Da Inna Who Fa Mout’ Mi Tongue / In Whose Mouth is My Tongue: Writing As A Belizean American

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“But Aunt Ingrid, dat nuh soun’ like we! Dah nuh so we talk! Hm! Da mussy wah American Belizean Creole yuh de talk.”

When my niece Karen responded so insightfully to first reading my short story, “Tears No Have To Fall,” she exposed the heart of my own “battle with language.”¹ While for Grace Nichols, this battle had been with standard English and Guyanese Creole; for me it has been a battle with my memory of Belizean Creole and the various African American and Caribbean English that I acquired over the years of living in the north and southeast regions of the US.

Years ago, when I arrived in the US, I lived with my great-aunt Essie, and her daughter Mary on Bergen Street in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, New York. In the apartment above theirs lived Jerry, a young man from Chattanooga, Tennessee, whose wife Jane was also from Belize. Amid this extended household, I was introduced to my battle with language. My great-aunt still proudly spoke what we call “broad” Belizean Creole (bBC), but her daughter, then in her mid-twenties, had already become proficient at “lightening up her tongue,” which is to say, she spoke a version of New York English that sounded like a mixture of Jamaican English and Belizean Creole, but the kind of Belizean Creole spoken by radio announcers.

I quickly realized that this radio announcer language was one of the ways to “lighten my tongue” (LT), for this was also how Jerry’s wife sounded. Compared to her, Jerry’s slow, southern drawl was another language to me. When I further compared it to the tough, clipped sounding English of our Bed Sty neighbors, he did sound like he was from another country. Of course, I was encouraged by both my cousin Mary and Jane to lighten up my tongue, and I tried because there were immediate benefits to doing so: fewer fights with my school “friends” at I.S. 321, who were less hostile the moment my tongue began to lighten up. Bearing in mind that I am not a linguist, this is sort of what lightening-up sounded like:

(bBC) “Weh yuh wa’ ”? to (LT) “Wat you want?”
(bBC) “Weh yuh gwine”? to (LT) “Weh you going?”
(bBC) “Ah nuh wa’ dat.” to (LT) “Ah don’t want dat.”

After a year in Bed Sty, I relocated to Hampton, Virginia, to live with my uncle and his wife, who was from Petersburg, Virginia, but had spent most of her adult life in Harlem, New York. While my uncle spoke (bBC) very astutely, wickedly exploiting his “exotic” sound to attract female attention wherever and whenever he opened his mouth, my aunt spoke in a soft, soothing, sing-song drawl. Naturally, my aunt picked up where my cousin Mary and Jane had left off in encouraging me to lighten up my tongue. I struggled to do just that, for as before, there were immediate rewards to sounding more like those around me: the approving nods and smiles from my aunt, the ceasing of the disdainful “What did you just say?” from my new cousins, and even my uncle’s comments that, “Ingrid de start to soun’ educated; she de soun’ American,” all made me feel that I was beginning to belong.

Awash in the sea of tongues around me at home first in Bed Sty and later in Hampton, and at schools in Brooklyn, Hampton, and back again in New York City, and in my various travels up and down the south and northeastern shores of the US, I clung to the familiarity of my mother’s voice. Over the years, she had never stopped writing numerous letters to me. Her sound was always so reassuring, and while my tongue migrated to a variety of new US landscapes, the sound of Belizean Creole in my heart was the one that I heard in my mother’s letters.

Over the years, depending on to whom I was speaking, I became adept at switching tongues. I could move from speaking my newly acquired Virginian Belizean-sounding English to my aunt, my new cousins, and friends at school, to speaking the broadest Belizean Creole (bBC) to my uncle, and using standard Belizean Creole to my mom in the many letters I wrote back to her. Much later, when I spoke to my dad, who had lived
in the US since I was a child, he would say to me, “Gial, afta all dis time, you still de speak this (bBC).” I would switch and speak a version of Virginian or New York English to him. Then, when I would speak to my mom, who had now immigrated to live in the US, and she would say, “Weh wrong wid yuh? Yuh da American now, nuh?” I would switch and speak a version of (bBC) with her. Later still, when I found myself amid all the Caribbean, African, African American, Jewish, Latino, and other varieties of English spoken at Hunter College in New York City, I found my tongue leaping and peeping between these poly-rhythms to establish its own beat.

