

التمرد اللغوي: إعادة الدلالة للغة الإنجليزية القياسية في قصيدة لي روي جونز "بلاك دادا نيلاسموز"

Linguistic Rebellion: Re-signifying Standard English in LeRoi Jones' *Black Dada Nihilismus*

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الملخص

يُعتبر الشاعر الأمريكي من أصول أفريقية لي روي جونز (١٩٣٤-٢٠١٤) رائداً في تحدي الأفكار الغربية المتعلقة بالتحقير المتعمد للسود في الولايات المتحدة. حيث انه كان غير راضٍ عن نظام الدلالة في اللغة الإنجليزية القياسية بسبب اعتقاده بأن هذا النظام متحيز ولا يعكس احتياجات ورغبات الشعب الأسود. تناولت العديد من الدراسات كتاباته الثورية، ولكن لم تتناول أي دراسة تمرده اللغوي. لذا، تبحث هذه المقالة في تمرده ضد نظام الدلالة في اللغة الإنجليزية في قصيدته " بلاك دادا نيلاسموز" في ضوء نظرية "القرء الدال" لغيتس (١٩٨٨). تشرح هذه النظرية المحاولات اللغوية للكتاب الأمريكيين من أصول أفريقية في تحدي اللغة الإنجليزية القياسية. وتخلص المقالة إلى أن التمرد اللغوي لجونز هو تقنية حيوية لرفض دلالة اللغة الإنجليزية المتحيزة. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تعيد هذه التقنية إنتاج دلالات جديدة تتناسب مع التعبير عن الصوت الأمريكي الأفريقي في قصيدة جونز.

Abstract

The African American poet LeRoi Jones (1934-2014), was celebrated as the groundbreaker of Western ideas associated with the deliberate degradation of the blacks in the United States. He was dissatisfied with the signifying system of the standard English language due to his belief that this system is biased and does not reflect the needs and desires of black people. Many studies dealt with his revolutionary writings, yet no study examines his linguistic rebellion. Thus, this article investigates his rebellion against the English language signifying system in Jones' *Black Dada Nihilismus* in light of Gates' theory of *The Signifying Monkey* (1988). This theory explains the linguistic attempts of African American writers of challenging the standard English. The article concludes that Jones' linguistic rebellion is a vital technique of rejecting English language biased signification. Additionally, it re-signifies new meanings that fit the articulation of the African American voice in Jones' poem.

1. Introduction

Language is a key determinant of one's individual identity. It is a major ingredient for the colonized individual to cope with the new culture. In his landmark book, *Black Skin, White Mask*, Frantz Fanon, has remarkably explained the tragic sick identification of the colonized African minds with the European culture, and the infectious effect of the colonizer's language and culture on the colonized people. In a chapter entitled "The Negro and Language", he speaks extensively about the power a language possesses and how excelling in a language is linked to assuming a culture and accepting it as a supreme culture. Fanon explains how the colonized black people in France attempt to excel in the French language because that would make them whiter, in other words, more human. (1970, 35-36)

Fahamisha Patricia Brown in her book *Performing the Word: African American Poetry as Vernacular Culture* (1999) affirms that "the enslaved Africans developed their own mode of creative play which was oral. Since it was forbidden for them to learn reading and writing, the first mode was pidgin and then creolized form of English" (7). While it is an acknowledged fact that language is more than just a means of communication, it gives power to some while depriving others. Within the unique mixture of American society, the majority of the public are the whites and they are the ones who establish the rules of the mainstream. As a result, the standard English language is the official language of the country and the language of power, whereas the African American vernacular with its distinct feature remained powerless and stigmatized.

John McWhorter in his book, *Talking Back, Talking Black: Truths About America's Lingua Franca* (2016) affirms that racism is the significant reason behind the stigmatization of the African American

vernacular. He adds that anyone who wants to be intellectually acknowledged, must avoid using the African American vernacular, and learn how to perfect the use of the standard language (26). McWhorter maintains that black English is not a gutter talk, it is an alternate form of English, and it has its own rules which could be more or less complicated than the standard one (56). In addition, it is an identity marker for the African American community. McWhorter asserts that within the light of social science people tend to shape their language in a way that would best express their identity, and that's precisely what African Americans did (79). Thereby, depriving the African American speakers of their vernacular is like taking away a huge part of their unique identities.

