

**“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*