

# And Then I Went to School

by Joe Suina

I lived with my grandmother when I was 5 through 9 years of age. It was the early 1950s when electricity had not yet entered our Pueblo homes. The village day school and health clinic were first to have it, and to the unsuspecting Cochiti, this was the approach of a new era in their uncomplicated lives.

Transportation was simple. Two good horses and a sturdy wagon met the daily needs of a villager. Only five, maybe six individuals possessed an automobile in the Pueblo of four hundred. A flatbed truck fixed with side rails and a canvas top made the usual Saturday morning trip to Santa Fe. It was always loaded beyond capacity with people and their wares headed for town for a few staples. The straining old truck with its escort of a dozen barking dogs made a noisy exit, northbound from the village.

## A Sense of Closeness

During those years, grandmother and I lived beside the plaza in a one-room house. Inside, we had a traditional fireplace, a makeshift cabinet for our few tin cups and bowls, and a wooden crate carried our two buckets of all-purpose water. At the innermost part of the room were two rolls of bedding—thick quilts, sheepskin, and assorted—which we used as comfortable sitting couches by day and unrolled for sleeping by night. A wooden pole the length of one side of the room was suspended about ten inches from the vigas and draped with a modest collection of colorful shawls, blankets, and sashes, making this part of the room most interesting. In one corner sat a bulky metal trunk for our ceremonial wear and a few valuables. A dresser which was traded for her well-known pottery held the few articles of clothing we owned and the “goody bag”—an old flour sack Grandma always kept filled with brown candy, store-bought cookies, and Fig Newtons. These were saturated with a sharp odor of moth balls. Nevertheless, they made a fine snack with coffee before we turned in for the night. Tucked securely beneath my blankets, I listened to one of her stories about how it was when she was a little girl. These accounts appeared so old fashioned compared to the way we lived. Sometimes she softly sang a song from a ceremony. In this way, I went off to sleep each night.

Earlier in the evening we would make our way to a relative’s house if someone had not already come to visit us. There, I’d play with the children while the adults caught up on all the latest news. Ten-cent comic books were finding their way into the Pueblo homes. Exchanging “old” comics for “new” ones was a serious matter that involved adults as well. Adults favored mystery and romance stories. For us children these were the first links to the world beyond the Pueblo. We enjoyed looking at them and role-playing our favorite hero rounding up the villains. Grandmother

once made me a cape to leap tall buildings with. It seems everyone preferred being a cowboy rather than an Indian since cowboys were always victorious. Sometimes stories were related to both children and adults at these get-togethers. They were highlighted by refreshments of coffee and sweet bread or fruit pies baked in the outdoor oven. Winter months would most likely include roasted piñon nuts and dried deer meat for all to share. These evening gatherings and the sense of closeness diminished as radios and televisions increased over the following years. It was never to be the same again.

The winter months are among my fondest memories. A warm fire crackled and danced brightly in the fireplace, and the aroma of delicious stew filled our one-room house. The thick adobe walls wrapped around the two of us protectingly during the long freezing nights. To me, the house was just right. Grandmother's affection completed the warmth and security I will always remember.

Being the only child at grandmother's, I had lots of attention and plenty of reasons to feel good about myself. As a preschooler, I already had chores of chopping firewood and hauling in fresh water each day. After "heavy work" I would run to her and flex what I was convinced were my gigantic biceps. Grandmother would state that at the rate I was going I would soon attain the status of a man like the adult males in the village. Her shower of praise made me feel like the Mr. Indian Universe of all time. At age 5, I suppose I was as close to that concept of myself as anyone.

In spite of her many years, grandmother was highly active in the village ceremonial setting. She was a member of an important women's society and attended every traditional function, taking me along to many of them. I'd wear one of my colorful shirts she made by hand for just such occasions. Grandmother taught me appropriate behavior at these events. Through modeling she showed me how to pray properly. Barefooted, I greeted the sun each morning with a handful of cornmeal. At night I'd look to the stars in wonderment and let a prayer slip through my lips. On meeting someone, grandmother would say, "Smile and greet. Grunt if you must, but don't pretend they're not there." On food and material things, she would say, "There is enough for everyone to share and it all comes from above, my child." I learned to appreciate cooperation in nature and with my fellow men early in life. I felt very much a part of the world and our way of life. I knew I had a place in it, and I felt good about it.

### **And Then I Went to School**

At age 6, like the rest of the Cochiti 6-year-olds that year, I had to begin my schooling. It was a new and bewildering experience—one I will not forget. The strange surrounding, new ideas about time and expectations, and the foreign tongue were at times overwhelming to us beginners. It took some effort to return the second day and many times thereafter.

