

Tea Party

Hector Pieterse (Soweto, South Africa): I was 12 years old in 1976, when the South African police killed me on June 16. The colonial government decided that blacks would be educated in Afrikaans, the language of white Afrikaners in South Africa. It's a language that was used by the rulers, and black children hated Afrikaans. Most of our teachers didn't even know Afrikaans, so many of us failed our classes because we didn't understand the language. We didn't want to speak the language anyway because it was the language of the South African government, our oppressors. We became frustrated by our teachers' and parents' inability to change the system, so groups of students formed our own meetings in March 1976. We started slowdowns and class boycotts. On June 16, between 10,000 and 15,000 students left their schools and marched in the streets of Soweto, a black township near Johannesburg. We sang the song "Senzeni na?" ("What have we done?"), and carried signs that said, "Away with Afrikaans" as we made our way towards Orlando Stadium. Before we reached our destination, the police opened fire on us.

Damien O'Donovan (Ireland, *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*): In 1920, I watched one of my friends, Michael, get beaten to death by the British army for speaking Irish. After the British invaded Ireland and took over, we were forbidden to speak Irish in school. The teachers had a "tally stick," which they beat us with if they caught us speaking Irish. We didn't want to speak the language of the people who took over our country. We felt like traitors to our own history when we spoke English. In 1893 an organization called "Conradh na Gaeilge" (the Irish League) was formed to try to keep our language alive. Language is part of our identity. The Irish League wanted to preserve our literary culture as well as our language. They didn't succeed in stopping the decline of our language, but they instilled pride. "Within twenty years the Irish language was inextricably linked to the question of Irish independence. 'Ni tír gan teanga' ('without a language you have no country') was the new battle cry of the men and women who fought for independence in 1916. When freedom finally came, the Irish language was designated the first official language of the new nation."

Gloria Anzaldúa (Texas, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*): I am a Tejana Chicana. I grew up in Texas near the Mexican border. When I was a child, my teacher hit me when I spoke Spanish at recess. When I was a student at the Pan American University, I, and all Chicano students, were required to take two speech classes to get rid of our accents. Instead of giving up my language, I used my Chicano English to talk back. My language is my identity. Until I can be proud when I speak my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to code-switch without having always to translate, I cannot take pride in myself. I will no longer be made to feel ashamed for existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.

Joe Suina (New Mexico, "And Then I Went to School"): I am a professor in the department of Curriculum and Instruction at University of New Mexico. I grew up in a Pueblo home with my grandmother until I was 6. Then I was sent to school, which was a painful experience. I was told, "Leave your Indian at home." When I spoke the language that my grandmother and I sang and prayed in, I was punished with a dirty look or a whack with a ruler. In school I was taught that the way my grandmother spoke was not right. I learned that my people were not right. Unfortunately, I was taught to be ashamed of my language and my home. I was one of many indigenous people whose language and culture were stripped so we could assimilate into the dominant culture.

John Rickford (Stanford, "Suite for Ebony & Phonics"): I am a linguist at Stanford. My book, *Spoken Soul*, is about African American Vernacular English, otherwise known as Ebonics. And don't laugh when you say it. Ebonics came to be a joke with late-night comedians after the Oakland School Board approved a resolution recognizing it as the primary language of African American students. But it is no joke to linguists—or to African American writers. What some label a "lazy language" or a "slang language," James Baldwin called "this incredible music." Ebonics has a systematic, complex grammar structure that most linguists identify as originating in Africa. Of course, this debate mirrors similar debates across the globe. Like many linguists, I understand that linguistic identity is tied up in cultural identity. When our language is stigmatized by the broader society, children learn to be ashamed of their mother tongue.

