

**Notes on Mother Tongues:  
Colonialism, class, and giving  
what you don't have**

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*suspicious of his own tongue—a wretchedly lazy organ*

—Frantz Fanon  
(*White Skin, Black Masks*)

*More recent claims of xenoglossy have come from reincarnation researchers who have alleged that individuals were able to recall a language spoken in a past life.*

—Wikipedia

*Language belongs to no one; it belongs to no one and I know nothing about anyone.*

—Abdelkebir Khatibi  
(*Love in Two Languages*)

My language has a baby whose language is without words. My language communicates affection to her baby by fluttering her lips, twisting her tongue(s), and babbling inchoate sounds, syllables her baby seems to understand. Her baby won't stop laughing; my language is hilarious.

My language is searching for a language capable of expressing in words the magnitude of the love she feels towards her son; soon he will demand words of her. This inevitable human expectation makes my language anxious.

My language is an anxious language.

Languages who become mothers typically pass down the language their mothers spoke to them, a so-called "mother tongue," but my language doesn't speak such a language. My language speaks many languages—French, Italian, Arabic, Spanish, and English—none of which she can call home. Like other languages originating in histories of colonization, my language always had a language problem, something akin to the evacuation of a "first" or "native" tongue—a syntax endemic to the brain and to the heart.

When she has time—my language barely has any time—my language wastes it googling etymologies. "Etymology," "analysis of a word to find its true origin"; Ethymos: "true, real, actual." "Native" and "nation" share a common "etymology," from the Latin "nativus," "innate, produced by birth," but nations belonging to the nation-state system aren't innate; they are the outcome of ongoing territorial wars, man-made borders oblivious to pre-existing ecosystems in which language and land evolved symbiotically.

The “nation” of the modern, settler-colonial nation-state is premised on the eradication of groups and languages predating its formation; it turns land into territories that stand for a nation’s monolithic identity (nationalism) (monolingualism). Native languages, like other endangered species, are going extinct. On January 4, 1984, for example, the last speaker of Yavitero—an Arawakan language spoken near the Atabapo river in Venezuela—died together with the last Yavitero words.



My language isn’t dead, but she suffers episodic bouts of systemic melancholy. She comes from two nations (Lebanon and Venezuela) that are terrible at being countries—economically devastated nation-states on the brink of irrecoverable collapse. As she writes this, people in Beirut are rioting, torching symbols of wealth accumulation like banks and partially built condos promising luxurious lives in English. The government has defaulted on its debt, 50% of the population is predicted to sink below the poverty line and into hunger, prices of bread and other basic goods have skyrocketed overnight, all of it compounded with dysfunctional public infrastructures in which basic services like water and electricity are irregularly supplied, if at all. In Venezuela, in May 2020, the inflation rate was 2296.6 %.

My language can’t entirely blame her countries or their criminally corrupt political class for their dramatic failures at being countries. Formerly colonized territories inherit from the “mother” country a poisoned legacy whereby their survival is contingent on the adoption of a state system and

the enforcement of a colonial language. Fanon, an author who has shaped my language's understanding of herself, talks about "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness" in *The Wretched of the Earth*. There he describes how the bourgeoisie of recently liberated countries do terribly at emancipation; to become a country is akin to replicating colonialism's social and economic disparities:

National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious result of the mobilization of the people, will be in any case, an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been.<sup>1</sup>

My language calls Beirut in English on the weekends. "We are becoming Venezuela," her aunt sighs. My language doesn't know what to say. Her two countries converge along a godless, collapsing nexus. Subjected to US sanctions, considered threats to the stability of their respective geographical regions, Lebanon and Venezuela are paying the cost of their non-alignment. Crumbling economies and devastated ecosystems are political in nature and nature is never natural. All mother tongues are ideological. In Beirut, posters of Hugo Chavez represented next to Hassan Nasrallah are pasted on the highway's serpentine cement walls. The poster says: "The symbols of international resistance." Triangulations between Lebanon, Iran, and Venezuela haunt America's worst nightmares while people on the ground struggle for survival.

My language speaks of her countries in statistical and geopolitical terms because she wants to talk about love.

My language was born out of a love story between her two inoperative countries. She emerges in the 70s, in specific bodies; that of her mother—a tall, fair skinned, black haired Venezuelan secretary—and her father, a Lebanese diplomat living in Caracas.

My language remembers the glamour of an era she never lived. Her imaginary was marked by colorful images such as an orange Corvette her mother drove to multilingual parties where finely dressed guests donned rock-heavy rings on neatly manicured fingers holding martini glasses and seafood canapés (from the French). While my language's mother and father were falling in love, people had started killing each other in Beirut, marking the onset of a civil war waged from 1975 to 1990, spanning my language's entire childhood. Words to describe the emergence of love amid such brutal juxtapositions keep escaping my language. My language is convinced that her parents loved each other; a third world, glamorous romance driven by class aspirations. My language suspects that her parents' love was largely fueled by the desire to form a norm, own property, and reproduce a language they would educate and raise according to the precepts of their class.

