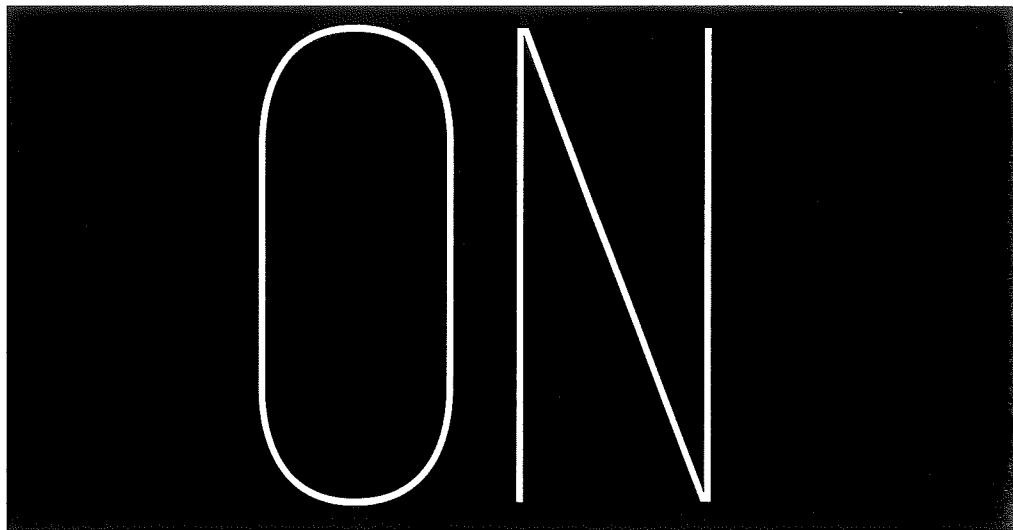


WEIRD



ON

A

JUNE JORDAN

Reader

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Introduction by Rachel Eliza Griffiths

"WHITE ENGLISH / BLACK ENGLISH: THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATION"

[1972]

[“White English/Black English: The Politics of Translation,” is as incisive and important as George Orwell’s 1946 famous essay “Politics and the English Language.” Orwell wrote about the obfuscating clichés of his time; Jordan celebrates the clarity and expressiveness of Black English, contrasting it with the perilous inanities of White English government-speak, as practiced by the Nixon administration. Jordan originally published the text as two articles in 1972: “White English: The Politics of Language” in *Black World* and “Towards a Politics of Language” in *Publishers Weekly*. She included the essay in *Civil Wars* (1981).]



WHITE ENGLISH

By now, most Blackfolks—even the most stubbornly duped and desperately light-headed nigger behind his walnut, “anti-poverty” desk—has heard The Man talking that talk, and the necessary translation into Black—on white terms—has taken place. Yeah. The Man has made his standard English speech, his second inaugural address, his budget statements, and ain’ no body left who don’t understand the meaning of them words falling out that mouth: In the *New York Times*, February 25, 1973, Dick Nixon has described the genocide perpetrated by America in Vietnam as “one of the most unselfish missions ever undertaken by one nation in the defense of another.”

Now, you just go ahead and let any little Black child lead you to the truth behind that particular, monstrous lie: let him tell you about the twelve days of Christmas “carpet bombing,” My Lai, day-by-day incineration of human lives, the mining of rivers, the bombing of hospitals, and “defoliation” of the land, over there. They all—all of them

whitefolks ruling the country—they all talk that talk, that “standard (white) English.” It is the language of the powerful. Language is political. That’s why you and me, my Brother and my Sister, that’s why we sposed to choke our natural self into the weird, lying, barbarous, unreal, white speech and writing habits that the schools lay down like holy law. Because, in other words, the powerful don’t play; they mean to keep that power, and those who are the powerless (you and me) better shape up—mimic/ape/suck—in the very image of the powerful, or the powerful will destroy you—you and our children.

Dick Nixon has declared that, since the U.S. of A. has completed its “unselfish mission” in Vietnam, America can turn “more fully to the works of compassion, concern and social progress at home.” Sounds pretty good, right? Translation: He means the death of all human welfare programs to end hunger, hazardous housing, inequity in court, injustice, and the suffering of poor health. Check it out; I’m not lying to you. Standard English use of the word “compassion” actually means the end of milk programs for needy school kids, an 18-month halt to every form of federal assistance for low-income new housing/rehabilitation, the terminating of Community Action Programs across the nation, and the subtraction of federal aid from elementary and junior high and high school systems especially intended to enable impoverished youngsters. And, since that’s what “compassion” means in White English, I most definitely do not see why any child should learn that English/prize it/participate in this debasement of this human means to human community: this debasement of language, per se.

