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Cotch

Abstract

This creative writing piece offers a reflection on a Patwa word and the Third Culture experience.

“Language is the dwelling place of ideas that do not exist anywhere else.”

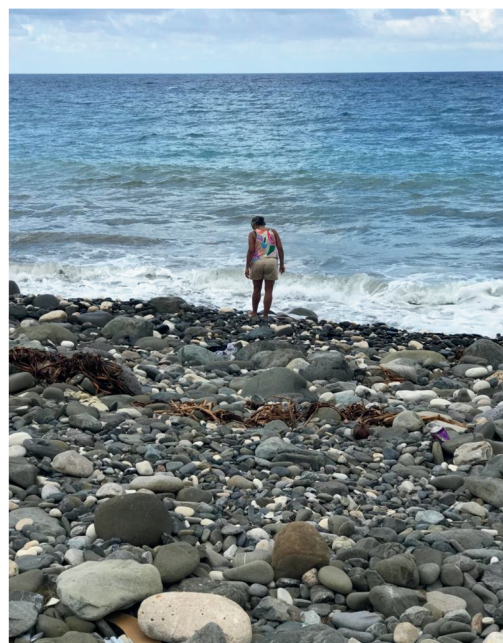
- Robin Wall Kimmerer. *Braiding Sweetgrass*¹

“I just miss Jamaica. I need to come home.”

“I can hear it.” she replied.

I had called my aunt to see if I could spend a week with her at her home near Portmore. I’ve lived in Canada for almost 40 years. There were seasons where I felt Canadian, felt a sense of belonging. I had gotten used to Anglo-Canadian culture, particularly conservative Christian Anglo culture. Unknowingly I dressed and spoke a certain way, believing I was blending into the mix, believing in the myth that is Canadian multiculturalism. Yet I would feel inexplicably untethered at times. I felt an inexorable longing for my country, for the warmth of the land and the people.

I have abandoned knowledge systems that stem from the European Enlightenment which privilege the cognitive over the corporeal. Instead, I am learning to let my body teach me. And I cannot explain the ache in my body that sometimes brings me to tears. I listen to sensations that cannot be expressed with my first language, the “Queen’s English,” as it was referred to ironically by my elders. I consider that perhaps there are other languages more useful than this one, despite its global hegemony. In Spanish, there are verbs for meals—desayunar, almorzar and cenar—to have breakfast, lunch and dinner respectively. Each word elegantly describes a particular meal for a particular time of day. Because of Jamaica’s race, class and language politics, English is my mother tongue. My upper-middle class private school upbringing didn’t have room for me to learn Patwa, the vibrant Jamaican language based on English and West African languages. I knew some words and phrases, but I could not (and still cannot) understand the language spoken quickly.



¹ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. 2014. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions.

It was the language of our domestic helper, our gardener, the market vendors. In the 70s it was considered poor speech, a sign of limited education. Today, I approach Patwa like I do French or Spanish—I piece phrases together in my head before clumsy attempts at speaking. Maybe because I am learning to stop self-editing or code switching, I find the occasional Patwa word jumping to the forefront of my consciousness while I speak. “Cotch” is one of those words.



I cannot think of an English equivalent. To cotch something is to place it temporarily until it gets to its final destination. It comes from an old English word, “scotch,” which referred to a wooden block placed temporarily under a wheel to prevent it from moving.²

“Where do you want me to put the bag?”

“Just cotch it over deh-so.”

If you sit on the arm of the sofa next to someone, you’re “cotching.” This is not a permanent situation, it would not be comfortable for very long. During a recent rehearsal I asked my Trinidadian bandmate about the word—he also uses it. He agreed that there is no English equivalent, and that it is in fact a very handy word. Musing over the word helped me to see the beauty in the Patwa language that I missed for so long. I now find myself reaching for it because of its succinctness, and its ability to explain what Canadian English cannot.

For years I have been cotching somewhere in-between Jamaica and Canada. Neither location feels fully like home, so perhaps I need to make roots in that liminal space. I can locate myself the in-betweenness of my Jamaican and Canadian identities, knowing that I am not alone there.

The term “third culture kid”³ describes people like me who leave their countries of origin because of their parents’ choices before they have had a chance to fully develop a personal or cultural identity.

We have more in common with each other than we do with those from either of our other cultures.



²<https://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/commentary/20210523/carolyn-cooper-cotching-fools-paradise>

³ <http://www.iss.edu/pages/kids.html>

I spent a week in June at my aunt's house. The intense heat didn't bother me—the air conditioning had been down in our building in Toronto a few weeks before during an unexpected May heat wave, so I used the time to acclimate. I joined her as she ran errands in Kingston on the weekend. I ate all of my favourite foods. I booked a day trip with tour guides, a married Jamaican couple, who took me through the Blue and John Crow Mountains from St. Catherine into Portland. I deeply inhaled the cool, damp air and listened to the singing of verdant hills. Along the coast outside of Buff Bay, the birthplace of my paternal grandfather, I asked to stop at the roadside so that I could put my feet in the sea.



There used to be a plantation nearby which could have been where his people came from. As we drove through a bustling town in St. Mary, the wife commented on the bad smells coming through the open car windows. Those smells reminded me of trips into town with my mother when I was small. I've never been anywhere that smells this way. It is home for me. Even her disdain was familiar and comforting—"Out of Many, One People," as the Jamaican motto goes. It probably sounds strange, but I felt healing permeate my skin that day. The longing that brought me back was satisfied during my weeklong visit, but that day was especially pivotal. My feet were firmly planted into the soil where my ancestors lay. I didn't feel untethered anymore. As Kimmerer says in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, "The land knows you, even when you are lost." She took care of me that day, and knowing where my roots lie, I can make a home anywhere.