

## MITOCW | MIT24\_908S17\_Creole\_Chapter\_05\_Language\_300k

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KAREN: So what does it mean to be truly authentic, and how does this idea of authenticity impact what it means to be whole or personhood?

And so, like, looking at yourself, how do you identify, and how is your identity your chosen identity based on your conceptualization of what it means to be authentically something?

Does, like, how you define authenticity and your relationship to authenticity impact how you choose to identify?

RACHEL: And sort of as an extension of this-- and these kind of go together.

That's why we're saying them together.

Do the languages, or does the language that you speak, or that your ancestors spoke affect this concept of authenticity?

So if you're the son of someone whose parents spoke a language, but you don't speak it, do you feel less authentic, or does it make you feel more authentic in some manner?

Or are there linguistic discourses of power that affect how you perceive the roles that the languages that you speak or that of your ancestors spoke affect your choice of identity-- and how authenticity of my language plays a role in it?

KAREN: Should we present the second question?

MICHEL DEGRAFF: I think we should start answering, right?

So thank you so much.

AUDIENCE: I guess I don't mind answering first.

So I guess the first thing-- so I'll answer one and two, but I'll start with two, because this is something that I always think about-- is the fact that I don't speak Spanish makes me less authentic in whatever Hispanic or Mexican identity I have, because I'm not able-- I feel like I wasn't allowed to identify with the Hispanic or Mexican community, because I didn't speak Spanish.

And like, you know, growing up, I guess it was different for my mother.

It didn't matter to her, and I guess at that timeframe, you know, whatever the population-- like, Spanish is becoming a very profound language in the US, and so, like, maybe during my mother's time there weren't a whole lot of Spanish speakers, so, like, for her, it didn't matter.

And like, my grandmother growing up, it was, like, not OK for her to speak, and so I feel like it's different for my mother because she doesn't care.

Honestly, I don't know how I should ask my mom how she identifies with herself, but it's very different because, for me, I do feel like that was important whereas it wasn't important for her.

And I still don't feel authentic in my Hispanic or Mexican identity, because I don't speak the language-- and that maybe, in some ways, speaking the language would allow me to identify more with, like, the culture, because I feel like it's important.

And then I guess, overall, authentic, I honestly hate thinking of it like that, because I am so un-authentic then, because I'm African-American, I'm white, and I'm Hispanic, and nobody considers me authentic because it's like, how can you be authentic if being-- I feel like being authentic, in this way, means, like, having to identify specifically with one or another, and you can't authentically be all-- you can't be more than one.

I don't know if that makes sense.

And I guess for me, it's just like my identity, I just have to pick and choose what I liked, what was OK, and some of it has been imposed on me.

There are aspects of my identity that I didn't get to choose and that I'm trying to change, because like now feeling woke, I guess, and learning about different aspects of my culture and history regarding whatever it may be, I feel like I'm trying to change aspects of my identity that were not-- yeah, I hope those answered your questions.

I got really flustered, because there's this camera over here.

Normally, it wouldn't matter, but yeah-- so I hope that answers your question.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: So let me make a note-- let me make a note here, because I think you've mentioned the camera.

But this is not live, which means that-- AUDIENCE: It doesn't matter.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: No, with whatever you decide that you don't want to be going to the billions will be moved, OK?

AUDIENCE: No, I wouldn't do that.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: OK, so I want you to feel totally comfortable that if you say anything that you feel should stay

in the class here-- I think it's OK.

We'll just-- we'll just edit it and make sure that-- AUDIENCE: No, it's not that about.

It's just-- AUDIENCE: Beyond having it, OK.

AUDIENCE: It's the idea somebody out there would end up watching and listening to what I say.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: But one thing that you have to think about, too-- I mean, which is actually key, so there are lots of other folks, you know, even younger than you.

At least, you can step back, and as you've just said-- you said, OK, now I need to remove that from my identity.

I need to make this choice.

I need to think about what was imposed to myself.

We see that-- how many people don't have this capacity to actually step back and self analyze the way you just did, you see?

AUDIENCE: I like to analyze myself.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: Yeah, but that's something that you're sharing with other people that might help them a lot, you know, because it frees you to be able to do that, right?

AUDIENCE: Sometimes.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: It's a path to freedom in a way-- self-liberation, yeah.

AUDIENCE: I think I also feel constraining at the same time, because it's so hard to-- because I think like some of the things-- like, some of these things are so ingrained into society and for different people-- like, how you see yourself in the world.

And it's really hard to change perception.

For instance, I have talked about this, but like, hair, African-American hair, and trying to change my perception of African-American hair relates in some ways to changing perceptions of my own identity because they're related, if that makes sense?

Yeah, other people can-- AUDIENCE: I guess I don't know.

I think it's, like, kind of unfair not for you guys because we all do it, but it's unfair to use the word authentic when referring to something like identity, or culture, or a group of people, because it's like-- I mean, I don't think it was a word that was intended for a person.

It's very much like one of those adjectives that's for inanimate objects, you know?

It's like for things that don't have-- AUDIENCE: Gold.

AUDIENCE: Yeah like gold, like authentic, like something that you can define.

Like, OK, if something's authentically gold, that means it's 100% gold.

But you can't put bounds on things like people, and cultures, and identities to the point where you have a concrete definition, because no person's ever going to get that perfect definition.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: But it has always been the tendency to try to quantize these-- so you mentioned gold, right.

