, I had studiously emulated how *White* people spoke because I'd wanted to sound impeccable. But I've since encountered many great orators that collectively broadened the faces and terms I associate with "native" English speaker. Code-meshing advocate Vershawn Young refuted the notion of a standardized English, performed invariably by White Americans, by exhibiting the dismaying illiteracy of even the most affluent, purportedly educated, public officials (164-5). As it stands, White Americans benefit from inflated perceptions of their literacy while non-Whites are linguistically marginalized and devalued.

I've had the distinct impression throughout my life that my literacy was held to a separate, lower standard. Not uncommonly, it won't be initially assumed or even tacitly acknowledged that I'm fluent in, let alone speak, English. If I delay to respond within nanoseconds of appropriate timing, or am a few decibels shy of hearability, it'll be tersely deduced that I "don't speak English." Within my radius, presumptions take precedence and my tenuous self-identity can be revoked. I've startled people in many parts of the world when I spoke a common phrase in English without a perceptible accent. I recall an incident in Johannesburg, South Africa, where I aroused a woman's sudden fascination in my singular upbringing. Forgetting that I approached her, she bypassed my inquiry and demanded, "Where are you from?" She might've been alarmed that I, an outsider, had breached her Western-born stronghold. Conversely, I've discovered that I can set people at ease with a Chinese affectation. I have a White, Asian Studies friend that always laughs, red and breathlessly, when I reproduce my mother's accent. Even though I capably speak it, English is still regarded as a White language and, owed to how others perceive me, I have to constantly re-negotiate and defend against lower estimations of my literacy.

From thirteen months until the age of three, I'd lived in a purely Chinese vacuum under my grandmother's care in Guilin, China. Though the city is touted for its picturesque caves, mountains

and rivers, my baby photos depict squalor and filth. In one of my earliest photos, I am squatting beside sewage and litter on a dirt road, with smudged cheeks, inflamed mosquito bites and half of a rice flour biscuit in my hand. I spoke my first words unabashedly and uninhibitedly, in an accepting, shared language fabric of close family and friends. Though affectionately monickered “Guilinese” by my mother and its people, the Guilin dialect is unbearably doltish. The mouth is kept agape and elongated, syllables are rhythmically pitched and unceremoniously dropped, and sudden volume spikes at sentences’ end are characteristic. The people who speak it are unflinchingly uncouth. As an example, if my grandmother half-heartedly tried to discipline me, I’d squawk (in Chinese), “I’ll throw uh cawck atcha!” And out of love or ignorance, my grandparents didn’t wish or teach me differently.

Across the world in New York City, my parents had completed advanced degrees and were industriously, financially situating themselves, wanting their only child to have a formal, first-world education. They calculated that geographical proximity to esteemed American powerhouses like Yale and Princeton would ensure my ascension, but a grand metamorphosis seemed unlikely. I was a scrawny, unrefined kid in an intimidating, new world. As ghetto as Queens was during the ‘90s, it remained utterly unrelatable from provincial Guilin. We were comparably much poorer, and it never felt like there was room for us. Our one bedroom apartment was confining and nightmarish. The walls teemed with the ghostly pitter-patter of mice and roaches. The summer months sweltered without the costly indulgence of air conditioning. I was disoriented by and unaccustomed to the thick fat crowds, the ear-numbing roar of the LIRR and tall seated toilets. When people spoke to me, they might have well just spoken *at* me. I would press a nervous finger against my lips in ponderance. My father was rarely present during this tumultuous transition. It felt that I’d only see him every few weekends. As English was one of his weaker languages, he had to take a job in another city. I orbited around the only remaining constant, my mother, who served as my *de facto* translator and literacy sponsor.

When first familiarizing myself with English, my mother and I were already busied with converting my Guilinese to Mandarin, so my mispronunciations and malapropisms of English were enabled and concretized. My parents spoke the bougie, standard Mandarin of prodigious Beijing. They’d met while attending Peking University (China’s Harvard). Because my provincial dialect wasn’t dissimilar, I could organically decode and mimic them. English, on the other hand, was irreconcilable. When contoured around my tongue, the sounds were graceless, either too drawled or blunted. Any word I became acquainted with would be reproduced incongruously. I used “sweetheart” often, even though it was very mid-century and sounded incredulous and mismatched for a small, brutish child. Rather, the terminology befitted someone more charming, perhaps a fuller, rosy-cheeked Southern woman, a Western ideal of a deep and capable resource of love. In actuality, and completely opposite my adult reticence, I was once an incredibly loving and effusive child that always gravitated towards my mother. Despite its myriad of hybridizations, my most spoken words retained one message: “妈妈 I love you,” or “我爱你 mama!”

