

## Book Review *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy* by April Baker-Bell

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2020 was an unprecedented year for the entire world but more so for the US, where COVID-19 killed far more people than in any other country and caused widespread unemployment, food insecurity, and homelessness. What is more striking is the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on minority, immigrant, and low-income populations. These disparities question the notion of post-racial America and call for a long and difficult journey toward social justice. Moreover, 2020 will also be remembered as a year of inflammatory political rhetorics, extreme polarization, and racial tensions. Recurrent deaths of Black people at the hands of law enforcement resulted in protests and riots across the country. Published during such tumultuous times, April Baker-Bell's 2020 monograph, *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*, shows how language and racism are intertwined, makes a strong case against the anti-Black linguistic racism affecting millions of lives both inside and outside the classroom, and offers an Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy as a way to deal with linguistic injustice. Throughout the book Baker-Bell introduces Black Language Artifacts as a part of the antiracist pedagogy where Black experience and Black culture are used as a resource for learning. Bringing together theory, history, culture, pedagogy and activism, Baker-Bell aligns with the mission of social justice movements like Black Lives Matter and calls for action to create classrooms where Black students' linguistic and cultural resources are valued and imagines a world without anti-blackness, where another George Floyd doesn't get killed despite his repeated plea—"I cannot breathe"—in "Standardized American English."

Chapter 1, "Black Language Is Good on Any MLK Boulevard," provides context for the book, drawing on Baker-Bell's personal experience of growing up in Detroit and developing literacy that was immersed in Black language and culture. Although she grew up speaking Black English, she doesn't remember having her speech corrected either by her teachers or parents. However, she occasionally noticed her parents trying to "sound more white" by code-switching while talking over the phone (1). But gradually, she started to hear criticisms of Black Language as inferior and inadequate from the teachers at school. Interestingly, even though Michigan State, and Detroit in particular, was an epicenter of Black language research, scholarship, and activism, it was not until Baker-Bell began to teach English Language Arts at a high school in Detroit that she became fully aware of language politics. There she had to negotiate the school administration's preference for White Mainstream English and her students' need and right to speak their authentic language that they used at home and in the community. She realized that with the kind of teacher training she had received, the teachers would keep "reproducing the same racial and linguistic inequities [they were] hoping to dismantle" because there was an assumption that students entering English Language Arts class by default speak White Mainstream English (4). Further exploration of the issue revealed that most

language classrooms were more like “cultural and linguistic battlegrounds instead of havens where students’ language practices were affirmed, valued, and sustained” (5). Even after nearly half a century since the adoption of Students’ Rights to Their Own Language (SRTOL) resolution by Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and a slightly different version of the same resolution by National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in 1974, there are teachers who believe that code-switching dismantles white supremacy, or even worse, who belittle and punish students for speaking Black language. This, Baker-Bell says, is because many teachers “do not realize that standard English is a byproduct of white supremacy” (6). Such revelatory moments motivated Baker-Bell to enter “the language wars”—a phrase she borrows from a veteran linguist Geneva Smitherman whose pioneering work on Black language she admires (4). The rest of the chapter explains Baker-Bell’s choice of terminologies, like Black Language and White Mainstream English as both rhetorical and political moves; lays out the main argument that linguistic and racial hierarchies are intertwined; proposes a linguistic justice framework as a way forward; and outlines the remaining chapters.

In Chapter 2, “What’s Anti-Blackness Got to Do With It?” Baker-Bell introduces Anti-Black Linguistic Racism as a framework and explains how it operates through research, scholarships, and pedagogies to affect Black students. The solution she proposes to confront this framework is Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy. Building upon the complex experience of her students, who use Black Language as a vital resource in their communities and classrooms while they experience Anti-Black Linguistic Racism in the same spaces, Baker-Bell argues that “policing of Black Language and literacies in schools is not separate from the ways in which Black bodies have historically been policed and surveilled in U.S. society” (12). Yet many people do not see this connection and insist that Black people should continue to use the “Standardized English” to resist the hegemony of the same. However, this is not going to work as Audre Lorde famously said, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 107; also, qtd. in Baker-Bell 12). According to Baker-Bell, linguistic racism is “supported and maintained through institutional practices” with the help of what Rosina Lippi-Greene calls a “standard language ideology” that often goes unquestioned (14). The US has a long history of linguistic racism that is further entrenched by policies like English-Only and fueled by the rise of anti-minority, anti-immigrant political rhetoric in the last few years. Moreover, Anti-Black Linguistic Racism is not just an “examination of white linguistic hegemony and how it informs Black students’ language education”; it is more about “the dehumanization that Black Language-speakers endure when using their language across multiple contexts” (20). That is why the traditional eradicationist and respectability language pedagogies do more harm than good to Black students who inherit a unique historical legacy of enslaved Africans separated by language, later “dispersed in the United States” and “intentionally denied access to literacy by law” (64). Therefore, an Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy that places Black language at the center is the need of the hour.