To begin with, unlike my grandmother, the teacher did not have pretty brown skin and a colorful dress. She wasn't plump and friendly. Her clothes were of one color and drab. Her pale and skinny form made me worry that she was very ill. In the village, being more pale than usual was a sure sign of an oncoming fever or some such disorder. I thought that explained why she didn't have time just for me and the disappointed looks and orders she seemed always to direct my way. I didn't think she was so smart since she couldn't understand my language. "Surely that was why we had to leave our 'Indian' at home." But then I didn't feel so bright either. All I could say in her language was "Yes, teacher," "My name is Joseph Henry," and "When is lunch?" The teacher's odor took some getting used to also. In fact, many times it made me sick right before lunch. Later I learned from the girls this smell was something she wore called perfume.

### **An Artificial Classroom**

The classroom, too, had its odd characteristics. It was terribly huge and smelled of medicine like the village clinic I feared so much. The walls and ceiling were artificial and uncaring. They were too far from me and I felt naked. Those fluorescent light tubes made an eerie drone and blinked suspiciously over me, quite a contrast to the fire and sunlight my eyes were accustomed to. I thought maybe the lighting did not seem right because it was man-made, and it wasn't natural. Our confinement to rows of desks was another unnatural demand made on our active little bodies. We had to sit at these hard things for what seemed like forever before relief (recess) came midway through the morning and afternoon. Running carefree in the village and fields was but a sweet memory of days gone by. We all went home for lunch since we lived a short walk from school. It took coaxing, and sometimes bribing, to get me to return and complete the remainder of the school day.

School was a painful experience during those early years. The English language and the new set of values caused me much anxiety and embarrassment. I couldn't comprehend everything that was happening, but I could understand very well when I messed up or wasn't doing so well. Negative messages were communicated too effectively and I became more and more unsure of myself. How I wished I could understand other things in school just as well.

The conflict was not only in school performance but in many other areas of my life as well. For example, many of us students had a problem with head lice due to the "unsanitary conditions in our homes." Consequently, we received a harsh shampooing which was rough on both the scalp and the ego. Cleanliness was crucial, and a washing of this sort indicated to the class that one came from a home setting which was not healthy. I recall one such treatment and afterwards being humiliated before my peers with a statement that I had "She'na" (lice) so tough that I must have been born with them. Needless to say, my Super Indian self-image was no longer intact.

**“Leave Your Indian at Home”**

My language, too, was questioned right from the beginning of my school career. “Leave your Indian at home!” was like a school trademark. Speaking it accidentally or otherwise was punishable by a dirty look or a whack with a ruler. This reprimand was for speaking the language of my people which meant so much to me. It was the language of my grandmother, and I spoke it well. With it, I sang beautiful songs and prayed from my heart. At that young and tender age, it was most difficult for me to comprehend why I had to part with my language. And yet at home I was encouraged to attend school so that I might have a better life in the future. I knew I had a good village life already, but this awareness dwindled each day I was in school.

As the weeks turned to months, I learned English more and more. It may appear that comprehension would be easier. It got easier to understand, all right. I understood that everything I had, and was a part of, was not nearly as good as the whiteman’s. School was determined to undo me in everything from my sheepskin bedding to the dances and ceremonies which I had learned to have faith in and cherish. One day I dozed off in class after a sacred all-night ceremony. I was startled awake by a sharp jerk on my ear, and informed coldly, “That ought to teach you to attend ‘those things’ again.” Later, all alone, I cried. I couldn’t understand why or what I was caught up in. I was receiving two very different messages; both were intended for my welfare.

Values in lifestyle were dictated in various ways. The Dick and Jane reading series in the primary grades presented me pictures of a home with a pitched roof, straight walls, and sidewalks. I could not identify with these from my Pueblo world. However, it was clear I didn’t have these things, and what I did have did not measure up. At night, long after grandmother went to sleep, I would lie awake staring at our crooked adobe walls casting uneven shadows from the light of the fireplace. The walls were no longer just right for me. My life was no longer just right. I was ashamed of being who I was, and I wanted to change right then and there. Somehow it became very important to have straight walls, clean hair and teeth, and a spotted dog to chase after. I even became critical of, and hateful toward, my bony, fleabag of a dog. I loved the familiar and cozy environment at grandmother’s house, but now I imagined it could be a heck of a lot better if only I had a whiteman’s house with a bed, a nice couch, and a clock. In school books, all the child characters ever did was run at leisure after the dog or kite. They were always happy. As for me, all I seemed to do at home was go for buckets of water and cut up sticks for a lousy fire. Didn’t the teacher say drinking coffee would stunt my growth? Why couldn’t I have nice tall glasses of milk so I could have strong bones and white teeth like those kids in the books? Did my grandmother really care about my well-being?

### Torn Away

I had to leave my beloved village of Cochiti for my education beyond 6. I left to attend a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) boarding school 30 miles from home. Shined shoes and pressed shirt and pants were the order of the day. I managed to adjust to this just as I had to most of the things the school shoved at me or took away from me. Adjusting to leaving home and the village was tough enough. It seemed the older I got, the further I got from the ways I was so much a part of. Since my parents did not own an automobile, I saw them only once a month when they came in the community truck. They never failed to come supplied with “eats” for me. I enjoyed the outdoor oven bread, dried meat, and tamales they usually brought. It took a while to get accustomed to the diet of the school. Being in town with strange tribes under one roof was frightening and often very lonely. I longed for my grandmother and my younger brothers and sisters. I longed for my house. I longed to take part in a Buffalo Dance. I longed to be free.

