[ Music ]

>> Stories about Black identity that aren't always shared in the open.

>> Girl, we can't say that. It's like a grio, a hair salon, a newsroom and your mama's kitchen all in one.

>> Interdental fricatives.

>> What's that?

>> Interdental fricatives.

>> Explain please.

>> Interdental fricatives.

>> There are a lot of things that define Black speech patterns. And one of them is this thing called the interdental fricative, interdental fricative. It's something we hear all the time.

>> Do dat, do that do do dat dat dat.

>> Come on.

>> Do dat, do that do do dat dat dat.

>> Yeah.

>> Do dat, do that do do dat dat dat.

>> Do dat, do dat, do do dat dat dat. You know, who dis, who dat. They so crazy.

>> They crazy.

>> Basically, it's when people pronounce the the sound in words like this, and that as a D sound. So it becomes dat, dose, dees, it's something that predominantly happens in Black speech.

>> Come on.

>> Do dat, do that do do dat dat dat.

>> Yeah.

>> Do dat, do that do do dat dat dat.

>> And it's important, because how we sound can make a difference in a lot of ways. It has a lot to do with who people think we are, maybe even how we're treated or how people react to us.

>> And it can really affect how we feel comfortable with who we are. So what does it mean? when people tell you, you sound Black or you sound White? That's what we're talking about today on The Stoop. Dis is Lela Day. And dat is --

>> Dis is Hannah Baba.

>> So Hannah, has anyone ever told you, you sound White?

>> Well, yes, all throughout my childhood, I've been told, you know, I look Black, but I sound White.

>> You definitely look Black. You look Black. Do I look Black?

>> You do.

>> So, but I sound White. That's what I've been told. What about you?

>> Yes. And I've got some things to say about this. Okay, so for me growing up, there were plenty of jokes about the way I talk.

>> Listen to how you talk, like a White girl. Who you think you is?

>> You sound White when you're on the phone.

>> But I can't help the way I sounded. It's like my default voice. You know, you have that default voice. And it's just how I speak. Not all the time, but I grew up in Las Vegas. And there were two types of Black kids in school. And there were those who hang out with other Black kids and those who bounce back between Black and White friends. And I was in the second group. I imagine you were too.

>> Yeah, absolutely.

>> So with all that switching back and forth, my voice switched to and it still does like, when I'm on the phone with my sister.

>> Girl, you betta ack somebody. Uh uh, I do not know what you are talkin' bout.

>> It's not something I'm always conscious of. Sometimes it just sort of happens.

>> Code switching.

>> Yep.

>> Yeah, he came in looking all crazy, actin' all crazy, talkin' all crazy. I was like, uh uh, you betta back off.

>> Now as an adult, I have fun with it. But as a kid, it wasn't always this way.

>> All up in my koolaid. You don't even know flavor.

>> Finding my voice was painful. And at school, being told I sound White meant one thing. I wouldn't be eating my corndog and tater tots at the Black kids lunch table. But that was then, you know, got over it. Right. And nowadays in some schools corndogs are replaced with tofu lookalikes. So it got me wondering if the conversation among teens has changed too. Because teenagers nowadays eat tofu.

>> That's true. They do. They do eat tofu, at least in the Bay Area they do.

>> That's right. So I went to a place where I thought I might find some Black teens who've been accused of sounding White.

>> Where's that?

>> The skate park.

>> The skate park, of course.

>> A lot of people have told me I talk White before like, I don't know like, what it means to like, talk White or talk Black.

>> They be saying I talk White. I get pissed off. They only do it because my mom's White, you know, so, I have to speak respectable and they think since I'm Black, I have to act ghetto and be stupid.

>> I guess talking White would be like, I don't know like, I want to say like, speaking improper, I guess like, like how most White people talk or most normal people talk, you know.

>> This conversation about voice got me interested in talking to someone whose job is basically his voice.

