

“Speak White” by Michèle Lalonde (1968)

Speak white

It sounds so good when you
Speak of Paradise Lost
And of the gracious and anonymous profile that trembles
In Shakespeare's sonnets

We're an uncultured stammering race
But we are not deaf to the genius of a language
Speak with the accent of Milton and Byron and Shelley and Keats

Speak white

And forgive us our only answer
Being the raucous songs of our ancestors
And the sorrows of Nelligan

Speak white

Talk about this and that
Tell us about Magna Carta
Or the Lincoln Memorial
The grey charm of the Thames
The pink waters of the Potomac
Tell us about your traditions
As a people we don't really shine
But we're quite capable of appreciating
All the significance of crumpets
Or the Boston Tea Party

But when you *really speak white*
When you *get down to brass tacks*

To talk about *gracious living*
And speak of standing in life
And the Great Society
A bit stronger then, *speak white*
Raise your foremen's voices
We're a bit hard of hearing
We live too close to the machines
And we only hear the sound of our breathing over the tools.

Speak white and loud

So that we can hear you
From St-Henri to St-Domingue
What an admirable tongue
For hiring

Giving orders
Setting the time for working yourself to death
And for the pause that refreshes
And invigorates the dollar

Speak white

*Tell us that God is a great big shot
And that we're paid to trust him*

Speak white

Talk to us about *production profits* and percentages

Speak white

It's a rich language

For buying

But for selling

But for selling your soul

But for selling out

Ah!

Speak white

Big deal

But to tell you about

The eternity of a day on strike

To tell the story of

How a race of servants live

But for us to come home at night

At the time that the sun snuffs itself out over the backstreets

But to tell you yes that the sun is setting yes

Every day of our lives to the east of your empires

There's nothing to match a language of swearwords

Our none-too-clean parlure

Greasy and oil-stained.

Speak white

Be easy in your words

We're a race that holds grudges

But let's not criticize anyone

For having a monopoly

On correcting language

In Shakespeare's soft tongue

With the accent of Longfellow

Speak a pure and atrociously white French

Like in Vietnam, like in the Congo

Speak impeccable German

A yellow star between your teeth

Speak Russian speak call to order speak repression

Speak white

It is a universal language
We were born to understand it
With its teargas words
With its nightstick words

Speak white

Tell us again about Freedom and Democracy
We know that liberty is a black word
Just as poverty is black
And just as blood mixes with dust in the streets of Algiers
And Little Rock

Speak white

From Westminster to Washington take it in turn
Speak white like they do on Wall Street
White like they do in Watts
Be civilized
And understand us when we speak of circumstances
When you ask us politely
How do you do
And we hear you say
We're doing all right
We're doing fine
We
Are not alone

We know
That we are not alone

Michèle Lalonde, 1970, translated Albert Herring, 2001–2012