



Da State of Pidgin Address

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Da State of Pidgin Address¹

Lee A. Tonouchi

Try look dis concrete poem “Test Your Pidgin P.O.V.”:

NO
CAN

I wuz inspired for write dis piece aftah I saw Joe Balaz’s Hawaiian Concrete Poetry series on display.¹ One time I wen fo’ check out Joe at one of his readings and I toll ’em “Joe brah, your concrete poems, dey pretty SOLID.” He go laugh. So den I wen ax ’em, “Eh, you eva tot about making one Pidgin Concrete series o’wot?” And he tot about ’em fo’ awhile den he wuz all like “Eh Lee, YOU should go try.” So I wuz tinkin shooots, I go chance ’em.

Now, wen you look at “Test Your Pidgin P.O.V.” tell me wot you guys see?
Wot?! Oooo, so much negativity brah; no can.

I use dis poem wen I go around for talk to classrooms, public, private, intermediate school, high school, college, anykine, and das da first answer dat students usually give me too—NO CAN. So many Pidgin pessimists. Can you come up wit one more positive way of looking at dis piece o’wot? Try tink.

Right on. Ho, you get ’em. Das how. We get ONE Pidgin optimist in da house.

I like dis piece, not only cuz I wrote ’em, but cuz da ting mirrors actual life. We’s brought up for believe dat we cannot do certain tings if we talk Pidgin. So ass why upon da initial examination, da negative reading is wot most people arrive at first.

In da real world get planny Pidgin prejudice, ah. Dey, da ubiquitous dey, dey is everywea brah; dey say dat da perception is dat da standard english talker is going automatically be perceive fo’ be mo’ intelligent than da Pidgin talker regardless wot

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dey talking, jus from HOW dey talking. Get studies dat show dis kine speech biases and discriminations, but I no need really look da studies, cuz I can see dis happening insai my classrooms.

I wuz teaching Pre-College Communications at Kapi'olani Community College for mo' than two years. I had one student, Frazier we go call 'em, who would try fo' buss out his bessest english wenevah he wrote his papahs. Cuz I guess he nevah like look "dumb" ah, wen his first-year peers gave him da critiques. Dis one sample from one of Frazier's finer essays.

When I ascertain questions from my friend in pertainment to college, I try to replies with my own experience which will help adapt the college background to her. College for me will help because when I give my cooperation to others, especially kids, I can resolve a problem that is able enough to solve and to be able to 'win-win' on both parties in the end.

K, it's pretty bad dat Frazier writes li'dis, but mo' hod fo' tell 'em his papah NO MAKE SENSE wen I hear some of his peers telling 'em "Oh Frazier, you're so smart. I wish I could write like you."

Ai-ya. Wot for do? Gotta conference wit da boy, but wot you tell 'em wen everybody telling him how bad-ass he is? K, usually wen I quote people I like for quote Booga Booga or Star Wars, but for dis case I wen choose for quote not George Lucas, but George Orwell. So I sat Frazier down and I toll 'em, George Orwell once sed someting to da effeck like "Nevah use one big word wen one MINUSCULE one will do." Frazier wen look at me wit one blank face. So I axed him if he wuz trying for impress me by using "big words." Denying 'em he sed, "Nah mister, I jus using my vocabularies."

Frazier not alone. Get planny kids like him. Wen I ask da students for do freewriting, lotta times I get back all kine disorganized papahs dat grammatically no even make sense. But wen I tell da students dat I NOT going colleck 'em, dat I like dem write for fun, I walk around da room and I see lotta da kids stay writing in Pidgin like das da voice dat comes most natural to dem. And I'm looking over their shoulders and I'm all like WOW, dey get ideas. Stay organize. And can understand too. Too bad I sed I wuzn't collecking 'em.

You kinda wondah how kids come out li'dis. Trying fo' write "english" but end up writing stuff dat no even make sense. Classic conditioning gotta be. From my experience, teachahs nevah sed, you're stupid if you talk in Pidgin; dey nevah sed 'em direck li'dat. Wuz mo' INSIDIOUS da way dey do 'em.