I came home for the four-day Thanksgiving break. At first, home did not feel right anymore. It was much too small and stuffy. The lack of running water and bathroom facilities was too inconvenient. Everything got dusty so quickly, and hardly anyone spoke English. It occurred to me then that I was beginning to take on the whiteman’s ways that belittled my own. However, it didn’t take long to “get back with it.” Once I reestablished my relationships with family, relatives, and friends, I knew I was where I came from. I knew where I belonged.

Leaving for the boarding school the following Sunday evening was one of the saddest events in my entire life. Although I had enjoyed myself immensely the last few days, I realized then that life would never be the same again. I could not turn back the time just as I could not do away with school and the ways of the whiteman. They were here to stay and would creep more and more into my life. The effort to make sense of both worlds together was painful, and I had no choice but to do so. The schools, television, automobiles, and many other outside ways and values had chipped away at the simple cooperative life I began to grow in. The people of Cochiti were changing. The winter evening gatherings, the exchanging of stories, and even the performing of certain ceremonies were already only a memory that someone commented about now and then. Still, the two worlds were very different and the demands of both were ever present. The whiteman’s was flashy, less personal, but very comfortable. The Cochiti were both attracted and pushed toward these new ways which they had little to say about. There was no choice left but to compete with the whiteman on his terms for survival. To do that I knew I had to give up part of my life.

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# Speak It Good and Strong

by Hank Sims

## Yurok Youth Vow to Bring Back the Language of Their Ancestors

This is how it used to be. For no one knows how long—at least 700 years, probably many more, maybe back as far as the creation of the world—all the people who lived between Little River and the Klamath River on the coast, and inland up the Klamath to Weitchpec, were Yurok, and they spoke their own language. Having been born of the area, the language was minutely attuned to the landscape and the seasons, so that the very words and sentences reflected the rhythm of the place.

By 1950—100 years after settlers began arriving at the North Coast of California in great numbers—the Yurok language was all but gone, as were the languages indigenous to Humboldt County: Hupa, Wiyot, Tolowa, Karuk, Mattole, and Chilula, among others. The children of the Yurok were taken away from their families and sent to boarding schools, where they were beaten for using their native tongue. Parents spoke English to their children when they came home, and grandparents got old and passed away. People were made to feel ashamed of their language. It dwindled away almost to nothing.

But a couple of weeks ago, when Archie Thompson arrived in Arcata a little bit late to a meeting and spotted Jimmie James, the two men, both in their nineties, joyously clasped hands and suddenly the old language was pouring out of them, each strange syllable following unhurriedly upon the last. They spoke with the unconscious confidence that people have when expressing themselves in their first language—the confidence that is the most difficult thing to acquire when learning someone else's. For a moment, listening to them, you could almost imagine what it used to sound like hundreds of years ago, up the coast and along the lower Klamath.

Few of the 35 or so people who were attending that day's strategy session at Potawot Village, which had been convened by the Yurok Elder Wisdom Preservation Project, would have been able to understand precisely what Thompson and James said to each other in their greeting. They'd all heard such conversations before, between two people who'd grown up with the language, and even the best speakers among them knew that they had a long way to go before approaching Thompson's and James' fluency.

And no one objected—no one would dare object—when, for the second time that day, James hijacked the microphone to gently admonish the assembled students of the Yurok language, most of them the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the people of his generation. A kindly gentleman with a sharp sense of humor, James told them that the Yurok they spoke just didn't have the “ring” of the language that the old Indians spoke.

“All of us here, we know how to talk, and we know what it sounds like,” he said, indicating himself, Thompson, Aileen Figueroa, and Georgiana Trull, the four elders who were able to attend the strategy session. “I hope I’m not discouraging you, but what you need to get hold of is the real word, and what the language really means.”

The words were mostly there, but the younger generation was missing the most important aspect of the language: its soul.

“You got to speak it good and strong,” James continued a moment later. “There’s a lot of you folks out there interested in learning. But it ain’t getting to you. And it’s our fault. And it’s your fault.”

What James was saying, everybody already knew it. But it helped them to hear it again, from the mouth of a respected elder. Because all of the people there were determined, from those who have been studying Yurok for 20 years to the high school students who have just started to pick up the language. They made a promise to themselves, to their elders, and to the generations to come. They’re going to bring it back. James’ words served as a reminder that more was at stake than grammar lessons, and it made them want to work harder.

