

*Review Essay*

## **Does the Universe Tilt to the Side of Linguistic Justice? When, Where, and How?**

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Baker-Bell, April. *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity and Pedagogy*. Routledge, 2020. 128 pages.

In July, 2020 CCCC Chair Vershawn Ashanti Young shared the position statement, “This Ain’t Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!”, a statement approved by the CCCC Executive Committee. The contributors to this statement write directly in response to “witnessing ongoing #BlackLivesMatter protests across the United States in response to the anti-Black racist violence and murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, and a growing list of Black people at the hands of the state and vigilantes” (para. 1). In connecting racist violence to implications for literacy and language educators, they further “acknowledge that the same anti-Black violence toward Black people in the streets across the United States mirrors the anti-Black violence that is going down in these academic streets . . .” (para. 1).

If the CCCC position serves as a demand for Black linguistic justice, then April Baker-Bell’s book *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity and Pedagogy* serves as a detailed account of the precise locations for these academic streets from where linguistic violence exists, and their obstructions to Black survival. As I witnessed the #BlackLivesMatter protests this summer, I admit I smacked lips and sucked teeth a few times when scrolling social media posts by literacy and composition educators posing with #BlackLivesMatter bumper stickers: Weren’t these the same folks who at best, remained silent to the issues concerning Students’ Right to Their Own Language many of us Afro-linguistic scholars had been

preaching about for decades? Did they not see the connections between their complicit silence at best (some of them were downright antagonistic to Black linguistic justice) and the violence inflicted upon Black people? Perhaps they really were colorblind . . .

Baker-Bell's book, however, offers no excuses to feigned colorblindness, unintentional ignorance, or straight-up antagonism. From jump, Baker-Bell makes the connections between violence and linguistic racism concrete:

Like the mission of Black Lives Matter, *Linguistic Justice* is a call to action: a call to radically imagine and create a world free of anti-blackness. A call to create an education system where Black students, their language, their literacies, their culture, their creativity, their joy, their imagination, their brilliance, their freedom, their existence, their resistance MATTERS. (3)

In fact, the requirement that Black students need to adopt Eurocentric cultural norms deviating from Africanized patterns of expression in order to survive is a boldfaced lie. Baker-Bell further reminds us that speaking "standard English" ain't stopped one police officer from ever killing an unarmed Black citizen, noting:

If y'all actually believe that using "standard English" will dismantle white supremacy, then you not paying attention! . . . Eric Garner was choked to death by a police officer while saying "I cannot breathe." Wouldn't you consider "I cannot breathe" "standard English" syntax? (5)

#### CHAPTER 1: "BLACK LANGUAGE IS GOOD ON ANY MLK BOULEVARD"

After establishing the connections between linguistic justice, violence, and survival, Baker-Bell establishes linguistic justice as a pathway to freedom, by noting that the linguistic freedoms traditionally afforded to white students to facilitate linguistic discourse, must also be afforded to Black students (7). More specifically,

Telling children that White Mainstream English is needed for survival can no longer be the answer, especially as we are witnessing Black people be mishandled, discriminated against, and murdered while using White Mainstream English, and in some cases, before they even open their mouths. (7)

Given that linguistic justice demands linguistic liberties that should be equally afforded to Black citizens, the remaining chapters and contents in Baker-Bell's book, provide a roadmap for achieving linguistic justice. As we embark upon this pathway, we need to identify locations, moments,

and actions that allow the universe to tilt back toward the side of linguistic justice.

As Baker-Bell notes, the style and arrangement of the book is just as important as the book's contents because it establishes a connection between Black language and her own lived experiences. As a result, the book includes a vast collection of artifacts ("dialogues, charts, graphs, instructional maps, images, artwork, stories and weblinks"), each of which capture how multifaceted Black discourse really is, and how integral it is to Black survival (7). Each of these modes of writing connect intricately to the path that Baker-Bell has provided us for achieving Black linguistic justice while also pushing teachers and scholars away from the traditional boundaries of what academic scholarly books look like. In addition to these artifacts, concrete and practical lesson plans are included to guide literacy educators with specific activities and practices to promote linguistic justice, especially within secondary and postsecondary classrooms.

## CHAPTER 2: "WHAT'S ANTI-BLACKNESS GOT TO DO WITH IT?"

As readers embark upon the pathway to linguistic justice, Baker-Bell's second chapter offers Anti-Black Linguistic Racism as a framework for how traditional academic and pedagogical practices normalize racism (8). Beginning with descriptions of her work with youth at the Leadership Academy, the primary site for her teacher-scholar research, Baker-Bell connects common-place pedagogical practices associated with this site (including educators and students), with the longer term implications for linguistic violence. As a working definition, Anti-Black Linguistic Racism "describes the linguistic violence, persecution, dehumanization, and marginalization that Black language-speakers experience in schools and in everyday life" (11). To forecast some of the experiences Baker-Bell shares of Anti-Black Linguistic Racism at the Leadership Academy, Baker-Bell describes the connections between policing of Black Language and literacies, and the ways in which Black bodies are "surveilled in U.S. society" (12). This surveillance is no different than the "symbolic linguistic violence and spirit-murder that Black students experience daily in classrooms" (12).

