

Spring 2009

BALDWINISM: The English language functioning as a system of racism and colonization in a “Post”-Colonial America

Julian Mitchell
Occidental College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.oxy.edu/ecls_student

Recommended Citation

Mitchell, Julian, "*BALDWINISM*: The English language functioning as a system of racism and colonization in a “Post”-Colonial America" (2009). *ECLS Student Scholarship*.
https://scholar.oxy.edu/ecls_student/11

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the English and Comparative Literary Studies (ECLS) at OxyScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in ECLS Student Scholarship by an authorized administrator of OxyScholar. For more information, please contact cdla@oxy.edu.

Julian Mitchell
Senior Comps
03.18.09

BALDWINISM
**The English language functioning as a system of racism and
colonization in a "Post"-Colonial America.**

James Baldwin's *If Black English Isn't Language, Then Tell Me, What Is* asserts the English language as a contemporary system of racism and marginalization. The construction of Western language reflects the same alienating principles which validate the Western ideology of race, executing the political and economic agendas of both colonization and nationalism. Therefore, the English language is colonial because it establishes a power structure which imposes whiteness to create a means of identifying and objectifying the "other", placing empirical value upon racial separation. "Whiteness" is defined as "the quality of being white or freedom from darkness and obscurity; purity or cleanliness". Thus, Baldwin argues that language implements a system of race within speech and literature, in which "white" English or "proper" Western language signifies access to white privilege and the achievement or stride toward racial independence. Consequently, "Black" English is despised and considered mystifying and impure. For this reason, the English language demonstrates a political device, exercising its inherent whiteness to subjugate and destroy the cultural relevance of colonized people.

Language must then be identified as a tool of separatism on the basis of race and class, mimicking the framework and function of both slavery and colonization. Functioning as such, language proves the existence of the colonizer

in a “post” colonial society. Marginalizing “black” language objectifies blackness to the critical lens of Whiteness. Baldwin addresses the absolute necessity of “blackness” to the historical maintenance of white power. This is why Baldwin refutes the naïve notion of “slang” or “black” English not being considered language in regards to appropriation. Rather, Baldwin challenges us to recognize the system of oppression language was founded upon and functions in accordance with. The ruling class uses language to subjugate and exploit the “other” in a cowardly attempt to manipulate a common culture that falsely affirms “white” as superior.

We must not only understand the contemporary existence of racism and colonization, but the ways in which blacks have been historically positioned within these systems to remain cyclically enslaved. Baldwin declares the argument of language “has nothing to do with language itself but with the ‘role’ of language” (1). Examining this, “Baldwinism” refers to Baldwin’s rhetorical strategy of awakening the human consciousness to the presence of colonial systems such as English language. Speaking with a piercingly direct eloquence, Baldwin explains how such intellectual institutions refute blackness in order to uphold the distinction of whiteness in the Western racial paradigm. The concept of “Literary colonialism” personifies the ways in which English language facilitates social order and reproduces black dialect to re-assert power to whites in hopes of eradicating the presence of blackness in American society.

Baldwin’s argument is centralized around clearly articulating the distinction between history and culture. A debate about language would not be relevant if

not for a “history” of racism and slavery. The existence of whiteness in language is a means of achieving superiority. Baldwin states, “black English is rooted in American history” (1). Black English must be founded in “American history” since we classify “English” language as the Western or “American” system of communication. English Language then, is a manifestation of the oppressive western social systems of colonization, in which a “common” language is formed, “but each race has paid, and is paying, a different price for this common language, which, as it turns out, they are not and cannot be saying the same things” (1). “History” personifies the emergence and prominence of such colonial systems. Baldwin argues that American history is a façade of Western ideologies emphasized to colonize the mind and force blacks to agree to an oppressive commonality and accept a position of inferiority.

Historically, blacks were brutally killed and immorally dehumanized by whites. Whiteness was the noose which garnered the neck of black identity, seeking to steal the last breath of hope for a suffocating race. A race of racially identified “blacks” forced into a system of social representation, made to comply with a hierarchy designed to eradicate the existence of their race. Blacks were never granted the right of cultural relevance. Blacks were deprived of ambition and foreign to the realities of justice and equality. For this reason, The New Yorker proclaims that Baldwin’s work “had been greeted as a revelation about the cruelties of a racist culture and its vicious human costs”. (103). Raped, beaten and slaughtered for over 400 years of “American history”, black women and children were unidentified victims of a cultural genocide created to greater

empower an already superior white race. For blacks, “American history” is metaphoric of the oppressive systems of racism and colonization which became the basis of social and political development for this nation.