### **The Elder Hammer**

Kathleen Vigil, a 62-year-old resident of Westhaven, founded the Yurok Elder Wisdom Preservation Project a couple of years ago because she knew that time was running short. Vigil is the daughter of Aileen Figueroa, one of the oldest members of the Yurok Tribe and a master speaker of the language. The project was born of a terrible realization—that people of her mother’s generation, the last generation to have any contact with the old Yurok ways, would not be around forever.

“There was a gathering in Klamath for the Yurok language, and a cry came out,” Vigil said last week. “My mother was 91 or 92 at that time, and we really needed to do some documentation on her.”

Figueroa is one of the Yurok people’s treasure troves of information, of the old stories and history of the tribe. But most important to her mother’s heart, Vigil said, was the language. The idea that the language would someday die with her and the few surviving speakers was a great weight on Figueroa’s heart, Vigil said.

And the language preservation programs in place at the time weren’t doing enough, Vigil felt. People weren’t learning quickly enough. Not enough people were prepared to devote the amount of time necessary to truly understand it. Classes would cover the basics, then people would drop out. The elders would have to start over with a whole new class, once again teaching students how to say hello, goodbye, man, woman.

“The language would get at a point, and it would stop and no one would do anything with it anymore,” Vigil said. “It was like—we don’t want to hurt your feelings.”

Vigil decided that the passing of the language to the younger generation needed to be intensified—more people needed to devote more time to language preservation, and they needed to study it more deeply.

Leo Canez, a 30-year-old Eureka resident and a special projects coordinator for the Arcata-based Seventh Generation Fund, now sits on the board of the Elder Wisdom Preservation Project and helped organize and coordinate the language strategy session at Potawot Village. He had his own tale to tell about how he came to realize that he had to work to restore the language.

A little over a year ago, he was talking with Georgiana Trull—of the elders who attended the strategy session—and telling her all the things that he was involved with in his work with the Seventh Generation Fund. He was telling her about the interesting, empowering work that various Native American groups were doing around the country, and how he felt honored to play some role supporting their efforts. Trull was nonplussed, he said.

Instead, she pointed at him and said, “And what are you doing for your people?”

Canez has a name for this type of moment. He calls it “The Elder Hammer.”

A few weeks later, he said, he was sitting around with some friends. There were a few elders at the table, and they began talking to each other in the old language. As Canez tells it, he and his friends all looked at each other, and they all had the same thought: Why can’t we understand what they are saying?

That’s when he decided to attend language classes, and to devote himself to bringing Yurok back.

### **Novice Speakers**

Early on in the strategy session, 26-year-old Kishan Lara, who is taking her doctorate in linguistics and education at Arizona State University, told everyone that there are people out there, respected linguists, who are saying that Yurok is already an all-but-dead language, that it will be gone in 10 years, when most of the people who grew up with it will be gone. But Lara only brought up what these linguists had to say because she was sure they were wrong.

“People are going to be speaking this language out in the community in 10 years,” she said. “And I hope Aileen and Jimmie know this, because it is our promise to them.”

Maybe half of the people at the two-day Potawot Village strategy session were around Lara’s age, and all of them were as determined as she was. Many of the young people in the room studied at the several weekly community classes held around the



Yurok Reservation and in Arcata. Some of them—teenagers or recent high school graduates—had studied at Hoopa High School, where Yurok has been offered as a “foreign language” option for a few years now. Others were students at the brand-new American Indian Academy charter school in McKinleyville, where Figueroa and Vigil lead a daily class in the language for students.

At the meeting, many of the young speakers talked about what the language has given them in the time they’ve been studying it. Skip Lowry, a 25-year-old who does work at the reconstructed Su’meg Village, a Yurok site in present-day Patrick’s Point State Park, said that he has found it easier to pray once he became able to do so in Yurok. “I feel like the physical side of our culture has been preserved somewhat, and now I see the spiritual side coming back,” he said.

One of Georgiana Trull’s grandsons, 25-year-old Frankie Joe Myers, said that one of the positive things about living in this day and age is the wider American culture no longer pressures people to give up their roots, as it did in the past. “In my father’s generation, it wasn’t looked on as positive to be Indian,” he said. “In a way, it’s become popular. It’s become cool to be Indian.” Learning the language went along with the rebirth of traditional dances—the Brush Dance, the World Renewal Ceremony—over the past few decades, and these ceremonies, together with the language, strengthened his identity as a Yurok, he said.

But many of the young people also talked realistically about their frustrations in learning Yurok. Virginia Myers, Frankie Joe’s sister, recently took a semester off from her studies at UCLA to care for her grandmother and to study the language with her. Myers said that she originally thought that after three months or so, she would be reasonably fluent. In fact, it is taking much longer than that. As Virginia recounted to the group, Trull would at times become frustrated with her granddaughter, telling her, “You’re not thinking Indian! You’ve got to think Indian!”

