

Space, Race, and Language Through Black Juvenile Experience: A Comparative Study on “Big Boy Leaves Home” (1938) By Richard Wright And Albert French’s *Billy* (1994)

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Resumé: La race et l’espace se sont toujours entremêlés pour rendre le vivre avec l’autre (blanc) difficile. Cette expérience du racisme est représentée dans deux œuvres afro-américaines dont la nouvelle de Richard Wright, « Big Boy Leaves Home » de *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938) et *Billy* (1994) d’Albert French. Ces deux œuvres ont ceci en commun qu’elles traitent des rapports interraciaux à travers deux jeunes protagonistes afro-américains qui, pratiquement broyés par les lois « Jim Crow » du Sud des Etats-Unis d’Amérique, lutteront tant bien que mal pour échapper à cet espace et ses effets racistes. Si Big Boy parvient à s’échapper par train vers le Nord, Billy sera injustement électrocuté pour avoir tué une fillette blanche. Cette étude revisite le passé américain pour en exposer cette tache noire qui persiste toujours: le racisme contre la plus vieille minorité des Etats-Unis, Les Noirs.

Mots clés: Espace, race, langue, noir, expérience, crime, Etats-Unis

Abstract: Race and space have almost always been an integral part of African-American writing dealing with Black people’s experience in the US. Race mingles with inclement space to make life difficult for two young boys who just want to live like their agemates on the other side of the racial line. This study is on Richard Wright’s “Big Boy Leaves Home” from *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938) and Albert French’s *Billy* (1994), is an exercise into a comparative inquiry on Black people’s experience with space, language and racism. The two works share much in common, from the use of history through racism and the use of Black dialect. Like Wright’s short story, French’s novel revisits the American past through its southern compound of race relations in order to expose racism in America and how such an enormity took a heavy toll on Black people because it still plagues America’s historical minority (Blacks).

Keywords: Space, race, language, black, experience, crime, America

Introduction

From early African-American writings (slave narratives) through fictional works by African-Americans in the post-emancipation era, one constant approach to literature emerges. It is a faithful depiction of the real and lived experiences of these people in order for them to not only be remembered and reinitiated, i.e., be put in the service of the people. African-American authors, more often than not, proved to be more interested in sociological naturalism than in any other form of literary practice. Art here is political. Toni Morrison aptly says, “[A]ll good art has always been political. None of the best writing, the best thoughts have been anything other than [political]” (Taylor-Guthrie 3). Such a now deliberate and now unconscious choice originates from the African belief in the word. The word could be manipulated to be a means of social change. In 1928 James Weldon Johnson claims that on the ground of the utilization of the written word, the White would not allow Black authors to engage in competition with them. He writes, “white America does not welcome [...] the Negro competing with the white man on what it considers the white man’s own ground” (Qtd. by Daigle 642).

In the 1930s, at the apogee of the Harlem Renaissance movement, a new form of literary utilitarianism¹ climaxed into what Jonathan Daigle calls new black naturalism, i.e., one that is meant to “analyze the interlocking relationships among racism, life chances in the South and North, and black self-fashioning” (Daigle 642). Such naturalism found echoes with writers whose tradition was called protest literature. One icon of protest literature is Richard Wright who considered that Black America had writers who authored “technically brilliant performance” certainly because these were coached by critics like Alain Locke (“The New Negro”) or W.E.B. Du Bois (“Criteria for Negro Writing”).

Yet, in his 1937 “Blueprint for Negro Writing”, Wright deemed that “Negro writing has been something external to the lives of the educated Negroes themselves. That the productions of their writers should have been something of a guide in their daily living is a matter that seems to have never been raised seriously. [...] Rarely was the best of (Negro) writing addressed to the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, his aspirations” (Napier 45). No wonder that Wright made less lip service and went on to author *Uncle Tom’s Children* a year after “Blueprint.” The

¹ This formulation antagonizes with the conception of the literary endeavor as a skill based on professional dedication because according to Christopher Wilson, authors like David Graham Phillips, Upton Sinclair, and Frank Norris believe their authorship to not be “a matter of inspiration, but of rigorous work habits, a watchful eye on the market demand, and a sense of one’s responsibility to the public” (Wilson 511).

Black person's experience has been central in Wright's body of work. This brand of naturalism is found in the work of Pittsburgh native and John Elder Wideman's cousin, Albert French who published *Billy* in 1994.

"Big Boy Leaves Home" and French's *Billy*² share much in common, from the use of history through the racism and the use of Black dialect to the special storyline. According to Jay Parini, a reviewer of French's *Cinder*, "the past seems to preoccupy the best American novelists these days, and probably for a good reason: the present is such an improbable place to have landed. Novels [...] are great machines of excavation and recovery; their authors did and expose, ponder and repossess. [...] Among the finest if lesser known of recent diggers in the American muck is Albert French [...]."³ Like Wright's short story, French's novel revisits the American past through its southern compound of race relations in order to expose racism in America and how such an enormity took a heavy toll on Black people because it still plagues the American historical minority (Blacks) today. Billy Lee Turner and Big Boy have a common plight even though both the story of each character ends differently.

Descartes states that "[...] it is only by means of comparison that we recognize the truth precisely. [...] [A]ll knowledge whatsoever [...] is obtained by means of comparison between two or more things" (Descartes 179). This study is an exercise into comparison. It consists in unraveling thematic congruence and difference in Wright's short story titled "Big Boy Leaves Home" and French's *Billy: A Novel*, two works sharing much in common. Carried in a comparative vein, the study seeks to reveal where Wright's work and French's *Billy* cut across in themes like escaping the strictures of Jim Crow in Mississippi, migration in Black America, the train motif, the criminalization of race, the issue of leadership among Black people in the early days of emancipation, and ultimately the use of Black vernacular language/culture in fiction by African American authors.

