

## Black Vernacular in *Billy* by Albert French: African-American Ethnic Self-Assertion

KONATÉ Siendou  
Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny, Abidjan  
Email : [siendouk@gmail.com](mailto:siendouk@gmail.com)

### INTRODUCTION

*“A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey.”* (Baldwin, 1997: 6)

*“A word is a microcosm of human consciousness.”* (Vygotsky 126)

Albert French’s 1993 *Billy: a Novel* is the representation of violence against Black people in the United States. The story of Billy Lee Turner is an indictment of the American justice system. It denounces the white supremacists’ handling of justice, the manipulation of capital punishment with regards to the people of Black descent in the United States. More importantly, *Billy* denounces juvenile capital punishment, as it looks like it only applies to young Black people. Billy Lee Turner is executed in 1937 following the stabbing to death of a white girl in Banes County in Mississippi. Instead of proving the guiltiness of Billy and then apply the law as it happens with juveniles, the young boy is fried on the electric chair to the relish of white torture-mongers. Face to this situation, Wilbur Braxton clearly highlights the injustice perpetrated by the Mississippi court presided by Judge A. J. Harper. Braxton says:

This boy is only ten years old. Obviously he is not an adult, or even a close to his manhood. [...] Billy Lee Turner is just a child. This case must be tried in juvenile court. Trying this child in an adult court is a clear violation of his rights. Certainly he cannot be judged by a jury of his peers. And for the State of Mississippi to see a first-degree murder indictment and to be seeking the death penalty for a ten-year-old boy, a child is simply immoral. (Billy 158)<sup>1</sup>

To Braxton’s plea, Judge Harper opposes a deafening refusal. He thus responds:

*“[...] the law is very clear. If a minor commits an adult crime, and murder in and by its nature is an adult offense, that minor, regardless of age, is to be tried as an adult, and punished accordingly if convicted. This here boy is no child when he kills. [...] This is Mississippi. That little girl was Mississippi. This Nigra, this Billy Lee Turner, is Mississippi, and Mississippi will attend ta its own affairs as it sees fit”* (Billy 159).

The content of the two declarations are diametrically opposed. Killing the white little girl amounts to killing Mississippi and the values this US state represents; for, Judge Harper and

---

<sup>1</sup> Subsequent references to French’s novel will remains as is, i.e., using the book title, while others will be acknowledged by the author’s name.

associates to set Billy free will sign the death warrant of Mississippi whereas this action will simply celebrate the rule of law, equity and justice.

The representation of Southern supremacist violence in *Billy* comes with a host of metaphorical violence which is visible in the last lines of Judge Harper's response to Baxton: "This Nigra" for "this Negro", and "ta" for "to." Judge Harper's tone is representative of the Southern "plantocracy" and the attending English that demean Black people who have been denied education. The lack of education and/or illiteracy among Blacks reflects on the way these people are made to speak in the text. One may legitimately state that *Billy* explores another form of violence inasmuch as the mix of the so-called proper or correct English with the vernacular sort runs against the conventional literary norms, thereby not only creating new canons for the non-Western literary productions in the United States, but also celebrating African-American expressive modes.

This paper attempts to demonstrate how the English language is particularly used by African Americans to assert themselves in French's *Billy*. It contextualizes what is known to be Black Vernacular English first, and ultimately shows how Albert French deploys such a use of English in his text.

### **Of Black English in the United States**

In 1995, two years after its publication, I was presented a copy of French's *Billy*. Struggling with the so-called Standard English in works like Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, among other readings, French's book seemed like another hurdle to surmount because the opening pages as well as sections exemplifying ethnic American English or American dialects, which were new to me. It is only later that I came to realize that Lee Turner's English is one of the many Englishes spoken in the United States as well as around the world. In French's *Billy*, there is a deployment of Englishes: Standard English as spoken by lawyers and judges, White Southerners, and Black English which some people, out of racism and stereotypical biases, downgrade to baby talk and/or dialect, whereas others simply negate the very existence of such a language.