Despite all the negative views against African American vernacular, many African American writers utilized it in their literary works. Geneva Smitherman in her study *The Power of the Rap: The Black Idiom and the New Black Poetry* states that the interrelationship between language and culture obliged a new generation of aspiring African American writers to use the African American vernacular in their literary works. Because for them to capture the actual African American experience in America they had to use the African American vernacular. The usage of the African American vernacular made this poetry difficult to be fully appreciated by white readers and white critics as well. These writers captured the flavour of Black American speech-its rhythms and sounds, both its dialect and style, they needed a new medium to their new messages. Furthermore, on a psychological level, language reinforces an individual's sense of identity and group consciousness, which best explains the reasons behind the act of any

colonizing nation to force their language on the colonized people and prevent them from using their mother language. (1973)

2. Henry Louis Gates' *The Signifying Monkey*

The Signifying Monkey was groundbreaking when first published in 1988, and it helped in establishing its' writer reputation as one of the most prominent American scholars. Henry Louis Gates Jr., an African American literary critic, has recognized the need for an African American literary theory since he believed that biased Western theories are not valid means to appreciate African American experience. So, he articulated the first African American theory of criticism based on African culture and tradition. In the preface to his book *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates declared that his book is a contribution "for the abolition of racist and sexist presuppositions in literary studies" (1988, xv).

The Signifying monkey deals with a uniquely African American linguistic practice, which involves the use of verbal aggressiveness. African American's let go of their anger, resentment, and frustration by a rather harmless war of words. In the foreword to *The Anthology of Rap*, Gates says that "Signifying is the defining rhetorical principle of all African-American discourse, the language game of black language games, both sacred and secular" (2010). This African American linguistic practice has passed the test of time. As a matter of fact, it's popularity has increased with the passage of years, and it spread worldwide in the shape of Rap which is the modernized version of Signifying. Gates asserts that Signifying has its roots in the rap. Both Signifying and Rap have the same linguistic verbal game and follow a complicated linguistic pattern, they are humorous and intensely profane, it is just the name that has changed throughout the years. Gates further adds that Signifying and Rap "draw strength by shattering

taboos, sending up stereotype, and relishing risqué language and subject matter”. (2010)

Gates, further, says that:

Signifyin(g) is a verbal game using many strategies like insults, puns and metaphors, and other techniques. It is an indication that what is said should not be taken literary, and that each word could have both a literal and a figurative meaning. Gates links this practice to an ancient mythical character, Esu-Elegbara, the trickster god of the Yoruba people and the messenger of the gods, who interprets the will of the gods to man, he is double-faced, a meditator and his meditation is a trick, “the divine linguistic” who speaks all languages. he is “double-voiced”, his mastery of language gives him immense power. (6-7)

In this sense, Signifying is a Defence mechanism to the African American speaker. When one looks at the way Africans acquired the English language, it makes perfect sense. Because Africans were forced to learn a new language, the language that marginalized them as the insignificant other, and was spoken by their oppressors. Hence, they used this new language in a uniquely African American way. In order for them to be able to express their resentment and anger at their situation, they had to send hidden or coded messages to each other via their speech, and they had to make sure that their white masters will not be able to decode their messages. As a result, they relied heavily on wordplay and they had to master this linguistic activity in their unique way to employ it as a weapon for their right. This African American linguistic practice was studied by many scholars and was given different names, but it was Henry Louis Gates who first studied it extensively and built his own African American theory of criticism.

3. Linguistic Rebellion in *Black Dada Nihilismus*

LeRoi Jones' *Black Dada Nihilismus* was first published in *The Dead Lecturer* (1964). Written in two parts, the poem legitimizes black Art by attacking the dominating rules of white Western arts. The overall tone of the poem is bitter, violent, and obscure. Throughout the poem, the reader can sense that the poet is struggling with the language. The language which marginalizes him and black people. He is fueled with anger and resentment which he expresses in the shape of verbal aggressiveness and insults against the whites. Edward Margolies described the poem as 'destruction of syntax, order, and sense [...] an expression of hostility [...] rage [and] contempt' (Margolies, 1968, 194–5). Baraka did not accuse the white establishment on an empty basis, he lists a variety of historical, political, and social incidents pertaining to the actual reason behind his hatred of the whites. All of which supports his main argument concerning the power of black rhetoric over the white.

The title of the poem is derived from radical Avant-garde philosophies from the Western canon, in particular, from Dadaism and Nihilism which are defined in Cuddon's *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* as:

Dadaism is A nihilistic movement in art and literature started in Zurich in 1916 ... "The term was meant to signify everything and nothing, or total freedom, anti-rules, ideals, and traditions. Dadaism became popular in Paris immediately after the first world war. The basic word in the Dadaist's vocabulary was 'nothing'. (Cuddon, 1999, 204)

Moreover, Nihilism is defined as:

A word invented by Turgenev in his novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862). It denotes a radical or extreme radical attitude that denies all traditional values, and, not infrequently, moral values as well. Turgenev invented it to describe the radical elements in the Russian intelligentsia who were profoundly disillusioned by lack of reform and believed that the only way to achieve anything was to destroy more or less completely all prevailing systems" ... "Nihilistic ideas spread and Nihilism threatened for a time to develop into quite powerful revolutionary force. (Cuddon, 1999, 547)

As can be noted, both of these philosophies defied the established standards of the West. However, the poet gave them a black particularity, or in light of Gates's theory, he signified them to subvert the dominance of these Eurocentric philosophies. His point was that, although these philosophies defied the rules, the black one is the true revolution that will demolish all the previous rules.