After describing this surveillance, Baker-Bell offers a brief review of Black language and rhetoric because despite the decades and decades of research on Black language, the people still hafta define *they* terms for a mainstream audience. In brief

Black Language is the rhetoric of resistance embedded within the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, which led to the birth of what some call the 21st century civil rights movement. It is the phonology and gram-

matical structure of former president Barack Obama when declining to accept change from a Black cashier by saying, “*Nah, we straight.*” Black Language is the controversial words of wisdom that Michelle Obama shared at the 2016 Democratic National Convention, “*When they go low, we go high.*” . . . Black Language is also the native language and rich linguistic resources that so many Black children bring into classrooms every day. (13)

After defining Black Language for the people, Baker-Bell then draws upon Critical Race Theory (CRT) to examine the ways in which we have normalized linguistic racism, so much that it’s difficult for us to even identify linguistic racism as a form of racism (16), especially since there are no laws in the United States that make linguistic discrimination illegal (17). After laying the groundwork for understanding Anti-Black Linguistic Racism, Black Language, and CRT, Baker-Bell returns to data from an interview with one of the Black female students with whom she worked at Leadership Academy. From this data, she understood that Black speakers are critically aware of the ways their language is policed and that relationship to anti-Blackness; however, they often don’t have the precise language to make sense of these experiences. Baker-Bell’s work, then, gives us the language to speak truth to power and help our students make sense of how we move toward Black linguistic justice.

Later in the chapter, Baker-Bell identifies how without a language to call out linguistic injustice, Black students often internalize Anti-Black Racism, particularly through the consequences educators inflict on students when employing Black language (21). Midway through the chapter, Baker-Bell presents her first table of the variety of ways that Anti-Black Racism permeates education. A few examples provided range from negative teacher attitudes and beliefs that Black Language is inherently inferior to Mainstream White English, to the assumption that students can use Black Language as long as they can code-switch, to a contrastive analysis approach that acknowledges differences between languages, but still requires White Mainstream English for formal contexts (22–23). While these approaches range from intolerant to quasi-tolerant, the impact on Black speakers still inflicts linguistic violence, and internalizes self-hate toward our languages, identities and culture. Finally, Baker-Bell identifies ten framing ideas for Antiracist Black language and pedagogy, which provide teachers with practical ways and examples of what antiracist language pedagogy looks like in a classroom. In order to adopt this pedagogy, teachers need to interrogate white linguistic superiority and provide opportunities for Black linguistic consciousness raising (34). Several additional artifacts are offered to demonstrate Antiracist Black language pedagogy for teachers.

## CHAPTER 3: "KILLING THEM SOFTLY"

Chapter three is where we begin to see the meat of data collection and analysis around the students in Baker-Bell's study. It begins by centering students' voices at Leadership Academy as counterstories "because research, theories and pedagogies on Black Language education are not very inclusive of Black students' perspectives about their language learning or everyday language experiences" (40), though some previous teacher-research studies do address Black students' linguistic attitudes and their relationships with Black Language (Perryman-Clark, "Africanized Patterns"; Perryman-Clark, *Afrocentric Teacher-Research*; Perryman-Clark, "African American Rhetoric"). Baker-Bell's first impression of Leadership Academy also addresses the ways the dress code and other requirements reflect binary assumptions about gender (39). Such a move sets up for an oppressive system that is reinforced in many K-12 and postsecondary classrooms. Baker-Bell's presentation and analysis of students' initial attitudes about Black language based on an initial discussion moreover reinforce the ways that systematic oppression is internalized by Black students, though through her analysis, some students begin to acquire language for critiquing these systems, thereby also developing critical consciousness about who has the power and authority to enforce and reinforce these oppressive systems.

The attitudes about Black language are moreover internalized through their perceptions of speakers' visual appearances and conduct based on the way the speaker talks. Through an activity presented by Baker-Bell, students initially identified those speakers who used Black Language as those more likely to be perceived as thugs, lazy, or unprofessional, while those employing Mainstream English were more likely to be perceived as professional, smart, and good (47). After discussing these perceptions, Baker-Bell presents data from a group of students who discuss the activity outside of the class session and begin applying the implications of the activity to the practices of teachers at Leadership Academy. They also address the concept of "double-consciousness" that applies to how both they and their families have to adapt to both Black Language and Anti-Black Language contexts to avoid judgement or punitive consequences. Janel, one of the students in the study, develops conscious-raising notions about Anti-Racist Black language, however, noting:

At the end of the day, I think it is more smart for you to talk in both languages rather than speak in one language or talk proper all the time. If you can do both, then it show that you are obviously smart. (53)

Put simply, monolingualism is less sophisticated than multilingualism.

