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Taking Control: A Story of Power and Knowledge Through Language

Fleur, seemingly soft-spoken is a force to be reckoned with. The best way to describe her would be the calm before the storm - completely powerful and magnificent in her silent, observant demeanor. Fleur radiates comfort, safety, compassion, deep care, and serenity. She does not like small, shallow talk, she loves probing and holding difficult conversations to discover who a person is when they are not around others. Definitely a great person to get to know. I met Fleur because we are both from Boston and we received the Posse Scholarship (along with 8 other individuals) to attend Bryn Mawr College. We bonded instantly over our love of (sometimes cheesy and cliché-filled) books and have been friends ever since. Spending a lot of time with Michelle, I've learned about where she was born, but this provided me with an opportunity to explore more.

Born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Fleur grew up speaking Haitian Creole and French (3). When she migrated to the United States with her family, her language began to expand. She proudly professes that she became fluent in English after 6 months of teaching herself. During this time, because typically American school systems have students learn at least another language, Fleur began learning Spanish and Latin through school (4) (12).

At the age of 10 and recently moved to a town just outside the city of Boston, Fleur knew the basics of English. While living in Haiti, she was taught the basic "hi, how are you"s and after

moving here, she became fluent over a short period of time. She would frequently check out books from her school's library, reading and absorbing as much as she possible could. She would sit in front of PBS and write down all the words she didn't know to look them up later. Fleur learned, adapted, and observed and self - taught herself through TV and a caught on via her peers around her. Upon arriving in the US, there was a sense of urgency to learn (12). Fleur had to take control and figured out way to teach herself the English language because her parents did not have the time and were also learning the language themselves. This allowed Fleur to take initiative to learn as much English as fast as she could - in less than 6 months - which she reminisces back on that fact both fondly and with tremendous pride (5).

In the 6th grade, one day while emerged in a book, the school's Latin teacher noticed Fleur spent a lot of her time in the library and decided to ask her if she to learn a little Latin. Eager for the challenge, Fleur said yes and was taught the language up until 12th grade. Spanish was an elective class she also took from 6th grade until college. Spanish happened to be a more familiar language since Haiti is on the same island as the Dominican Republic and she has visited a few times when she was younger.

Overtime, English has become her dominant language and believes it is because now she lives in America where that language is the predominant language spoken around her. English is the easiest to access so she primarily uses English. Fleur thinks in English now and she doesn't like it. She feels it is not her native tongue. In many ways, it still remains foreign for her, but over the years, it has morphed and has become something less foreign and so now what use to be not foreign - her Haitian Creole, her native language - has slowly become a secondary, "foreign" language for Fleur. The roles have shifted (7).

Whenever Fleur becomes flustered or thinks too hard, her Haitian accent appears or she trips over all the languages in head. She tries to suppress her 'slip-up' with her accent because she feels like people will judge her or laugh (32). Therefore, Fleur works really hard to submerge her accent, however, there is more freedom and confidence when talking to another Haitian in Creole (28). She is proud to belong to the Haitian culture so even if the words get jumbled up and not everything expressed makes sense, they are comfortable enough to laugh at their mistakes, but not to mock one another, but rather, they laugh in a way that celebrates the language, the history, the power, and the knowledge that transpires between them through every word they speak.

Furthermore, Fleur sees a power struggle between the languages in her head. She believes that knowledge is power so she feels more powerful than other people because language allows access to other people and things. She describes this sensation as addicting. Interesting, there is a sense of shame associated with having an accent and expressing that side of her multilingualism, however, on the other side, she has pride in having multiple languages in her repertoire. Despite that, Fleur thrives off of the power of the knowledge she acquires with language and wants to continue to learn more languages in the future.