See, the issue of white English is inseparable from the issues of mental health and bodily survival. If we succumb to phrases such as “winding down the war,” or if we accept “pacification” to mean the murdering of unarmed villagers, and “self-reliance” to mean bail money for Lockheed Corporation and bail money for the mis-managers of the Pennsylvania Railroad, on the one hand, but also, if we allow “self-reliance” to mean starvation and sickness and misery for poor families, for the aged, and for the permanently disabled/permanently discriminated against—then our mental health is seriously in peril: we have entered the world of doublespeak-bullshit, and our

lives may soon be lost behind that entry. In any event, The Man has brought the war home, where it's always really been at: sometimes explosive, sometimes smoldering, but currently, as stark, inhuman, and deliberate as the "perfect grammar" of Nixon's war cries raised, calm as a killer, against the weak, the wanting, and the ones who cannot fight back. How will we survive this new—this, to use a standard English term, "escalated"—phase of white war against Black life?

Well, first let me run down some of the ways we will *not* survive:

- 1/ We will not survive by joining the game according to the rules set up by our enemies; we will not survive by imitating the doublespeak/bullshit/nonthink standard English of the powers that be. Therefore, if the F.B.I. asks you do you know so-and-so, a member of the Black Panther Party, for example, you will not respond in this Watergate "wise": "I do seem to recall having had some association with the person in question during, or should I say, sometime during, the past." You will say, instead, for example: "What's it to you? What do I look like to you? What right do you have to ask me that question?"

- 2/ We will not try to pretend that we are the Pennsylvania Railroad or some enormous, profiteering corporation such as Grumman Aerospace, and consider the government pennies to "small businesses" initiated by "minority businessmen" to be anything other than what they are: pennies coping out on the mass situation of increasing disparity between the white Have-group and the Black Have-nots.

- 3/ We will not help ourselves into extinction by deluding our Black selves into the belief that we should/can become white, that we can/should sound white, think white because then we will be like the powerful and therefore we will be powerful: that is just a terrible, sad joke: you cannot obliterate yourself and do anything else, whatever, let alone be powerful: that is a logical impossibility; we must cease this self-loathing delusion and recognize that power and happiness and every good thing that we want and need and deserve must come to us as we truly are: must come to us, a Black people, on our

terms, respecting our definitions of our goals, our choice of names, our styles of speech, dress, poetry, and jive. Otherwise, clearly, the "victory" is pyrrhic. You have won a job, you think, because you have "successfully" hidden away your history—your mother and your father and the man or woman that you love and how you love them, how you dance that love, and sing it. That is victory by obliteration of the self. That is not survival.

4/ We will not survive unless we realize that we remain jeopardized, as a people, by a fully conscious political system to annihilate whoever/whatever does not emulate its mainstream vocabulary, values, deceit, arrogance, and killer mentality. This is a time when those of us who believe in people, first, must become political, in every way possible: we must devise and pursue every means for survival as the people we are, as the people we want to become. Therefore, when a magazine like *Newsweek* has the insolence to ask, on its cover: **WHATEVER HAPPENED TO BLACK AMERICA?**, we must be together, ready, and strong to answer, on our own terms, on our own *political* terms: none of your goddamned business; you know, anyway, you did it; you stripped the programs; you ridiculed/humiliated the poor; you laughed when we wept: don't ask: we gone make you answer for this shit.

White power uses white English as a calculated, political display of power to control and eliminate the powerless. In America, that power belongs to white power. School, compulsory public school education, is the process whereby Black children first encounter the punishing force of this white power. "First grade" equals first contact with the politics of white language, and its incalculably destructive consequences for Black lives. This is what I mean, exactly: both Black and white youngsters are compelled to attend school. Once inside this system, the white child is rewarded for mastery of his standard, white English: the language he learned at his mother's white and standard knee. But the Black child is punished for mastery of his non-standard, Black English; for the ruling elite of America have decided that non-standard is sub-standard, and even dangerous,

and must be eradicated. Moreover, the white child receives formal instruction in his standard English, and endless opportunities for the exercise and creative display of his language. But where is the elementary school course in Afro-American language, and where are the opportunities for the accredited exercise, and creative exploration, of Black language?

The two languages are not interchangeable. They cannot, nor do they attempt to communicate equal or identical thoughts, or feelings. And, since the experience to be conveyed is quite different, Black from white, these lingual dissimilarities should not surprise or worry anyone. However, they are both communication systems with regularities, exceptions, and values governing their word designs. Both are equally liable to poor, good, better, and creative use. In short, they are both accessible to critical criteria such as clarity, force, message, tone, and imagination. Besides this, standard English is comprehensible to Black children, even as Black language is comprehensible to white teachers—supposing that the teachers are willing to make half the effort they demand of Black students.

Then what is the difficulty? The problem is that we are saying *language*, but really dealing with power. The word "standard" is just not the same as the word "technical" or "rural" or "straight." Standard means the rule, the norm. Anyone deviating from the standard is therefore "wrong." As a result, literally millions of Black children are "wrong" from the moment they begin to absorb and imitate the language of their Black lives. Is that an acceptable idea?

As things stand, childhood fluency in Afro-American language leads to reading problems that worsen, course failure in diverse subjects dependent on reading skills, and a thoroughly wounded self-esteem. Afterward, an abject school career is eclipsed by an abject life career. "Failing" white English leads straight to a "failure" of adult life. This, I submit, is a fundamental, nationwide experience of Black life up against white English used to destroy us: literally accept the terms of the oppressor, or perish: that is the irreducible, horrifying truth of the politics of language.

