

Black English

by Nicholas Stix



Krystyna Jachmowicz

“Those is the niggers that was f--kin’ with my sh-t.” “I knew that nigger was one of the niggers I could rely on.” The first speaker was a twentysomething “homegirl” from the projects, the second a drunk in his late 30’s. Both were riding on New York’s A train on different days and at different times. There was nothing extraordinary about their usage.

“That’s ‘transcendent’ [black] English,” said the young New Yorker, correcting her white professor, a 40-year teaching veteran. Faced with an error-riddled paper, the professor had sought to correct her English. But she denied his expertise. It’s a black thing, you wouldn’t understand.

From the end of the Civil War through the 1950’s, accommodationists such as Booker T. Washington, nationalists such as Carter G. Woodson (in *The Miseducation of the Negro*, 1933) and W.E.B. Du Bois, and revolutionaries such as George S. Schuyler (whose pseudonymously printed, serialized 1930’s newspaper novels have recently been collected as *Black Empire*) all were of one mind on the need for black Americans to become not just literate, but *superliterate*. Black illiteracy was either the result of racial oppression or of the passivity of the “inferior” black masses. In any event, educational movements led by the “talented tenth” would teach the Negro to outwit the white man.

Approximately 40 years ago, black nationalism underwent a profound change, embracing gangsterism. The “Black English” (“BE,” a/k/a “Ebonics”) campaign, which began about ten years later, is a curious amalgam of black supremacists and the white “progressives” who patronize and fear them and whom the Afrocentrists hold in contempt. One of the motiva-

tions of the new, gangster-style nationalist leaders was the desire to erect a world mirroring that of the then-recently departed Jim Crow. In this world, no white adult would be allowed to “disrespect” a black child by correcting him; white teachers who did so were “miseducating” black students. After all, according to Afrocentrism, blacks and whites are citizens of different nations. Blacks are neither “Americans” nor “African-Americans,” but *Africans*. The tag “African-American” was merely an intermediate step along the path toward total separation from everything American.

The argot described today as “Black English” is characterized by the constant use of street slang, obscenity, double negatives, the dropping of prefixes, word endings, and many verbs, and a lack of grammatical structure. The campaign to legitimate BE has been conducted largely through public agencies at public expense. With the help of wealthy, “progressive” white patrons, an upper-middle-class black insurgency imposed this idea on working-class and poor black children. Once it was decided that to be truly “black” was to be illiterate, promiscuous, and violent, it was child’s play to theorize that a “black learning style” was characterized by “relational” and “nonlinear” thinking (illiteracy and innumeracy). Intellectual excellence was derided from the gutter to the principal’s office as “acting white.” Millions of black parents who insisted on their children speaking proper English and doing their homework suddenly found themselves up against a formidable opponent—the state.

Some whites are willing to rationalize away all black educational failure. As a socialist political operative in New York confided to me during the 1988 Tawana Brawley hoax, “You can’t expect blacks to participate as equals in public discourse.” This is typical of such humanitarian racism. In fact, many progressives are so afraid of being called racists by blacks that they take

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the initiative in labeling any whites holding blacks to standards as “racists.”

The cultural split among blacks is between those who see gutter language as “liberating” and those who privately call it “slave talk.” However, public debate is limited by the commandment, “Thou shalt not criticize a brother or sister in front of *them*.” And the black nationalists who so delight in giving it to the “white devils” will call any black breaking ranks an “Orco,” “Rent-a-Tom,” “allegedly Black person,” “Negro,” etc. That is, when they are not letting their fists do their talking.

Fortunately, I have yet to run into a black student who corrects my attempts at improving his work. (I had a close call with one hostile student, but before he could erupt, the police suddenly showed up and arrested him during a class. I never saw him again.) I have had black students go beyond the countless copy editing and proofreading corrections I impose on all students, to fix phrasing I had left untouched. One young woman had used some street slang—“their no good, sorry ass selves”—which I found charming. By letting the slang pass, I had patronized her. It had no business in a philosophy paper. All the same, she took it upon herself to delete the slang in a later version.