I learned that I enjoyed switching and being selective about my sound—about what “nation language” I would speak, when, where, and how. I had a range of choices, and I enjoyed the play and performance as my tongue danced a choreography of languages at will. This dance became a full circle when I began my graduate research on the Gullah people of the South Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands. For in their nation language, I reencountered my own, not just the one in my mother’s letters, but the ones that echoed through hers, that of my maternal grandmother’s and great-grandmother’s, and I began to reestablish this inside Belizean Creole for myself. Even now, my tongue dances the limbo at will, but inside, it swims in the rhythms of my mother’s, grandmother’s and great-grandmother’s tongues. It floats on a scale that rivals any multilingual’s, but its middle voice range is the one I have created. There is always the hint of my mother’s laughter to my tongue, and always, there is evidence of her sound and the many borders my tongue has crossed to enter into its own rhythm.

Thus, the first question with which I have had to grapple as a Belizean American writer is this: in whose nation language do I speak and write? I can no more deny my Belizean “roots” than I can deny my US “routes.” Writing, then, has become a means of recognizing and synthesizing the varying strands of my cultural identity as an African Belizean who has lived in the US for most of my teenage and adult life. Given these multiple cultural heritages, I find Paule Marshall’s artistic vision of reconciling the varying strands of her African diasporic identity most instructive. So too has been the work of Zora Neale Hurston, from whose novel Their Eyes Were Watching God I draw the first part of the title of this article. The works of other African diaspora writers and scholars

4. Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1978), 17. As Phoeby retells Janie’s story, Janie’s tongue is in her friend Phoeby’s mouth. It is this idea that informs the title of this essay. I also want to thank my friend and colleague Dr. Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd for her critical insight in formulating this title as it reads.
such as Ghanaians Ama Ata Aidoo and Ayi Kwei Armah, African Americans Estella Conwill Majozo and Toni Morrison, Trinidadians Judylyn Ryan and Earl Lovelace, and of course Belizean Zee Edgell, have all contributed to my vision of and method for being a Belizean American writer. Indeed, without Edgell’s poignant representation of our lives in *Beka Lamb*, I would not have dared to attempt writing about my own experiences as a Belizean.

The second concern for me as a Belizean American writer has been finding a viable metaphor in which to root the possibilities of such an undertaking. For me that metaphor has become our barrier reef. As I thought about the beautiful reef, I thought about its function, how in its capacity it protects and sustains regenerative life forms that are uniquely beautiful and fascinating. This barrier reef led me to think about the barriers and borders within our lived environments as Belizean writers, those internal and external ones that we must negotiate to live viable lives as historical subjects in a global context.

For me, these internal and external barriers and borders are rooted in my immigration and migration routes to and throughout the US. They are routed physically in the various cultural and historical borders that I have criss-crossed in becoming a Belizean American. More importantly, they are rooted in the psychic barriers of the numerous cultural and historical languages through which I have moved as I traveled from Belize, to Bed Sty, to Hampton, Virginia, to Chattanooga, Tennessee back to New York, this time Harlem and Queens, then to New Jersey, and then back south to Columbia, South Carolina. In the many waves of these crossings, the memory of my mother’s tongue was the barrier reef on which I stood and came to recognize the ways to value, enjoy, and play in the variety of tongues in which I swam. The shallow, warm-watered, multigenerational sound in her letters nurtured and enabled me to regenerate my own distinctive voice amid the deeper waters of all the other African, American (Central, South, and North), and Caribbean English in which I came to realize I belonged.