Well, number one, we grownups: we, the Black mothers and Black fathers, and Black teachers, and Black writers, and grown Blackfolk,

in general: we do not have to let this damnable situation continue; we must make it stop. We cannot accept the terms, the language of our enemy and expect to win anything; we cannot accept the coercion of our children into failure and expect to survive, as a people. The legitimacy of our language must be fully acknowledged by all of us. That will mean insisting that white/standard English be presented simply as the Second Language. That will mean presenting the second language, obviously, with perpetual reference to the first language, and the culture the first language bespeaks.

Sincere recognition of Black language as legitimate will mean formal instruction and encouragement in its use, within the regular curriculum. It will mean the respectful approaching of Black children, in the *language of Black children*. Yes: it's true that we need to acquire competence in the language of the currently powerful: Black children in America must acquire competence in white English, for the sake of self-preservation: BUT YOU WILL NEVER TEACH A CHILD A NEW LANGUAGE BY SCORNING AND RIDICULING AND FORCIBLY ERASING HIS FIRST LANGUAGE.

We can and we ought to join together to protect our Black children, our Black language, our terms of our reality, and our defining of the future we dream and desire. The public school is one, ready-made battleground. But the war is all around us and the outcome depends on how we understand or fail to perceive the serious, political intention to homogenize us, Blackfolks, out of existence. In our daily, business phone calls, in our "formal" correspondence with whites, in what we publish let us dedicate ourselves to the revelation of our true selves, on our given terms, and demand respect for us, as we are. Let us study and use our Black language, more and more: it is not A Mistake, or A Verbal Deficiency. It is a communication system subsuming dialect/regional variations that leave intact, nevertheless, a language that is invariable in profound respects. For example:

A/ Black language practices minimal inflection of verb forms. (E.g. *I go*, *we go*, *he go*, and *I be*, etc.) This is non-standard and, also, an obviously more logical use of verbs. It is also evidence of a value system that considers the person—the actor—more important

than the action.

- B/ Consistency of syntax:
You going to the store.
(Depending on the tone, can be a question.)
(Depending: can be a command.)
(Depending: can be a simple, declarative statement.)

C/ Infrequent, irregular use of the possessive case.

D/ Clear, logical use of multiple negatives within a single sentence, to express an unmistakably negative idea. E.g., You ain gone bother me no way no more, you hear?

E/ Other logical consistencies, such as: *ours, his, theirs, and, therefore, mines.*

Our Black language is a political fact suffering from political persecution and political malice. Let us understand this and meet the man, politically; let us meet the man *talking the way we talk*; let us not fail to seize this means to our survival, despite white English and its power. Let us condemn white English for what it is: a threat to mental health, integrity of person, and persistence as a people of our own choosing.

And, as for our children: let us make sure that the whole world will welcome and applaud and promote the words they bring into our reality; in the struggle to reach each other, there can be no right or wrong words for our longing and our needs; there can only be the names that we trust and we try.

BLACK ENGLISH

As a poet and writer, I deeply love and I deeply hate words. I love the infinite evidence and change and requirements and possibilities of language; every human use of words that is joyful, or honest, or new because experience is new, or old because each personal history testifies to inherited pleasures and/or inherited, collective memories of peril, pain, and even genocide.

As a human being, I delight in this miraculous, universal means of communion: I rejoice in this communing means that leading linguists, such as Noam Chomsky, have now shown to be innate, rather than learned; thanks to the revolutionary work of such linguists, we now understand that word patterns connecting person to reality, and reflecting and/or responding to reality, are no more learned than the brain is learned or the intestine is learned: language is a communal means intrinsic to human life. And I celebrate this fact of language that man and womankind have been privileged to explore and extend always as a means of discovery and/or revelation and of coming together and/or reaching closer to social conditions that will justify and summon forth the lyrical, hallelujah telegrams of love and peace and victory for merciful, just, and life-supporting human conduct.

But, as a Black poet and writer, I hate words that cancel my name and my history and the freedom of my future: I hate the words that condemn and refuse the language of my people in America; I am talking about a language deriving from the Niger-Congo congeries of language. I am talking about a language that joins with the Russian, Hungarian, and Arabic languages, among others, in its elimination of what technicians call a "present copula"—a verb interjected between subject and language where I will tell you simply that, "They mine." (And, incidentally, if I tell you "they mine," you don't have no kind of trouble understanding exactly what I mean, do you?)

As a Black poet and writer, I am proud of our Black, verbally bonding system born of our struggle to avoid annihilation—as Afro-American self, Afro-American marriage, community, and Afro-American culture. I am proud of this language that our continuing battle just to be has brought into currency. And so I hate the arro-

gant, prevailing rejection of this, our Afro-American language. And so I work, as a poet and writer, against the eradication of this system, this language, this carrier of Black-survivor consciousness.