The theory that American blacks speak a language of their own gained public notice during the early 1970’s. In *Black English* (1971), J.L. Dillard expounded the first systematic theory, while Geneva Smitherman, John Langston Gwaltney, and Molefi Kete Asante, among others, have since discoursed on the subject. In general, they oppose the older notion that American black English presents dialects of American English. BE’s central thesis, that blacks and whites speak *different languages*, equivocates on the distinction between “language” and “dialect.” By the same logic, Bavarians could argue that they do not speak a German dialect, but rather a separate language. Such a logic of exceptionalism could then be extended to every dialect of every language, just as many ethnic groups in the world today demand recognition as separate “nations.”

The examples of BE offered by Dillard (and to a lesser extent by Gwaltney) have the flavor of uneducated, poor, rural blacks, in a style more reminiscent of black Americans in 1871 than in 1971. Such pastoral romanticism must ignore the kinship between the English of poor, illiterate Southern blacks and that of their white counterparts. Smitherman’s examples, on the other hand, are more contemporary and urban. Her compendium of idiomatic phrases, not all of which are clearly black in origin, are colorful when used by accomplished speakers. However, today’s average black is no more accomplished at speaking than the average white.

A mixture of moralism and pseudoscience pervades works such as *Afrocentricity* and *Kemet, Afrocentricity & Knowledge* by Molefi Kete Asante (formerly Arthur Smith)—the “godfather” of Afrocentrism and chairman of Temple University’s Black Studies Department—and *Drylongso* by John Langston Gwaltney. Although Gwaltney is a professor of anthropology, *Drylongso* is less an examination of than a piece of instant folklore. The blind Gwaltney apparently fancies himself a “seer” in the African tradition of the “griot”; thus it would be disrespectful to question his authority. He gives the impression that he conducts his research by wandering from African village to village as a native wise man, but the truth is that his interviews were carried out in America! All he will tell us is that his research occurred during the early 1970’s. Gwaltney changes the names of his informants, whom he tells us were all relatives and

lifelong friends, and refuses to divulge the locations of his interviews.

Gwaltney’s book is full of normative judgments as to what constitutes a “core good black person,” along with a glossary of BE terms. Written exclusively with white patronage, the work was obviously intended for a white audience. Otherwise, why include a glossary of terms every black would know? Except that many would not. For instance, the term “ofay” is defined as meaning “white.” This is true, but only in the same sense in which “nigger” means “black.” Before it fell into disuse approximately 30 years ago, “ofay” was the most derogatory term a black could use in speaking of a white.

Other glossary entries are mutilated, given an exotic, patois-like sound like that of Cajun or Haitian Creole. For example, the flat consonant “lingua-alveolar” sounds (e.g., “t” and “d” sounds), made by the conjunction of tongue and gum ridge and associated with English and German, are changed to “bilabial” (two lip) sounds with a more French feel. Thus, the street term “diddley squat,” or “diddley” for short, becomes the exotic-sounding “doodlee-squa.” “Diddley squat” means “anything,” “nothing,” or “sh-t,” as in “They don’t pay diddley.”

The purpose of such mystification is to invent an exoticism that black American culture supposedly lacks. In a revealing essay 20 years ago—“If Black English isn’t a Language, What is?”—the late James Baldwin dropped all pretenses to scholarship or logic, arguing that American blacks’ history of enslavement and discrimination entitled them to see black English as a real language, linguistic criteria be damned.

All BE theories rest on the assumption that General American Speech (GAS) is “what white folks speak.” Anyone who has ever tried to teach English to white students of any age knows how wrong that premise is. GAS is a normative ideal; the average white speaks a shameful parody of good English. If things were otherwise, predominantly white colleges could shut down their “white English” writing programs.

If we take the explicit claims of BE advocates seriously, no white professor may teach black students. For he cannot possibly understand them, and they cannot possibly understand him. Yet, most black students obviously *do* understand their white instructors. Here the theory switches from the empirical to the normative. The principle of BE is that black students *should not* understand their white professors.