Racism is rooted in a hatred which derives from white insecurity. The uncertainty of purpose conjoined with the historical burden of upholding a fraudulent ideology of superiority both confuses and infuriates whites into a psychological rage, seeking to destroy that which it does not understand. Thus, Whites utilize hate as a defense mechanism; suppressing a fear of equality, with whiteness granting historical entitlement and justification for immoral activity. In his brilliantly articulate novel *Native Son*, Baldwin writes, “It is the peculiar triumph of society—and its loss—that it is able to convince those people to whom it has given inferior status of the reality of this decree; it has the force and the weapons to translate its dictum into fact, so that the allegedly inferior are actually made so, insofar as the societal realities are concerned” (20). Baldwin notes whites indulge in racism to construct an impenetrable shield from the perceived threat of a social power shift.

To counter, however, Baldwin assures, “American Negroes have no desire for vengeance. The relationship of blacks and whites is, after all, a blood relationship, perhaps the most profound reality of the American experience” (104). Yet to develop a common language and develop a “national” culture would be to act upon a romanticized and meaningless plea for a “new” society which fails to honor the true aspirations of the oppressed.

Because language “incontestably, reveals the speaker” one must understand the way language develops a system of racial identity. As race is a social construction in Western society, race is also prevalent within Western language. “Black” English is a sub-cultural extension of English language. “Black” implies the presence of a “black” speaker. Once the black identity is confirmed, black speech is then facilitated by the western classification of the black identity. Being grounded in America’s history assures this example of verifying a black voice directly correlates to the Western framework of identifying the “black” identity; “black” defined as the “other” or that which is not white. Baldwin speaks to this inescapable examination writing, “I have not written about being a Negro at such length because I expect it to be my only subject before I could hope to write about anything else” (8). This means an individual whose language is classified as “black” is subject to intellectual objectification, having their speech marginalized and shattered into fragments of subjugated dialect.

Baldwin states that because “language is meant to define the other—the other is refusing to be defined by a language that has never been able to recognize him” (1). Blacks justifiably object to defining their cultural means of “describing and thus controlling their circumstances, in order not to be submerged by a reality they cannot articulate” as simply “American” or English language. To do so is an act of ignorantly submitting to a Western ideology which was developed specifically to differentiate blacks and whites on the basis of power and privilege. Language is a medium of acquisition into the public discourse, Yet blacks were denied access and invisible to the public sphere.

Though this exclusion has been subject to an extensive debate for equal rights, Baldwin argues that such a desire is idiotic because the English language does not acknowledge the existence of Blacks. He states, “ It is quite possible to say that the price a negro pays for becoming articulate is to find himself, at length, with nothing to be articulate about” (6). For black people, the complete refutation of black dialect to perfect the English language is the same as forfeiting black speech to whiteness. Whiteness which, by definition, desires “freedom” from the black identity; agreeing to enslave your own intellectualism to preserve an “American” cultural “history”.

Further examining the colonial definition of history, Baldwin explains that black discourse is disregarded as English due to the Western desire to create a “common” language(1). This common language functions as a representation of a communal identity, or a universal compliance to the order presented within English language. The common language becomes the speech of a national culture, which the West has entitled “American”. Submitting to national culture means forfeiting affiliation to a native identity other than white. Blacks must conform to the ideals of a nation dominated by whiteness. For that reason, all races must be cataloged as “Americans”. Blacks must pledge the essence of their existence to uphold a patriotism that condones America’s practices of racism and colonization. Accepting Western categorization indicates an undisputed contentment with “historical” and “American” values. Hence, submissively adopting the “White” English language.

For blacks to approve of this conformation is to honor an undeserved loyalty to a country built upon racism, continuing through the exploitation and enslavement of fellow blacks. Such a commitment by blacks would be both ignorant and naïve. Historically, English language has been established as the common, “root” language of America. Yet, Baldwin argues that “Cultural” language must be created and developed to protect “private identities”, displaced from the racist social systems (2). Baldwin believes blacks, as well as other marginal groups should develop and cherish their own form of dialect specific to their circumstances and environment. Baldwin encourages blacks to use their “culture” to create “history”, but never use American history to create a culture, as whites impose their history to force the establishment of a culture.