According to Max Shachtman, African Americans do not have a language of their own. The communist thinker writes, "The Negroes do have a common language, but it is no more 'their own' than the Yiddish jargon is the language of the 'Jewish nation.' It is the language they acquired from the American people as a whole, with whom they share it in common. It does not distinguish them as separate from the balance of the population any more than does the English tongue common to the inhabitants of the northwestern Wheat Belt"(Shachtman 72). He goes on to state that "generally speaking, the culture of the Negro is the culture of the section of the country where he resides" (Ibid 73). In other words, African Americans are identified as users of the English language as much as one sees the Anglo-Saxon American.

Shachtman's claim is indisputably controversial in that it raises the divergence-convergence linguistic debate on the existence of Black English and/or the Ebonics. Some linguists believe that "Black English" is merely an improper or incorrect version of the Standard English spoken by White Americans, and therefore a dialect of American English. In that vein, Alice Filmer writes, "Within mainstream American society—in conservative and liberal sectors alike—a prevailing belief holds that speakers of AAVE [African American Vernacular English] are somehow deficient intellectually, culturally, and socially as evidenced by their use of language"

(Filmer 258). Other critics argue that ‘Black English’ “emerged as a result of a pidgin/creole hybridization process as opposed to being taught Old English, baby talk” (Smith and Crozier 110). It is worth noting, after Dennis Baron in his article titled “Ebonics and the Politics of English,” that “[...] Black English is not a single, monolithic variety of English. It varies from group to group and region to region [...] by age, gender, social class, and context, just as all forms of language do” (Baron 12). Whether one likes it or not, however, the use of any language (even the English language) carries with it the inevitable contamination of the language by the user. In short, a borrowed language almost always bears the imprint of the user. The African-American community is no exception to this scientific truth. In other words, there is such a thing as Black or African-American English. Perhaps, Alamin Mazrui best captures what is at stake here. He writes, “the struggle about the ‘nature’ of Ebonics, therefore, must be seen as an aspect of the wider African American struggle for self-definition and (re)possession of their history” (Mazrui 34). This is exactly why the Oakland debate over AAVE went up to the US Congress in 1998.<sup>2</sup>

If Albert French’s intention is to represent violence against African Americans in Southern US, the credibility of his story only becomes consummate when the characters adopt the speech patterns of the environment in which they are cast. Visibly, the white supremacist and racist establishment in the fictional Mississippi uses the Southern dialect used in actual Mississippi. In fact, the period following the arrest of Billy is a deployment of the Southern Mississippi white dialect. Conversely, from the beginning of the novel to its last page, French has recourse to this English because he attempts to remain true to the Black experience in the United States. This experience is cultural and linguistic. In fact, the enslavement of Niger-Congo languages speaking Africans in the US created a new system of signification that some linguists termed as AAVE, Black Vernacular English (BVE), or Ebonics. The vernacular English spoken by these people of African descent may have its roots in the history of the migration of African slaves from other British colonies across the Caribbean and directly from the African continent. According to Walt Wolfram, “During the period from approximately 1600 to 1690, slaves were largely imported from Barbados and typically worked with English-indentured servants on small plantations, with considerable interethnic contact taking place. This group therefore may have brought a creole-like variety with them but also may have lost some of the traits quite rapidly through more extensive interaction with slave owners and indentured European-American servants. [...] During the 1690-1750 period, there was massive importation of labor directly from African – about 90 percent– due to the need of cheap labor, and there was also less interaction with whites. With more blacks arriving directly from Africa in large numbers, there might have been more contact-related language fossilization arising from imperfect language learning. The fossilized interlanguage might have ended up as a substratal influence in the English of the early African Americans”(Wolfram 48). As for Ebonics, Smith and Crozier consider that it is not synonymous

---

<sup>2</sup> The School Board of the Oakland Unified School District passed a resolution in December 1996 declaring that Ebonics was a language in its own rights and that it was not a dialect of English, thereby sparking a debate on the opportunity of teaching Black kids in Ebonics and therefore declaring Standard English as unfit for their intellectual development. Major Black leaders and some Conservative politicians opposed it. This alone shows that AAVE or Ebonics was a reality to reckon with.