In chapter 3, “Killing Them Softly,” Baker-Bell argues that researchers and educators must listen to Black Language speakers’ voices and engage their perspectives to get the counterstories that deconstruct the dominant narratives. This chapter opens with a student’s testimony of how destructive anti-Black language pedagogies can be to students’ self-confidence and sense of being. Baker-Bell foregrounds the stories of the Black students she worked with and calls them

“counterstories because research, theories, and pedagogies on Black Language education are not very inclusive of Black students’ perspectives” (39). This is one of the strongest parts of this book, where Baker-Bell asks readers to consider Black students’ stories to understand the impact of dominant language ideologies and Anti-Black Linguistic Racism. Based on Baker-Bell’s research at Leadership Academy, a high school in Detroit, this chapter focuses on her first Black Language Artifact titled “Black Language and Identity.” This artifact “was designed to initiate a conversation about Black language and White Mainstream English at the same time of unveiling the students’ initial attitudes toward both languages” (42). In fact, a major part of Baker-Bell’s contribution is to create a pedagogy that relies on Black Language Artifacts and foregrounds Black culture and experience as an integral part of the learning process. Baker-Bell uses composite character counterstorytelling as a critical race methodological tool that puts interview transcripts, field notes, artifacts, and research memos together to create “a coherent narrative that captured and provided a thorough depiction of how the students at LA [Liberty Academy] understood their linguistic realities” (44). They are woven together with the writer’s interpretation, reflection, and theoretical insights from other scholars. They show how traditional eradicationist and respectability language pedagogies are inadequate to address the deep-seated Black linguistic racism, linguistic double consciousness, and their material consequences in the lives of Black students: hence, the need for the Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy to teach historically marginalized Black students.

The title of the fourth chapter, “Scoff No More,” refers to Carter G. Woodson’s point about how Black students were made to “scoff” at their mother tongue and Geneva Smitherman’s Critical Language Awareness pedagogy that aims to develop students’ critical consciousness about language politics. In this chapter, Baker-Bell focuses on praxis, showing how she used Black linguistic consciousness-raising as a part of Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy on the ground. Using the remaining six Black Language Artifacts and some ethnographic snapshots, Baker-Bell asks the readers to consider why it is “pivotal for Black students to learn about their own linguistic backgrounds” and how the students begin to “critically interrogate and consistently resist white linguistic hegemony and Anti-Black Racism” (64). Many Black students who have unconsciously internalized white linguistic hegemony are not aware of the history of Black language. The carefully designed artifacts were used to transform the history of Black language into an easy learning experience for the students and familiarize them with the grammatical and rhetorical aspects of Black language along with the intricacies of language, race, power, agency, and action. Baker-Bell discusses the results of this pedagogy in Chapter 5, “Black Linguistic Consciousness,” where the findings indicate a significant growth in the students’ Black Linguistic Consciousness as evidenced by the character counterstories that do not show the presence of “ambivalence and internalized Anti-Black Linguistic Racism” that was found in the first attitudinal assessment (96). However, this doesn’t mean that Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy is a panacea for all deep-rooted problems, as some students continue to show linguistic double consciousness. Baker-Bell reflects on her own experiences working with the students and about the things she could have done better. This self-reflective element further enhances her ethos as a researcher and writer. She concludes this chapter with a note that this pedagogy is equally useful to other language groups and white students who “are

more likely to perpetuate Anti-Black Linguistic Racism and uphold white linguistic hegemony” (100).

Chapter 6, “THUG LIFE: Bonus Chapter: Five Years After Leadership Academy,” offers additional insights into the role African American literature could play in Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy to dismantle Anti-Black Linguistic Racism. Although literature plays an important role in developing critical consciousness, an explicit discussion of language is not always a part of the study of literature dealing with linguistic racism. In fact, literary works provide “a rich opportunity for students in English Language Arts classrooms to examine how language and race inform identity and experience” (103). The recent rise of young adult African American novels could be useful in putting “current racial and linguistic realities in conversation with the critical analytical tools” and working toward a robust Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy (103). Baker-Bell shares the artifacts from a course *Linguistic (IN)Justice: A Black Counterstory of the English Language* that she taught to preservice English Education students, an interview with a student, and details of THUG LIFE events where THUG is an acronym for Angie Thomas’ 2017 young adult novel *The Hate U Give* that they read in the class. Both Baker-Bell and Thomas are inspired by the rapper Tupac Shakur’s concept of THUG LIFE that strongly criticizes the white supremacist capitalist system. Baker-Bell presents these pedagogical ideas as examples that can be implemented, altered, or taken as an inspiration to use literature in the service of linguistic justice rather than as a prescription.

In sum, *Linguistic Justice* is a book that pushes the boundaries in many ways. It defies traditional generic confinements by weaving together “theory, history, culture, activism in a multimodal, interactive teaching-learning curriculum undergirded by Anti-racist Black Language Pedagogy” (Smitherman xvi). Likewise, it blends Baker-Bell’s personal attachment to the topic with research and rich ethnographic details. She has walked a fine line between the personal and the professional in the way that her positionality and lived experiences add authenticity to the content without compromising intellectual rigor. The theoretical clarity of Black Linguistic Racism, that it is not just about language but is more about the dehumanization of Black Language speakers, distinguishes this book and provides a more humane touch at the same time. The strongest part of the book, in my view, is where Baker-Bell puts Black students’ voices at the center. Instead of falling into the trap of cultural relativism, she puts Black language, culture, and the speakers’ voices and experiences on equal footing and lets them speak for themselves. Although she uses the word *decolonial* only once, her entire project has a decolonial undertone. So *Linguistic Justice* can be interpreted as an act of epistemic delinking that “change[s] the terms and not just the content of the conversation” (Mignolo 459). The book has a specific focus on Black language, but its linguistic justice framework can be adapted to other contexts like writing studies as well. Finally, Baker-Bell mentions how her framework could be useful to white students and other linguistic groups, but a little more discussion in this direction would benefit the readers who do not exclusively work with Black students.

## WORKS CITED

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