I know back in my parents' time (like in da forties and fifties) da teachers wuz corporal punishment-happy. If dey talked Pidgin in school den da teachah would slap 'em wit da ruler. Ka-pow. Ow, ow, ow.

During my time (seventies, eighties, nineties around) wuz against da law kine fo' give students lickens, but I remembah if we wanted for go bachroom, we couldn't

tell da teachah, “Teachah, can go bachroom?” You gotta enunciate and tell, “May I please use the restroom?” And if you no tell ’em li’dat, den you gotta hold your shi-shi, brah. If I knew den wot I know now, HO, I would’ve SUED da DOE for da kine cruel and unusual punishment. Million dollah settlement right dea.

In today’s enlightened times, I would’ve hoped dat people’s attitudes toward Pidgin would be way bettah now. But generation aftah generation and I dunno if tings wen change all dat much.

I wuz helping out da Pidgin linguistics guys from University Hawai’i cuz dey trying for see how Pidgin today stay changing.² Dey axed me for tape young college-age peoples talking Pidgin, so I decided for offer ’em as one extra-credit assignment to my students. I figgah most would probably take me up on da offer cuz ees like free points almost. Anyhow, in one class had maybe like a dozen guys in da class and most of ’em talked Pidgin. But I wuz shock dat ony couple of ’em wanted fo’ do ’em. Wot shock me da most wuz Ernest, da biggest Pidgin talker in da class, he nevah like participate. He wuz all like “Nah Mistah, I trying fo’ cut back.” So in a way wuz kinda like Ernest wuz equating talking Pidgin to smoking cigarettes cuz he gotta “cut back.” If he talk too much Pidgin, den he going get Pidgin cancer and he going DIE, brah. Pua ting. Sad yeah, da tinkin’.

How many years since I been outta school and still yet nahting change—kids is still SHAME for talk Pidgin. Even in front ME!?! Fo’ make da assessments I decided fo’ do one exercise wit my students. I wen go ax dem for brainstorm for me one list. I toll ’em, “Try tell me all da tings dat people told you ova da years dat you CAN-NOT do wit Pidgin.” And dis wot dey came up wit:

Dey Say if You Talk Pidgin You No Can . . .³

be smart
 be important
 be successful
 be professional
 be taken seriously
 be one teacher
 be one doctor
 be one lawyer
 be a government worker
 be big businessman
 be da Pope
 be the president
 be the wife of the president

Dey say if you talk Pidgin you no can . . .
 communicate
 eat at fine dining restaurants
 enter a beauty pageant (and win)
 flirt

function
go out tonight
go to job interviews
go mainland
go mainland school
go opera or someplace elegant
go forward

Dey say if you talk Pidgin you no can . . .
get good grades
get one good education
get good job
get a smart guy
get a sophisticated guy
get chicks

Dey say if you talk Pidgin you no can . . .
give public speeches
join the military
look high-class
make it in Hollywood
pray to God
read
run for governor

Dey say if you talk Pidgin you no can . . .
score
sound intellectual
survive
talk straight
talk proper
talk to da phone operator
talk to da judge
talk at funerals
talk to da haoles
talk to tourists
talk in European countries
talk in the classroom
take tests
teach
understand

Dey say if you talk Pidgin you no can . . .
work customer service
work at Neiman Marcus
write a “proper” sentence
write letters
write formal essays
write papers to pass this class

Dey say if you talk Pidgin
YOU NO CAN.

Ho, from reading dis poem look like you pretty much useless, good fo' nahting den, if you talk Pidgin. Destined for be da kine deadweight to society.