...Look at what happened in Latin America. The casinos of Havana and of Mexico, the beaches of Rio...the ports of Acapulco and Copacabana—all these are the stigma of this deprivation of the national middle class. Because it is bereft of ideas, because it lives to itself and cuts itself off from the people, undermined by its hereditary incapacity to think in terms of all the problems of the nation as seen from the point of view of the whole of that nation, the middle class will have

nothing to do than to take on the role of the manager for Western enterprise.<sup>2</sup>

My language became a language among the middle class of two broken developing nations. She remembers the words her mother lacked when yearning for objects she couldn't have. My language would sit on her mother's bed, feeling the heat of her mother's body while her mother browsed through the pages of a hefty jewelry magazine, turning my language (me) into a powerless witness to her burning desire for rocks. My language remembers the black glossy backgrounds against which the rings were photographed, the way she tried hard to make sense of the difference between one ring and another, how the chiseling of the stone resulted in variations of glow, which, according to her mother, was proportional to the size of the ring. Her mother longed for wealth she didn't have while living in the fear that the wealth she did have might be taken away from her. She despised Chavez with an intensity equivalent to her desire for gold. My language must have been 18 when Chavez came to power. She remembers trying to make sense of her mother's revulsion at his never ending, empathic speeches, what he claimed he was fighting for and against. Although my language's 18-year-old self wasn't particularly politicized, she remembers thinking that someone who granted land titles to indigenous tribes and declared their languages "heritage" couldn't be that bad. Later, after her mother's death, my language honed her understanding of context, acquiring words like "class," "socialism," and "capitalist accumulation." When her mother died, my language firmly positioned herself on the left end of the ideological spectrum, to the antipodes of where her mother stood.

My language is engaged in the necessary but difficult enterprise of developing a language through which she can diagnose “herself” as a symptom of history. She believes that she can put the stories of her conditions into words, the story of how she became a language without a mother tongue. My language leans towards analytical language; she sometimes confuses abstraction for liberation, liberation for (self-) dissolution. My language doesn’t belong to a single body; she isn’t an individual language. There is nothing particularly special about my language. My language doesn’t talk of “herself” in the first person because she doesn’t feel ownership over the self whose body she transiently inhabits. Her sense of self is tenuous. My language could be anybody. She prefers to speak of herself in the third person.

Self-scrutiny or the practice of incriminating what is closest to you comes more easily to those who already experience a Double-Consciousness, in Dubois’ term. Fanon writes, “consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third person consciousness.”<sup>3</sup> My language doesn’t pretend to know what it means to suffer a white gaze on black skin. She can’t possibly know. But when she speaks, her voice, whether in French, English, or Arabic, is unhomed, lacking a center—a dance of perspectives blurring her most vital intuitions, as if colonialism (an internalized, devaluing gaze) had hijacked my language’s ability to access herself (in language).

My language isn’t argumentative. She believes that her lack of a primary language is the result of personal experiences compounded by structural circumstances, but she



can't prove it. I cannot demonstrate what my language is unable to prove. I speak of my language in the third person because knowing my language intimately means accepting the inherent split that exists between us, a dialectic of embodiment and estrangement that defines our relationship. My language is wary of my efforts; she doesn't fully trust my ability to come up with a language that convincingly demonstrates that certain platitudes such as "everything is connected" are in fact true. I too have misgivings about my language; she can turn against me at any moment and deprive me of my words. She doesn't know that at night, while she is asleep, I am awake, striving to come up with a syntax that can hold in a single sentence antithetical histories of ownership and dispossession, sentences in which the victim is also the perpetrator.



Some might say my language is French, but I would dispute that. Today when reheating beef puree while holding her son, my language wanted to say, "stop kicking the \_\_\_\_\_," but the word for "knob" escaped her. She ended up saying "bouton," which was right but sounded incorrect to her. My language doesn't have a dominant language. Having many languages is like having many selves. My language often feels dispersed. She can hardly manage the contending pieces of her unravelling narrative. She hesitates before she speaks. In what language will she tell her son his story?

My language speaks French to her son because she wants him to know that English isn't the only language. She calls him *mon amour*, *my love*, *hayete*, *habibi*, *amore*, all

languages her son understands. Having many languages is my language's dominant language. She learned Italian with her Eritrean boyfriend, French via the God of repressed Dominican nuns, Arabic in the streets of Beirut, Spanish with her Venezuelan grandmother. She forgot how she learned English. My language learned to speak through a logic of accumulation. She collected languages like objects she could smoke, lick, or lose.

My language is still waiting for a language to claim her.

French, the language my language supposedly speaks to her son, came to her via her father and Lebanon's colonial legacy. My language attended schools whose civilizing mission was to tame other, non-French languages. Lycées Français around the world reproduce French's imperial aspirations disguised as unbiased universalism, but the French of the periphery (the colonies) is always defined in relation to a center—French France.

He told himself, I am a midground between two languages: the closer I get to the middle, the further I am from it.<sup>4</sup>



It is not uncommon for the colonized elite to disavow their mother tongues in favor of a colonizing language. My language is the product of such disavowal, how certain syntaxes are considered worthy of investment while others are dismissed or left to their own decay. Fanon understands the colonized elite, the identification with everything that isn't you. My language comes from a colonized elite that