But we are talking about power, and poetry, and books—history books, novels, what have you—none of these can win against the schools, the teachers, the media, the fearful parents, and the ruling elite of this country, unless we understand the politics of language.

In America, the politics of language, the willful debasement of this human means to human communion has jeopardized the willingness of young people to believe anything they hear or read—even if it's just about the time of day.

And what is anybody going to do about it? I suggest that, for one, we join forces to cherish and protect our various, multi-foliate lives against pacification, homogenization, the silence of terror, and surrender to standards that despise and disregard the sanctity of each and every human life. We can begin by looking at language. Because it brings us together, as folks, because it makes known the unknown to strangers we otherwise remain to each other, language is a process of translation; and a political process, taking place on the basis of who has the power to use, abuse, accept or reject the words—the lingual messages we must attempt to transmit—to each other and/or against each other.

In short, the subject of "Black English" cannot be intelligently separate from the subject of language as a translation and translation as a political process distinguishing between the powerless and the powerful, in no uncertain terms. Here are a few facts to illustrate my meaning:

1/ Apparently, "Black English" needs defense even though it is demonstrably a language; a perfectly adequate, verbal means of communication that can be understood by anyone but the most outrightly, retarded, standard racist.

2/ On the other hand, where is the defense, who among the standard, grammatical white English mainstreamers feels the need, even, to defend his imposition of his language on me and my children?

3/ Thou know'st the mask of night is on my face,
Else would a maiden blush bepaint my cheek
For that which thou has heard me speak tonight.
 Fain would I dwell on form, fain, fain deny
what I have spoke: but farewell compliment:
Dost thou love me? I know thou wilt say "Ay"
 And I will take thy word: yet, if thou swear'st
Thou mayst prove false: at lovers' perjuries,
They say, Jove laughs.

—*Romeo and Juliet* (Act 2, Scene 2)

Now that ain hardly standard English. But just about every kid forced into school has to grapple with that particular rap. Why? Because the powers that control the language that controls the process of translation have deiced that *Romeo and Juliet* is necessary, nay, indispensable, to passage through compulsory, public school education.

4/ "You be different from all the dead. All them tombstones tearing up the ground, look like a little city, like a small Manhattan, not exactly. Here is not the same. Here, you be bigger than the buildings, bigger than the little city. You be really different from the rest, the resting other ones.

"Moved in his arms, she make him feel like smiling. Him, his head an Afro-bush spread free beside the stones, headstones thinning in the heavy air. Him, a ready father, public lover, privately alone with her, with Angela, a half an hour walk from the hallway where they start out to hold themselves together in the noisy darkness, kissing, kissed him, kissed her, kissing.

"Cemetery let them lie there belly close, their shoulders now undressed down to the color of the heat they feel, in lying close, their legs a strong disturbing of the dust. His own where, own place for loving made for making love, the cemetery where nobody guard the dead."

—*His Own Where*

Now that ain no kind of standard English, neither. Both excerpts come from love stories about white and Black teenagers, respectively. But the Elizabethan, nonstandard English of *Romeo and Juliet* has been adjudged, by the powerful, as something students should tackle and absorb. By contrast, the Black, nonstandard language of my novel, *His Own Where*, has been adjudged, by the powerful, as substandard and even injurious to young readers.

I am one among a growing number of Black poets and writers dedicated to the preservation of Black language within our lives, and dedicated to the health of our children as they prepare themselves for a life within this standard, white America which has despised even our speech and our prayers and our love. As long as we shall survive, Black, in white America, we, and our children, require and deserve the power of Black language, Black history, Black literature, as well as the power of standard English, standard history, and standard literature. To the extent that Black survival fails on these terms, it will be a political failure: it will be the result of our not recognizing and not revolting against the political use of language, to extinguish the people we want to be and the people we have been.

Politics is power. Language is political. And language, its reward, currency, punishment, and/or eradication—is political in its meaning and in its consequence.

A few days ago, a white woman telephoned to ask me to appear on her television program: she felt free to tell me that if I sounded “Black” then she would not “hire” me. This is what I am trying to say to you: language is power. And that woman is simply one of the ruling powerful people in white America who feel free to reject and strangle whoever will not mimic them—in language, values, goals. In fact, I answered her in this way: You are a typical racist. And that is the political truth of the matter, as I see it, as I hope you will begin to see it: for no one has the right to control and sentence to poverty anyone—because he or she is different and proud and honest in his or her difference and his or her pride.

Let me end by focusing on Black language, per se: A young friend of mine went through some scarifying times, leaving her homeless. During this period of intense, relentless dread and abuse, she wrote

poems, trying to cope. Here are two lines from her poetry: “what have life meanted to me” and, “you are forgotten you use to exist-ed.” There is no adequate, standard English translation possible for either expression of her spirit. They are intrinsically Black language cries of extreme pain so telling that even the possibilities of meaning and existence have been formulated in a past tense that is emphatic, severe. I deeply hope that more of us will want to learn and protect Black language. If we lose our fluency in our language, we may irreversibly forsake elements of the spirit that have provided for our survival.

