Talking Black

Growing up in the urban black culture of Kenilworth, my siblings and I looked like rural Amish Mennonites but didn't always talk that way.

(This is the beginning of a longer piece that I am hoping to publish in print. This updated version was posted mid-February 2007)

In 1965 my parents moved from the corn fields and pastures of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania to “the projects” of Washington, DC. Leaving the familiarity of the Pennsylvania Dutch language and ways, they became neighbors to a people of strange culture and tongue. Because they followed God’s missionary call to “live the Jesus life” in Kenilworth, my siblings and I grew up white in the urban ‘hood.

We learned to sing hymns a capella, in four-part harmony, in our father’s church and shake our booties to go-go in the Kenilworth alleys. We ate home made bread from our mother and Chocolate-Banana Bomb Pops from the ice cream truck. We donned chaste dresses and confining long pants but envied our friends for their tank tops and shorts. And while we walked like the country we talked like the ghetto.

“Talking black,” we called it, the change in pronunciation, inflection, word choice, and grammar that took place when we spoke to a black person. It became so ingrained we spoke that way amongst ourselves and even occasionally to random other white folk.

We talked black jumping double-dutch or roller-skating with our playmates in Kenilworth. We talked black in our mixed-race church, Fellowship Haven, and at the corner store buying Now-and-Laters. We even sounded black when we read the Bible, King James Version. We talked black in school classrooms during the times we lived in Pennsylvania and were thought exotic. “Talk like a black person for us,” our plainly-dressed country classmates would say.

My sister Lydia, who married a black man from Arizona, used to joke that she sounded more ghetto than he. My sister Lois, whose adventures in DC, Pennsylvania, Australia, and Canada gave her a mish-mash of potential voices, still gets mistaken for a black woman over the phone.

My sister-in-law Sandy recently told me a story of meeting our family for the first time during a period when we called Lancaster County, Pennsylvania our home. She couldn’t quite believe her eyes when she saw my sisters, two white, homemade-dress-wearing Mennonite girls who sounded like they belonged in a black, urban ‘hood. My

brother hadn’t even warned her that my family was Amish-Mennonite, much less that we sometimes were of a race different from our skin color.

My first recollection of meeting your family was when I rang the doorbell at your house on Old Philadelphia Pike. Your mom came to answer the door. She just said, “Welcome, come on in. I’m Tim’s mom, and I’ll call him.” I think you were five, and you crawled into my lap while I was sitting at the bottom of the steps because Tim was still sleeping and had forgotten to tell his mom that I would be stopping in. And then I was introduced to Lydia and Eunice, I believe. Lydia was young enough that she wasn’t wearing a covering. She had real long hair in pigtails. The girls were sitting in the kitchen and they were talking. All I remember is somebody said, “Man, dem dudes, dey was just a’bookin’.” And I thought, “This is really strange.”

As a youngster, this ability to “talk black” was something I prized. But years away from direct interaction with Kenilworth folk – including time in Texas and England – blunted my street talk and mixed it with an unrecognizable blend of other influences. Still, the ability to relax enough to “talk city talk” was, for a long time, a measure of my comfort level in a certain situation, the linguistic equivalent of “letting my hair down.” Allowing the old dialect to come out became a way of revealing myself in a new place.

In the winter of 2003 I moved back to Kenilworth, a three block by three block community in Northeast DC dominated by a public housing “project” called Kenilworth Courts. Since my parents, Elmer and Fannie Lapp, had retired back to Pennsylvania a year or so before, I became, from what I could see, one of two non-black people in the entire neighborhood.

It didn’t take long for me to realize that I was a white man unconnected to the place except by memory. Everyone in the neighborhood used to know “the Lapps.” Now, since the DC Housing Authority had shuffled in a new generation of residents, some had no clue who I was. I soon found myself trying to slip back into “street talk” as a way to show people in the neighborhood that I was like them, that I am “part black,” that I wasn’t just some ordinary, stupid white guy lost in their ‘hood.

But the talk, for me, was gone. The talk was so bastardized, so forgotten and unused that attempts to relax into “black talk” came out garbled, indistinct mumbling, mumbo-jumbo. This hit me when I realized that even neighborhood people had to ask me to repeat myself. Obviously, I wasn’t talking like them.

I think my urge to “talk black” was, those days, a desire to recover the speech of my childhood, partaking of it as of comfort food. I wanted my mouth to be full again with the slang of that street-smart dialect that was always less inhibited, less rule-bound, richer with story and metaphor, with the undertow of play and double meaning.

I’d had enough of the educated English language, and so I went back to the ‘hood. Forget about long-winded sentences; in Kenilworth, a few loosely-strung syllables convey all one needs to say. Don’t worry about measured speech; just relax the jaw, let the lips roll, and don’t sweat hitting all the proper endings.

In Kenilworth I returned to a place where the corners of speech sound round and inviting. The rhythm of the language there yanked me out of myself and put me down where I’ve been before, put me down at home. I think this must be what speaking in tongues is all about.