with Black English. Rather, they find it pejorative and demeaning for African Americans. These scholars argue that the terminology

was coined [...] not as a mere synonym for the more commonly used appellation ‘Black English.’ Rather, the term Ebonics was coined in repudiation of the white supremacists lie that, Niger-Congo Africans and their descendants was an Old English ‘baby talk’ or pidgin/creole English vernacular. When Ebonics is used as a synonym for Black English, the deliberate intent of those who do so is to appropriate the term Ebonics and use it to further propagate the Anglocentric discourse that African Americans are sub-human and should not be viewed otherwise. (Smith and Crozier 133)

Mumia Abu-Jamal, the once Philadelphia-based Black activist and radio journalist who was on the death row until January 2012 when his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, better captivates the reality lying behind what is called Black English. He writes, “Black English, for millions of us in the inner cities, and the projects, is not street language –but home language, where we communicate our deepest feelings, fears, views and insights. We needn’t be damned for using it anyone –especially so-called teachers” (Abu-Jamal 27). Clearly, Abu-Jamal’s position is inscribed in the line of thought of African-American thinkers like James Baldwin who posed the right question when it became clear that some defenders of whiteness sought to impose their worldview and linguistic standards on the rest of the American society, Black people being the main target. Attempts to homogenize linguistic practices by imposing standards and canons are not surprising inasmuch as they form the basis of the so-called melting pot that the United States brags about. This ideal, however, forecloses any opportunity to avail of one’s right to (cultural) difference in a society where difference imposes itself to the point where the melting pot becomes an unattainable dream that imposes the existence of its nemesis: the “salad bowl.” This is assuredly the sense of Maurice Merleau-Ponty warning with regard to language. According to this French thinker,

Un langage [...] qui ne chercherait qu’à exprimer les mêmes choses, épuiserait son pouvoir d’enseignement dans des énoncés de fait. Un langage au contraire qui donne notre perspective sur les choses, qui ménage en elles un relief, inaugure une discussion sur les choses qui ne finit pas avec lui, il suscite lui-même la recherche, il rend possible l’acquisition.<sup>3</sup> (Merleau-Ponty 126).

Numbers of African-American writers have had recourse to the Black dialect in their fictional reproductions. Sterling Brown wrote countless poems to defend Black culture and experience. In keeping with the spirit of renewal, the Harlem Renaissance writers intended their works to celebrate Blackness not only in America but also around the world. Langston Hughes’ poems are very telling in that regard. Richard Wright, a celebrated writer known for his practical understanding of arts and literature, also gave in the Black dialect to bestow more validity on *Uncle Tom’s Children* in the 1930. This recourse is interesting because it shows not only that there is something known as Black language in the United States, but also the need to render

---

<sup>3</sup> Translation: “A language [...] seeking to express things the same way loses the didactic power of the enunciation of facts. On the other hand, a language that provides our perspectives on things, which accommodate in things a whole relief tends to initiate a debate that does not end with things; by itself it creates research and makes acquisition a possibility.”

perennial the fact that such a language must be preserved as a full-fledged part of African-American history that continues to influence Black talks and speeches today.

### ***Billy and Black Vernacular English***

The question as to why African American creative artists avail of what is referred to as Black English is more than relevant. According to language theorists, language represents the civilization of the community that speaks it. George Steiner writes, “The linguistic world-view of a given community shapes and gives life to the entire landscape of psychological and communal behavior. It is language which decides how different conceptual groupings and contours are to be ‘read’ and related within the whole” (Steiner, 1975: 87). Thus, French uses the so-called Standard English associated with Caucasian Americans and the so-called upper-class, and Black English responds to an ideological and political imperative in American ethnic literature. With regard to the writer’s commitment, Jean-Paul Sartre writes,

Si l’écrivain fait de la littérature, c’est-à-dire s’il écrit, c’est parce qu’il assume la fonction de perpétuer, dans un monde où la liberté est toujours menacée, l’affirmation de la liberté et l’appel de la liberté. Un écrivain qui ne se place pas sur ce terrain est coupable; non seulement il est coupable, mais il cesse bientôt d’être écrivain.<sup>4</sup>  
(Sartre, 29-30)