Thus, even as our world becomes more global and more accessible, for the sake of “belonging” while cultivating an image of ourselves as newly discovered “virgin” territory to be explored, developed, and exploited, we dare not deny the external borders of race, gender, class, ethnicities, sexuality, languages, religion, and regional disparities that continue to keep us from recognizing our shared common humanity. Internal barriers of personal and historical memories and our perceptions of our selves, linguistically and otherwise, can enable as well as disable our abilities to see our commonalities, our wholeness, not only as Belizeans, but as Caribbean and Central American people and people of the world. As cultural imperatives of hierarchy based on conceptions of difference, historical and personal memory can tear us from each other and even apart from ourselves. But as
sources of nurture or as that which filters unwanted sediments or divisions, historical and personal and collective memory can also function in our lives in a similar way, even as the barrier reef functions in our country’s landscape: to foster, nurture, and build internal wellsprings and patterns of creative and regenerative life forms.

My writing, or my “vocations utterance” as a Belizean writer, is about excavating and recreating those personal and collective memories that can enable life-sustaining visions of ourselves in a world in which competing debilitating hierarchical notions of identity and selfhood are provided as possible models for being. I use “excavating” in the sense of “literary archeology,” which Toni Morrison describes as a process of discovering and reconstructing the truth of the lived “interior” lives of our ancestors. Indeed, my artistic vision is nurtured by the need for creating reciprocity between the contested cultural and historical legacies that I encounter in myself as a Belizean American writer, and between those I encounter in the US milieu in which I create my own fiction and teach literatures of the African diaspora in US classrooms. Thus, in the circle of an African Belizean American identity, I have constructed what Ngugi calls a “liberating perspective” from within which to recognize, appreciate, and share the diverse gifts within my or our human family as people of African descent, as Belizeans, and as those of the Americas.

Twenty years ago, when Zee Edgell’s Beka Lamb was published, few might have calculated the impact that it would have or the fame it would achieve through its inclusion in literature curriculum and numerous scholarly works. This Belizean writers’ summit that we construct and participate in marks another significant historical step toward the development of a Belizean literary tradition.

This brings me to my third concern as a Belizean writer: the continued cultivation of Belizean writers. This can be done only if there are structural facilities in place to ensure that, as writers, we receive the resources, training, and literary criticism necessary for the development of our craft. I envision Belizean literature taking its place regionally and globally. For this to happen, the role of personal and collective memory as well as the place of myths (possibly the creation and/or reclaiming of some) to serve as barrier reefs, if you will, are integral to this literary process. Our writing, my writing, as a Belizean

5. I use the term “vocations utterance” here as it is used in the prologue to Ayi Kwei Armah’s prophetic novel Two Thousand Seasons (Oxford: Heinemann, 1973), xi.
7. Ngugi wa Thiongo, Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature (London: James Currey, 1986), 87. While I am aware that Ngugi uses this concept in discussing the politics of language in African literatures, it seems to me that it is a concept that is applicable also to the literatures and people of the African diaspora.
American must dig deeper into and reflect the empowering and inspiring lives of our personal and collectively diverse ancestral legacies. We must do this digging so that we can continue create literary representations of Belizean truths, locally and in a diaspora context. This will nurture our cultural autonomy as well as our cultural continuities with other nations of the region that share our common history of enslavement and resistance to enslavement, colonization, and neocolonialism. It seems to me that we must, I must, do this digging in a language that reflects the historical and contemporary sociopolitical realities of our personal and collective cultural identities.

from Tears No Have To Fall

Pa dead. He just up and drop down dead one day. And even though done three years a’ready since he dead, people still sound like they talking to me from far ‘way and me left hand still no come back yet. Three years a’ready, but I remember it so well, seem like it was only yesterday. One day, he say he no feel so good. Next few days, he leaning on Ma Hilda shoulders as he walk from their room, through Charma room, my room, inna the bathroom. He just going to wash his face and what not, but he can’t even walk this little distance by himself. Day after that, bright and early, this small white bus that have this bright, flashing red light on the top of it, pull up in front a we gate. Two men, dress all in white from head to foot, jump out a each side and rush up we front steps. See here, they come right inna Pa and Ma Hilda room. Next thing me know, they practically carrying Pa down the steps with them. Ma Hilda, she push her head inna Charma room where the two a we kinda peeping to see what happening, and she say, “I gon be back directly. Behave yuh selves ‘till I come back, yuh hear me?” Before we even finish saying, “Yes, Ma Hilda,” she done out a the door a’ready, gone down the steps after the big strapping looking men that take Pa ‘way from me.8

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