My English vocabulary inherited meanings through comparable Chinese precedents and was initially given a minor or supplementary role. If I wasn’t confident that my English sample alone would successfully convey what I wanted to say, I’d resort to a select arsenal of Mandarin with designated meanings. The McDonald’s golden arches looked like pigtails to me (ours was beside a Wendy’s, so I might’ve associated both logos with hairstyles). Whenever we walked by I would ask,

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“Can we go My Donna 辫子地方 (pigtail place)?” I was decipherable if my mother only circumvented the obtusely accented English and focused on my Mandarin. She alone understood me without question so we failed to address my corrupt language use. I’d pulled heavily from Chinese to draw associations and comparable meanings, so my English was, at its bones, an impure derivative that flailed without context. Linguists have studied the language learning processes of young children and concluded that it’s impossible to remove one’s first language from the target language (Young 160). Because my English was birthed ancillary to and reliant on my mother tongue, they were intertwined in spite of them being two strikingly different languages.

For a few reluctant weeks, I was placed in day-care even though my mother wasn’t working. The experience may have served to gently prod my immersion, but it proved distressing and intolerable. Allegedly, I lacked commonalities with the other children and fundamental, preschool level intelligence. I truly can’t remember any friends but can vaguely recall the impatience and insensitivity of the teachers. I was untranslatable and boring, my reality too austere when compared to the grandiose fictions the children worshipped. My unrushed, lifelike drawings of bowls of rice and squat toilets starkly contrasted with other kids’ castles, princesses, and heroes. And somehow, even though I’d practically lived on a farm in China, I wasn’t at all advantaged when it came to animals. I didn’t know that cows incontrovertibly “moored” or that pigs could never be the color green. And most offensively, I couldn’t use seated toilets. I had to be lifted onto the ivory perch, where I’d ritually squat and splatter pee everywhere.

Though I was hastily removed, I was already knocked out of the safety of my mother’s orbit during those lonely, debasing weeks. Exposed to the world, I was suddenly made aware of the edges of my inherent otherness, a deformity and depreciation of my being. My revelation was a kind of double consciousness—a constant duality and tension between my living self and the outward perception that was stigmatized and made inferior—that propelled me to furiously learn English and abate my differences (Young 151). The very next year, I entered Kindergarten with same age peers. Because English wasn’t my first language and America didn’t feel like “home,” I nursed a habit of overcompensating in order to obtain my literacy and some semblance of normalcy.

I was extremely self-conscious of my dictation and how I enunciated. Owed to my anxieties about my speech and general lack of friends, I rarely socialized and turned inward, honing my writing as a means to assimilate. I was never taught how to read or write in Chinese, so the act of putting pen to paper served as immaculate soil for cultivating my English literacy. At our first parent-teacher conference, my mother felt a momentary wave of disbelief followed by immense pride when my teacher declared that I was *good* at writing. After briefly showcasing the notebook to prove that it was indeed my handwriting (my lettering identifiable by its tidy assembly and modelesque stature), she commended my heavily borrowed retelling of the *Three Little Pigs*. I’d apparently absorbed the tale from somewhere and regurgitated the main plot points during free writing. The lack of ingenuity was obvious, and excused, by my command of sentence structure, paragraphing, and overall grammar. But I question that teacher’s judgment because I never considered it a triumphant piece. I knew in my heart that the story was not mine, and that my writing was not good when compared to the enthralling storytelling of the original.

Though that was meant to be a pivotal moment in my life where my literacy first and finally garnered approval and notice from someone with an educative purview, it felt undeserved. She was likely swayed by my mediocre piece because I wore the same clothes day to day, had a fresh off the boat bob cut and an Asiatic monosyllabic surname. Her being impressed was contingent on my being a Chinese immigrant from an impoverished background. The public school was in a multicultural blue-collar sect and I don’t believe that the literacy standard would be up to par with those of a more expensive, privileged curriculum. In “Sponsors of Literacy,” Deborah Brandt discusses the systemic distribution of literacy and its impacts: as education is democratized and made accessible, its requirements are increasingly stratified and escalated (89). My teacher’s expectations were adjusted

according to our collectively lower proficiency. In addition to my own vacillation between English and Mandarin, the classroom was filled with the varied dialects of Black, Muslim, and Hispanic students. Most likely, none of us had access to reliable sources of “standard” English.

I improved my faculty of English by emphasizing my reading and writing throughout grade school and was affirmed when my appealing, formulaic essays tested me into challenging, specialized programs in more affluent districts. When I was accepted into a high school for the intellectually gifted on the Upper East Side, my mother became complacent with matters regarding my education and intervened less. We ceased our private, intimate exchanges and gradually drifted further apart with every passing school year. As my performance in English served as precious currency for advancement, it became my predominant, then *only* language. In the mornings, I’d take the Manhattan-bound train to new English speaking territories, while my mother remained in ethnic Queens. All these years, she’s kept biased towards her native tongue while working at the same Citibank in Chinese-concentrated “Falasheng” (Flushing). And yet she coddled my bumbling Mandarin by conversing with me in her lesser English to help me along.