Lois-Ann Yamanaka (Hawai'i, "Obituary"): I was raised in Pahala, a sugar plantation town on the Big Island of Hawai'i. I write my poems and stories in Pidgin instead of Standard English because I cherish the language, culture, and people I grew up with. With my stories, I fight back against the teachers who told me I would never make it if I spoke Pidgin. If I stopped speaking my language, I would be cutting my ties to my home and relatives, my family gatherings, the foods prepared and eaten by my people, and I would change my relationships to friends and neighbors. I grew up with the sound of Pidgin in my own mouth, in my own writing. When I spoke it and wrote it, I discovered the institutional racism so profound in generations of us here in Hawai'i that we cannot even smell it for what it is.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Kenya, "Consciousness and African Renaissance: South Africa in the Black Imagination"): I am a Kenyan writer of Kikuyu descent. I began a successful writing career writing in English before turning to work almost entirely in my native language, Kikuyu. I wrote several successful novels in English—*Weep Not, Child*; *A Grain of Wheat*; *The River Between*; and *Petals of Blood*. Then in 1986, I wrote *Decolonising the Mind*, my "farewell to English." For me, English in Africa is a "cultural bomb" that continues a process of erasing memories of precolonial cultures and history. Speaking or writing in English is a new form of colonialism—of taking away our cultural heritage and memories and replacing them with a language and view of the world that fails to honor our people's literature and culture. By writing in my mother tongue, I am not only honoring Kikuyu traditions and our past, I am acknowledging and communicating their present. African writers need to reclaim their mother tongues.

Gearóid Mac Lochlainn (Ireland, "I Am the Tongue"): I'm a Belfast poet who writes about the urban experience in Northern Ireland. My language shows the fragmented, shrapnel-strewn life I've lived in "north of Ireland." I write in a language—Irish—that is neither fashionable nor profitable. I believe that the outlawing of the Irish language was the main tool in the overall silencing of voices of dissent—just like with the American Indians. In fact, when I went to New York, I heard about native language restoration on the Pine Ridge Reservation. I left New York and went out to Pine Ridge because I'm working to set up Irish language programs in Belfast's schools.

Molly Craig (Australia, *Rabbit Proof Fence*): When I was 14 years old, my sister, my cousin, and I were stolen from our family in Jigalong, Australia, and taken to the Moore River Native Settlement—an internment camp for mixed-race Aboriginal children. Here, we were taught that our language, our culture, our religion, our parents were bad and everything British was good. Here, my native tongue—Mardujara—was beaten out of me. The government believed that “mixed” Aboriginal children were smarter than their darker relatives. They believed we should be taken from the bad influence of our families and should be isolated and trained as maids and day laborers. As one Australian official said, “We have power under the Act to take any child from its mother at any stage of its life. . . . Are we going to have a population of one million blacks in the Commonwealth or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there ever were any Aborigines in Australia?” I walked 1,000 miles home along the rabbit proof fence, carrying my little sister much of the way. Later, my children were stolen from me and taken to the Settlement. They were told they were orphans.

Neville Alexander (South Africa, “Feeling at Home with Literacy in the Mother Tongue”): I am the director of an organization in South Africa that brings “mother tongue” literacy back into our children’s lives. For too many years, colonization and globalization have resulted in the “linguistic genocide” of African languages. Our organization is helping to inspire a sense of unity and a common African identity that was stripped away when European colonizers came to Africa. They not only took the natural resources of our land. They took our identity and our languages. In order to “succeed” we had to learn their languages. Over the centuries, many of our people have lost their languages. They have become illiterate in two languages—their mother tongue and the colonial language. I want African children to be read to and to read for themselves versions of the same stories in their mother tongue or in the language of their choice, so we are publishing children’s books in African languages. Our organization is working to establish and promote a culture of reading and writing in African languages. We want to ensure that universities and other higher education institutions undertake and sustain the development of African languages. We are working to motivate and support publishers to develop a reading market in African languages.

Wangari Maathai (Kenya, *Unbowed*): I grew up in Kenya, a country in Africa. For most of my young childhood, I lived at home and spoke my native language. But when I went to school, my language was banned. In fact, if we were caught speaking our language, we had to wear a button known as a “monitor.” The monitor had phrases stamped on it: “I am stupid, I was caught speaking my mother tongue.” As I describe in my book, *Unbowed*, “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 talked in your mother tongue. In retrospect, I can see that this introduced us to the world of undermining our self confidence.” After a while, we just stopped talking our own language. “The use of the monitor continues even today [in 2007] 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.” I won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for my work on the Green Belt Movement in Kenya.

Bud Lane (Siletz, “Last of the Siletz Speakers”): Some people already count my language as dead. I speak Oregon Coastal Athabaskan. At 50, I am one of the youngest speakers of my language. Here in the Northwest, we are a hot spot for language extinction. I’m hoping to change that. You see, I think that the language and the people are the same. I didn’t grow up speaking my language either, but I found an elder Siletz woman who knew the words, but who never spoke them in public. She’d been taught shame of her native tongue by white society. But Nellie Orton found her voice and taught me my language. Now I teach our language at the local school, so that our children can save our native tongue. “Once among the most linguistically diverse places on Earth, Oregon has drowned under the English tide. It now is infamous as a language-death hot spot. By Living Tongue’s standards, hot spots are areas with a high concentration of different languages, few remaining first speakers—people who learned the language as children—and little language documentation.”