² *Uncle Tom's Children* will be abbreviated as UTC and *Billy* will remain as is for intratext referencing. "BBLH" is used to refer to the short story "Big Boy Leaves Homes." Conversely, the author's name will be used for referencing as indicated for MLA bibliographical referencing.

³ See Jay Parini's review of French's *Cinder*, the sequel to *Billy*. Available at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/sep/08/featuresreviews.guardianreview>>.

I. Black Territoriality in America

1.1. The Trap of Space: The Two Young Males and Southern Race-Conscious Spatiality

The stories of Big Boy and Billy Lee run parallel. As Jay Parini states, the two authors tap into the history of Blacks in the southern side of the United States, and very particularly in Mississippi. Visibly, Wright draws from his own experience in this part of the country. That's why Richard Yarborough states in the introduction to Wright's work, "*Uncle Tom's Children* constitutes a self-conscious rejection of the past, of roles and traditions that impoverished the spirit than nurtured it, that indirectly helped perpetuate [...] 'the age-old repressions formed under slavery and peonage'" (*UTC*, Introduction, xxix). Big Boy and Billy's story is familiar to Wright because these characters live in segregated areas like him. Wright writes in his autobiographical sketch known as "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow":

We moved from Arkansas to Mississippi. Here we had the good fortune not to live behind the railroad tracks, or close to white neighborhoods. We lived in the very heart of the local Black Belt. There were black churches and black preachers; there were black schools and black teachers; black groceries and black clerks. In fact, everything was so solidly black that for a long time I did not even think of white folks, save in remote and vague terms. But this could not last forever. (*UTC* 3)

Like Richard Wright a fellow Mississippian, both Big Boy and Billy Lee live in only-black areas because of Jim Crowism, i.e., the philosophy of segregation and racial discrimination following the abolition of America's "peculiar institution."⁴

Space and/or territoriality are a very central theme in African-American political and aesthetic praxis. Territory is demarcated by skin and the shades affected to it. In the US, the tone of the skin is of great significance, and Du Bois does not fail to underscore this in his seminal book, *The Soul of Black Folk*, that "[t]he problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men [...] in America and the islands of the sea" (Dubois 221). Both Wright and Billy are fully cognizant of this as well. The author of *Uncle Tom's Children* makes it clear that the problem of the US in the last century rolling up into the current one, has been or still is the racial divide. French and Wright set their story in Mississippi, a part of the United States where the color line is more conspicuously drawn. Both

⁴ This formulation is attributed to John Calhoun who called slavery "the South's most eloquent spokesman for the 'peculiar institution'" on page 18 of *New Jerseyans in the Civil War*. Likewise, Adam Tate, in *Rethinking Calhoun*, writes, "Slavery for Calhoun was a practical good because it maintained peace between the races, and to speak in abstract terms about the morality of slavery was only to invite slave revolts" (Tate 61).

Big Boy and Billy, and by extension their people, have to comply with the Jim Crow laws of Mississippi where White-Only signs are not only in such public spaces as restaurants, bars and transportation, but spaces believed to be free and public like ponds and parks are also cordoned off because of Billy Lee and his people. Billy Lee and Big Boy live where Blacks do not mingle with Whites.

The boys absolutely know that they do not belong because they show caution before swimming in the pool in the hopes that no one will catch and punish them. For example, on Old Man Harvey's property the words "No Trespassing Sign" read clearly. This warning Bobo asks Big Boy and company to mind this marker to Jim Crow and Southern territoriality. Big Boy lives behind the tracks of the railroad of the Southern Pacific, a part of town reminiscent of the rundown parts of cities and towns where Black people are allowed to live. Billy Lee's living condition is no different from Big Boy's. Billy Lee and his community live in a poor and dilapidated portion of Baines, in the patch where Blacks cannot mingle with whites. The White-Only signs are not only in such public spaces as restaurants, bars and transportation, but spaces believed to be free and public like ponds and parks are also cordoned off because of Billy and his people. Both Big Boy and Billy Lee, and by extension their people, have to comply with the color line traced by the Jim Crow laws of Mississippi. At work is not only Southern white territoriality in particular, but also the condition of Big Boy and company as well as Billy Lee's speaks to the fact that the US has been inherently segregated, and that a genre of people were not ready to part ways with these die-hard habits.

Southern territoriality shows when the boys in both books attempt to do the most natural thing: share space (believed to be free) with other people living in it. Big Boy and his pals (Bobo, Lester and Buck) play the tough truants. They skip classes and find themselves in a pond at Old Man Harvey's. The boys absolutely know that they do not belong because they show caution before swimming in the pool in the hopes that no one will catch and punish them. For example, the "No Trespassing Sign" reads clearly on Old Man Harvey's property. White territoriality creates and reinforces Black territoriality, even though at some point spatiality with Blacks loses ground to White invasion. Both stories show two very tightly knit Black communities. After the boys committed involuntary murder, they flee to their parents in search of a safe haven against reprisals from Whites. The stories of Big Boy and Billy run parallel because after the crucial

incidents in the communities. As soon as Big Boy and Billy Lee kill a white person, the sense of community, belonging and togetherness springs up.

