

The Subtle Act of the “Code Switch” – Medium



[Joel Leon.](#)

father. artist. story-teller. dream chaser. paradigm shifter. dot connector.
love provider #Bronx: mrmag.bandcamp.com/album/songs-for-charles

Oct 10, 2016



Photo courtesy of [Elliot Luscombe](#)

You don't go to school for this. Perhaps, you should. Perhaps there should be a standard set, a practice, for what this involves. An education on what it entails. There is no kind of training that can be given for what happens when you enter a room where the voices, where the speak that happens in the spaces you are encountering, are not the ones you are accustomed to. Aside from those who understand the unspoken code of ethics, there is a gaping hole where the bridge that connects the Black communicator, and the bodies that feel foreign to said communicator, communicate through. No one came to me and said "this is how you speak to others who don't look like you." I would learn this on the fly, off the cuff...these are the

things that you grab ahold of when the lifeboats run out and you fear AP courses, because you know the kids who sit in those rooms studied for those classes way before they knew what “AP” stood for. Even now, there are waiting lists for daycare and Pre-K in communities where they don’t have to lower their voices when asking questions. They are taught to also speak in the affirmative. Code switching is the silent elephant stomping to shreds the commonality in the rooms, unless you are in on the secret: code switching is another cute way for “speaking White”.

Oh. Speaking White. You ain’t know? It’s a thing. I feel it most when I laugh a certain kind of laugh that doesn’t feel like *Bronx* me. It feels more like the *went to high school in Midtown* me. And those are two very contrasting worlds, worlds with varying degrees of hue, that never converged. You learn to make these worlds meet in accordance with who sits in the rooms. We do it without knowing, at times. It sits outside race, ethnicity, lives in culturism, outside our periphery— there is a tinge of Dominica that rests under my tongue whenever my Uncle Winston talks about lobster tails around me; it is a comfort. White speak is comfortable for other White people, or maybe I am imagining this world, that sort of existence? I know how it feels to say the word “dope” in a room full of non-colored people, and the smiles or chuckles that come from it. Because it is not normal for them, as it would be normal for those who breathe the vernacular, who are steeped in the culture, and that live not in just Black and White. That kind of coding is relevant to the Dominican, the Puerto Rican, the Asian or White who has been in the circle or lunchroom with the same people that they ride the school bus with. That comes from speaking a language others just are not privy to. This is the dialog of socio-economics. There is a rigid caste system you live in, when you grow up outside of the walls that allow others in without license or question. I sit in rooms with others who don’t know how to or why they need to code switch — because they do not have to think on these things. It was not part of a vigorous process they would have to go through in order to be initiated into the world. They are born into the world, clean, without chains or restraint. All I have known are handcuffs and firehoses. And one could surmise that times have changed, but I know what a hoodie and sweats and a beard

mean as opposed to chinos, a clean shave and collared shirts with a brown skin, when put face-to-face in a board room of my peers. I recognize the shifting of seats, the teachings that carried me through grade school, mental health and prison advocacy, as well as agency life: the art and skill of knowing when “dope” isn’t a good fit, but perhaps “good job” and “that sounds good” may be more appropriate. Who decides the parlance, our speech? I am now watching a debate where a 70 year old White man, who has not a clue how to run for president let alone how not to sound like a walking sexual predator, has been given a mic and a platform because he has the money to do so. You pick up things, much in the way ballers know courts, a feeling you get, vibes almost — you read rooms in ways in which one who is not brown or black recognizes because they have been forced to, have been made to because of circumstance.

You count the curse words you use, you lower the accent, brighten the shine on phrases that feel more suitable for coffee pot, water cooler decor, that fit the narrative of the office. I am acutely aware of the cleaning lady who does not speak english very well; because my mother washed the backs, arms, legs and buttocks of men and women who could perhaps pay her salary in a day, for years. I am first generation American. My mother did not know what code switching meant in theory, but I knew the difference between Uncle Vincent on the phone, and Con Edison, or Ms. Van and Cablevision. The education that happens when you leave the comfort of the walls and corners may be greater than any campus, greater than any boarding school that your nephew may go to.

My nephew is in a boarding school in Maine, in a world where snow falls freely and still will remain pristine after it subsides, and students his age rode horses they probably owned prior to having the option to ride one, as mentioned in my nephew’s “Welcome” packet. I am happy for him, and happy for those students, students who have a leg up and who will not be judged by their first names, but merely on the basis of their GPA’s. I tell him about the conversations that he will not understand, because money is a new level of conversation he is not well versed in (yet). Because money

advances you to a place where code switching is not a topic brought up in their circles. Even a Ben Carson with money, even a Jay Z with new money now, knows what the Warren Buffet's and Bill Gates' of the world will never understand. His skin, the lightness of it, affords him a certain kind of privilege that I try to make him aware of, and I try and keep a healthy dialog with him about the guise of what the media tells him being Black means, and what its actual definition is when he walks into the world. He will be surrounded by boys in sturdy crisp polos, with many his age who may have parents who paid their children's yearly tuition fee flat out, literally out of pocket perhaps, with no need to worry or penny pinch or plan, or at least, plan to the extent that ones who come from a certain level of inherent access plan when plotting estate divisions and property taxes.

There are places where know-how and the embrace of my hood ethos comes in handy, particularly when in the vicinity of those who want to eat of the culture but do not want to be of it; those that wish to obtain the benefits of involving and attaching their namesakes to the culture, but abstain from taking the time to learn of why the culture matters to the persons who are the creators of it, who make the bread and butter, their earnings and livelihoods from it. They love my knack for making the work pliable, simple to dissect for the laymen; taking syllables, talking through the notes that live like the pinches of flavor that sit in the wines they covet, tackling cores of issues — they love it and use it for debates and lectures, and yearn for how they can lean further into the surface of the dramas I write about. I color the lines for people, I make it easy to digest. The pieces are there for them, the “them” being anyone who benefits from the words, the writings. And I recognize how my use of the code allows others to feel like they are a part of the conversation, that they know how it feels to have to shift your words around for others. Because, in the end, all any of us want is to be accepted. We all want to be in on the parade, in on the secret. The switch, the valve that gets pulled when the audience changes, is a delicate dance, a dance some are all too familiar with. Learn this fast, I will probably tell my nephew, or someone will teach it to you who doesn't look like him or me. And that is a lesson I wish on no one.



- **Joel Leon.**

father. artist. story-teller. dream chaser. paradigm shifter. dot connector.
love provider #Bronx: mrmag.bandcamp.com/album/songs-for-charles