>> This is 1A. I'm Joshua Johnson. Thanks for checking us out today.

>> Joshua Johnson is the host of a popular national talk show called 1A, and he used to be the morning host at an NPR station in San Francisco. He's African American, but he sounds pretty similar when he's on the air.

>> He says he's noticed President Trump's immigration policies playing out in his community.

>> And when he's talking with me in person. Is this your radio voice?

>> This is my voice.

>> This is your voice. So as your --

>> People asked me that a lot. They're like, do your radio voice. I'm like, have we not been talking for 15 minutes? This is it. You know, my goal on the radio is to sound like me. I don't want to sound like the news anchor who was enunciating the headlines at you.

>> But Joshua says he's experienced surprise reactions when people realize he's Black.

>> We did a show about race and diversity in Silicon Valley. And somewhere in the show, I mentioned that I'm African American, I forget what the context was, but somewhere in the show, I mentioned it. And I got an email from a listener who basically wrote, I never would have guessed that you were Black. Joshua says he doesn't let these reactions about his race really bother him, because like me, he's heard it all, that patronizing tone.

>> Mm hmm.

>> You are so articulate, you speak so well. And Joshua thinks this ignorance can also be a lesson in disguise. Show us assumptions we often have about race.

>> So how did he respond to that? Did you ask him?

>> I did ask him. Did you respond to that?

>> I did. I did. I told him, it was a very good thing, that you as a White person have to stop looking at me as a Black person as other and presume that I sound like errbody on BET.

>> Then I asked Joshua, if he'd ever been accused of sounding White when he was growing up, and he tells me that he not only heard the accusation, but he grew up with Black adults, insinuating that it was preferable. To sound White was to sound high quality.

>> That's kind of what those kids were saying.

>> Exactly.

>> In my hometown of West Palm Beach, Florida, and I remember, the choir director, Mr. Richardson, said, I want you to sound so good, that if I put you on stage behind a curtain, and had you sing to the audience, everyone would swear you are White.

>> To sound marketable, or quote unquote, proper.

>> Proper.

>> We've heard that is the goal most parents and teachers set out for kids, right?

>> Right.

>> I mean, saying the word ain't in my house would warrant a side glare from mom that was just as bad as a spanking.

>> Ain't.

>> Ain't, I ain't doing it. So Joshua says he was very aware of this as a child.

>> I always knew there was something blessed and something cursed about the way I spoke. I knew that it would open doors for me. And I knew that none of my friends was behind those doors.

>> But what is it about the fear of these doors closing because of the way we sound? There's actually a name for it. It's called linguistic profiling.

>> There is such thing --

>> A linguistic profiling. It was a term coined by professor John Bah, and he's a PhD at Stanford University. He did this study, where he selected five racially diverse cities in the Bay Area to ask about housing for rent. First, he called using an African American accent.

>> May I help you?

>> Yes, my name is Michael Davis. I was calling to see if you might have any houses for rent that might be available.

>> Then he called again, this time with a Latino accent.

>> Hello, this is Juan Ramirez. I'm calling about the apartment you have advertised in the paper.

>> With these accents, Paul was often told nothing was available. But when he switched to what he called a neutral accent --

>> Ah, ha.

>> Uh huh. He was often invited to see the property.

>> Wow. That's incredible.

>> Yup.

>> But not surprising.

>> Not surprising. You know what? I was recently, linguistically profiled.

>> How?

>> Okay, so I was working on this story. And it involved a support group for African Americans. And many of them had a criminal record.

>> I remember that story.

>> Yep. And at first, they seem really open to being interviewed. And then they just turned cold and days turned into weeks of messages without any return phone call.

>> You, I remember you having a hard time with them getting back to you.

>> Yeah, it was, it was really difficult because they were totally open in the beginning. And so then we finally met one of the coordinators, she looked at me, and she's like, started laughing. And she says, I would have gotten back to you sooner if I would have known you were Black. Oh, yeah. So I was in, right. I was in. And although we both laughed together about her comment, inside I was feeling like deflated.