Against what light
is false what breath
sucked, for deadness.
Murder, the cleansed
purpose, frail, against
God, if they bring him
bleeding, I would not
forgive, or even call him
black dada nihilismus. (1-9)

Jones re-signifies Dadaism and Nihilism in a way that fits Gates' belief that African Americans empty the sign from the normal signified and fill it with new meaning, in other words, they repeat with a difference. By doing so, the standard white generated relation

between the sign and the signified is destroyed and new meanings will be created. This act is done unconsciously or even consciously by black speakers, and it will create a discourse that will stand side to side by the already existing one (46).

The very first line of the poem starts with a full stop, which gives a hint that something was omitted, perhaps something language failed to convey, which shows Baraka's struggle with language. Baraka uses irony to denounce the white western "light" and associates that light with many negative images such as "deadness", "Murder" and being "frail". The poet believes that the Western "light" is not so bright after all. it is based on superficial appearances and this the case with the western faith as well, "The protestant love, wide windows, color blocked to Mondrian", the churches are beautifully decorated with fine art, but it is empty of real faith. The poet is fed up with the shallow Western society, for being judgmental and stereotyping people based on appearances. The following extract from the poem sheds the light on the desperate attempts of Jews to assimilate into the American society:

and the
ugly silent deaths of jews under
the surgeon's knife. (To awake on
69th street with money and a hip
nose. (11- 15)

In *Amiri Baraka's Life-Changing Jazz Writing* published in The New Yorker by Richard Brody in 2014, Brody clarifies Jones' reference. Brody states that Jews were being stereotyped for having a hooked nose, which made a lot of Jewish people get nose jobs in unsterilized places leading to the death of many of them.

Interestingly, Baraka refers to many figures whether artistic, political, or even mythical from the western canon like Hermes, Trismegistus, Moctezuma, instead of all these western figures, he invokes a black one, A Black Dada Nihilismus, because the Western culture has turned the West into a "grey hideous place". Gillespie argued in *Black Dada Nihilismus: Theorizing a Radical Black Aesthetic*, that:

Black Dada Nihilismus is not simply the combination of the three linguistic signs: Black, Dada, and nihilism. It is both the critical philosophical meaning of those signs and what those philosophical meanings signify when conceptualized together as a theory of a Black radical aesthetic. (Gillespie, 2018, 113)

Gillespie adds that Jones writes the introduction to *Black Dada Nihilismus* to make the reader start seeing the West values as "values to be rejected, refused, and negated". (2018,106)

After introducing the evils of the "grey hideous" West culture in the first part of the poem. In the second part of the poem, Baraka violently propagates the total eradication of that culture and art and replacing it with a black one.

From Sartre, a white man, it gave
the last breath. And we beg him die,
before he is killed. Plastique, we
do not have, only thin heroic blades.
The razor. (26-30)

Believing that even the most radical white thinkers like Sartre whose name was associated with existentialism philosophy still provides a white version of the world. That's why Even the most radical white philosophy had to be removed completely. The poet was not mild by no means when expressing his anger with the Western world,

because the Western philosophy cannot be removed with "Plastique" which indicates the use of fair, polite, or reasonable language. Black artists had to be very extreme and use "thin heroic blades" or "The razor" which indicates the use of violent vernacular.

Why you stay, where they can
reach? Why you sit, or stand, or walk
in this place, a window on a dark
warehouse. Where the minds packed in
straw. New homes, these towers, for those
lacking money or art. (32-37)

The poet strongly rejects the urge to assimilate by some African Americans, because for him assimilation means the total loss of the Africans unique identity. In other words, black people should not try to be "white" or talk like them, use their syntax. Instead, he urges them to be proud of their blackness and roots. David Grundy in his book *A Black Arts Poetry Machine: Amiri Baraka and the Umbra Poets* (2019) clarifies that the last two lines refer to housing projects for the poor, the ones who are "lacking money or art" and to "the minds packed in straw" is a reference to public academies, Baraka himself studied in one, the typical black Howard University. He had a bad experience in that place, and he resented the fostered lie these institutions tried to sell, namely "middle-class success". (2019, 75)

Rather than, these desperate attempts to assimilate, the poet encourages black people to embrace the "cult of death". In one of his lines, Baraka uttered unimaginable violence directed towards the whites:

A cult of death,
need of the simple striking arm under
the streetlamp. The cutters, from under

their rented earth. Come up, black dada
nihilismus. Rape the white girls. Rape
their fathers. Cut the mothers' throats.
Black dada nihilismus, choke my friends
in their bedrooms with their drinks spilling
and restless for tilting hips or dark liver
lips sucking splinters from the master's thigh.
(37-46)