Part of the problem, everyone realized, was that too often they were still thinking in English then translating their thoughts into Yurok. That, plus the fact that few people had been able to accurately capture the rhythm of their elders’ speech. Carole Lewis, a 54-year-old Hoopa resident who has been studying the language for some 20 years, apologized to the elders present on behalf of everyone. “I can see the sorrow they have for their language, because in a way we’re murdering it.” She exhorted her fellow students, those just starting out, to listen more closely to the audio recordings made by the elders. “We’re going to lose some of it anyway,” she said, “but if we don’t pay attention we’re going to lose a lot more.”

But like almost everyone there, Kishan Lara remained confident.

“The Yurok are a resilient people,” she said. “We’ve been through a lot of hardships, and we came back. And the language is going to be no different.”

### **Aiy-yu-kwee’**

From the Yurok point of view, the language has always been there—it was given to the people by the Creator, along with the Yurok lands. That’s what the old stories teach, and any questions are pretty much settled there. Although linguists and anthropologists not brought up in the Yurok tradition raise a number of interesting questions about where the language came from, they don’t have a much better answer about how it got to the North Coast.

Like Wiyot, the language of the people that lived around Humboldt Bay, Yurok belongs to a family of Native American languages called “Algic” languages, meaning they are distantly related to certain languages of the Midwest, such as Cheyenne, Blackfoot, and Cree, and to others of the Northeast, like Massachusett, Micmac and Narragansett. But Yurok and Wiyot are the only Algic languages spoken west of the Rocky Mountains—the myriad other languages spoken in the West before contact belong to some other language family, or, like Karuk, have no apparent relation to any other language at all. The academics are not exactly sure how a language from the east came to be spoken in coastal northern California.

But throughout the centuries, the language clearly became deeply intertwined with this land. A couple of days after the strategy session, Canez gave an example. There are two different Yurok words to describe dogwood—one used when the plant is in bloom, the other when it is not. The words sound nothing alike. But encoded within the words is a small story about the natural systems in which the Yurok lived. By the time the dogwood bloomed each year, Canez said, the great green sturgeon that still inhabit pockets of the Klamath were no longer in the river. That meant it was safe to swim without fear of ripping yourself open on the gigantic creature’s ferocious spikes.

This is perhaps the greatest hurdle that young Yurok speakers face in their efforts to reclaim the language—the need to understand not just the words that make up the language, but how to “think Indian” in a way that the language makes sense. (“You say a word, and it doesn’t mean what it means in English,” someone noted at the strategy session. “It means more.”)

There’s also the mechanical difficulty common to any attempt to learn a second language: Teaching your mouth to make sounds it is not accustomed to making. For English speakers, this is infinitely harder with Yurok than it is with any other European language. Yurok is filled with noises difficult for an ear used to English to

understand. It contains glottal stops—made with the throat rather than the mouth. It contains an unusual vowel, sort of a cross between a short “o” and the consonant “r.” One sound, written as “hl,” has no close equivalent in English; instructional materials advise a student to place their tongues at the roof of the mouths, then exhale around both sides of the tongue.

But even with these impediments, Yurok isn’t as poorly off as many other native Californian languages. First and foremost, students can still draw upon elders who have known the language from birth. The Yurok community can work together with Hoopa and Karuk people, both of whom have active language preservation projects. The UC Berkeley Department of Linguistics has long conducted studies in the language, and is making its material available to students of the language. And the Yurok have a small corps of people—Canez mentioned Carole Lewis and Leroy Halbe of Weitchpec, both in their middle years—who are on the verge of becoming the next generation’s master speakers.

In the coming years, the Yurok Elder Wisdom Preservation Project hopes to develop a standard lesson plan for new students in the language, to get more people to attend community classes in the language and to institute an annual summer immersion camp for students, in which only Yurok would be spoken. And the leaders of the project want to continue to record the speech and stories of the elder generation, while they still have time.

Canez takes courage in the way that groups of dedicated individuals devoted to other indigenous tongues, such as Hawaiian, have been able to pull their languages back from the brink. These days, Hawaiian is taught in schools around the state and a growing number of people are speaking it fluently. And even non-indigenous Hawaiians have adopted bits and pieces of the language, giving Hawaiian English a regional flavor that grounds it to the islands. Canez thinks something similar could happen here.

“Everyone knows the Spanish words *uno, dos, tres, hola, adios*. Yuroks know them too,” he said. “Why doesn’t everyone around here know the Yurok words for those? Where we are now, we can bring that back.”

The first word you learn in any language class is “hello.” In Yurok, the word is *aiy-yu-kwee’*.

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## The Monitor

by Wangari Muta Maathai

By this time, English had become the official language of communication and instruction in Kenyan schools. Those of us who aspired to progress in our studies knew that learning English well was essential. Many schools emphasized that students must speak English at all times, even during holidays.