For example, after the swimming pool incidents both Big Boy and Billy Lee run to their place. Big Boy comes to his mother like any frightened child looking for her protection. Big Boy tells his mother, “They after me, Ma! They after me...” (*UTC* 35); “Ma, Ma, Ah don wan em t ketches me” (*UTC* 40). Likewise, after killing the white girl, Billy Lee runs to his mother and wants her to shield him against the sheriff who is after the killer. He asks his mother to ward off the danger from him: “Mama, is the sheriff gits me, huh? Mama don’ts let him gits me” (Billy 61). As soon as both mothers gather enough information, they look for ways and means to escape. Billy’s mother instructs her son to run away: “Billy Lee, listen to Mama and do just as I say. Get out of that window behind Mama’s bed, run across that field, and get in them bushes where the Catfish turns. You stay there. Don’t you come out till you hear me call, just me, you hear Mama? [...] You hide till night. Mama come, you hide till Mama come get you [...]. Now go, run, baby” (Billy 62). Even when Sheriff comes for Billy and hits Cinder, she never shows the hideout of her child. She encourages the boy to escape when the hunting mob comes close to Billy’s whereabouts the next day: “Cinder pushes Billy away and screams, ‘RUN, RUN, RUN, RUN, RUN, RUN, RUN, RUN...’” (Billy 101). Though in the end Billy is caught and brought thrown into jail and ultimately is tried like an adult, the intensity of the verb “run” speaks volume about the mother’s urge to help her offspring.

After Sister Morrison, Big Boy’s mother, gathers information from Big Boy. The boy’s mother runs to her husband Saul who refers to the community for help in order to thwart a possible white backlash. The old man sends for the influential member of the Black community: “[...] Go t Brother Sanders tell im Ah said c mere, n go t Brother Jenkins n tell im Ah said c mere; n go t Elder Peters n tell im Ah said c mere. N don say nothing to nobody but whut Ah tol yuh. N when yuh git thru come straight back. Now go” (*UTC* 39). The decision reached by the assembly is that the boy be sent away because as Peters says, “[...] ef yuh don theres gonna be a lynchin...” (*UTC* 43). Ultimately, Sanders proposes that Big Boy leave to Chicago with his son who drives for “the Magnolia Express Company” (*UTC* 44).

Like Cinder, Morrison orders her son to flee: “Run fas, Big Boy!” (*UTC* 45). The young boy obeys and the searching mob is unable to catch him. Clearly, because of utter racism in the

South the Black community changes one of its main strategies in child-raising. As Ralph Ellison has it, “One of the Southern Negro family’s methods of protecting the child is the severe beating [...]” (Ellison 85). Instead of beating the faulty children, they are shown the way to escape the environment that forecloses opportunities and equal rights from Black people.

The mother figure plays here not just the role of someone who covers her offspring with a protective wing, but one who tries to resist the repressive white system of Mississippi. Sister Morrison and Cinder both, to varying degrees, stand up to the system. Though the former seems to play an ancillary role by the men after Big Boy’s counteract, she no less helps the men of community leaders to gather and come to a solution with regard to Big Boy. The latter, Cinder, is rather a combative one. That she refuses to speak and show the whereabouts of her son is an act of defiance. What is more, when the sheriff comes investigating, he is met with cold silence from Cinder:

“You his mama, that boy yours?”

Silence.

“Answer me when I am talkin to you. You that boy’s mama?”

Silence.

Where is that boy at? Ya his mama? You better answer me,”

Silence. [Emphasis mine] (*Billy* 63).

These instances of void may be construed as voicelens and fear. They are evocative of defiance instead. The violence of the white slaveholder is in the voice of the sheriff here. Ignoring this enforcer of the White establishment shows that Cinder couldn’t care less about him, the people of his kind and the values they stand for. Cinder’s strong resolve is seen better when the sheriff knocks her down, she gets up like a man. In fact, “she *does not turn from his snarling face, she does not flinch from his flexing muscles.* [...] *she is silent and only stares up into his eyes.* [...] his hand comes smacking across Cinder’s face, knocking it to the side, *but she jerks it back and throws her eyes back into his*” [Emphasis mine] (*Ibid.* 64). Even the repeated slapping does not deter Cinder’s determination to serve silence to the sheriff. Cinder’s silent is revolutionary because she refuses the acquiescing culture of the ex-slave who is prone to answering “yes sir!” at every turn when the white man speaks. Unlike sister Morrison, who connives with her husband and the Black leaders to send off Big Boy – which is undoubtedly another form of defeating the system⁵ with cunning and efficacy –, Cinder indulges in powerful silent resistance

⁵ “By system, we have in mind the entire American complex of basic institutions, values, beliefs, etc.[that aim to pin down the people of darker skin in the US]” (Ture & Hamilton 41).

which ultimately sends away the sheriff. This fact shows that these women have voice beyond the apparent silence they display a strong will to resist the power that be. This insidious form of undermining has oftentimes proven efficient in power struggles.

1.2. Black People, Migration and the Search for New Spaces

To escape dire existential predicament constitutes, in and of itself, a movement and/or migration. Wright attempts to narrativize a very crucial historical event in the experience of Black people in the belly of North America and the Caribbean. It is the very idea of movement. From the forcible removal of Black from Africa (the Middle Passage) through their escape during slavery days to the Great Migration in the early 1900s, people of Black descent in the America have embodied itinerancy and/or migration. The Diasporan notion of migrancy (whether forcible or voluntary) in North America and in the Caribbean owes much to the condition of Africans in the New World. Plantation agriculture and the sharecropping system on which it hinged did not allow for Black mobility after emancipation. These people could not move up the social and economic ladder in Dixieland because of the Jim Crow laws and the Apartheid system they helped enforced. Just as nowadays Africans, Asians, and other people migrate into the West in search of a better-being, so too Africans in the Americas were forced by inclement living conditions to move from southern states to the North and the West of the United States. Stewart Tolnay aptly captures the scope of this movement (the Great Migration) among African Americans from the proclamation of slaves' emancipation (1865) to the mid-1950s. He writes that "the 'Great Migration' of African Americans out of southern states and into northern cities was one of the most significant demographic events of the twentieth century" (Tolnay 210). Sarah-Jane Mathieu believes that "African Americans turned to migration as one of the earliest and most compelling exercises of their new autonomy and mass movement as a politicized response to their region's social, economic and political climate. Simultaneously domestic and international migrants, African Americans used relocation as a measure of their freedom, as an exercise of their civil rights, and as a safeguard against mounting racialized violence during the Jim Crow era (1877-1954)" (Mathieu 19).