Baldwin states, “what joins all languages, and all men, is the necessity to confront life, in order, not inconceivably, to outwit death: the price for this is the acceptance, and achievement, of one’s temporal identity” (1). Every self-identified group must develop a language as a means of expressing life. A “communal” reality does not exist as whites seek to create. Without a common reality, a common language cannot be established. Speech is only a relevant translation to others whose realities reflect the words being spoken. As a result, equality is not supported by language. Further, equality in the context of racial identity cannot be forced through the production of a national culture. To accept a common or “national” language is to assume a position of privilege and accept a role within the oppressive system. When a community lacks shared circumstances which influence their speech, no system within that society is just

in appropriating speech. This is because such speech represents a race or culture which is without appropriation.

Baldwin supports his argument of using culture to build a history of cultural significance, as opposed to using history to develop a communal culture of whiteness saying that “they[blacks & whites] each have very different realities to articulate, or control”(1). These “realities” are reference to the true conditions blacks face as being victims of the system, establishing their own private culture. The reality for whites is that of being the dominant; privileged and in control of the system. “White” culture then speaks to a history of whiteness. To elude the grasp of white culture, Black English must be established in order for blacks to assemble an alliance of black solidarity.

Black English is essential for disassociating from the “common” language and national culture of oppression. Baldwin advocates saying, “language reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity. There have been, and are, certain times, and places, when to speak a certain language could be dangerous, even fatal”(2). Black English is a means of literary liberation from literary colonization. Black English is a revolutionary vice used to combat the racist system of English language. Language is only considered “dangerous” because it reflects historical, civil race relations between blacks and whites. This is summed up simply: If you were black in a town where they hang, if I may use black English, “Niggas”, you had a high risk of death.

Terms such as “Nigger” used for racial oppression give a clear example how White Americans have sought to gain a sense of shared identity with blacks. Desiring to cover their own insecurities as a race, whites developed such terms within their racist, colonial system of language in order to construct a fantasized, iconic representation of what the “black” identity is. In the brilliant social critic Cornel West’s book *Race Matters*, there is an excerpt from the revolutionary negro author Ralph Ellison saying:

Since the beginning of the nation, white Americans have suffered from a deep inner uncertainty as to who they really are. One of the ways that has been used to simplify the answer has been to seize upon the presence of black Americans and use them as a marker, a symbol of limits, a metaphor for the ‘outsider’. Many whites could look at the social position of blacks and feel that color formed an easy and reliable gauge for determining to what extent one was or was not American.

Perhaps this is why one of the first epithets that many European immigrants learned when they got off the boat was the term “nigger”—it made them feel instantly American. But this is tricky magic. Despite his racial difference and social status, something indisputably American about Negroes not only raised doubts about the white man’s value system but aroused the troubling suspicion that whatever else the true American is, he is also somehow black.

-RALPH ELLISON

‘What America Would be Without Blacks’ (1970)(West 3).

Ellison gives a perfect description of the way whites operate their system of racism and oppression with the subconscious ambition to build a shared, or “national” identity with blacks. Such a desire by colonizers, even in a time of white power and domination, surfaces the hypocrisy of Western systems of

oppression, as well as showing the dependency of whites upon colonized groups to keep America functioning accordingly. Black English is “the creation of the black Diaspora” (2). Because of this, whites feel validated by their whiteness in accessing black means of communicating, as whiteness conducts an examination of the black identity. This sense of entitlement derives from the historical positioning of blacks as eternal slaves to American systems of whiteness.

Baldwin gives another example of Ellison’s point stating, ‘I do not know what white Americans would sound like if there had never been any black people in the United States, but they would not sound the way they sounds. *Jazz*, for example, is a very specific sexual term, as in *jazz me, baby*, but white people ‘purified’ it into the Jazz Age”(2). Baldwin illuminates the influence black English had on the birth of a musical phenomenon. Black culture became the standard of popular culture. Nevertheless, whites needed to claim ownership of language to remain dominant in the public sphere. Whites robbed such phrases from black English and reproduced them to function with a meaning parallel to the unjust principles of Western colonization.

Knowing that whites will continue to manipulate and reconfigure black English, Baldwin says jokingly, “now, no one can eat his cake, and have it, too, and it’s late in the day to attempt to penalize black people for having created a language that permits the nation its only glimpse of reality, a language without which the nation would be even more whipped than it is”(2). Whites have a vulnerable dependency upon black dialect and the “black” identity. Both black

dialect and the black identity are historically advocated as sincere testimonies of America's "truth". This "truth" is grounded in a history of lies and deceit. Such lies include America's investment in creating and valuing a system of morality and praising the false promotion of America as the "land of the free".