So in the history of Haiti, there was this famous French-- she was Creole French, meaning that she was of French ancestry, but he was born in the Caribbean.

His name was [INAUDIBLE],, and he added one chapter where he created this calculus of-- he could compute 128 parts of black versus white.

So he had this calculus of if you half black, half white, then you're mulatto.

If you're quarter black with three quarters white, then you're Quadroon.

And he had terms.

He had adjectives-- talking about adjectives-- he had adjectives for each of these categories, but how do you compute that?

How can you look at someone and decide that they are 128 black versus the rest, white?

But there was this strong belief somebody that you could do that, and that actually each of these partitions would define [INAUDIBLE] biological reasons.

But if you were half black, half white, you would behave like this, or you would have physical properties from these lines.

But if you were one quarter white and three quarters black, then you could predict what your behavior and your

physique would actually look like.

Think of Jim Crow in the US, so one drop of black blood-- one drop of black blood would make you non-white, right?

But it's good to have people to think of it in these terms and try to remove ourself from this cognition.

AUDIENCE: So I guess what I'm thinking about is-- I remember you told this story early in the semester about how there are these documentarians from New York who came to do interviews with you-- MICHEL DEGRAFF: That's right.

I was thinking of that, yeah.

AUDIENCE: --and they felt bad because the idea that, like, they were less Haitian for not speaking Haitian creole.

So I agree that the idea of authenticity implies that there is this paradigm-like way to be an identity, but so I don't know.

Like, it's not clear to me-- it seems possible that, like, the paradigm Haitian does speak Creole, though I don't know.

I wonder about that.

AUDIENCE: I also feel like that I agree with that statement.

However I feel that maybe in the future it won't be a possible paradigm just because of migration and the fact that there can be a Haitian who is, like, three generations away from that parent that was Haitian, and they're still allowed to say that they're Haitian.

They don't speak Creole.

They may be, I don't know, have whatever you can define as the paradigm Haitian.

So I guess for now that might be a true statement to a certain extent, but I don't think that-- but I think that that was the point of the concept of us and authenticity.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: And we still got to mention Achebe and Wachongo, right, because they had the whole debate about what's authentic African rights, right?

And that was actually part of bigger constraints where they were debating what makes them authentic.

AUDIENCE: Yeah. but the problem is like the line drawing.

Like, oh, you're not a real Haitian.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: Yeah, yeah.

AUDIENCE: I guess one thing I could add here is like, a lot of your examples were, like, mixing authenticity for, like, different cultures and that not being authentic any more.

But one thing I really liked that you guys brought up was the idea of, like, tracks-- and especially what he said about India, where when you think of India, there's this one thing you can think of, whether it's like the food or like the culture.

And that's like very north Indian.

Like, I come from south India, and if I like-- as I came here, I chose to be more Indian.

Like, I got more involved on clubs on campus and stuff like that, but like-- and the Indian I'm becoming is very different than my actual heritage.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: Yeah-- AUDIENCE: Yeah.

So I have all these connections on like cultures that I think I'm getting, but it's actually not really connected to my family at all.

And I guess that's partially because I don't speak the language that they have, so none of my culture came from, like, my family really.

But also by not speaking that language, like, everything about my culture from home whether it's religion or anything like that, it's kind of very separated from me.

So I guess I kind of understand it, but I don't really understand the roots of most of it.

Whereas everything here that I'm leaning, I'm like, oh, OK.

Like, this makes sense, and this is what everyone does.

I mean, to be like an Indian in America.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: OK.

So I think that that goes back to your question, because if you think of who is now one of the best known Haitian writers, Edwidge Danticat, that we've read in this class, and in which-- OK, she was in Haiti until age 12, and then at age 12, she came to Brooklyn, New York, and now she's one of the best Haitian writers.

And she sees herself as Haitian, you see?

And she speaks Creole, but she doesn't write in Creole.

All of the text that she has become famous for, they are English texts.

But for me, when I read Edwidge Danticat, as we did here in the class, I hear Haiti, I see Haiti, I feel Haiti, because she's managed to write as a Haitian although she didn't speak Creole.

And as she does, she's also become a very powerful woman.

Another case is Wyclef Jean, right?

You guys know this hip hop artist, Wyclef?

So Wyclef has done so much for Haiti.

In fact, at some point, even was to be Haitian president, and he was-- actually, that's a good story, because he was excluded from running because he was not Haitian enough legally.

He had spent too much time out of Haiti.

But yet, he's one of the best known Haitians in the world today, Wyclef Jean, because a major hip hop artist, and he sings mostly in English, but he also has some songs in Creole actually to remind people that he is Haitian.

And always, when he sings-- when he goes to a concert, he wrap himself up with the Haitian flag, so he's very pro-Haitian without having the full inventory of what defines Haitianes So I think I like watching this person show's-- the idea that you can create your own identity even in America, and that's what an identity should do for it.

It should be an asset.

It should be a tool for us [INAUDIBLE] the world, not something that we need to hold as fact.

And if you look at the literature on stereotype threat, that's the way it was actually, so people were being hindered in their performance because of identity.

It was because of them being put in a box because of that.

You see what you guys all think that, well, we can use it in a way, like what you said, it would me to create my own and be powerful with it and be happy with it.

You see, now, it's other people who put me in the box.

And I think that's what we should think about when people are imposing on us to actually described as moving between imposed identities that they want to pull yourself away from, and eventually if you do that, well, you become happier, right, hopefully?

AUDIENCE: Hopefully.