Thus, the Great Migration, or hints at this capital event in African-American lived experience occupied, and continue to do so, an important and important part in Black literature,

art and music. Black people's migration has been initially associated with escape and running away. The Underground Railroad by Harriett Tubman and others is a prime example of this desire to free oneself from the strictures of dire economic and social injustice against the people of African descent in the New World. The Great Migration was mostly associated with traveling on trains. About train and track, Toni Morrison in an interview with Robert Stepto in 1974, theorizes. Men are infatuated with movement and the means of mobility. She states, "[...] [G]oing from town to town or place to place or looking out and over and beyond and changing and so on – that [...] is one of the monumental themes in black literature about men" (Taylor-Guthrie 26).

The train motif is also evoked in songs and writings by Black people in the Americas. In the Caribbean, reggae singers like Bob Marley, Joseph Hill of Culture, among others, sing the train of delivery, one that will transport the righteous and sufferers in this oppressive world of ours into a better and heavenly world. The train acts like a medium used by the (ex-)slaves to redeem from hard work and slavery's evils. In the US, the train plays the almost the same role. Songs were developed by slaves during heavy and relentless work on slave-operated plantations as well as during the sharecropping system that replaced it in the aftermath of the so-called emancipation proclamation in 1765. Actually, sharecropping replaced payless plantation works. It was a system to keep Black people further exploited, maintained in web of endless debt to pay to white farmland owners. Visibly, such owners had no interest in Black people's leaving them behind. After the nominal emancipation proclamation, the racialization of relations between Black and White became conspicuously unbearable; the (ex-)slaves were denied the rights enshrined in the US Constitution. Of course, they were considered sub-humans, and therefore Jim Crow laws had to keep them in a place Jim Crow laws deemed "theirs" only to ensure that they are cornered every time and starved to death. No wonder that a blind Bluesman sings: "I'm goin' to Detroit, get myself a good job [...]/ *Tried to stay around here with the starvation mob*"[Emphasis is mine](Qtd. by Rodgers 15). Even the possibility to move from one space to the other within the South was foreclosed to them. Laurence Rodgers writes, "despite [their] racial woes, African Americans of the South were often loathe to exercise their right to leave their homes, partly because of the various schemes developed by white southerners to harass potential migrants into staying" (Rodgers Ibid.).

During the Great Migration the song reveals itself as a reminder of the way to go for a better-being. All in all, the train motif speaks to Black people's want to migrate up north, this idyllic land of freedom,⁶ to leave this damning where everything looks gloomy. Thus, in songs related to train, which is an embodiment of worldly movements, are endowed with some spiritual value whereby the oppressed, poor and Black person is dignified and elevated to the status of the righteous. When in "the distance a train whistled mournfully" (*UTC* 18), Big Boy and his pals "began to chant, pounding bare heels in the grass" (*Ibid.* 19):

Dis train boun fo Glory /Dis train, Oh Hallelujah
 Dis train boun fo Glory /Dis train, Oh Hallelujah
 Dis train boun fo Glory/ Ef yuh ride no need fer fret er worry
 Dis train, Oh Hallelujah/ Dis train...

 Dis train don carry no gambler/ Dis train, Oh Hallelujah
 Dis train don carry no gambler/ Dis train, Oh Hallelujah
 Dis train don carry no gambler/ No fo day creeper er midnight rambler
 Dis train, Oh Hallelujah/ Dis train ... (*UTC* 19)

The glory chanted by these boys is redemption from suffering the throes of racism and its ramifications in the South. Glory is associated with escape to the North, and the good old song here shows that not only has Big Boy a subconscious predisposition to leave Dixieland (the South). Big Boy and his friends express the will to go up North and enjoy equal rights as witnessed here:

Far away a train whistled.
 "There goes number seven!"
 "Headin fer up noth!"
 "Blazin it down the line!"
 Lawd, Ahm goin noth some day."

 "They colored folks up Noth is got ekual rights." (*UTC* 28)

⁶ The North has been mythified by Blacks because it offered a safer haven for them against racism and manifestations in Dixieland. Tolnay Stewart couches this myth in words that couldn't be more accurate. He writes, "Like most migrant populations, their relocation did require a period of adjustment to their new communities, and resulted in some temporary dislocation. But the real barrier to the ultimate success of southern migrants in northern society was not their regional origin or their history of geographic mobility. Rather, it was the same barrier that obstructed their progress of their northern African American neighbors: their race" (Tolnay 2001: 249). Besides, inter-Black hostility was present as can be witnessed by Mahoney, because the new arrivals of southern-born African Americans bore some strains on the already thinning economic security of the northern-born peers. Northern whites tried to draw lines because they feared the mounting number of Blacks. This had some repercussions on Black native northerners: "Racial tensions grew in the North and segregation became more pronounced in these years. African Americans who were born in the North or who were longtime residents of the region felt these changes and, to some degree, blamed the new arrivals for the growing hostility" (Maloney 10).

The idea of migration is so deeply engrained in the community that when Big Boy reacts vigorously against Jim, they advise that he run away to the North.