More truth and reality harbors in the ideological term "black" than white people may ever fathom. This self-proclaimed nation of freedom cannot be neither liberating or moral. America's primary systems purposely enslave and immorally separate its people by race and function. For this reason, Baldwin refers to America being further "whipped". In his novel *The Future of Race*, Henry Louis Gates states speaks to this notion saying, "The point isn't that there are black artists and intellectuals who matter; it's that so many of the artists and intellectuals who matter are black. Its not that the cultural cutting edge has been influenced by black creativity; it's that black creativity...is the cutting edge" (58). There is a vibrant complexity of beauty and power within the Black identity, which provokes a jealousy and hatred within Whites since they have historically excluded themselves from access relativity to blacks, or the "cutting edge".

Whites salivate with a desperate hunger to unveil this reality of America which appears exotic and enticing. A reality that requires a real experience and understanding of the suffering and victimization resulting from slavery, racism and colonization. The white race proved successful in protecting their race from being victimized by racial suffering and objectification. They enforced hierarchy's of power to praise and falsely validate white America as superior in the name of patriotism and Western moral value. Consequently, however, white people must

now diligently strive for a cultural commonality with blacks. Yet colonized groups should refrain from sympathizing because whites may not “have their cake and eat it too”.

In order for white people to “share” anything with blacks, whites have to humble themselves and forfeit their entitlement. History must be stripped of its contemporary duty of affirming the same degrading and dehumanizing American value system. The white race must refute the nature of their whiteness, apologize for history and admit their fear of inadequacy. In this apology, white people must admit their fear of inadequacy. They must acknowledge the place within their spirit which unconsciously shuns the black identity and the offspring of its cultural manifestation in America. Yet whites are too prideful. After blatant physical and intellectual violence performed upon black people, the white race refuses to accept their vicious role. To retreat from accountability, whiteness became their alternative to remain powerful. As a result, black dialect is not learned or comprehended but stolen and reproduced to become “American”.

Historically, as well as in contemporary society, whites accomplish their goal of translating black dialect into the English language. They do so to publically verify their superior placement in America’s social hierarchy. Metaphorically speaking, Whites receive gold medals in colonial body building. After years of being trained by history and tradition, whites boast their artificially developed strength gained by inducing a steroid: whiteness. America’s “stage” perceives whites as powerful giants, possessing superior strength. A “model” of greatness. However, while proving victorious, it is evident that the actual lifting of

weights and physical endurance proved inadequate in producing that success. More credit and attention should be directed toward the supplement taken than to the physical preparation.

The same scenario is apparent in the case of whites reproducing black language in America. Whites not only discredit black authenticity, but expose their ignorance which humiliates America's system of communication.

Baldwin gives an example of this saying:

“Beat to his socks which was once the blacks most total and despairing image of poverty, was transformed into a thing called the Beat Generation, which phenomenon was, largely, composed of *uptight*, middle-class white people, imitating poverty, trying to *get down*, to *get with it*, doing their *thing*, doing their despairing best to be *funky*, which we, the blacks, never dreamed of doing—we were funky, baby, like funk was going out of style”. (2).

Baldwin gives a perfect example of how whites exploit themselves when robbing black dialect. The phrase “Beat to his socks” signifies poverty for the black race. Poverty is synonymous with scarcity, shortage and deficiency. Poverty is the result of the wealth generated and kept away from blacks by a white-constructed capitalist system. Poverty is being stripped to your bare essentials, without a means of recovery. Because of white America's failure to relate to such circumstances, they respond out of prideful ignorance. Being both historically disassociated from and contemporarily protected from poverty, whites can only seek to address their desire to share the black identity. Because “black” represents a mysterious, hyper-sexualized, iconic representation of a culture popular in America, whites impose their entitlement to claim the language.

In doing so, not only do whites accept a reality they clearly cannot articulate, in this case being middle-class, but unconsciously give reverence to black speech as the root of popular American discourse. This exposes the irrationality and hypocrisy of Western systems of marginalization. Whites continuously exploit and victimize themselves in the attempt to marginalize the “other”. As white insecurity takes the forefront, blacks must understand their positioning as the “brand” of popular culture. Baldwin’s irony rests on an underlying principle that blacks inherit power in America and must remain true to their private identity in order to effectively combat against the oppressive system of race. Black English represents a clearer reality. A struggle and diligence too overwhelming for white comprehension.

The English language also discredits black English as language because its existence is astonishing. Distancing Africans from the English language was vital in securing slavery’s longevity. English was only available to white slave owners, creating a private identity for the colonizer. Baldwin addresses this issue saying, “Blacks came to the United States chained to each other, but from different tribes: Neither could speak the other’s language. If two black people, at that bitter hour of the world’s history had been able to speak to each other, the institution of chattel slavery could never have lasted as long as it did” (2). Africans were denied access to Western speech, and in such, whites believed Africans across the Diaspora would be eternally silenced.