Carmen Lomas Garza (Texas, *A Piece of My Heart/Pedacito de mi corazón*): I grew up in Texas in the 1950s. “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.” I was afraid to go to school because I didn’t want to be beaten for speaking my language. Later, I was punished or ridiculed for my accent and made to feel ashamed. I wondered why white students were praised for learning a new language and practicing their Spanish in the halls, but Mexican American students were punished for doing the same. “By the time I graduated from high school I was confused, depressed, introverted, and quite angry.”

Dr. Geneva Smitherman (aka “Dr. G.,” *Talkin and Testifyin*): I am Distinguished Professor of English at Michigan State University and Director of the African American Language and Literacy Program. As a linguist and educational activist, I have been at the forefront of the struggle for language rights for over 25 years. As a writer, I forged a writing style that combines academic discourse and African American Language that has become widely celebrated for efficacy in making the medium the message. I have written many books including *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*, and *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture and Education in African America*. I am considered a leading authority on Black English, also known as Ebonics and African American English.

Esther Martinez, also known as P’oe Tsawa, Blue Water (New Mexico, “Protecting Native American Languages and Culture”): I was a storyteller and Native Language teacher. I fought for years to preserve the Tewa language, the language of my people of the Northern Pueblos of New Mexico. I created Tewa dictionaries for each of the pueblos. Until my death, I continued to tell the stories of my people. For too many years the United States government’s policies of termination, relocation, and assimilation of Native American tribes resulted in the loss of our land and our language. I am proud of the Esther Martinez Native American Language Preservation Act created in my name to give money to tribes to create programs to prevent the loss of their heritage and culture.

Aileen Figueroa (Klamath River, “Speak It Good and Strong”): I was one of the last fluent speakers of the Yurok language, the native language of the Yurok people who live on the Klamath River in Northern California. I was born on the Lower Klamath River in 1912, and I attended elementary school in Klamath until I was forced to attend the boarding school in Hoopa, which forbid students from speaking their native languages. I ran away from the school and made it to Redwood Creek, where I was caught by a truant officer. Because I went home to Klamath instead of staying at the boarding school, I kept my language and culture. You see, language is shaped by the landscape, the culture, and the people who speak it. For 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 . . . 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.” I worked with a linguist to create a written form of our language, and I taught it for 60 years. Before my death, I started the Yurok Elder Wisdom Preservation Project, and I participated at the American Indian Academy at McKinleyville High School.

Andrew Windy Boy (Chippewa/Cree, North Dakota, *Our Spirits Don’t Speak English*): “I did two boarding schools in North and South Dakota in the mid-60s to the early 70s. I wasn’t allowed to talk my native tongue or practice my native ways. They cut my hair. They put a dunce cap on me and made me wear it when I talked my native tongue. Kids laughed at me. They punished me for talking my first language. Whenever I talked, Cree would come out, and they hit me. I got hit so much I lost my native tongue. The only thing I remember is my Indian name. I hope nobody has to go through this. We have to have our own language. How else can we talk to our spirits? They don’t understand English.” (From *Our Spirits Don’t Speak English: Indian Boarding School*.)

Momodou Sarr (The Gambia, "The Symbol"): The "Symbol" referred to several objects used to stop children at my elementary school in The Gambia from speaking our language at school. The teachers made us wear either a dead cow skull or a chain of empty little milk cans strung together to form a necklace if they caught us speaking in our home language from the moment the school bell rang to the end of the school day. Almost all of us spoke the majority dialect, Mandinka. The language of instruction at school was English. As soon as we crossed the invisible boundary between school, village and community, we spoke English. The "Symbol" made you visible to the rest of the student body. It also isolated you from your friends, and worst of all, it took away your dignity and self-esteem. Once you assume the burden of wearing the "Symbol," you become the hunter, lurking in corners hoping to catch someone speaking in the local dialect. The hunted knew that the hunter hid in corners, yelling out names during recess hoping to catch fellow students by surprise. The hunted also knew that the hunter hid in the bathroom, sitting on top of the toilet bowl to avoid detection.

.....