In other words, writing is not a mere aesthetical exercise as some Eurocentric critics attempt to make literature and art seem. Let us beware of some pronouncements like Harold Bloom’s in his *The Western Canon* where he writes, “The greatest enemies of aesthetic and cognitive standard are purported defenders who blather to us about moral and political values in literature” (Bloom 40), because it is his belief that “the study of literature, however conducted, will not save any individual, any more than it will improve any society”(Bloom 31), which is a majestic misrepresentation of things. In fact, if literature does not improve society, it is clear that second materials (literary criticism) that come out of it are political and/or ideological because of their prescriptive nature. Bloom’s *The Western Canon* “exists precisely in order to impose limits, to set a standard of measurement [...]” (Bloom 35). The old canonicity (The Western Canon for that matter) is Eurocentric, exclusivistic, and therefore a danger for a world setting out to be polyvocal and plural. Minority literature, which Bloom believes, offers itself up “for rapid ingestion and discarding” (Bloom 31) has a different logic; for it, to write is irrevocably to take part in the reshaping of a society where freedom is embattled.

The writer is burdened with a responsibility binding him or her to the cause and category of people. In order to address efficiently a community, one needs to use the language of its people. Thus, the author of *Billy* uses a couple of language registers to map out the landscape of communication. Standard English in *Billy* speaks to the literate and educated people. Also, it faithfully translates these people’s worldview and their Eurocentric and elitist approach to language. The use of Black Vernacular English (BVE) obeys the logic of speaking to the Black community by replicating the mannerisms and linguistic singularities of Blacks in order to

---

<sup>4</sup> Translation: “When an author indulges in literature, that is to say when he assumes, in a world where freedom is constantly under threat, the function of perpetuating the assertion of freedom and the call to freedom. A writer who runs away from that ground is culpable; he is not only guilty but also ceases being a writer.”

validate the existence this form of group expression as a full-fledged language. Billy Lee Turner's language not only translates the experience of Black America in the sense of trying to be different as imposed by one's identity and cultural heritage. In the process of affirming oneself and one's language community in the face of adversity such as is the case for the first American ethnic minority (African Americans), *Billy* deploys the distinctive traits of African-American English as being different from other dialects of American English.

On the surface, the story runs two registers of language: Standard English and Black/African-American English. However, while a great deal of the story is narrated in Standard English in full compliance with the rule of proper English grammar, as if it were addressed to a totally different readership, the first chapter and most inter-Black dialogues are expressed in Black English as much as conversations among Whites are expressed in non-Black English. This decision by French raises a reception question at first glance. However, such an argument stands on shaky ground because dialogues by Black and White characters are an inseparable whole that makes the story a compact reality. Notwithstanding the compactness of the story, the first chapter of Billy Lee Turner looks like addressing a particular readership, one that is visibly an illiterate group. The story opens with a description of the landscape and the environment where Black people live. The opening of the book runs in broken English: "Out there by Til Hatcher's farm, especially in them pickin fields, it was hot. [...] Them wagons comin back from them pickin fields be that dusty color, same color of that red dirty road they be rollin on" (Billy 1). As well, throughout the text, whether it is Billy Lee Turner, his people or the white people of Banes, the language level is low. To plant the decorum—the Black community and its lived experience—Albert French hints at Black family as a dislocated one where the mother plays dual parental role of mother and father when the father bails out of his natural responsibilities. For example, the supposed father of Billy Otis Owen is featured using Black English, which some may categorize as slave vernacular. Owen lures his lover with the sweet words that ever exist:

Ya my woman, the only woman there ever be for me, Ah need ya, need ya wit me. Ah love ya, Cinder, love everything about about ya. This here place ain't right for ya and me, gots ta gits someplace better, be someplace where streetcars and picture shows, pretty dresses for ya. Ain't nothing down here for us. Ya too pretty for this old ugly place. (*Billy* 8)

Of course, this is sweet talk. As such, it supersedes racial bounds because man in every culture has to wield the word appropriately in order to have the trust of the woman he courts. Owen is no exception because he beds and impregnates Cinder, only to abandon her. This is not anything new under the sun either. However, when it comes to the Black community, authors who have a social responsibility drive at a social problem undermine the furtherance of the oldest American ethnic minority. When the gossip around town is upon the absentee father, the author uses the same vernacular English that seems to better translate the Black family from slavery days up to the early twentieth century when the story is set. As the talk about Otis Owen goes around, French puts the Black English words in the mouth of an unidentified character who claims the following: "That boy ain't ever comin back for that girl. Leavin her wit that baby and no man ta care for em. Ain't right. Ah knew all along that Otis Owens up ta no good. He ain't comin back here. Wit them ways he gots, somebody done cut him ta death already" (*Billy* 9).