Unlike Wright who uses the flight motif by means of locomotion, French makes Billy Lee attempt to run and hide. After attempts to hide from the police, Billy Lee is caught by the hounding white mob spearheaded by the Sheriff as usual. French could have had Billy escape as Wright did with Big Boy only to resort to an indictment of US racism as a deterministic factor in the behavior of Black children and males with regards to the law in the country in his 1940 *Native Son*. Wright unapologetically uses violence to threaten the American society. Thus, he makes Bigger Thomas commit violent crimes and makes him perish by “legitimate violence” exercised by the law: Like Billy, Bigger dies on an electric chair. Unlike Wright in 1940, French indicts the US criminal and judiciary system which puts juveniles in death row.

French’s intertextual dependence on Wright’s materials is clear. French’s book, *Billy*, looks like a mix of Bigger Thomas and Big Boy. Both characters in Wright’s earlier fiction rely on violence as a means to undo the social strictures on them. Of course, violence has a negative content; it stands in contradiction with constructive values. At times, this social phenomenon becomes constructive; it is either a reaction to another form of violence (a counter-violence) or simply it shows as a process of self-recreation for the individual that that recourse to it. In “BBLH” as well as *Billy*, violence is a tool of the protagonist’s existential affirmation; Big Boy and Billy Lee Turner have recourse to violence to decide their fate and on their own terms. After all, in “Many Thousands Gone” an essay in *Notes of a Native Son*, James Baldwin writes, “[...] no American Negro lives who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in the skull [...]” (Baldwin 42).

Big Boy changes the course of his life by facing the white man as a man when he is thought of as a boy. He kills Jim who has killed two of his friends and now attempts to corner him; he also fights any hurdles (human or natural) on his way. He encroaches upon the Whiteman’s so-called territory by bathing in off-limit pond; he kills a snake to take the latter’s place in a den, and a dog that is to make the white mob know his whereabouts. Like Big Boy who makes his own essence – he defeats the deterministic elements of his environment (laws, men and nature)–, Bigger Thomas understands that if he does not stand up, he will be annihilated by his environment which determines where he has to be, who he should be. When he

accidentally kills Mary Dalton, he has to run from the searching mob. Down the road, he kills his own girlfriend who looks like to tell on him. As Cornel West writes, “Bigger reacts to his environment instinctually [...]. To make himself and invent himself as a black person in America is to strike out against white supremacy – out of pain, fear, silence, and hatred. The result is psychic terror and physical violence – committed against black Bessie and white Mary” (Gates & West 96). Like Big Boy and Bigger, Billy Lee wrestles with and accidentally kills a young girl brought up in the Black-hating culture of the South. Billy Lee, like Big Boy, flees and hides in the surrounding bush, kills a snake and a dog attempting to reveal his hideout, and like Bigger, Billy Lee is caught by the searching mob and tried like an adult, and eventually electrocuted. An essential part in African American fiction is relocation, fleeing. For instance, the flight motif is central in Wright’s *Native Son* (Book Two or The Flight) and Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, combines with actual means of mobility (here the train), after a “feat of valor,” to express the feeling that Black protagonists have had more than enough in the environment they and their people (fictional and in actual life) dwell.

II. The Color of Crime and Racializing Crime

2.1. Criminalizing Race

Intertextual connections between “BBLH” and *Billy* show in the criminalization of “race.” Of course, race *per se* is a construction. According to Stuart Hall, “[r]ace is a phenomenon which one only begins to understand when one sees it working within the different institutions, processes, and practices of whole societies, in their full complexity; societies in which race becomes a determining aspect of the social structure, of the way in which its relations work and the way in which institutions are linked and connected with one another” (Hall 60). Yet, race as a social construct may be seen as the capitalization of skin complexion and/or cultural difference to define as a community, a group of people. Clearly, biology and culture have been successively used to define groups. Sometimes, and very usually and unfortunately so, race has been used as a mean to stratify people as superior or inferior. This is racism, which Augie Fleras defines as “those ideas and ideals (ideology) that assert or imply the superiority of one social group over another because of perceived differences, both physical or cultural,

together with the institutionalized power to put these beliefs into practice in a way that exploits or excludes the ‘other’ because of who they are or what they do” (Fleras 434).

When it comes to Black people in the United States and elsewhere, their group (or race for the convenience of this criticism) has been characterized as a bad race. Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton aptly observe that “[...] we must realize that race is an overwhelming fact in this historical period. There is no black man in this country who can live ‘simply as a man.’ His blackness is an ever-present fact of this racist society” (Ture and Hamilton 54). Interpersonal and institutional racism (which are the categories Ture and Hamilton discuss) target people with a darker skin tone more than other ethnicities in the US.

Conversely, white people, or those with a fairer skin tone, view themselves as the Elected Ones of humankind. Whether it is during slavery days, the years immediately after the so-called Emancipation, or the era little before and after the Civil Rights acts of 1964 and 1965, the people of Black descent in America have almost always been criminalized. First, white supremacists constructed a mythology of the “black as the bad guy.” Anything black is devil and anything white is angel. Hegel’s infamous phrase –Africa, the “Dark Continent”⁷– derives more from this mythology than it is from empirical observations and some philosophically objective conclusions. This lie permeated throughout the run-up era to slavery (both in Europe and in the New World) to the days when segregation and discrimination were erected into laws in the US. From these days till now, the same belief persists even though racism seethes very subtly through institutions and interactions between Blacks and their historical “Other,” i.e., the Anglo-American. Institutional racism –through law enforcement agents and laws themselves– associates dark complexion with lawbreaking, murder, rape, drug-dealing, and more importantly any anti-hegemonic reactions to the norms and values of the white dominant culture.

⁷ Hegel, who for all evidence has never set foot on the African soil, writes “[Africa] is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it—that is in its northern part—belong to the Asiatic or European World. Carthage displayed there an important transitional phase of civilization; but, as a Phoenician colony, it belongs to Asia. Egypt will be considered in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit. What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World’s History” (Hegel, 1956: 99).