A common practice to ensure that students kept pressure on one another was to require those students who were found using a language other than English to wear a button known as a 'monitor.' It was sometimes inscribed with phrases in English such as "I am stupid, I was caught speaking my mother tongue." At the end of the day, whoever ended up with the button received a punishment, such as cutting grass, sweeping, or doing work in the garden. But the greater punishment was the embarrassment you felt because you had talked in your mother tongue. In retrospect I can see that this introduced us to the world of undermining our self-confidence.

Not surprisingly, none of us wanted to be caught with the monitor and as a result we spoke English from the time we left church in the morning until we said our final prayers at night. This was remarkable given that everyone in St. Cecilia's had spoken only Kikuyu until then. But the system worked in promoting English: Even when we went home or met children from school in the village, we tended to speak English. The use of the monitor continues even today in Kenyan schools to ensure that students use only English. Now, as then, this contributes to the trivialization of anything African and lays the foundation for a deeper sense of self-doubt and an inferiority complex.

Years later, when we became part of the Kenyan elite, we preferred to speak in English to one another, our children, and those in our social class. While the monitor approach helped us learn English, it also instilled in us a sense that our local languages were inferior and insignificant. The reality is that our mother tongues are extremely important as vehicles of communication and carriers of culture, knowledge, wisdom, and history. When they are maligned, and educated people are encouraged to look down on them, people are robbed of a vital part of their heritage.

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# Obituary

by Lois-Ann Yamanaka

English class, we got Mr. Harvey. Jerome looks at me and puts his middle finger on the desk to our worst teacher, because Mr. Harvey says for the fiftieth time this year:

*“No one will want to give you a job. You sound uneducated. You will be looked down upon. You’re speaking a low-class form of good Standard English. Continue, and you’ll go nowhere in life. Listen, students, I’m telling you the truth like no one else will. Because they don’t know how to say it to you. I do. Speak Standard English. DO NOT speak pidgin. You will only be hurting yourselves.”*

I tell Jerry, “No make f-you finger to Mr. Harvey. We gotta try talk the way he say. No more dis and dat and wuz and cuz ’cause we only hurting ourselves.”

I don’t tell anyone, not even Jerry, how ashamed I am of pidgin English. Ashamed of my mother and father, the food we eat, chicken luau with can spinach and tripe stew. The place we live, down the house lots in the Hicks Homes that all look alike except for the angle of the house from the street. The car we drive, my father’s brown Land Rover without the back window. The clothes we wear, sometimes we have to wear the same pants in the same week and the same shoes until it breaks. Don’t have no choice.

Ashamed of my aunties and my uncles at baby luaus, yakudoshis, and mochi pounding parties. “Eh, bradda Larry, bring me on nada Primo, brah. One cold one fo’ real kine. I rey-day, I rey-day, no woray, brah. Uncap that sucka and come home to Uncle Stevie.” I love my Uncle Steven, though, and the Cracker Jacks he brings for me every time he visits my mother. One for me and one for my sister, Calhoon. But I’m so shame.

Ashame too of all my cousins, the way they talk and act dumb, like how they like Kikaida Man and “Ho, brah, you seen Kikaida Man kick Rainbow Man’s ass in front Hon Sport at the Hilo Shopping Center? Ho, brah and I betchu Godzilla kick King Kong’s ass too. Betchu ten dollas, brah, two fur balls kicking ass in downtown Metropolis, nah, downtown Hilo, brah.”

And my grandma. Her whole house smells like mothballs, not just in the closets but in every drawer too. And her pots look a million years old with dents all over. Grandma must know every recipe with mustard cabbage in it. She can quote from the Bible for everything you do in one day. Walks everywhere she goes downtown Kaunakakai, sucks fish eyes and eats the parsley from our plates at Midnight Inn.

And nobody looks or talks like a haole. Or eats like a haole. Nobody says nothing the way Mr. Harvey tells us to practice talking in class.

## HANDOUT: Obituary

Sometimes I secretly wish to be a haole. That my name could be Betty Smith or Annie Anderson or Debbie Cole, wife of Dennis Cole who lives at 2222 Maple Street with a white station wagon with wood panel on the side, a dog named Spot, a cat named Kitty, and I wear white gloves. Dennis wears a hat to work. There's a coatrack as soon as you open the front door and we all wear shoes inside the house.

*“Now let's all practice our Standard English,”* Mr. Harvey says. *“You will all stand up and tell me your name, and what you would like to be when you grow up. Please use complete sentences.”* Mr. Harvey taps Melvin Spencer on his shoulders. Melvin stands up slowly and pulls a Portagee torture of wedged pants and BVDs out of his ass.

“Ma name is Mal-vin Spenca.” Melvin has a very Portagee accent. Before he begins his next sentence, he does nervous things like move his ankles side to side so that his heels slide out of his slippers. He looks at the ceiling and rolls his eyes. “I am, I mean, I wanna. I like. No, try wait. I going be. No, try wait. I will work on my Gramma Spenca's pig farm when I grow up cuz she said I can drive the slop truck. Tank you.”