Later in the chapter, Baker-Bell introduces a counterstory from another participant in the study, Allistar to reflect the ways in which Black Language speakers internalize linguistic racism through educational systems. The story presents a scene where Allistar is late to class and explains his reasoning with his teacher. Despite the fact that he was late because his mother dropped him off late, the teacher, Ms. Helen, is fixated on the Black Language he uses to express his case. Ms. Helen informs Baker-Bell, “although he said that in a non-eloquent way, he is really smart” (57), something Allistar internalizes. When Baker-Bell asks him about his previously written response about speakers of Black Language having little education, Allistar responded by stating “Usually when you see somebody who talk like that, they’re a thug,” despite the fact that Allistar is a frequent user of Black Language and also used Black Language in his response (57). Such an instance reflects one of many ways that the internalizing of Anti-Black Language racism kills Black students softly, and Baker-Bell concludes the chapter by offering Janel and Allistar’s counterstories as providing an “in-depth look at how students are impacted by Anti-Black Linguistic Racism” (61).

#### CHAPTER 4: “SCOFF NO MORE”

Chapter four builds from the previous chapter by acknowledging that Black people have been historically conditioned to internalize Anti-Black Linguistic Racism. While the previous chapter presents data as counterstories from two participants affected by the internalization of Anti-Black Linguistic Racism, chapter four provides praxis to guide readers with adopting an antiracist linguistic pedagogy, what Baker-Bell describes as “Critical Language Awareness pedagogy,” a pedagogy that moves students toward critical conscious and its relationships with power and authority. In essence, such a pedagogy encourages students to examine the relationships between correctness, rules and the power structures designed to reinforce them (Smitherman 10).

But developing critical consciousness first requires language educators to reteach the history of Black Language that students often internalize as negative, something Baker-Bell demonstrates through additional activities with students, informing them that the language students previously judged from a sample prompt is in fact a rule-governed, legitimate language. From there, students are provided with additional historical context, often through the praxis of “language planning,” where Baker-Bell guides students through a historical lesson that connects the institution of slavery with Black Language and African slaves’ abilities to communicate with each other despite coming from different villages, countries, and regions

where different African languages and language varieties were spoken. Such an act, she notes, could not be successful without language planning (67). This connection, Baker-Bell makes when sharing texts of negro spirituals and the coded language used by slaves to offer a counter-language to the colonizer's language (70). Connecting Black Language to history and its implications to slavery in an American colonial context lays the groundwork for establishing the relationship between racism and language to begin teaching antiracist linguistics.

After establishing this context, Baker-Bell guides readers through an antiracist pedagogy that introduces educators and students to the complexities associated with Black Language, including its grammatical structures and rhetorical features. Baker-Bell breaks down an introduction to Black Language into the following categories, while offering specific examples of each feature/category: syntax, semantics, pronunciation, and rhetorical features (75). After teaching examples of these features, Baker-Bell's students are then assigned to identify a Black Language artifact and write an ethnographic essay that analyzes how Black Language is used in their daily lives (81) that enables students to discover the many ways they underestimate the uses and powers of Black Language and the impacts on their lives. Once students see the value and influences of Black Language on their lives, students are then ready to have larger conversations about language, race and power, and their relationships with critical conscious-raising. Baker-Bell then presents a series of additional activities, including profiling quizzes that help students further interrogate these relationships.

Chapter four concludes with additional activities and pedagogies that seek to move students beyond simple conscious raising, and more toward taking action to dismantle structures of oppression. These activities range from creating social media campaigns to writing letters to public officials. Other activities encourage students to connect linguistic racism with racial violence to create solidarity with communities of color by exploring literacy narratives and other readings about cultural sharing. In short, Chapter four provides educators with a series of activities that offer starting points for how we work to dismantle Anti-Black Linguistic Racism, where the goal is still linguistic justice.