2.2. Racializing Crime

The racialization of crime is apparent in both “BBLH” and *Billy*. Wright’s short story (*Uncle Tom’s Children*) is more of an illustration of racialized crimes. “BBLH” carries the same tone when it juxtaposes Black and White in a very decisive encounter. When the boys trespass Jim’s land and swim in the pool that they think must also be theirs, they face a white woman in shock. While Buck and Lester climbed the embankment well away from the “white woman”, Big Boy walks toward her because he intends to collect his cloths and hide his nakedness. Bertha calls up for Jim. Big Boy insists: “We wan git our cloes” (*UTC*, 30), and Bertha screams twice: “You go away! You go away! I tell you, you go away!” (*Ibid.*). The fear generated by the boys is due to the belief that black people are criminals. Proximity with them means murder. As if violence should avert potential violent act, Jim shoots Lester and Buck on the embankment. The three warnings by the white woman had to be followed by a robust reaction. Eventually, violence begets violence. Big Boy kills the taller and heavier white man who comes to rescue the white woman in danger of black violence. This scene is more evocative of how race is criminalized by southerners that it expresses Wright’s championing violence as a means to stand up in a hostile environment as the South for Black people. Like Big Boy, Billy Lee kills a white girl, Lorie, who tries to rough him up. Unlike in Big Boy’s case, Billy Lee’s crime sparks wild guess among white people. They blame the death of the white girl on Black railroad workers. When the town’s sheriff investigates, he seems to have a great deal of culprits in mind. His questions to Jenny (*Billy* 35-7) show that he wants to hear that a great number of Black adults are involved just to corroborate his preconceptions about the “race” in question.

The racialization of the crime committed by Billy Lee speaks volume about how the “race” (skin color) of the people of Black descent is demonized at will whenever we hear of crime. It reveals that Black boys are also hypersexualized like the adults of their kind. The probability is high that Big Boy is considered (by his corpulence) as a potential rapist of white women whose purity the white establishment intends to protect against “Black filth.” (This also shows the interconnection between the racialized crime and the lewdness of some white who only see sex in very much everything). In the US, crime suspects are almost always thought of as being blacks. The criminal is always black until proven to belong to a different ethnic group. This proves well that Wright and French have not invented this state of affairs; they simply tap

into a material made available to them by the society they live in. In other words, even though these authors may well be accused of fictionally criminalizing their community, they seem to faithfully translate a state of affairs in the US.

III. Sense of Community And Language

3.2. Black Solidarity and Sense of Leadership

The two works hint at an element of vital importance to the community that they portray. The issue of the sense of community and leadership is salient despite the apparent lack thereof among Blacks. To deal effectively with the problems faced by the people of African descent in the US, some thinkers have engaged in discussing Negrophobia, Anglo-conformity, Eurocentrism, White supremacy – “the system of domination by which White people have historically ruled over and, in certain important ways, continue to rule over nonwhite people” (Mills 1-2). This system has succeeded in hammering into the head of nonwhites in the US that they had integrate, to assimilate in order to be part of the fabric of American society. Stockley Carmichael (aka Kwame Ture) and his co-author have demonstrated that for a historically oppressed community like that of Blacks to integrate a pluralistic society it has to have a sense of its own self: “enter coalitions only *after* you are able to ‘stand on your own’” (Ture and Hamilton 81). The concept of integration “is based on the assumption that there is nothing of value in the black community and that little of value could be created among black people” (Ibid 53).

Integration, at first glance, is the aim of the Blacks in the two works of fiction here. When the surface is scratched, one realizes that “BBLH”, and to some extent *Billy*, shows that the sense of community is at work in the segregated Black community. The mobilization of the community by the Elders, which is evocative of African palaver system in the village, preludes well a sense of togetherness not only needed to expedite punctual social problem, but also it denotes a strategy to cope with racism or what Charles Mills terms the Racial Contract.⁸

⁸ The “Racial contract” is historically the attempts of White thinkers to rationalize a social contract, in the spirit of Rousseau but based on racial preference, in order to a better living for humans. This Contract builds on a false universalism. According to Mills, the contract in question manifests itself in writing off nonwhites both locally and globally. Locally in the US, the Contract reveals in Jim Crow laws in their insidious modulations today. “*Globally*, the Racial Contract effects a final paradoxical; norming and racing of space, a *writing out* of the polity of certain spaces as conceptually and historically irrelevant to European and Euro-world development, so that these raced

Though the Blacks are aware of the rights conferred to them by the US Constitution, they also know these rights are nowhere within their reach. Integration is predicated upon self-help, self-organization and togetherness. These values have constituted the cornerstone of any community in search of self-affirmation and effectiveness in social interactions. Big Boy's crime is unpunished because of social cohesion and solidarity within the community. This is no endorsement of violence as a *modus operandi* per se; it is instead a coping strategy in a hostile land. The boy escapes the grips of the local white establishment because the community brainstorms to come up with a way for his safety. Unlike Big Boy, Billy Lee is caught. The entire community is terrorized by the sheriff and the law. Solidarity between Blacks here is shaky. Only Billy's mother and aunt, and Reverend Simms (as preachers usually help in similar situations) are helping cope with the foreseeable capital punishment of the Black boy. For example, Rev Sims indulges in a long preaching the unsaids of whose lines are directed to the white establishment and the Jim Crow laws that prop it.