Almost throughout *Billy*, malfeasance, misconduct by Blacks and injustice by whites against them are reported in the Black vernacular which is a kind of baby talk compared to the broken

English spoken by white rural residents. French juxtaposes the broken English of the whites, the baby talk of the Black and the Standard English of the narration.

For instance, when Billy Lee Turner and Gumpy venture into the pond by the Paskos, a part of Banes off-limit to Blacks, soon-to-be-Billy's-victim Jenny Lori, react with the territoriality known to southern supremacist Whites who always want Blacks to "stay in their place", or not to cross the color line. When Lori notices Gumpy and Billy, she gets infuriated by their presence: "I don't want them around here. That's my pond and I don't want their nigger asses in it [...]. Let's sneak up and catch em, you want to do that? We can sneak around and get in them trees, then com in the bushes behind em, then we can get em" (*Billy* 24). Lori shouts: "Ya niggers get out of there. Get out of there. Ya hear me? Gad damn ya" (*Billy* 26). Clearly, Lori's English is clear except for the misuse of the pronoun "you" which she and her kind of people pronounce "ya" sometimes like Black people. Similarly, when Sheriff Tom gets into the Patch in search for the two Black boys responsible for the murder of Lori, the white girl, he uses the same language as the deceased girl and the latter's girlfriend Jenny as well as any white person in the place. When Sheriff Tom is looking for Billy, he asks Cinder, the boy's mother, a series of questions: "Where's that boy at, where's he at? I want that nigger and I want his little knifin ass right now. You his mama? [...] You his mama, that boy yours? [...] Answer me when I'm talkin to you. You that boy's mama? [...]Where's that boy at?"(*Billy* 63). Despite the verbless sentences and the missing "g" in the gerund form the Sheriff uses, the language seems to border the standard and correct form unlike that of Billy, Shorty and the Reverend. All the members of the Patch, with the exception of Billy's mother, Cinder speak the Black vernacular.

Lori and Jenny chase the two boys, and they catch only Billy, who demands that Lori leave him alone: "Git off me, girl. Git off me" (*Billy* 28). After Lori beats and scratches Billy, she releases him. Though she asks Billy to get away, he walks royally and arrogantly, and prepares to defend himself. Billy snarls and warns Lori who hectors him: "Ya better leave me be's, Ah kills ya, Ah kills ya" (*Ibid.*). This is what Billy eventually does. He stabs Lori in the ribs and she dies of bleeding.

The Standard English of the narration could not be more evident than in the maxim on time when the Lori dies of the stab wound. The narrator declares:

Time is no friend, it has turned its back and will not help, will not move anything, will not slow things down that are moving. It will not stop the blood seeping from Lori's side, it will not bring Doctor Grey up the road. It will not be intimidated by the curses hissed at, nor will it show mercy for Ginger Pasko's pleads that beg it to give, pray for it not to take. Where it has given hours, days, years, it will not yield moments. Where it has given moments so freely and with abundances, it now gives eternity. (*Billy* 33)

This juxtaposition of language registers –Standard, Vernacular or Bullwhip Days<sup>5</sup> English, and Southern dialect– may be construed as signifying the United States, not as a homogeneous and

---

<sup>5</sup> This phrase originates from the title of James Mellon's edited book of the oral history of ex-slaves. The Bullwhip Days are times when some African snatched from their native lands by their own brothers and sold to slavers found themselves imbruted in the Americas in Southern plantations. The English spoken then is what the interviewed slaves used. There is an excellent similarity between the speech of the Blacks in the Patch and those (former) slaves.

undifferentiated body, but as differences that must be acknowledged and affirmed in compliance with the US fundamental law which enshrines difference on the basis of sex, religion, and color.