“PROBLEMS OF LANGUAGE IN A DEMOCRATIC STATE”

[1982]

[Black English and Standard English were both in trouble by the 1980s. The media reported that most college students could no longer think analytically, read with understanding, or express themselves with clarity. Jordan responded to the “crisis” with alacrity and acumen. She delivered “Problems of Language in a Democratic State” as the keynote address for the 1982 Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English in Washington D.C. She included it in *On Call* (1985).]

In America, you can segregate the people, but the problems will travel. From slavery to equal rights, from state suppression of dissent to crime, drugs and unemployment, I can’t think of a single supposedly Black issue that hasn’t wasted the original Black target group and then spread like the measles to outlying white experience.

If slavery was all right, for example, is state violence and law could protect property rights against people, then the Bossman could call out the state against striking white workers. And he did. And nobody bothered to track this diseased idea of the state back to the first victims: Black people. Concepts of the state as the equal servant of all people, as the resource for jobs or subsistence income; concepts of the state as a regulator of the economy to preserve the people from hunger and sickness and doom, these are ideas about a democratic state that have been raised, repeatedly, by minority Americans without majority support.

Most Americans have imagined that problem affecting Black life follow from pathogenic attributes of Black people and not from malfunctions of the state. Most Americans have sought to identify themselves with the powerful interests that oppress poor and minority peoples, perhaps hoping to keep themselves on the shooting side of the target range.

Nevertheless and notwithstanding differences of power, money, race, gender, age and class, there remains one currency common to all of us. There remains one thing that makes possible exchange, shared memory, self-affirmation and collective identity. And isn't that currency known and available to everybody regardless of this and that? And isn't that common currency therefore the basis for a democratic state that will not discriminate, or non-discriminating, currency our language? Isn't that so?

I remember very clearly now, when I first became a teacher, back in the 60s, popular wisdom had it that the only American boys and girls who could neither read nor write were Black. This was a function of the poverty of culture or vice versa. I forgot which. But anyway, Black children had something wrong with them. They couldn't talk right. They never heard a word you said to them. They seemed to think that they should throw their books around the rooms or out the windows. And another thing, their parents were no good or they were alcoholics or illiterate or, anyhow, uninterested, inept, and rotten models.

Obviously, school was cool. It was just the students who kept messing up. In those days teachers were frequently brave, depressed,

dedicated, idealistic, tireless, and overworked, but they were never accountable for their failures to teach Black children how to read and write. That was not their responsibility. That was a minority problem of language, in a democratic state.

At the least, most Americans have tried to avoid what they call trouble: opposition to the powerful is a pretty sure way to get yourself in trouble.

But lately these same Americans have begun to understand that trouble does not start somewhere on the other side of town. It seems to originate inside the absolute middle of the homemade cherry pie. In our history, the state has failed to respond to the weak. State power serves the powerful. You could be white, male, Presbyterian and heterosexual besides, but if you get fired or if you get sick tomorrow, you might as well be Black, for all the state will want to hear from you. More and more of the majority is entering that old minority experience of no power: unless you stay strong, state power does not want to sweetly wait upon you.

And when minority problems become the problem of the majority, or when the weak stay weak and the strong become weak, then something does seem to be mighty wrong with the whole situation. I suggest that as long as state power serves the powerful, more and more of the people of this democracy will become the powerless. As long as we have an economic system protected by the state rather than state protection against economic vagaries and deprivations, then your and my welfare become expandable considerations.

Less than two decades after the 60s and I find national reports of a dismal discovery occurring at Harvard, at the nearby community college and on the state campus where I teach. Apparently the minority problem of language has become a majority problem of low-level reading and writing skills. Every university in the nation now recognizes that most of its students seriously lack those analytical abilities that devolve from disciplined and critical and confident and regular exercise of the mind. Students cannot express themselves, clearly. They cannot judge if an essay is gibberish or coherent. They cannot defend a point of view. They cannot examine a written document and then accurately relate its meaning or uncover its purpose.

And either they have nothing to say, or else they talk funny. How did this happen?

I know what went down for Black kids, the ones people dismissed as unruly, unteachable. What those children brought into the classroom: their language, their style, their sense of humor, their ideas of smart, their music, their need for a valid history and a valid literature—history and literature that included their faces and their voices—and serious teachers who would tell them, “C’mom, I see you. Let me give you a hand,”—all of this was pretty well ridiculed and rejected, or denied to them.

Mostly Black kids ran into a censorship of their living particular truth, past and present. Nobody wanted to know what they felt or to teach them to think for themselves. Nobody wanted to learn anything from them. Education was a one-way number leading from the powerful teacher to the trapped parolee. Nobody wanted to hear any more political arguments raised by the fact of certain children whom the compulsory school system consistently failed. Not too many people wanted to grant that maybe schools really are political institutions teaching power to the powerful and something unpalatable and self-destructive to the weak. Not too many people wanted to reexamine their fantasies about the democratizing function of American education.

And when Black dropout rates across the country soared and stabilized at irreversible tragic heights because the kids figured, “If you don’t know and don’t care about who I am then why should I give a damn about what you say you do know about.” The popular wisdom smiled, satisfied: Good riddance to a minority uproar.