No one laughs at Melvin. Otherwise he'll catch you on the way home from school and shove your head in the slop drum. Melvin sits down. He blinks his eyes hard a couple of times, then rubs his face with two hands.

Jerry stands up very, very slowly and holds on to the edge of his desk. “My name is Jerome.” His voice, weak and shivering, his fingers white. “I in. OK, wait. I stay in. No, try wait. OK, try wait. I stay. I stay real nervous.” His face changes and he acts as if he has to use the bathroom. He looks out the window to the eucalyptus trees beyond the schoolyard.

Jerry continues, “I am going be one concert piano-ist when I get big. Tank you.” I'm next. Panic hits me like a rock dropped in a hollow oil drum.

Mr. Harvey walks up to my desk, his face red and puffy like a pink marshmallow or a bust-up boxer. He has red hair and always wears white double-knit pants with pastel-colored golf shirts. He walks like Walter Matthau. Mr. Harvey taps my desk with a red pen.

The muscles in my face start twitching and pulling uncontrollably. My eyes begin darting back and forth. And my lips, my lips—

*“I'm waiting,”* Mr. Harvey says.

Jerry looks at me. He smiles weakly, his face twitching and pulling too. He looks at Mr. Harvey, then looks at me as if to say, “Just get it over with.”

*“Cut the crap,” Mr. Harvey spits. “Stop playing these goddamn plantation games. Now c’mon. We’ve got our outlines to finish today.” Mr. Harvey’s ears get red, his whole face like fire with his red hairs and red face.*

*“My name Lovey. When I grow up pretty soon, I going be what I like be and nobody better say nothing about it or I kill um.”*

*“OH REALLY,” he says. “Not the way you talk. You see that was terrible. All of you were terrible and we will have to practice and practice our Standard English until we are perfect little Americans. And I’ll tell you something, you can all keep your heads on your desks for the rest of the year for all I care. You see, you need me more than I need you. And do you know what the worst part is, class? We’re not only going to have to work on your usage, but pronunciations and inflections too. Jee-zus Christ! For the life of me, it’ll take us a goddamn lifetime.”*

*“See,” Jerry whispers, “now you the one made Mr. Harvey all mad with us, we all going get it from him, stupid.”*

I want to tell Jerry about being a concert pianist. Yeah, right. Good luck. How will he ever do it? Might as well drive the slop truck if you cannot talk straight or sound good and all the haoles talk circles around you. Might as well blend in like all the locals do.

Mr. Harvey walks past my desk. *“C’mon, Lovey. Start your outline. You too, Jerome.”* Sometimes I think that Mr. Harvey doesn’t mean to be mean to us. He really wants us to be Americans, like my kotonk cousins from Santa Ana, he’d probably think they talked real straight.

But I can’t talk the way he wants me to. I cannot make it sound his way, unless I’m playing pretend-talk-haole. I can make my words straight, that’s pretty easy if I concentrate real hard. But the sound, the sound from my mouth, if I let it rip right out the lips, my words will always come out like home.

*Excerpt from “Obituary” from Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers by Lois-Ann Yamanaka. Copyright © 1996 by Lois-Ann Yamanaka. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.*

# A Piece of My Heart/ Pedacito de mi corazón

by Carmen Lomas Garza

When I was five years old my brother came home crying from the first grade in public school on the third day of classes because the teacher had punished him for speaking Spanish. She had made him hold out his hands, palms down, and then hit him with a ruler across the top of his hands.

This confused us because up to that day my parents had been telling us about how much fun we were going to have in school. So we looked to them for an explanation of this confusing reaction over such a natural act as speaking and why he deserved the unusual punishment. The expression on my parents' faces and their mute silence haunts me to this day. It must have been such a painful moment for them. How could they explain that the punishment was for racial and political reasons and not because he had done something bad?

The incident and the punishment caused much discussion among my parents, their friends and peers whose children were also experiencing the same treatment. Even though it had been seven years since my father and other Mexican Americans had returned from military service during World War II, things had not changed very much in Texas. Now that their children (the baby boom generation) were becoming school age, the discrimination continued. It did not matter that some of our families had been *Tejanos* (Texans) since the days of the Spanish land grants—long before Texas was taken from Mexico. Nor did it matter that almost all of us were *mestizos*, a mixture of Spanish and native Mexican or Native American.

Discrimination against the Mexican American was the main reason my parents became involved with the American GI Forum, a World War II veterans organization of Mexican Americans who fought for civil rights. One of their first activities was to sue a funeral home for refusing to receive the body of a Mexican American hero killed in the Korean War.

My brother's incident still had to be explained. My parents tried to tell us the reasons for the punishment and stressed that from then on at home we would practice speaking only in English and not both languages as we had been doing. I did not make nor understand the distinction between the two languages. And my parents many times spoke in both languages in spite of their decision. All I kept thinking was that I was next in line to go to school the following year.