In the oppressed Black communities (in both the antebellum and the Reconstruction eras) religious leaders played a crucial role. Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey, among others, conscientized with religious undertone, and talked their oppressed fellows into standing up against the oppressor. Unlike Turner and Turner, Reverend Sims does a usual preaching, but his sermon relates the everyday life of his community in crisis. He calls on God for help (*Billy*, 111-112). Because of the preacher's words, Billy Lee's mother calls her son to take his pain to God as well. Reverend Sims will provide moral support to Billy throughout his incarceration to his electrocution. On surface, one may construe Reverend Sims' moral uplifting as an enterprise of indoctrination aiming at putting souls and mind to sleep –which Martin Luther King opposed during the civil rights movement of the 1950's before turning to a non-violent pressure on the oppressors of the Black community⁹. Evidently, Sims could not but use an analogical approach to fight racism in the Mississippi of the 1930's. Clearly, French following into the footsteps of Wright makes a critique of religion, but also both seek for a new kind of leadership to address the issues in and around the Black community.

spaces are categorized as disjointed from the path of civilization" (Mills 74). This visibly rejoins Hegel's form of ratiocinations on Africa.

⁹ According to King, "Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion. [...] Such a religion is the kind the Marxists like to see –an opiate of the people" (King 28-29).

In other words, Black leadership is one that has an obligation of results. Leaders have to bring change in the life of the oppressed Blacks instead of change in their own life. Reverend Sims and the community in both Billy and “BBLH” are in the selfless category of leadership. They have no choice save for self-help. Conversely, nowadays Black leadership plays into self-serving and vacuous rhetoric that affects only the leaders busy with carving a place for themselves. Cornel West who writes,

Black political leadership reveals the tame and genteel face of the black middle class. The black dress suits with white shirts worn by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. signified the seriousness of their deep commitment to black freedom, whereas today the expressive tailored suits of black politicians symbolize their personal success and individual achievement. Malcolm and Martin called for the realization that black people are somebodies with which America has to reckon, whereas black politicians tend to turn our attention to their somebodiness owing to their ‘making it’ in America. (West 57)

West pits the traditional and effective leaders who are selfless against self-serving leaders who have a treacherous attitude vis-à-vis the cause of Black people. Clearly, there is a need of a leadership susceptible of appeasing the worries of a community pinned down by Jim Crow laws, a system of oppression whose ramifications are still rampant today. The temptation is great to believe that substantial change has been achieved through the presidency of Barack Obama. Actual change has not occurred though. In other words, for change to happen the community needs a leader such as delineated by West.

3.2. Black America and “Englishes”

In both “BBLH” and Billy, language plays an important part. Both authors are indebted to Black or vernacular popular culture. *Uncle Tom’s Children* draws extensively from the way poor ex-slaves speak to reflect their experience and bestow an amount of authenticity to the stories. Like Wright, French’s story reveals the cultural intertextuality that vitalizes the text. The first pages of *Billy* speak to the author’s willingness to be true to the community and its culture.

Both authors make a very crucial claim. Black people do have a language of their own even though the English they speak derives from the English spoken in their country of residence. Here, we speak of vernacular English because morphologically and phonologically, the language of the Black is characteristically and distinctively peculiar. The juxtaposition of Standard English and Black Vernacular English is a cultural claim by Black authors in the midst of White people who deny them agency and humanity.

Some critics, both Black and White, have claimed that there is no Black English; that it is just a poor use of Standard English. Two views and politics are pitted. On the one hand, there is Anglo-conformity seeking to homogenize the cultures of the people who make up the US in the name of a credo that has proved royally wrong. The *E Pluribus Unum* [out of many one] theory has hard time realizing itself because what Ralph Ellison calls folklore won't give way to the dominant culture, which is just an expression of a group's atavism. Folklore, according to Ellison, "preserves mainly those situations which have repeated themselves again and again in the history of a given group, [...] i.e., rites, manners, customs, which ensure the good life or destroy it. [...] These drawings may be crude but they are nonetheless profound in that they represent the group's attempt to humanize the world" (Ellison 171). Black folklore lies in the word, as it has always been in the African cultures where some ex-slaves were taken forcibly to the New World. As much a great deal of the original culture of these slaves was denatured by their living conditions in the Americas, so too the new language that they acquire has been affected the new users. Toni Morrison could not be more accurate when she claims that "Language changes — and should — because it is as alive as its speakers and writers. It is stifling or bad only when unclear, mediocre, false or wholly devoid of creative imagination" (Morrison 37). The "creative imagination" of Blacks resulted in Black vernacular, the preserver of Black culture, throughout years. No wonder why "Ebonics" threatens those who see Standard English as the only norm over and against other Englishes in the United States.

One clearly sees why James Baldwin was at loggerheads with the English language. He writes, "My quarrel with the English language has been that the language reflected none of my experience. But now I began to see the matter in quite another way. If the language was not my own, it might be the fault of the language, but it might also be my fault. Perhaps the language was not my own because it I had never attempted to use it, had only learned to imitate it. If this were so, then it might be made to bear the burden of my experience if I could find the stamina to challenge it, and me to, to such a test" (Baldwin, 2011: 67).

Baldwin sustains a strategy of appropriation that is in keeping with the logic prompting Wright and French to use the English language. Billy Lee and Big Boy speak a form of English that depict the everyday experience of Black in Mississippi. The tone, accents and choice of words are all evocative of the Blackness of the language. And yet, critics of this Black vernacular

believe that it is spoken by users with poor mastery of the rules of grammar, and that the language is purely and simply a dialect of Standard English. Amiri Baraka (aka LeRoi Jones) believes in the apartness of Black English. Baraka writes, “It is absurd to assume, as has been the tendency, among a great many Western anthropologists and sociologists, that all traces of Africa were erased from the Negro’s mind because he learned English. The very nature of the English the Negro spoke and still speaks drops the lie on that idea” (Baraka 9).

Like Paul Laurence Dunbar who relies heavily on Black popular culture – very especially folk songs –, Wright and French use Black English because it best translates their own experience, but also that of their characters. Big Boy, Billy Lee, their friends and family speak the language of their community. The entire story of Big Boy, the character’s dialogue with others, like Billy Lee’s story, is run in Black English. These authors use the language out of political and aesthetical necessity as Baldwin claims: “A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey” (Baldwin, 1997: 6).