>> Yeah.

>> You know, kind of like, kind of like eating that corn dog alone at lunch again. But as for my voice, whether it works to my advantage or not, it's just the one I got.

>> That's just the one you got Lela, and it's a beautiful one.

>> Thank you.

>> You know, there's someone else that's got a lot to say about voice and she's right here in our backyard. Yeah.

>> From Oakland, California, Chinaka Hodge.

>> In Katrina's world, she walks above it all. Ghetto brown gel slicks cosmos back in her hair easily. She walks quickly. No time to talk. Shoots insults over her shoulder, your mama. She's living for her lovers memory and he's not even dead yet. This is the sound. Pickles and red Kool Aid sticking to her lips like blue Now Laters, spiced apple cider, sunflower seeds, chitlins and abject poverty. She's 14, womanly, big bosomed, bigger bottoms, everybody wants to hold her thigh, hold her breast, hold her back, no one wants to hold her hand.

>> That is powerful. That's Chinaka Hodge, Oakland poet, educator, playwright, and screenwriter. And she did a TED talk. In that poem we just heard, Chinaka wrote that based on what she can see out of her window in West Oakland, so that's where we went to talk about voice, how we sound and why it matters. So let's go to West Oakland, and hang out on her stoop.

>> The stoop is very much our kitchen, and our living room and our sink. And it's been lots of things over the years, my dad, my dad comes out here and plays drums from time to time. We got a lot of stairs, a lot of stoops and a lot of conversations here, but welcome.

>> So has anyone ever told you that, that you sound White?

>> Absolutely, absolutely, on many occasions. I went to two small, independent Black schools. So I had a different education than most, than most straight out the gates. And so I left those schools and went to Cole Middle School in West Oakland. And that was the first time anyone had told me I sound White, but I'd never gone to school with any White folks. I'd never, like I went to a Black gymnastic center and I rode horses with the Black Cowboys, and I did Black tennis camp. So in many ways I was boogie, but I'd never, I'd never heard that I found it White because I'd never been around White folks. I sounded like every Black person I'd ever been around. But when I got to Cole, there was definitely a different lexicon, a different phonology. And it actually encouraged me and impelled me to study African American vernacular English when I went away to university. So I got to study with Rene Blake out of Stanford University, who was in our faculty at NYU whose major focus is copular forms of the verb to be, which was very interesting to me. So I, you know, I actually did a concentration in linguistics with a, with a focus in African American vernacular English for my undergraduate degree. And so, I've been told I sound White. I've been able to unpack that. I've been able to --

>> You studied it.

>> -- I studied it.

>> Yeah what does that mean though?

>> I studied it for quite some time. So I don't think there's a such thing is sounding White. And when I when someone says that, I was like, do I sound White like a Scottish person? Do I sound like, like White, like a Brahmin in New England? Do I sound White like someone from Utah? Where's my tongue in my mouth when I sound White? Is -- are there interfere, inter dental fricatives. You know, like I asked all of those things. And then at the same time, I do know what it means to switch what Renee Blake called Rfulness back in the day.

>> What's that?

>> Rrfulness.

>> Rfulness is a, it's a, it's a term that she coined, I believe, but it's about the level to which an art is pronounced or not in a word that often provides distinction --

>> We need an example.

>> -- one sounding Black or White, so actually did mine, our final for that course, was to listen to a musician. And just basically get, I think 250 different examples of him using words that have r's in them and then measure the amount of r that was in it. So we chose E40, who actually has more rfulness than most people, an African American. he tends to stress the r's like, America, you know, what? 40 water.

>> Errbody got choices. I choose to get money, I'm stuck to this bread. Errbody got choices. This bitches is choosing. I'm all in they head. Errbody got choices. Keep it one thou -- I liked it, I choose. Errbody got choices.