Africans were made intellectual outsiders, expected to work mutely among other voiceless Africans whose native dialect failed to match. the language of

fellow Africans. However, as Baldwin states, “Black English is the creation of the black Diaspora” (2). Brutally beaten together, Africans became one. Enduring horrid health and malnutrition together, Africans became one. Suffering deadly working conditions together, Africans united. More significantly, being forced to slave and die as Africans, together, a shared experience was nurtured. Slavery generated enough commonality for Africans to produce a system of relative speech.

Black English, or African Dialect in America, was created through an internal desperation to articulate spiritual lamentations of real circumstances. Black speech is a prayer to a God which promised Africans their history of suffering was not in vain. A speech of triumph and resilience, special and exclusive. Black English has an eccentric quality only noticeable to Africans who can testify to the exile and abandonment which became the reason for developing the language. Baldwin speaks to the spiritual value of black English saying, “Subsequently, the slave was given, under the eye, and the gun of his master, the bible—or in other words, and under these conditions, the slave began the formation of the black church, and it is within the unprecedented tabernacle that black English began to be formed...this was not, in the European example, the adoption of a foreign tongue, but an alchemy that transformed ancient elements into a new language” (2). Black English is an extension of black spirituality. Black dialect is a voice of self-constructed religion established to give blacks hope and faith for a liberated future.

Blacks understand they cannot praise the spiritual representations of white people, because the white bible and the white church sought to spiritually enslave Blacks. Baldwin states, "A language comes into existence by a means of brutal necessity, and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey" (2). Therefore, when blacks communicate in their dialect, sermons are produced and shared to address the needs of the black community which embody black spiritual realities beyond the comprehension of whites. So not only have blacks conquered the impossibility of developing an "African-American" language, or shared language for Africans in America, but blacks successfully developed the language into an effective means of avoiding the racist systems of colonization which exist in America to create a speech of liberation and black solidarity.

It makes absolute sense. If I, as white America, dedicated my life, and the existence of my race, to enslaving, murdering, and destroying all sources of social and cultural empowerment for African people. And, in the process, consistently fail and humiliate myself, also exposing my racial insecurities; I would be mad at black people too. I would do everything in my fabricated power to deny that Blacks have dominated popular culture and heavily influence popular speech. For white America, devaluing black English is an infantile protest. Angry whites are complaining in outrage. They understand their contemporary lack of capability to remain all-powerful The United States.

Franz Fanon states, "The liberation of the nation is one thing; the methods and popular content of the fight are another. It seems to us that the

future of national culture and its riches are equally also part and parcel of the values which have ordained the struggle for freedom” (51). Liberation has been commercialized in popular Western conversation. Despite this, we cannot allow Western “history”, or Western ideals to become “popular”. It must be understood that the contemporary colonizers work to create a national culture which remains faithful to racist and separatist “American” principles. Blacks must recognize their power as a “brand” of exploration in America. A brand influential enough to unite and distant enough from white understanding to inspire fellow colonized people to learn from and develop their own private identities of language and empowerment. Such a literary revolution can be the basis of a cultural revolution powerful enough to combat the contemporary Western social systems of racism and colonization in “post”-colonial America.

James Baldwin combines a potent clarity with an admirable moral cunningness to examine the English language as a contemporary system of racism and colonization in a “post” colonial society. The text accurately repositions the debate of language from a question of form and appropriation, to a question of function and history. Black English is not accepted because black people are still not accepted. Whites America fears equality, while seeking to build a common identity with blacks. Such a national identity cannot be reached without holding the white race accountable for American History, in addition to whites accepting black dialect as a relevant means of communication. Literary colonialism is a very contemporary concept, signifying an endless struggle, yet to be conquered.

As the English, or 'American' language represents American History, there shall always be a need for blacks to withhold their exclusivity of speech. Baldwin says, "he[the white man] cannot afford to understand it...would reveal too much about himself...smash the mirror before which he has been frozen for so long"(2). Through the study of "Baldwinism" in addition to understanding Literary colonialism, blacks are now one step closer to re-envisioning their authenticity and power in America.

WORKS CITED

Baldwin, James. Notes of a Native Son. First. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955.

West, Cornel. Race Matters. First. New York: Beacon Press, 1993.

Roth-Pierport, Claudia. "Another Country: James Baldwin's flight from America." The New Yorker February 9, 2009: 102-106.

Baldwin, James. "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What is?." The New York Times July 29, 1979: 1-3.