Also, and more importantly, this juxtaposition of registers celebrates the peculiar use that Black people make of the English language, thereby validating a Black dialect of English in the Americas. Although the narration of the story is performed with Standard English in an attempt to conform to the canons and conventions of that language and the culture derive from, once in a while, the author strikes out the “g” in the gerund and uses “em” in lieu of them. This of and by itself speaks to the deterioration of the English language in the Deep South. After all, the slaves picked up their English from the way the language is used in this predominantly slaveocratic society. As if the presence of the Black person brings us the unconventional use of the language in the Whites, anytime a white person comes into contact with a Black person or a thing Black, the level of the language is brought down. For instance, although Standard English is in use in the court, Judge Harper, the Sheriff and others constantly break the linguistic codes and convention. At first sight, this may be construed as a way to conjure up the low level of understanding of the Black person among Whites, but that there is a recurrence of unconventional English used by those who purport to uphold the sanctity of the language and the culture it conveys is evocative of a psychological disposition and a drive with Whites to have recourse to broken English. Lowering the language level for it to fit the Black interlocutor is thus a lure.

As well, the use of vernacular English to represent African-American lived experience raises the serious question as to whether Black people could master other people’s language or not, considering that the vernacular is a heritage from African slaves in the Americas and that these slaves originated from a place where plurilingualism was an indisputable fact of life. West Africans and Niger-Congo African brought in shackles to the Americas speak more than one language. The same is true nowadays as in present-day African countries where colonial languages coexist with mother tongues or national languages. The truth of the matter is that Blacks were able to master the slave-master’s language if the latter wanted them to. However, the Manichean social setting (i.e. segregation: slaves in their shacks after fieldwork and the master in his mansion) was purposefully organized to draw color line and ensure that it lasted perennially. No wonder after slavery segregation and the attending discrimination against Blacks had a strong recurrence. As well, to this date there still are places where segregation is practiced under the cloak of legality. More importantly, the slave-master knew the power of language. As George Steiner writes, “Languages are living organisms. Infinitely complex, but organisms nevertheless. They have in them a certain life-force, and certain powers of absorption and growth. But they can decay and they can die” (Steiner 1970: 96). That’s why, during slavery days he ensured that no two slaves speaking the same African language be together during the Middle Passage or in plantations. The slave-trader and slave-owner attempted to kill the African slave whenever the latter tried to show a sign of agency and intelligence. More importantly, they succeeded in figuratively or culturally killing the Black person under his yoke by setting up roadblocks on his way to maintain his language-culture and to acquire a new one in the so-called New World. There is no mistake about this: creating a space where the Blacks could not acquire literacy was an integral and successful implement of the Whiteman’s politics of self-preservation. François Lo Jacomo aptly captures this truth. He writes,



Si chaque individu s'exprime en tant que représentant d'un groupe, alors la langue devient une arme et le plurilinguisme traduit un rapport de force entre groupes en présence. L'émergence de langues dominantes est l'effet d'une conquête de pouvoir, où les facteurs strictement linguistiques jouent un rôle dérisoire à côté des réalités politiques et économiques.<sup>6</sup> (Jacomio 46)

The slave's continual use of his mother tongue as well as his mastery of the slave-master's language meant empowerment. Therefore, literacy meant the collapse of the slaveocratic system by way of the slave's building agency through knowledge of the White man's world and its workings, and attempts to upset this world. The slave-owning system was well aware of this agency of language as much as is Steiner when he states that "chaque langue est un acte de liberté qui permet à l'homme de survivre. [...] Chaque langue réalisant en cela une formidable économie de liberté, l'homme gagne un pas sur l'inexorabilité de sa condition de mortel ainsi que sur ses échéances économiques et biologiques"<sup>7</sup>(Jahanbegloo 147).

In short, the use of "baby talk" featured as being the way Blacks spoke the English language partook in the infantilization of the Black person, and therefore attests to attempts to preclude the Black person's longing for self-realization and liberation. This is why Albert French's work becomes relevant. The book is an attempt to bring the question of Black language (whether it be Black English or Ebonics) to the fore possibly in prevention of the homogenizing power of the Euro-American English as Steiner warns us: "Un jour surviendra où nous serons face à une crise psychologique considérable : le monolinguisme régnera sur une planète qui subira la domination économique de l'anglo-américain, qu'on nomme déjà 'l'espéranto du commerce'"<sup>8</sup>(Jahanbegloo 149).