#### CHAPTER 5: "BLACK LINGUISTIC CONSCIOUSNESS"

Chapter five continues with counterstories from students that apply Antiracist Black Language pedagogy into practice, first beginning with an analysis of students' attitudes and perceptions about Black Language and internalized Black Language racism (93). The first series of counterstories describe

a dialogue between Baker Bell and to what degree students' attitudes about Black Language changed after being introduced to Antiracist Black Language pedagogy. While it's clear that students' attitudes have changed for the better with respect to Black Language, Baker-Bell uses mixed methods of data that juxtapose spoken conversation with visual drawings from the students to describe attitudes and perceptions about Black Language. With one example from Janel, she describes a drawing where she has the freedom to "speak A [Black Language] wherever [she sees] fit" (95). Another student, Lola, asserts that she is willing to confront others who criticize Black Language by educating them about its legitimacy. For Baker-Bell, these two counterstories and their relationships with Black linguistic consciousness remind us what Black linguistic justice is all about: It's about freedom of expression and its ability to use Black language as one sees fit.

Baker-Bell also presents counterstories from Allistar and Fetti, two additional students from her study. In the story, Fetti jokes about Allistar's drawing, asking why he drew a picture of "the same dude twice" (97). In response, Allistar replies, "I drew the same boy for both languages because he is like me. He integrate both languages wherever he at. It is part of me. It has become one of my traits as a human being just like my culture and religion" (97). Such a statement in relation to Black linguistic justice, reminds readers that Black Language, identity and culture are inseparable. Denying Black Language to its speakers is the same as denying humanity to Black people. A Black linguistic justice then demands more than 3/5 of a person: It demands that to accept Black people, we must accept the whole person.

*Chapter 6: "THUG LIFE": Bonus Chapter: Five Years After Leadership Academy*

The final chapter begins with a passage from Angie Thomas' novel, *The Hate U Give*, to help students understand the relationship between linguistic identities and practices and how they are reflected in literature (103). Baker-Bell acknowledges that the purpose of this bonus chapter is to present "Black Language Artifacts" adopted from a preservice English education course where she used novels such as *The Hate U Give* and other adult literature to (1) provide a foundation that explores the relationships between identity and expression (including its freedom or lack thereof), (2) explore a study of language beyond White Mainstream English, (3) include a variety of representations of Black Language and its relationship to Black cultural epistemological frameworks, and (4) to show "how it is nearly impossible to separate a person's language from their racial positioning in society" (103).



Baker-Bell then offers a linguistic justice framework through seven Black Language Artifacts along with a series of pedagogical activities that align with each artifact. The first artifact, Black Language and Identity, allows students to explore relationships between “language, culture and identity within the Black community” (104). The second artifact, Language History and Culture, requires students to participate in a language-based study that investigates the relationships between the “historical, cultural and political underpinnings of Black language” (105). The third artifact, The Study of Black Language, delves into research and scholarship about the structures of Black Language in addition to sociolinguistic perspectives (106). The fourth artifact, Language and Power, explores the relationships between language and power (106).

The fifth artifact, Language and Racial Positioning, moves more broadly beyond power to its specific effects on power, authority and privilege on Black speakers. With one activity, students explore the concept of code-switching as connected to the protagonist in *The Hate U Give* (THUG) William Starr’s own experiences with code-switching (107). The sixth artifact, Language, Agency and Action, moves from knowledge to action, by asking students to analyze examples of how Black writers and speakers have powerfully and successfully used Black Language in pursuit of freedom (108). The seventh artifact, Black Language & Music & Memes, provides present-day examples of how popular cultural media can be used to analyze Black Language (109), and the final artifact, Developing a Language of Solidarity, moves toward critical consciousness and awareness of linguistic diversity toward developing solidarity with a range of racial groups who are similarly impacted by linguistic violence and racism (109).

If I were to find a phrase to sum up this book, it would be that it’s a “no-excuses book”: It disrupts the tired excuses that writing educators have used for decades to deny Black students linguistic justice from, “if I don’t teach standard English, how will they learn it?” to “if I don’t teach standard English, how will they get a job?” to “if I don’t teach standard English, Black students will be perceived as thugs and be vulnerable to the criminal justice system.” All of these excuses bear no merit, as Baker-Bell has shown us that teaching Mainstream White English does not prevent Black people from being killed, nor does it enable Black people to be more likely to obtain employment. Put simply, these are just excuses. Responses to these excuses have often been used to elevate code-switching; however, this book also shows us that neoliberal solutions like bidialectalism and code-switching also do linguistic harm by denying the full humanity and legitimacy of Black Language.

Another excuse that has been used by writing teachers is to suggest that linguistic justice is hard to put into pedagogical practice; however, Baker-Bell's book (especially chapter six), provides a step-by-step guide for writing educators who do not know where to begin, despite the existing scholarship on African-centered language pedagogy (Richardson; Perryman-Clark). Perhaps, Baker-Bell's book might have provided more citations and discussion of how this work moves beyond previous pedagogies to show how linguistic justice is in fact possible; however, the book in essence tackles the heart of what Black linguistic justice is really about: It's about the preservation of Black humanity and life. When Black lives are preserved, then the universe is able to tilt more closely to the side of linguistic justice.

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