## "Speak White" by Michèle Lalonde (1968)

Speak white
It sounds so good when you
Speak of Paradise Lost
And of the gracious and anonymous profile that trembles
In Shakespeare's sonnets

We're an uncultured stammering race
But we are not deaf to the genius of a language
Speak with the accent of Milton and Byron and Shelley and Keats
Speak white
And forgive us our only answer
Being the raucous songs of our ancestors
And the sorrows of Nelligan

## Speak white

Talk about this and that
Tell us about Magna Carta
Or the Lincoln Memorial
The grey charm of the Thames
The pink waters of the Potomac
Tell us about your traditions
As a people we don't really shine
But we're quite capable of appreciating
All the significance of crumpets
Or the Boston Tea Party

But when you really speak white When you get down to brass tacks

To talk about *gracious living*And speak of standing in life
And the Great Society
A bit stronger then, *speak white*Raise your foremen's voices
We're a bit hard of hearing
We live too close to the machines
And we only hear the sound of our breathing over the tools.

Speak white and loud
So that we can hear you
From St-Henri to St-Domingue
What an admirable tongue
For hiring

Giving orders
Setting the time for working yourself to death
And for the pause that refreshes
And invigorates the dollar

Speak white
Tell us that God is a great big shot
And that we're paid to trust him
Speak white
Talk to us about production profits and percentages
Speak white
It's a rich language
For buying
But for selling
But for selling your soul
But for selling out

Ah!
Speak white
Big deal
But to tell you about
The eternity of a day on strike
To tell the story of
How a race of servants live
But for us to come home at night
At the time that the sun snuffs itself out over the backstreets
But to tell you yes that the sun is setting yes
Every day of our lives to the east of your empires
There's nothing to match a language of swearwords
Our none-too-clean parlure
Greasy and oil-stained.

Speak white
Be easy in your words
We're a race that holds grudges
But let's not criticize anyone
For having a monopoly
On correcting language

In Shakespeare's soft tongue
With the accent of Longfellow
Speak a pure and atrociously white French
Like in Vietnam, like in the Congo
Speak impeccable German
A yellow star between your teeth
Speak Russian speak call to order speak repression

Speak white
It is a universal language
We were born to understand it
With its teargas words
With its nightstick words

Speak white

Tell us again about Freedom and Democracy
We know that liberty is a black word
Just as poverty is black
And just as blood mixes with dust in the streets of Algiers
And Little Rock

Speak white

From Westminster to Washington take it in turn

Speak white like they do on Wall Street

White like they do in Watts

Be civilized

And understand us when we speak of circumstances

When you ask us politely

How do you do

And we hear you say

We're doing all right

We're doing fine

We

Are not alone

We know
That we are not alone

Michèle Lalonde, 1970, translated Albert Herring, 2001–2012