

STUDENT POET HIGHLIGHTS CODE-SWITCHING IN COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

Student poet composes thoughts on the racial divides in verbal expression

Sophie Rosenthal
Elon News Network | @sophrosenthal

After Elon University freshman Mal Turnipseed presented his poetry in a creative writing class during his senior year of high school, his teacher encouraged him to keep writing outside the classroom. When the COVID-19 pandemic began, he started to write more poems and created a second Instagram account to share them.

A recent poem of his titled “The Art of Code-Switching” addresses why many Black people change their vernacular around white people and how their speech impacts their lives. The poem was inspired by Turnipseed’s personal experience growing up in both primarily white and primarily minority neighborhoods. He said he decided to write the poem after watching a clip of the television show “Big Mouth” on TikTok about code-switching.

“

YOU'RE STILL
SPEAKING WITH
THAT SAME LEVEL
OF RESPECT ... JUST
BECAUSE YOU TALK
THIS WAY, YOU'RE
NOT A THUG OR A
CRIMINAL. YOU'RE
JUST YOU: YOUR
INTENTIONS ARE
THERE, YOUR HEART
IS THERE. YOUR
VALOR AND MERIT IS
THERE. IT'S JUST THE
WAY YOU SAY IT, IT'S
DIFFERENT AND THAT'S
ACCEPTABLE AND
THAT'S VALID.

CALEB MARTIN
FRESHMAN

“When you’re going for an interview or you’re going to do something around people who I guess will be considered proper, a lot of minority kids ... have to kind of switch their language up so that they seem more proper or they seem more like they were raised well,” Turnipseed said.

Turnipseed calls code-switching an art and said he considers it to be a talent.

“I guess [it’s] something that’s kind of sad to have to see that we have to do that,” Turnipseed said. “But still something that I consider to be very talented, and a skill that a lot of people kind of just naturally perfected over time, because we have to, because it’s safer. And it’s necessary for us to be able to move forward in life.”

Freshman Caleb Martin read Turnipseed’s poem and said that on a surface level, everybody changes the way they talk based on who they’re talking to. People rarely talk to their grandmother the same way that they talk to their best friend, but when it comes to race relations, Martin said it takes on a different meaning.

Referencing a line in the poem about being



MADDIE SHOSTEN | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Freshman Mal Turnipseed writes poetry about the connection between speech and race.

pulled over by a white cop, Martin said there are times when choosing not to code-switch can be life-threatening.

“In my personal opinion, your worldviews, everything that you care about, doesn’t matter,” Martin said. “As long as you are a person in a car [who] is Black and there’s a cop with a gun, nobody cares about what you believe in.”

Martin said Turnipseed’s poem also highlights how “white rhetoric” can pit Black people against each other. When Black people try to “talk more white,” according to Martin, it becomes a competition. He said this is exemplified in the line of the poem that says, “You’re not like those ghetto boys and ghetto girls.”

“You’re showing the people that you’re trying to impress basically that you’re not like other Black kids, or Black men, or Black women, or Black whoever because you’re better than them, you’re more educated, so they should hire you over the other [Black people],” Martin said. “It shouldn’t be the reality, obviously.”

Though he believes it can be necessary, Martin said code-switching is ultimately harmful. If Black people continue to talk differently around white people to accommodate a white version of professionalism, it doesn’t allow white people to ever recognize that the way many Black

people speak naturally can also convey professionalism and respect, Martin said.

“You’re still speaking with that same level of respect ... Just because you talk this way, you’re not a thug or a criminal. You’re just you: your intentions are there, your heart is there. Your valor and merit is there. It’s just the way you say it, it’s different and that’s acceptable and that’s valid,” Martin said.

Freshman Britt Mobley said Turnipseed’s poem is an accurate representation of the reality of code-switching. Mobley said he agrees with Martin that code-switching doesn’t help the underlying problem, but he said it is a “quick fix” for a problem that Black people cannot solve on their own.

“In terms of code-switching, is it harmful to Black people? I would say yes, because it does not get to the root of the issue, the system[ic] idea of things,” Mobley said. “But ultimately, what else can you do? This is how society is right now. Are you going to put yourself in a situation where you’re trying to change society, but in doing so damage your own self? Or do you conform to what it is right now, even though it’s crappy, and aim to change the future?”

Turnipseed’s poetry can be found on Instagram at @seedmusicinc, which also accepts student poetry submissions by direct message.

The Art of Code Switching

By Mal Turnipseed

Hi! How are you?
Ayyee Yooooo!!!
Simple as that.
Two different sentences.
Same greeting.
Just saying hello to a friend.
An acquaintance.
Sometimes maybe a
stranger.
For black kids living in
different worlds. It’s as easy
as saying their A, B, C’s.
Knowing what to say.
Who to say it too?
Takes time to learn.
Indeed it does.
But it’s necessary.
Safer.
It’s dangerous to be caught
in a situation.
Where you don’t know this
art.
Pulled over.
Cop staring you down.
Gun on his hip.
Hand straying ever closer.
To shake your hand.
You got the job.
They liked you.
You’re not like those ghetto
boys.
Those ghetto girls.
They laughing with you.
Migos blasting through the
house.
Henny in one hand.
Your boo’s hand in the
other.
Rocking at the barbecue
together.
Family laughing.
Unc on the grill.
Friends playing ball.
They approach you.
The police.
The bosses.
The crew.
The fam.
I hope your familiar with
the Art of Code Switching.

via @seedmusicinc