The short story “Big Boy Leaves Home” and most other short stories in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, is replete with unmistakably Black English. An instance of this use of language is when Big Boy and his friends joke and enjoy a sunbathing:

“Big Boy yuhs CRAZY!”
 “Don ax me nothing else.”
 “Nigger, yuhs CRAZY!”

 “Man, don the groun feel warm?”
 “Jus lika bed”

 “Ah kin feel that ol sun goin all thru me
 “Feels like mah bones is warm” (*UTC*, 18)

The level of language throughout the story, and in the rest of the book, remains steady and the same. Albert French not only makes his white characters speak Southern English, but also has the people of the Black community bear the standard of their culture. The white sheriff looking for Billy asks the boy’s mother about his whereabouts in some broken English: “Where’s that boy at, where’s he at? [...]. You his mama? [...] You his mama, that boy yours? [...] Answer me when I’m talkin to you. You that boy’s mama? [...] Where’s that boy at?” (*Billy*, 63). Billy warns his accidental victim with the same tone as Big Boy: “Git off me, girl. Git off me [...] Ya

better leave me be's, Ah kills ya, Ah kills ya" (*Billy*, 28). Or, an example of the use of Black English runs from page 48 through page 50. This dialogue between Billy Lee and Gumpy on the run is evidence of French's intent to memorialize Black way of speaking English:

"Ah ain't wants them gittin me."
 "They ain't comin"
 "They's git ya? Theys jump ya?"
 "Theys gits me down, but Ah's git up."
 "Theys come git ya again?"
 "They can'ts git me, Gumpy they's girls."
 "Ya gots blood in ya face, they's got ya." (*Billy*, 49).

Like in "BBLH", the level of the language among white and Black folks remains the same. French's use of Black Vernacular English shows that there is other English than Standard Anglo-American English. This attempt reveals a cultural self-assertion in a country where peripheral cultures are on the brink of extinction of behalf of the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture of the US.

If the parodying of Southern white dialect in white American fiction is meant to believably portray the whites of Mississippi, the Black vernacular rather speaks to the author's intent upon asserting the identity of his people through a peculiar use of the "master's language." This attitude is almost naturalized in former colonial spaces and is known as hybrid culture. Some critics of language/culture in the Caribbean talk about "créolité." It is a cultural exchange aiming at creating as a space of recognition of difference in a context where homogenization is the norm. The American sociopolitical project of a melting pot seems not to work properly because its conceivers fail to acknowledge the cultural particularisms that make the American social fabric. African-American vernacular is part if these cultural specificities rejected on account of homogeneity hiding behind Anglo-Eurocentrism. And yet, Edouard Glissant advises: "To listen to the Other is to expand the spiritual dimension of one's own language, i.e., to put in a relationship with others. Understanding the Other amounts to accepting, in the service of each regional and national language, to add to the particular strategies already developed new general strategies that may be discussed together." (Glissant 1995: 35)¹⁰

¹⁰ The original quotation is in the French language and it thus reads: "Écouter l'autre, les autres, c'est élargir la dimension spirituelle de sa propre langue, c'est-à-dire la mettre en relation. Comprendre l'autre, les autres, c'est accepter que la vérité d'ailleurs s'oppose à la vérité d'ici. Et s'accorder à l'autre, c'est accepter d'ajouter aux stratégies particulières développées en faveur de chaque langue régionale ou nationale des stratégies d'ensemble qui seraient discutées en commun."

Those of the dominant culture refuse to listen to the African difference in their midst. The debate on the Ebonics¹¹ in California shows that color line has a new marker, language, which carries the culture of its users. When a language is turned down, the real aim of distrust and fear is the user of the said language.

Conclusion

Wright and French share a great deal in common with regard to representing the experience of African Americans. Clearly, the gist of their messages is the same while the difference resides in the way to couch it.

Both Billy Lee and Big Boy and their environment are depicted with realism in order to provide a photographic rendering to the reader. Migration, language, leadership and violence which make up the fabric of African America are used with virtuosity by Wright who is seemingly emulated by French. Wright decides to tackle misconceptions and lies about races. His fiction contradicts claims like Abraham Lincoln's, one of the Founding Fathers of modern US who is reported to have said: "[...] there is a physical difference between the white and black races which will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality" (Mellon, Introduction, xv).

Uncle Tom's Children and the short story titled "Big Boy Leaves Home" in particular attempts to deconstruct the myths about Black in-/sub-humanity. Wright unearths the agency of the Black community through the persona of Big Boy who escapes the fury of the white mob intent upon vindicating the death of one of their own. The protagonist of "BBLH" escapes the rigor of the laws because the law is drafted with unjust intent and applied with the same. In the 1960's Martin Luther King came to realize immoral and unjust laws were not to be respected. Billy Lee does not escape the brutality of the Jim Crow-inspired laws because French tries to indict the US judiciary system to which the Black community loses a great deal of its members to this date. The execution of Billy Lee reveals the cruelty of the judiciary system. If Billy Lee were a white boy, the judge would wait until he reached majority.

¹¹ In December 1996, the School Board of the Oakland Unified School District passed a resolution that declared Ebonics to not only be a full-fledged language but also not to be a dialect of English. This sparks a debate on the opportunity of teaching Ebonics to African-American children. Even major Black leaders and some Conservative politicians opposed it.

These two works share much in common despite the long stretch of time between them. Perhaps, as far as the living conditions of African Americans are concerned the adage is true which says “the more things have changed, the more they stayed the same.” Not even the election of a Black president seems to make things change.

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