>> You know, he would, he would say his little bit more whereas like a Too Short might lean back off the r a little bit.

>> That's interesting. I'm realizing my mom always says worter.

>> Worter. Yeah.

>> Somewhere, I met this girl. Her name was Jo. She loved the way I rocked on the microphone. When I --

>> Or I'm trying to think of somebody who has like a definite East Coast sound and quote some r like what will Biggie Smalls say?

>> It's all good baby baby. It was all a dream. I used to --

>> It was all a dream, and there's an r in there, but it's between two consonants. So that changes some of the rules. I can nerd out on you guys are really hard, obviously. And I haven't studied in quite some time. But yeah, all of this, all of this, I think affected my writing and affected the way I thought about what presenting Blackness meant, what performing Blackness meant and what being Blackness meant. And so I think all of that gets touched on when you ask if somebody sounds White. It's like, well, do I and what does that mean? And, and I think, I think it's, always an affront when someone says you sound White, whether it's a Black person or a White person who said it to me in the past.

>> And if you don't know, now you know, nigga.

[ Music ]

>> We were talking about like, what do you think it would sound like if we actually weren't so aware of when we switch our voices back and forth, if we just spoke, like if you turn on the news, and you just heard someone say, what's up? Good evening, it's time to watch the news. Like, if you just heard that normal kind of family voice in the way that we talk about family, what do you think like it would? Do you think it would sound different?

>> I think it might sound different-ly. I don't know what it would be like, I feel like in some ways, I wouldn't want that. I wouldn't, part of the way that we speak to each other is our code, and we invented it for survival. And we need it from time to time so I wouldn't, like, I don't know. I don't want them to know all our hair secrets and all our our cooking secrets, and all our --

>> We need some secrets, right?

>> -- vocal secrets. We need some of them for ourselves. But I think that's part of the magic that keeps us young, and vital, and alive. You know? I think, I think that having a language our own in a time where our children are being murdered, I think is an, I think is an effective tool. So I like, I like speaking lots of languages, but I don't know. I feel like folks need to be initiated into ours.

>> Have you ever been in a situation where, where you were asked to speak to sound Blacker?

>> Oh, yeah.

>> Like the other way.

>> Yeah. I have been asked, and I have other friends who've been asked that. But then they don't, I mean it, it yypically, unravels, you know, rather quickly with me because I just talk a lot of shit. So, oh, I can't say that on your show. I talk a lot of crap.

>> No, you can. No, you can.

>> I can talk a lot of crap, so that usually opens the door much wider for whatever, producer or college programmer brought me to their site, I'll begin this conversation immediately. What do you, what do you mean? What do you want me to do?

>> How did they say it?

>> Can you? Can you Tone It Up? Can you do you think it could just -- there's always like a --

>> Do they dance like that when they say it?

>> You know, I won't say who but it's actually less with folks like that because by the time someone brings me in to do poems at school, they have a pretty good sense of who I am and, you know, but I did voiceover work for a while. And they give me notes like, we want to, we want to market to a more urban group. We want it to feel a little grittier or a little, a little harsher. And so I started recording three takes of it anything. So say like Nabisco cookies are great to eat. That'd be the first take. The second take, I would always do it sort of like what it would be like if I were performing a poem. So I'd be like, Nabisco cookies are great to eat. A little, a little more energy, little more enthusiasm. And then they inevitably would pick the third one where I would like, do this before, and be like Nabisco cookies are right to eat. That would be the one that they pick. They always pick the third one, 100% of the time.

>> That did sound like the best one to me, though.

>> Hey, it is what it is.

>> I like that one.

>> I mean, you're in my target demo, so.

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>> In San Francisco, I'm Lela Day.

>> And I'm Hannah Baba. I still don't think we sound like any Nabisco nothing. So we can forget that.

>> We will never be hired by Nabisco.

>> We will never be hired. That will not be our next gig.