But meanwhile, white youngsters fared only somewhat better. These are American kids required to master something described as the English language. These are American kids required to study what’s accurately described as English literature. When will a legitimately American language, a language including Nebraska, Harlem, New Mexico, Oregon, Puerto Rico, Alabama and working-class life and freeways and Pac-Man become the language studied and written and glorified in the classroom?

When will a legitimate American literature rightfully supplant

nostalgia for Queen Mary? Who teaches white kids to think for themselves? Who has ever wanted white children to see their own faces, clearly, to hear their own voices, clearly?

I believe Americans have wanted their sons and daughters to write just well enough to fill out a job application. Americans have wanted their children to think just well enough to hold that job. Not too many people have wanted to start trouble, or get into it. So I would say that our schools have served most of us extremely well. We have silenced or eliminated minority children. We have pacified white children into barely competent imitations of their fear-ridden parents.

But now there are no jobs and, consequently, somebody needs to write aggressive new editorials. Somebody needs to write aggressive new statements of social design and demand. More and more Americans finally want to hear new sentences, new ideas, to articulate this unprecedented, and painful, majority situation. But is there anybody new around the house? Someone who can think and organize a solution to this loss of privilege, this loss of power?

I am talking about majority problems of language in a democratic state, problems of a currency that someone has stolen and hidden away and then homogenized into an official “English” language that can only express non-events involving nobody responsible, or lies. If we lived in a democratic state our language would have to hurtle, fly, curse, and sing, in all the common American names, all the undeniable and representative and participating voices of everybody here. We would not tolerate the language of the powerful and, thereby, lose all respects for words, *per se*. We would make our language conform to the truth of our many selves and we would make our language lead us into the equality of power that a democratic state must represent.

This is not a democratic state. And we put up with that. We do not have a democratic language. And we put up with that. We have the language of the powerful that perpetuates that power through the censorship of dissenting views.

This morning I watched TV. Four white men sat around talking about some ostensibly important public issue. Everyone of them was wealthy, powerful, accountable to you and me and also accustomed

to the nationwide delivery of his opinions on a lot of subjects. Except for Tom Wicker, who can't shake his trembling southern drawl for the life of him, they might be quadruplets from an identical Ma and Pa. After about half an hour of this incestuous display, the moderator announced that, after the commercial, he'd send these "experts" out of the studio and replace them with quote for all unquote.

I could hardly wait.

After the break, the moderator returned with his new guests: four white men, everyone of them wealthy, powerful, unaccountable to you and me and also accustomed to the nationwide delivery of his opinions! So much for a quote free for all unquote.

When I say that those particular white men all sounded alike, I am not exaggerating. All of them used the language of the state seeking to transcend accountability to the people, as in: "The Federal reserve has been forced to raise interest rates" or "It is widely believed ..." or "While I can't comment on that I would like to emphasize that it has been said, many times ..." or "When you take all of those factors into consideration it is obvious ..." or "Unemployment has emerged as a number one concern." Is somebody really saying those words? Is any real life affected by those words? Should we really just relax into the literally non-descript, the irresponsible language of the passive voice? Will the passive voice lead us safely out of the action? Will the action and the actors behind it leave us alone so long as we do not call them by their real names?

We have begun to live in the land of Polyphemus. Poor Polyphemus! He was this ugly and gigantic, one-eyed Cyclops who liked to smash human beings on rocks and eat them. But one day he happened to capture the wily and restless Ulysses who, one night, gave Polyphemus so much wine that the poor lunk fell into a drunken sleep. Taking advantage of his adversary's discomposure, Ulysses and a couple of his buddies seized a great stick and heated its tip in the nearby, handily burning, fire. When the tip was glowing hot, Ulysses and his buddies stuck that thing into the one eye of Polyphemus, twisting it deeply into that socket, and blinding him.

Polyphemus howled a terrible loud howl. He was in much pain. "What is the name of the man who has done this to me?" he cried.

And the wily Ulysses answered him, "My name is No One."

Later, several other Cyclops raced up to Polyphemus, because they had heard him howling.

"Who did this to you?" they asked.

Polyphemus screamed his accusation for the world to hear: "No One has done this to me!"

Well, when the fellow Cyclops heard that they decided that if No One had done this to Polyphemus, it must be the will of the gods. Hence nothing could or should be done about the blinding of Polyphemus. And so nothing was done.

And after a while, Ulysses and his men escaped, unnoticed by the blinded Cyclops.

I share this story with you because it remains one of my favorites and because it was the only reason I stayed awake during my second year of Latin.

And I tell you about Polyphemus because we seem determined to warp ourselves into iddy-biddy imitations of his foolishness. To repeat: the other Cyclops decided that if no one had done anything then nothing was to be done. What happened to him represented the will of the gods.