But da weird ting is dat pretty much eh-rytime wen I read dis poem at readings and stuff, da people in da audience LAUGH. Ho da mean buggahs, ah. Do dey find humor in da plight of da Pidgin peoples? Could be, but I tink so people jus find 'em funny cuz dey know lot of da tings on da list is not true. Bogus li'dat. Why? Cuz dey know Pidgin people who eat at fancy restaurants, cuz dey know Pidgin people who's teachers, cuz dey know people who pray to God in Pidgin. (I even heard couple guys tell dat God talk back to dem in Pidgin too. Fo' reals.) And den we all know of at least one Pidgin sh-speaking individual who ran for governor. (Right off da bat, I can tink of both one loser and one winner even. Braddah Bu wuz da first guy for come to mind. You tink Braddah Ben like us acknowledge him too?)

Wenevah I read dis poem to classes, we talk about how much of dis is perceive and how much is reality. How many of these tings wuz actually part of their experience? How many of dem actually TRIED, ATTEMPTED talking to judges, tried working customer service, or tried writing formal papahs in Pidgin?? Da list starts for shrink. How dey know no can? Lotta times we get dat self-censorship action going on. We tink da oddah guy going rejeck us so we hold back, we no buss out da Pidgin. But sometimes we dunno, maybe we going be surprise.

Eh-rytime I talk to students I share wit dem my experiences. Publishing Pidgin articles and reviews in the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, the *Honolulu Advertiser*, the *Honolulu Weekly*, and the *Hawaii Herald*. I share wit dem how I wrote my thirty-page research papahs and da creative and critical parts of my thesis in Pidgin at UH (for ironically get my master's in english).

People ax me fo' write lettahs of recommendations for dem too. So I always warn 'em—I tell 'em, if you ax me going be in Pidgin, y'know. Cuz I no care if affeck me, but I no like my hardcore Pidgin stance affeck somebody else's chances of getting money or getting da job. If dey worried dey can ax somebody else. But so far eh-rybody who I wrote lettahs for, dey either got da job or dey got da scholarship (not every single scholarship dey applied for, but at least one from da batch). One venerable Pidgin writer surprised me and criticized, "Well, maybe they got it IN SPITE of your Pidgin letters." To some extent das true, cuz I not going write lettahs of rec for any ol' body. Dey gotta be good. So I no like take credit for their accomplishments. But still, at least WE challenging da hegemony of english.

Dey say how people on da "mainland" no can understand you if you talk Pidgin, but I share wit students how da Ford Foundation in New York, dey's da second largest charitable organization in da world, dey wen selleck me as one of a dozen

guys nationwide for attend their summit in New York for da Emerging Asian Pacific American Leaders in the Arts Convening.⁴ Free trip to New York, brah. Dey paid for da plane, food, hotel, eh-ryting, even da taxi cab and tip for da driver. I tip good wen not my money. And how I did my interview for dat? In Pidgin. And how I wrote my résumé? In Pidgin.

But of course das not fo' say dat prejudice against da Pidgin peoples is all in our minds, one figment of our vivid Pidgin imaginations. Gotta come from someplace. Wen I go out and do readings I meet planny of da anti-Pidgin people.

One time I wuz reading to one bunch of kids from Kalihi and dis middle-age Japanese lady comes up to me and she goes, "I HATE Pidgin." And den had one long dramatic pause before she finished, "But yours I like to listen to. Could you please sign my book?" At least dat one wuz not so bad. But sometimes I get da kine scary people who jus come up to you in public wen you jus cruisin'. Like one time I wuz at Big City Diner in Kaimuki, eating breakfast wit my friend, and dis haole guy comes up to me and hands me dis note.

Your short story on "Ben the Betrayer" is the stupidest piece of paranoid garbage I've ever read. My mother speaks better English than you'll ever speak, and she was black-listed by the DOE. HCE is a badge of ignorance and illiteracy, and everyone knows it. Grow up and have some respect for the language of Shakespeare Milton and Swift.
Tonouchi *san wa baka desu yo*. [Da Japanese part wuz written in Hiragana.]

Yuup, some people get issues, brah, wit Pidgin. But da main ting is dat both da Japanese lady and da haole man, both a-dem had my collection of short stories, *Da World*.

