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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

english, immigrant, felt, language, poetry, moving, students, poem, essay, mother tongue, syntax, express, writing, tan, worry, empirical evidence, urgencies, standard, freshman composition, formally recognized

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I'm Tracy k Smith, and this is the slow

00:09

down.

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In her 1990 essay mother tongue. novelist Amy Tan talks about the ways that immigrants like her mother, who don't speak Standard English, are often written off as unintelligent. ttan acknowledges the bias she herself felt as a child, listening to the way her mother spoke, she writes, I believed that her English reflected the quality of what she had to say. That is, because she expressed them in perfectly,

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her thoughts are imperfect,

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and I had plenty of empirical evidence to support me. The fact that people in department stores at banks and at restaurants did not take her seriously did not give her good service, pretended not to understand her, or even acted as if they did not hear her. Though tan was steered by her teachers toward math and science in school disciplines where elegance of language is not crucial.

She chose to become a writer. Her work moves in and out of various modes of English, capturing the passion, intelligence and intensity of her characters, no matter who they are. I first read mother tongue when I was teaching a freshman composition class called English 102 students from mostly immigrant backgrounds. I felt the pressure from my department to get students writing into standard English form, but I felt like a tyrant each week as I marked up their essays, which were often a mix of standard English and say, Jamaican patois or Trinidadian Creole. I worried that the demands I was required to place upon my students writing, were quietly degrading their sense of what they had to say, not just as students, but as people. If only this were a poetry workshop, I sometimes thought I could ask them simply to express themselves. To tell the stories that were urgent and vital for them. Grammar would mean less than feeling energy, and music. Teachers, like the one I once felt forced to be, can send a dangerous message to students for whom English is not a first language students whose expressive capacity in English is, I want to say enhanced by their relationship to other languages, other formally recognized languages, or non standard mode of English, like black English. Today's poem, immigrant can't write poetry by Wang ping, affirms my worry, it opens with an epigraph that demonstrates the prohibition non native speakers of English can be made to feel when it comes to expressing themselves in writing. But then, the poem goes on to render a moving argument about language and expression, and about the freedom poetry sometimes claims, the freedom to speak in ways that are obedient to the urgencies and irregularities of life. It's moving and on the surface simple. And it reminds me that what all poems are truly in search of sits outside of words. immigrant can't write poetry by Wang Ping. Oh, no, not with your syntax, said hv. To her daughter in law, a Chinese writing poetry in English. She walked to the table, she walks to a table. She walked to table now she is walking to a table now. What difference it make? What difference does it make? In nature, no completeness, no sentence really complete thought. language, our birthright and curse. Pay no mind to immigrant syntax. poetry, born as beast move best when free undressed. The slow down is a production of American public media in partnership with the Poetry Foundation.