The utter violence was extremely difficult to be comprehended by lots of people, which made some critics argue that, the poet was spreading hate speech or as the New York Times described as "Baraka's call for black revolutionaries to rape and murder in the service of liberation," (Davis, 1999, 13). These kinds of views have been manipulated by the verbal game of Signifying of the African American vernacular because they have to take the literal meaning of these words and did not realize that it is merely an act of Signifying. Gates clarifies this saying:

Whereas in standard English usage signification can be represented signified/signifier and that which is signified is a concept, or concepts, in the black homonym, this relation of semantics has been supplanted by a relation of rhetoric, wherein the signifier "Signification" is associated with a concept that stands for the rhetorical structures of the black vernacular, the trope of tropes that is Signifyin(g). (48)

Actually, taking the figure of Black Dada Nihilismus into account, proves that the poet's call for rape, choke, and cutting throats should not be taken literally. The poet's aggression remains within in a philosophical frame of work. Grundy gives good insights as he says that the poet's call to "rape the white girls", "rape their father" plays at the stereotype of the black Rapist, which was a racial image

constructed by the paranoid white conservatives to refer to blackness and black revolutionary figures. (79). This affirms that the poet was being cynical and the way he invoked and used the stereotypical image of the black rapist offers a biting and humorous satire. This type of biting satire is one of the tropes subsumed under the verbal game of Signifying:

Black scream
and chant, scream,
and dull, un
earthly
hollering (47-51)

Furthermore, the poet invites blacks to "scream and chant" which is part of his desire for his people to speak up in the face of their oppressors. However, what is more, interesting is his description of the scream itself "un earthly hollering" which extends over two stanzas, and it indicates the poet's struggle with language. Gates stated that the blacks employed the linguistic practice of signifying to pin down and challenge prevailing discourses, or stereotypes. They subverted the standard "white" language to make a space for their being. Black artists willingly started spreading the black vernacular and the ritual of Signifying in their literary works and songs because it is a better means to express themselves, especially since it has some traces of the African culture. (1988)

The poet's rage can't be verbalized using the existing language which failed him and was not a sufficient means to express the intensity of his rage with the Western culture. The culture which was responsible for the brutal crimes committed by the "the lost nihil German killers"(58), a reference to the Nazis, which he associates with:

"all our learned art"

'member
what you said
money, God, power,
a moral code, so cruel
it destroyed Byzantium, Tenochtitlan,
Commanch
(got it, Baby! (59-65)

In the above-mentioned extract, Baraka expands on the reasons for his frustration with the Western culture's "money", "God", "Power" and "moral code". All of these basics defined the Western culture, instead of regulating people's lives in a justice way, they were so cruel and barbaric. Despite, the shiny slogans and the solid promises, they destroyed Byzantium, Tenochtitlan, and Commanch.

The use of the vernacular expression "(got it, Baby!" exposes the poet's deliberate breakage usage of the slang expression of the African American vernacular to legitimize its use. Rosenthal makes an interesting point in his *Some Thoughts on American Poetry Today*, saying that "Baraka utilizes the syntax, the cultural tokens and the vocabulary of uneducated blacks to a highly literate context of references" (1973, 61). In this vein, Baraka brings the vocabs of uneducated blacks and use it along with a highly complicated philosophical vocabulary taken from the white culture as an act of defiance and rejection to the views that regard the black vernacular as an unfit language in a philosophical literary work.

He dedicates the poem to a list of famous blacks such as willie best, one of the first black American film actors, Du Bois an African American civil rights activist, Pan-Africanist, and a writer and Toussaint Louverture, a Haitian general and best-known leader of the Haitian Revolution and a host of other black figures.

(may a lost god damballah, rest or save us
 against the murders we intend
 against his lost white children
 black dada nihilismus (71-74)

The closing lines of the poem goes along with the overall bitter, angry and ironic tone of the poem, the poet invokes the voodoo figure of Damballah to save them from themselves and save the white people as well. So, the matter of their saving is in the hands of a mythical figure, which defies the rational thinking of the western world.

4. Conclusion

This article has examined Jones' linguistic rebellion in his poem *Black Dada Nihilismus* to react to the biased signifying system of the standard English language. It is conducted in light of Gates' *The Signifying Monkey*, which releases Jones's anti-discourse against the linguistic stigmatization of blacks by the English language. Jones celebrates the African American vernacular, circulating the vocabs of uneducated blacks and use it along with a highly complicated philosophical vocabulary taken from the white canon in order to reject the racist views that regard the blacks unfit for intellectual thinking. Signifying the African American vernacular re-births the African culture, which helps in the articulation of their needs and desires.

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