French's work raises the question of the imperative necessity of countering and debunking the monolithic conception of language and culture among Western-leaning and/or Eurocentric scholars and their readership when it comes to those who are deemed to be included in the dominant culture, and who are visibly marginalized because of their otherness. Discussing the Black writer and his use of the English language, James Baldwin notes, "Writers are obliged [...] to realize that they are involved in a language which they must change. And for a black writer in (America) to be born into the English language is to realize that the assumptions on which the language operates are his enemy"(Baldwin 2010: 140). The use of language in literature supersedes the mere aesthetics that Harold Bloom and affiliates may want us to believe, because language comes with a load of politics, morals, assumptions and prescriptions that the targeted group of people needs to address according to their interests. Enemies of things Black hide in the Black community and affect elitist gaits when debates of the functionality of Black English and

---

<sup>6</sup> Translation: "When each individual expresses himself or herself as the representative of a group, then language becomes a weapon and plurilingualism becomes relation of power between the groups in presence. The emergence of dominant languages is the product if a search for power where strictly linguistic factors play less important role than economic and political factors."

<sup>7</sup> Translation: "Each language is an act of survival. [...] Each language thus realizing a wealth of freedom, the individual wins over the imponderables of his or her mortal condition as well as over his or her economic and biological challenges."

<sup>8</sup> Translation: "A day will come when we have to face a huge psychological crisis: monolingualism will rule over a planet that will suffer the economic domination of the Anglo-American language which is already known as the Esperanto of trade."

Ebonics come to the fore. Attempts are being made to educate Black children through the medium of their everyday language: Ebonics. And yet, Black elitists and Eurocentric scholars are prompt to denounce this approach. The title of Leon Todd Jr.'s article is very telling in this regard: "Ebonics is Defective Speech and a Handicap for Black Children." What are Black leaders to do when it is clear that the Western curriculum,—which demonizes everything African/Black, be it figuratively or actually —, is designed to homogenize and to deny the right to difference as far as minority groups are concerned in the United States? Baldwin had it right when he speaks of a conspiracy against the Black person: "There is a reason that no one wants our children educated. When we attempt to do it ourselves, we find ourselves up against a vast machinery of racism which infects the country's entire system of education" (Baldwin, 2010: 143). In the same vein, Baldwin writes,

"It is not the black child's language that is in question, it is not his language that is despised: It is his experience. A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled. A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be black, and in which he knows that he can never become white" (Baldwin 1997: 6).

Black English as well as the forms that express it is about the Black person in the United States. As Houston A. Baker remarks,

"The Black text is historical evidence because it is present, palpable component of the past that formed it. Its creation — despite the mysteries of creative imagination — was governed by a thinking agent, by the mental like of a culture. *The sine qua non* that draws the linguistic and historiographical considerations together is the Black person as a thinking human being who possesses the supports, values, and stays of a unique culture" (Baker 127).

All in all, the Black text (by the same token, Black language) translates the Black person's culture and worldview. Writing the Black experience in the Black person's language contributes to altering the rigid logocentric conception of culture in the United States, but more importantly it endows the forgotten people with a voice they once were deprived of. Martha Cutter, the editor of MELUS, could not be more accurate when she writes, "the story of the US changes when it begins to account for other voices silenced by a generic We —as in 'We the People' — in favor of a more particularized and a specific story of the relationship of the ethnic peoples in the US and the ethnic peoples to the US" (Cutter 10).

## CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, one may reasonably accuse Albert French of flogging a dead horse for reusing motifs and themes of violence that once were central in the representation of African-American lived experience. Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* or *Native Son* valuably dealt with white supremacist violence against Blacks. The representation of violence in *Billy* begs us to research African-American experience and history in order to locate the execution of a Black child in the so-called Deep South. In that sense, this highly acclaimed work may be accused of dishonest representation of the truth. However, the author's defense line is strong: this work is fictional.