I worry about that notion of a democratic state. Do we really believe 11.5% unemployment represents God's will? Is that why the powerful say, "Unemployment has emerged?" If that construction strikes your ear as somehow ridiculous because, quite rightly, it conjures up the phenomenon of unemployment as if it emerges from nowhere into nothing, then what sense do you make of this very familiar construction used, very often, by the powerless: "I lost my job." Who in his or her right mind loses a job? What should I understand if you say something like that to me? Should I suppose that one morning you got up and drank your coffee and left the house, but, then, you just couldn't find your job? If that's not what anybody means then why don't we say, "GM laid off half the night shift. They fired me."

Who did what to whom? Who's responsible?

We have a rather foggy mess and not much hope for a democratic state when the powerless agree to use a language that blames the

victim for the deeds of the powerful.

As in: "I was raped." What should we conclude from that most sadly passive use of language? By definition, nobody in her right mind can say that, and mean it. For rape to occur, somebody real has to rape somebody else, equally real. Rape presupposes a rapist and a victim. The victim must learn to make language tell her own truth: He raped me.

But the victim accommodates to power. The victim doesn't want any more trouble; someone has already fired him or someone has already raped her, and so the victim uses words to evade a further confrontation with the powerful.

By itself, our language cannot refuse to reflect the agonizing process of alienation from ourselves. If we collaborate with the powerful then our language will lose its currency as a means to tell the truth in order to change the truth.

In our own passive ways, we frequently validate the passive voice of a powerful state that seeks to conceal the truth from us, the people. And this seems to me an ok situation only for a carnivorous idiot like Polyphemus.

I would not care if, for example, instead of bashing men's heads against the rocks, Polyphemus decided to watch TV, every evening. I wouldn't even care if he, consequently, became addicted to that ultimate passive experience, although maybe that's why he thought that when you murder somebody it's not such a big deal: the agony will last only a couple of minutes until the much more exciting drama of Ajax the Foaming Cleanser takes over the screen. Some people should be pacified. Polyphemus was one of those.

But I really think that a democratic state presupposes a small number of psychopathic giants and a rather huge number of ordinary men and women who cannot afford to resemble Polyphemus.

In September of this year, a huge number of ordinary men and women came out of their houses to make an outcry against the language of the state. Four hundred thousand Israeli plunged into the streets of Tel Aviv to demand an investigation of the massacre in Lebanon. They insisted. They must know: who did what to whom?

Against official pronouncement such as: "Security measures have

been taken," or "It seems that an incident has taken place inside the camps," nearly half a million Israelis, after the massacre at Sabra and Shatilah, demanded another kind of language: an inquiry into the truth, an attribution of responsibility, a forcing of the powerful into an accountability to the people. As Jacobo Timmerman writes in his Israeli *Journal of the Longest War*, it did seem to him that the democratic nature of the state lay at risk.

All the summer leading to Sabra and Shatilah I lived with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. It did not kill me. As Timmerman has described our remarkable endurance of the unendurable, "...nobody has yet died of anguish." But the invasion killed other people: tens of thousands died and I watched it happen. I sat down and I read the newspaper accounts or I listened to the nightly news. The uniformity of official state language appalled me. How could this be 1984 in 1982?

I saw American reporters respectfully quote Philip Habib as having proclaimed, "This is a ceasefire" even as the whistling bombs drowned out the broadcast. When Menachem Begin declared, "This is not an invasion," his statement appeared in print and on the screen, everywhere as the world news of the day, even as the Israeli tanks entered Beirut.

During that same September, 1982, and shortly before Sabra and Shatilah, Israeli planes bombed the houses and the hospitals and the schools of West Beirut for twenty-two hours, unceasingly. But this was something, evidently, other than a massacre. Our American newspapers and newsmen told us that this was a "tightening of the noose" in order to "speed negotiations at the peace table."

But when one word finally burst through that foggy mess of American mass media, and when that word was *massacre*, who took it to the streets? Who called for an investigation of the government and moved to put the leadership on trial? Who said *stop*?

It happened in another country where the citizens believe it matters when the state controls the language. It didn't happen here. It happened when the citizens decided that the passive voice in a democracy means something evil way beyond a horribly mixed metaphor. It didn't happen here.

It happened in Israel. And we Americans should be ashamed. But we were looking for a language of the people; we were wondering why our children do not read or write.

Last week a delegation of Black women graduate students invited me to address a large meeting that loud yellow flyers described as "A Black Sisters Speak-Out" followed by two exclamation points. I went to the gathering with great excitement. Obviously, we would deal with one or another crisis; whether national or international, I simply wondered which enormous and current quandary would be the one most of the women wanted to discuss.

During the warm-up period one of the women announced that we should realize our debt to the great Black women who have preceded us in history. "We are here," she said, "because of the struggle of women like," and here her sentence broke down. She tried again. "We have come this far because of all the Black women who fought for us like, like ..." and here only one name came to her mouth: "Sojourner Truth!" she exclaimed, clearly relieved to think of it, but, also embarrassed because she couldn't keep going. "And," she tried to continue, nevertheless, "the other Black women like ... but here somebody in the audience spoke to her rescue, by calling along the name of Harriet Tubman. At this point I interrupted to observe that now we had two names for 482 years of our Afro-American history.