When I’d stopped using bilingual options to convey exclusive nuances with my mother, a monumental portion of my literacy became void. Alarming, my writing began deteriorating. It scattered with misdirection, bloated with redundancy, and read jarringly. I fixated on my sentences, composing, re-arranging, and protracting until they lost direction. And though I strained for the right words, they always proved lofty or inaccurate. I grew frustrated with writing and became reluctant towards papers. Teachers’ comments felt abrasive, like lashes on tender flesh, but the failure resided in my own work. I couldn’t produce clear expressions to explain myself because my thought processes were fundamentally rooted in Chinese, my faculty of which was so lost by then that the memories could’ve been a remnant from another lifetime. I’ve yet to develop adequate English equivalents to fill or transition over the vacancies. Without my native speech saturating, supporting, and connecting my ideas, my writing became dissociated, tedious, and ineffectual.

As someone who code-switched and converted, rather than code-meshed and integrated, I lost the raw, expressive quality in my communication (Young 162). I compromised my literacy by letting my Chinese go out of practice and evaporate. I can only manage forced, short exchanges in a

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language I should naturally, competently speak. I have disappointed expectant relatives and visitors by failing to confidently address them in our once shared dialogue. My parents and grandparents are disheartened by my negligent, vaporous Mandarin. Though they’d wanted me to have an American education, they hadn’t expected the brunt of cultural divide. I’ve attempted to re-learn Mandarin with flashcards, beginner’s books, and Chinese dramas, but the characters are unfamiliar and rebound from memory. Having

obtusely abandoned the only language tethering me, I became estranged from my heritage and lost a sense of belonging and clarity.

When I ascribe idiosyncrasies or lapses in my speech to the fact that I am Chinese, I receive an impatient dismissal: “You are Asian *American* and you don’t have an accent.” Perhaps I’ve conveniently and too often used my ethnicity as a crutch to allow myself some cultural leeway whenever I rubbed off as abnormal. But it truly is the reason why I speak and write the way that I do. If anyone has a prolonged conversation with me, they’ll discern my unusual vocabulary and locutions, my pre-mediated evasions of certain pronunciations, and the underlying tremors that exacerbate my inarticulateness. Nancy Sommers, with her own displaced heritage, aptly describes in “I Stand Here Writing” that “...only children of immigrant parents can understand the embarrassing moments of inarticulateness, the missed connections that come from learning to speak a language from parents who claim a different mother tongue” (217). I began intentionally collecting my mother’s peculiarities of speech over the years, as mementos, hoping that I might also inherit her resilience.

English is her fourth language. She's managed through two widely disparate continents and marriages. Despite our distinct histories—hers by comparison so weighted with strife—we're united and alike. We both suffer from our respective neuroses (I'm bipolar) but my hypercritical approach, where I overthink and over-strive, also stems from the double consciousness surrounding my incurable otherness.

And yet, all this time, I've been envisioning a perfect, American English that doesn't exist. The threshold concept of writing is that text and language aren't static. Any transmission, regardless of its form, is an attempt in flux and never assured. Its interpretation is based on the audience and the totality of *their* experiences. On the last day of ENC 1101, first year Composition, we watched Jamila Lyiscott's TED performance on her three languages, all beautiful flavors of *English*. After someone implied that they hadn't, on account of her race, expected her to be "articulate," she rebuffed, "I may not come always before you with excellency of speech, but do not judge me by my language" (Lyiscott). Even if the delivery deviates from what's considered "standard" according to the dominant ideology imposed by those that speak only a single variant, there's a rich, gorgeous quality inherent in the wording of the marginalized (Young 164). Sommers, who argued that every person is a capable source of information, encouraged a more receptive audience, "to be open to other voices, untranslatable as they might be" (220). Even if the conveyance is hard to understand or relate to, there is still something worth a modicum of patience and reflection. Within every transaction, every written or spoken word, is a dynamic, evolving reconvergence of meaning. Just as Young advocated a multi-dialectical society that would benefit from the contributions of everyone's native intelligence by embracing and empowering their multitudes of self-expression, I've begun to appreciate aspects of my literacy that are far adrift from the norm and make my voice inimitable (161). Successful or not, my obsessive method, with its immeasurable layers of wandering, analysis and devotion, produces and contributes my own poetic wisdom.

When a kid summarily hissed "chink" in my direction in 2nd grade, it came into place that being Chinese was a permanent, irrevocable condition—no matter if I didn't speak any Chinese at all. He'd employed its negative connotation, but I've since reexamined and reassigned its meaning. Wardle and Downs preface their reasons for studying writing by reporting that most people have painful literacy beginnings that permeate into their later lives as writers, and that while those initial feelings can adjust over time, we remain "an accumulation of everything we have experienced" (9). My own process of learning English wasn't without difficulty and sacrifice. Adapting and functioning in a social capacity in order to further my education required building an armor around my person. I relied so heavily on the armor that I forgot to take it off and converse with my grandmother on the phone from time to time. I didn't reclaim and secure my heritage, so the armor became hollow, fragile, and developed chinks. But the chinks in my armor are intrinsic and meaningful. My literacy is the culmination of my singular life experiences, and my chinks are the acquired, distinctive scars that allow the light from within to shine through.

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