Presuming, as the theory suggests, that only blacks may teach black students, what would a BE writing class look like? Would the black professor instruct students on the “proper” use of the double negative, the “right” way to misspell, and how “appropriately” to drop prefixes, word endings, and many verbs? BE’s advocates claim to be positing an empirical theory of how blacks *do* in fact speak. Treating it rather as a theory of how blacks *should* speak demystifies its empirical claims.

BE arose as a strategy within urban welfare politics, when in the late 1960’s radical black student leaders and their white Marxist supporters demanded an immediate elimination of all barriers to the admission of unqualified black students not only to community colleges, but to previously selective (in the case of City College of New York, highly selective) four-year public schools. They demanded Black Studies programs with unlettered but radical directors and instructors (no whites need apply) to be chosen by “the community”; the granting of full faculty rank to unqualified staff members; and the introduc-

tion of remedial classes at the institutions in question. The hardy souls among professors, administrators, or students who dared stand up to the thugs were derided as “racists” or “sell-outs” and often physically assaulted.

Though the militants achieved only a portion of their demands, they did get intellectually fraudulent, “autonomous” Black Studies programs as political payoffs. The original plans for courses on “black” subjects within legitimate disciplines were soon trashed, in favor of separatist programs, barring white instructors. Washington’s nascent, ill-fated Federal City College at first openly barred white students from Black Studies, but admitted them when it became clear that the numbers of black students interested in the program were insufficient to justify its budget request.

Leonard Jeffries was named chairman of City College’s program with a knowledge only of the politics of the Ivory Coast and no publications to his credit. At the time, many of Jeffries’ peers were even less qualified. Psychologist Nathan Hare was named director of the Black Studies program at San Francisco State College simply because black nationalist students demanded it. Hare’s chief qualification was that he had recently been fired by America’s leading black school, Howard University, for being a perpetual troublemaker. In 1968, Washington’s Federal City College hired 25-year-old English instructor James Garrett. A playwright with only a bachelor’s degree and no research on black history, Garrett’s hatred of whites presumably compensated for his educational deficiencies. As Irene Tinker reported in 1973, Garrett saw a separate Black Studies program as serving the goals of “revolution and nation-building.” One

of his Federal City memos read, in part, “Black people are not western. They are westernized. In much the same way as one might get simonized. We are painted over with whiteness. . . . If you think that you can go to school and get what you call an education and feel that you will not have to pick up the gun one day to protect your life from these pigs and the rulers of the pigs and the rulers of the rulers of the pigs (those are the top pigs). . .”—you get the idea. The theory of “Black English” was simply an expedient extension of this gangster-style black separatism.

To test the veracity of BE as an empirical hypothesis, a black student need only attend a school in the “black Ivy League”—colleges of, by, and for black Americans, say Howard or Fiske University, or Spelman or Morehouse College. He should try using “Black English” in his essays for these black professors. Or upon graduating, he should try writing “black” for the black “slicks”—*Ebony*, *Essence*, *Jet*, etc.—written by, for, and about blacks. In either case, he would be tossed out on his ear.

“Black English” is clearly a strategy for dealing with whites in predominantly white institutions. In positing an insurmountable inability on the part of whites to understand blacks, it is stronger than the fashionable “insensitivity” thesis. Ultimately, though, as with all Afrocentrism, BE requires a constant state of exception: black nationalists are to be freed from the rules of logic, evidence, and ethics, and the findings of linguistics and biology. Defending BE involves constantly lying in one’s dealings with whites—not unlike the way many whites lie in their dealings with blacks.

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A 1930 Grad Revisits His Alma Mater

by *Harold McCurdy*

Measure for Measure slam-dunked on its head,
Lucio now truth-telling, the Duke a fraud
Guilty of humping Mistress O., the bawd,
And other failings Shakespeare left unsaid,

The feminist director reaps applause
For undergraduates bounding across the stage
In the chaotic license of their Age
Sanctioned by deconstruction’s popular Laws.

And Shakespeare is, and his good Duke, forgotten,
The Duke of godly mind, forgiving all
Who, being human, like Lucio, fall
Too much in love with everything that’s rotten.