

DARE to Dream

by Amy Clark

One of my favorite words, coined by George Ella Lyon, is “voiceplace.” It brings together two key elements of a person’s culture, and defines my life’s work and writing: empowering the marginalized voices of a marginalized place.

My voiceplace is central Appalachia, where railroad tracks connect squares of farmland, woods and town like the seams of a patchwork quilt. I was never taught my linguistic history at school—only “good” and “bad” binaries of English (my home voice falling into the “bad” category)—but I knew that that my great-grandmother’s words like *counterpin* for quilt and *pea-fowl* for the colorful birds that honked and clattered on the smokehouse roof were from another era. Preachers’ voices had rhythm in the way they found a cadence and followed it as they recited the KJV Bible and wove those words together with their own: *It don’t matter what comes; thou art with me*. I heard front porch stories in our *hollers* about *haints*.

As Linda Scott DeRosier says, we carry our histories in our mouths.

My home dialect almost always infuses my writing. I have invited it into students’ writing, as well. I tell them our voices are living artifacts that have survived five hundred years of critics, persecution, and predictions of leveling. There is nothing “incorrect” or “wrong” about them. For some, coming to terms with the voiceplace is a struggle. Others have called it life-changing in how they learn to write.

Dialect variation in writing matters because words and grammar patterns are more than their meanings. They can function as instruments of power or tell us what we need to know about people. In some parts of Appalachia, the pronunciation of one vowel, such as *Appalaycha* for Appalachia, can mark an outsider. It can also link people hundreds of miles apart, like the pronunciation of *wash* as *worsh*, spoken in Jonesville, Virginia and in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Dialect variation—if used effectively—can flavor fiction. Denise Giardina’s opening line to her novel *Storming Heaven* reads, “They is many a way to mark a baby while it is still yet in the womb.” Instantly, we know something about the narrator’s region, superstition, and age. And searching for dialect variation in primary sources such as early journals and letters is one of the best ways for us to date and study spoken language, like the way my great-grandmother wrote “*arthritis* remedy” in her recipe book. Digging through lace-like script for phonetic spelling is how I imagine it feels to brush sand from an ancient fossil.

Access to DARE would be invaluable in my writing and teaching, and expand what I can offer my students as they learn about their linguistic histories. As I talk about the legitimacy of dialects, the *why* behind our rich tapestry of voices in this country, particularly for writing teachers with misguided (and misinformed) strategies for standardizing their students’ written and spoken Englishes, DARE would strengthen my position on dialect variation in a society where sameness seems to be a privileged, institutionalized concept.

Amy Clark is the winner of DARE’s 2014 Essay Contest and will receive a three-year subscription to Digital DARE. (daredictionary.com)

How would you use DARE in your writing? Tell us about it! (dare.wisc.edu)