"What about Mary McLeod Bethune?" somebody else ventured at last. "That's three!" I remarked, in the manner of a referee: "Do we have a fourth?"

There was silence. Thoroughly embarrassed, the first woman looked at me and said, "Listen. I could come up with a whole list of Black women if my life depended on it."

⁴ "Well," I had to tell her, "It does."

But even this official erasure of their faces and their voices was not what those students wanted to discuss. Something more hurtful than that was bothering them. As one by one these Black women rose to express themselves, the problem was this:

A lotta times and I'm walking on campus and I see another Black woman and sol'll say 'Hi' but then she won't answer me and I don't

understand it because I don't mean we have to get into a conversa-

tion or do all of that like talking to me but you could say, 'Hi.' If you see me you could say, 'Hi.'

I was stunned. From looking around the room I knew there were Black women right there who face critical exposure to bodily assault, alcoholic mothers, and racist insults and graffiti in the dorms. I knew that the academic curriculum omitted the truth of their difficult lives. I knew that they certainly would not be found welcome in the marketplace after they got their degrees.

But the insistent concern was more intimate and more pitiful and more desperate than any of those threatening conditions might suggest. The abject plea of those Black women students was ruthlessly minimal: "If you see me, you could say, 'Hi.' Let me know that you see me; let me know I exist. Never mind a conversation between us, but, please, if you see me, you could say, 'Hi.'"

Who can tell these Americans that they should trust the language available to them? Who will presume to criticize their faltering, their monosyllables, their alienation from a literature that condemns them to oblivion?

If you chose, you can consider this desperation a minority problem in America, today, and then try to forget about it. But I believe this invisibility and this silence of the real and various people of our country is a political situation of language that every one of us must move against, because our lives depend on it.

I believe we will have to eliminate the passive voice from our democracy. We will have to drown out the official language of the powerful with our own mighty and conflicting voices or we will perish as a people. Until we can tell our children that the powerful people are the children, themselves, then I do not see why we should expect our children to read or write anything.

Until we can tell our children that truth is the purpose of our American language, and that the truth is what they know and feel and need, then I believe our children will continue to act as though the truth is just something that will get you into trouble.

I believe that somebody real has blinded America in at least one

eye. And, in the same way that so many Americans feel that "we have lost our jobs," we suspect that we have lost our country.

We know that we do not speak the language.

And I ask you: well, what are we going to do about it?

"NOBODY MEAN MORE TO ME THAN YOU AND THE FUTURE LIFE OF WILLIE JORDAN"

[1985]

[Soon after her promotion to Professor at Stony Brook University, Jordan began designing a course on Black English. She did not know of anyone else who had attempted a project like this. "Nobody Mean More to Me Than You And the Future Life of Willie Jordan" tells the story of developing and teaching that class, "The Art of Black English," and entwines it with the story of her student Willie Jordan. His twenty-five-year-old brother, Reggie, was killed midsemester by a policeman. Jordan published the essay in *On Call* (1985). She dedicated the book to "The Future Life of Willie Jordan."]

because that house was meant to shelter a family that is alien and hostile to us. As we learn our way around this environment, either we hide our original word habits, or we completely surrender our own voice, hoping to please those who will never respect anyone different from themselves: Black English is not exactly a linguistic buffalo, but we should understand its status as an endangered species, as a perishing, irreplaceable system of community intelligence, or we should expect its extinction, and, along with that, the extinguishing of much that constitutes our own proud, and singular identity.

What we casually call "English," less and less defers to England and its "gentlemen." "English" is no longer a specific matter of geography or an element of class privilege; more than thirty-three countries use this tool as a means of "intranational communication."² Countries as disparate as Zimbabwe and Malaysia, or Israel and Uganda, use it as their non-native currency of convenience. Obviously, this tool, this "English," cannot function inside thirty-three discrete societies on the basis of rules and values absolutely determined somewhere else, in a thirty-fourth other country, for example. In addition to that staggering congeries of non-native users of English, there are five countries, or 333,746,000 people, for whom this thing called "English" serves as a native tongue.³ Approximately 10% of these native speakers of "English" are Afro-American citizens of the U.S.A. I cite these numbers and varieties of human beings dependent on "English" in order, quickly, to suggest how strange and how tenuous is any concept of "Standard English."

Obviously, numerous forms of English now operate inside a natural, an uncontrollable, continuum of development. I would suppose "the standard" for English in Malaysia is not the same as "the standard" in Zimbabwe. I know that standard forms of English for Black people in this country do not copy that of whites. And, in fact, the structural differences between these two kinds of English have intensified, becoming more Black, or less white, despite the expected homogenizing effects of

¹ Black English aphorism crafted by Monica Morris, a Junior at S.U.N.Y. at Stony Brook, October, 1984. [The footnotes in this essay are Jordans.]

² English is Spreading, But What Is English. A presentation by Professor S.N. Sridahn, Dept. of Linguistics, S.U.N.Y. at Stony Brook, April 9, 1985: Deans Conversation Among the Disciplines.

³ Ibid.