The truth remains that claims like his are meant to prevent the concentration in US prisons of Black males most of whom are sitting in the death row for crimes that are visibly determined by the racist environment in which they were born. Therefore, using the language of the Black person appeals to Blacks to the chagrin of people like Harold Bloom who depoliticize literature, thereby hollowing out the natural agency it comes with as regards minority groups in the United States. Writing *Billy* in 1993, notwithstanding the long way the American society –Blacks within it– has come partakes of the constant battle of Black self-repositioning in a society extremely, however insidiously so, hostile to the furtherance of the first minority group in North America.

Conversely, when it comes to the question of language, Albert French makes a robust argument in alignment with great thinkers on language and cultural identity. The author makes assaults on the so-called Standard English to prove a point. Language is agency; to use it in a certain way may prove ideological. In fact, Standard English in the US is called American English. This type of English antagonizes with British English, which is deemed the site of original English. In other words, US Standard English is unacceptable for British speakers of Standard English. Thus, one may speak of English in plural or “Englishes around the world.” Black English or vernacular English falls in this plural configuration of living languages.

That Black people use Standard English does not mean much. Black thought is different from White thought. And, as Vygotsky has it, “To understand another’s speech, it is not sufficient to understand his words – we must understand his thought” (Vygotsky 125). Clearly, thought is the site of motivation, that’s why Vygotsky believes that “(...) even (thought) is not enough” (Ibid.). In other words, Standard English may express Black thought, and even so, such English may mean a more drastically different thing than assumed by people other than Blacks, because “Consciousness is reflected in a word as the sun in a drop of water. A word relates to consciousness as a living cell to a whole organism, as an atom relates to the universe” (Ibid. 126).

English spoken by a Black American seems more expressive of Black thought and experience. Albert French attempts to demonstrate this by deploying the variety of English language in the fictional Mississippi of *Billy*. Superimposing dialects and linguistic registers and giving more prominence to Black English deals American English purists heavy blows that are all but the other side of the violence represented by the author. This is metaphorical violence which is assuredly a political claim. In the US, attempts have always been made to enforce the credo of *E Pluribus Unum* (Out of Many One), which is of and by itself an attempt to foreclose plurivocity or manyvoicedness, thereby imposing monoculturalism in our world which is constantly changing because of language barriers in free fall. More Englishes in the US means more cultures, which translates best the current state of the US: a “salad bowl” or a failed melting pot.

## WORKS CITED

- Abu-Jamal, Mumia. "The Mother Tongue: Black English Revisited." *The Black Scholar*. 27.1, 1997: 26-27.
- Baker Jr., Houston. "On the Criticism of Black American Literature." In *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. Winston Napier, (Ed.). New York: New York University Press, 2000: 113-131.
- Baldwin, James. "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then, Tell Me, What is?" *The Black Scholar*. 27.1 (1997): 5-6.
- , *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*. New York: Vintage Books, 2010.
- Baron, Dennis. "Ebonics and the Politics of English." *World Englishes*. 19.1 (2005) 5-19.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994.
- Cutter, Martha. "Editor's Introduction: Ethnic Storytelling." *MultiEthnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)*. 36.1 (2011) : 5-12.
- Jacomo, François Lo, *Plurilinguisme et communication : rapport du séminaire*, Paris : SELAF, 1985.
- Jahanbegloo, Ramin. *George Steiner: entretiens*. Paris: Editions du Félin, 1992.
- Mazrui, Ali A., and Alamin M. Mazrui. *The Power of Babel: Language and Governance in the African Experience*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Mellon, James. *Bullwhip Days, The Slaves Remember: An Oral History*. New York: Grove Press, 1988.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *La Prose du monde*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1969.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *La Responsabilité de l'écrivain*. Paris: Verdier, 1998.
- Smith, Ernie and Crozier, Karen. "Ebonics is not Black English." *The Western Journal of Black Studies*. 22. 2 (1998): 109-116.
- Steiner, George. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- Steiner, George. *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman*. New York: Atheneum, 1970.
- Todd, Leon W. "Ebonics is Defective Speech and a Handicap for Black Children." *Education*. 118. 2 (Winter 1997): 177-180.
- Vygotsky, L.S. "Thought and Word." *The Routledge Language Cultural Theory Reader*. Ed. Lucy Burke, Tony Crowley and Alan Girvin. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Wolfram, Walt. "Issues in Reconstructing Earlier African-American English." *World Englishes*, 19.1, (2000): 39-58.