When I finally did get to school, my first grade teacher was a bit more compassionate and actually took the time to explain the fact that *the* Spanish and *the* English we spoke were not all one language. She demonstrated this by bringing from her bedroom to the classroom a huge fluffy pillow with colorful embroidery and said that the name we knew for it, *almohada*, was Spanish and *pillow* English. I knew and used both words.



The realization that the pillow had a written name and that I knew two languages clicked in my mind just like it had for Helen Keller when she understood the connection between the sign word in her hand for water and the actual water that was falling on her hand. But what had been one world was now two separate entities and it seemed that I had to negate one in order to be accepted and exist in the other.

Knowing the difference between the two languages did not save me from unconsciously using Spanish in the classrooms and on the school grounds so I, too, suffered many physical and emotional punishments. Each time I spoke English I was ridiculed for my accent and made to feel ashamed. At a time when most children start to realize that there is an immense outside world, and communication is an important vehicle toward becoming a part of that world, the educational institution was punishing me for speaking two languages.

When I was in junior high school, I complained to my mother: “*Mami, yo no quiero llevar tacos de tortilla de harina con arroz, frijoles y carne para lonche porque se rien las gringas.*” (“Mami, I don’t want to take tacos of flour tortillas with rice, beans, and meat for lunch because the white girls make fun of me.”) Tacos that were nutritious and made with love, care, and hope had to be replaced with sandwiches of baloney and white bread.

In high school we could take Latin, French, or Spanish classes, but the Mexican American students were still not allowed to speak Spanish in the halls or in other classrooms. It was so ironic to see the white students practicing their new Spanish words and phrases while walking down the halls yet the Mexican American students could expect punishment for doing the same. But the punishment wasn’t with a 12-inch ruler across your hands; it was with a 30-inch paddle that had holes drilled into it so that there would be less air resistance as it was slapped across the back of your legs. By the time I graduated from high school I was confused, depressed, introverted, and quite angry.

The Chicano Movement for civil rights of the late sixties and early seventies clarified some of that confusion, started the slow process of self-healing and provided a format to vent some of that anger. I had decided at the age of 13 to become an artist so when I was in college the Chicano Movement nourished that goal and gave me back my voice. But the university art department (which had over 50 percent Chicano students, the highest compared to all other departments) did not offer art history classes about my heritage: neither pre-Columbian, colonial or contemporary Mexican; nor the native American art, even though we were sitting in the middle of South Texas only 120 miles from the Mexican border. Instead we learned about French Rococo and Henry Moore, the English sculptor. I knew more about the Egyptian pyramids than the pyramids in Teotihuacan. I knew more about Greek mythology than Aztec mythology. The only source for formal training about my heritage was in the anthropology department but only after the study of the bones and teeth of Leakey’s Lucy.

I was looking for information about the Aztecas, Toltecas, Apaches and Hopi; the Nahuatl language and poetry; the Mayan ceramic sculptures; the gold jewelry and surgical

obsidian knives; cultivation of corn, chocolate, cotton, and the vulcanization of rubber. It would have been real cool when I was in high school to have known that way before Columbus invaded this hemisphere the Maya were playing a form of basketball wearing open-toe high top tennis shoes with rubber soles.

Discussions with other Chicano students were the best source of information. It was during one of these discussions, in which I described my revelation about the word pillow, that someone commented that the word *almohada* was of Arab origin as were many other words in the Spanish language.

How does a 6-year-old child in South Texas in 1954 come to use a word from halfway across the world for such a beautiful and intimate object? A word that traveled from a desert across a channel, up and down mountains, across an ocean, over and around islands, through jungles and up to another desert. The history of that word's journey as carried by thousands of people from parent to child, generation after generation had been suppressed or ignored by the two institutions that I had already experienced.

And so the anger, the pride and self-healing had to come out as Chicano art—an art that was criticized by the faculty and white students as being too political, not universal, not hardedge, not pop art, not abstract, not avant-garde, too figurative, too colorful, too folksy, too primitive, blah, blah, blah!

What they failed to see was that the art I was creating functioned in the same way as the *salvila* (aloe vera) plant when its cool liquid is applied to a burn or abrasion. It helped to heal the wounds inflicted by discrimination and racism.

We needed to heal ourselves and each other so we started by choosing a name for ourselves, a name to symbolize our movements for self-determination. The accomplishments of our parents during the 50's civil rights movement were not enough. We started to speak more Spanish in public places; we worked to get better representatives on the school boards and local governments, and we started to explore and emphasize our unique culture in the visual arts, music, literature and theater.

I felt that I had to start with my earliest recollections of my life and validate each event or incident by depicting it in a visual format. I needed to celebrate each special event or reexamine each unusual happening.

We have been doing Chicano art not only for Chicanos, but also for others to see who we are as people. If you see my heart and humanity through my art then hopefully you will not exclude me from rightfully participating in this society.

*Aquí les doy un pedacito de mi corazón en mi arte.* And now I give you a little piece of my heart in my art.

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