I jus glad dat we Pidgin peoples is not alone. All ova da globe get similar Pidgin kine movements going on. I wuz taking notice of some of da Associated Press headlines dis pass couple months, watching some of da current language movements going on in da world.

Da April 15, 2001, edition of the *Honolulu Advertiser* wen report dat in Singapore, da government is orchestrating one Speak Good English Movement by telling da people dat their Singlish is not patriotic. Singlish is one blend of english mixed togeddah wit da languages in Singapore, like Malay, Tamil, and all kine Chinese kine dialects. Most people in Singapore can talk British english, but dey raddah talk to each oddahs in Singlish. Da government getting hod time cuz use of Singlish is supah-popular and planny people see 'em as part of their Singaporean identity. But still yet da government is spending ukubillion bucks in one full-on TV, radio, mass media campaign fo' get people fo' talk "proper english."

According to da May 3, 2001, issue of the *Honolulu Advertiser*, people in Jamaica stay trying for elevate da status of their Jamaican patwa (from da French, patois), which is one blend of British english and da kine West African languages dat da

slaves talked wen da European colonizers brought slaves ova into da Caribbean. Da english elitist types stay all arguing dat patwa is jus lazy kine english. But da linguists' contentions is dat patwa is one misnomer cuz ees actually one creole wit its own grammatical structures. Dey even get one established orthography wit dictionary and eh-ryting. (Eh, so das da same-same kine misconceptions about Pidgin we stay fighting ova hea in Hawai'i.) In one effort to decolonize da mind, Jamaicans get one newfound sense of pride in their patwa. Da people stay pushing for use patwa in education, and even get some saying dat da government should recognize patwa as one official language jus like english.

Ova hea, wot? Tings is pretty mellow. Live and let live. Lotta people down wit da "good for know Pidgin, but you gotta know english" attitude. Da last time Pidgin wuz making news wuz wen da den Schools Superintendent wuz grumbling about low SAT scores. Da September 29, 1999, edition of the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* headline read, "LeMahieu Ponders Pidgin's Effect on State Students' Writing Scores. The Schools Chief Says Pidgin Might Be to Blame for Recent Test Results."

Dey always do dat. "Blame" Pidgin. I no tink dat "blame" is da right word, but took his brilliant english-tinking brain fo' tink of dat one? There's no doubt dat cultural differences affeck test scores. Das like old news. Back in da seventies Wayne Westlake made dat same observations too insai *Born Pidgin*. He wen put 'em li'dis: "[I]f the Hawaiians, or any of the various immigrant races had intelligence tests, the Mainland haole kids would 'test out low,' or fail miserably" (1).

But raddah than changing our methodologies, dey tink mo' bettah jus change da way students tink. Mo' bettah make 'em all confuse so their writing come out all kapakahi like my student Frazier.

Dis not for say dat no mo' nahting being done for promote da Pidgin cause. Get some stuff happening. Some high school and intermediate school classes I visted ova da years had da kine ethnic or Pacific literatures courses, but those classes wuz da exception. Depends on da teacher kine. And dey gotta fight to get da monies for those courses.

Bamboo Ridge Press, dey's been publishing Local literature in da state for ova twenty years, but still planny people nevah hear about dem. One time I wuz at Ala Moana and I saw my friend who came one teacher aftah college. I nevah see her long time and she wuz all like, "Leeeee, wotchoo doing now?" I toll her I wuz doing stuff for Bamboo Ridge. Den her eyes came all big and she sed, "Where? Ben Bridge?" I guess she tot I could hook her up wit some diamonds or someting. So I correck-ed her and I sed "No, not Ben Bridge, BAM-BOO-Ridge," and I explained how dey made books. Den she wuz all like, "Oh. That's nice. Gotta go. Wuz nice seeing you again." Not interested I guess. Lose money.

Wot else get going on? Lotta college classes ova hea use Local literature texts dat get Pidgin insai. Das awesome, especially wen it's da lower level, introductory

kine english classes. Cuz not eh-rybody going go on for be one literature kine scholar, so good dey get da exposure. (Some college classes on da continent use literature from Hawai'i wit Pidgin insai too. For da people keeping track.)

K, we get da Pidgin Coup group going around educating educators dat Pidgin is one language and ees not jus bad english.⁵ K, das good. Wot else? We get da former governor in denial. K, das not good. Ben Cayetano could been da ultimate role-model brah. If ony he embraced da fack dat he talk Pidgin.

I dunno. Slow yeah da evolution. Little anecdotal bright spots hea and dea. But nahting on one grand scale. Still waiting for da big Pidgin revolution. Sometimes I tink DEY SHOULD ban Pidgin. Ban 'em all. Eliminate ALL use of Pidgin in schools and government offices. Go try. Light da fuse and we go see wot happen. I know not going be status quo.

NOTES

1. John Balaz wen go publish his concrete stuff insai *Chaminade Literary Review*, *Hawai'i Review*, and *Kaimana* and den wuz collecked insai one chapbook called *Ola* (Tinfish Net/Work, 1996). His stuff wuz even exhibited in one showing called "Cementus—E Pill Kakou" was had thirteen of his pieces on display in da late spring/early summah of 2001 at da Aupuni Artwall at Native Books Kapalama. Joe wuzn't da first guy who wen go play around wit turning Hawaiian words into da kine visual poems. Wayne Westlake wuz experimenting li'dat in da seventies. Same same I not da first guy for make Pidgin words into pictures. Joe Hadley Or Bradajo like people call 'em nowadays wuz making his fancy Pidgin calligraphy from way back in da early 70s wit da release of his classic Pidgin composition book and record compilation called *chabookyu eensai: three poems in pidgin English* (Sandwich Islands Publishing, 1972).

2. The Pidgin Today Project stay coordinated by Ermile Hargrove, Diana Eades, and Jeff Siegel. Da goal of da study is for find out how people talk Pidgin today and see wot dey tink about 'em.

3. Dis group poem by da fall 2001 PCC classes of KCC wuz edited for flow li'dat, but da stuffs is all from their lists; mahalos to da students for geeving me their two-minute brainstorm lists of wot people toll dem dey cannot do wit Pidgin. Shout out to Jhoanna Calma for letting me use her PCC class too. To da students who came dat day—look get your name stay insai hea—Hanna Chang, Wendy Chang, Artemio Jubilado, Jessica Kim, Kathy Lam, Alwin Lo, Mandy Lo, Mark Lunasco, Lelanie Manding, Sam Marques, Melanie Montenegro, Lailani Montenegro, Janice Munar, Tiore Malia Nakaahiki, Jonathan Nitullama, Adore Ngo, Tarseny Otis, Kelly Pong, Gaily Siddayao, Jarnelle Spencer, Uolani Tupuola, Juliet Vallesteros, Tiffany Wong, and Kelsey Yamane. For da students who wuz absent—too bad, so sad. Next time no play hookey.

4. Da Emerging Asian Pacific American Leaders in the Arts Convening took place on January 20–21, 2001, at da offices of the Ford Foundation in Manhattan on East 42nd Street. Participants included Quang Bao, Lillian Oho, Tracey Fugami, Gayle Isa, Leslie Ito, Andrew Kim, Karen Park, Nicole Sumida, Stacy Suyat, Lee Tonouchi, and Sarita Vasa.

5. Da Pidgin Coup's "Pidgin and Education: A Position Paper" wuz drafted in November 1999 by Lori Bennett, Kathryn Davis, Diana Eades, Ermile Hargrove, William Hoshijo, Suzie Jacobs, JoAnn Kadooka, Vivian Machida, Terri Menacker, Dulcie Oshiro, Kent Sakoda, Michelle Winn, and Laiana Wong. Da ting debunks planny of da myths surrounding Pidgin. Get 'em online at www.hawaii.edu/sls/pidgin.html.