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Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy

April Baker-Bell

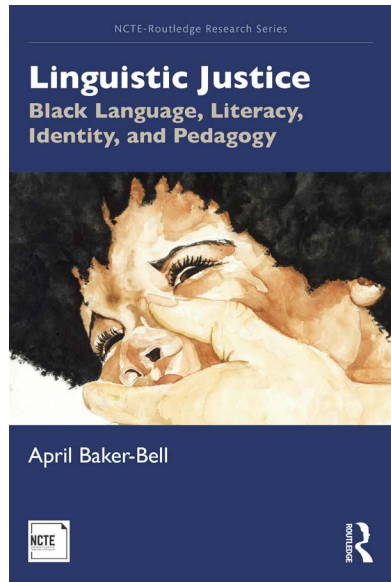
NCTE-Routledge, 2020, pp. 128

Reviewed by Michael J. Benjamin

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April Baker-Bell done known what she did with *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy* when she titled her first chapter “Black Language is Good on Any MLK Boulevard.”

I knew what she did, too, as The Carters’ “Black Effect” played in my head as I read the title. A masterful reference provided Baker-Bell’s, and *Linguistic Justice*’s, relationship to Geneva Smitherman. Smitherman, aka Dr. G, aka the Jay-Z of Academics, states in the foreword “mos def, this is the book we have been waiting for” (xvi). She ain’t wrong. The book is so good I had to read it twice to even begin to think about critiquing it as it intricately weaves together theory and practice. A self-admitted part manifesto, part theory reader, and part critical praxis collection, *Linguistic Justice* almost effortlessly glides from the NCTE/CCCC’s 1974 Students’ Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) resolution to the Black Lives Matter’s mission statement. The book is a call to action, to “radically imagine and create a world free of anti-blackness” and a larger education system that values Black students’ language and literacies (3). The tie between valuing Black Language and striving towards a world rid of anti-black racism is demonstrated viscerally in the death of Eric Garner. Baker-Bell cites the death of Garner a couple different times in the book, highlighting his use of White Mainstream English (“I cannot breathe”) as a police officer choked him to death. Baker-Bell could not have known that her book would be published amidst the COVID-19 pandemic which disproportionately wreaked havoc on minorities and just weeks before the murder of George Floyd, the life choked out of him by a police officer. Yet, the context into which *Linguistic Justice* was published is the point: the oppression and dehumanization of Black folk is omnipresent and radiates from the classroom into the community. From within the classroom, we ought to dismantle Anti-Black Linguistic Racism and destabilize white linguistic hegemony.



A “Black Language Theoreticum” or theory meets practicum book, *Linguistic Justice* argues for an Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy, enacted by Baker-Bell at Detroit’s Leadership Academy, a public charter school on the Westside of the city where ninety-nine percent of the student body is Black-American (8). A “teacher-scholar-activist project [done] with young people in Detroit,” Baker-Bell’s book highlights the way Anti-Black Linguistic Racism has oppressed and permeated Black students and Black Language-speakers, ultimately damaging their sense of self and identity (8). In its advocacy for Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy, *Linguistic Justice* offers seven critical inquiry-based learning experiences that offer Black students the opportunity to learn through and about Black Language. Baker-Bell offers a collection of images, dialogues, charts, graphs, instructional maps, artwork, stories, and weblinks in order to both show the dynamism of Black Language and how she understands and interacts with Black Language daily. Tying together Black death and Anti-Black Linguistic Racism, Baker-Bell argues for demolishing linguistic hierarchies for the sake of demolishing racial ones.

In chapter one, “Black Language is Good on Any MLK Boulevard,” which doubles as the introduction, Baker-Bell interrogates the bonds between race, culture, and language. Cementing herself in the tradition of Smitherman, Elaine Richardson (lovingly referred to as Docta E), Valerie Kinloch, Carmen Kynard, and many more invested in Black rhetorics, Baker-Bell begins by establishing her connection to Detroit and Michigan at large. An important note, as she points out, provided the state’s deeply entrenched position in the language wars. Owning up to her former naivete, Baker-Bell indicates the desire to create a book that enacts bell hooks’ “revolutionary pedagogy of resistance,” especially given the history of Black Language research “in the D” and the landmark 1977 Ann Arbor Black English case (4). *Linguistic Justice* is personal, with further impetus for the project stemming from a presentation at the 2017 National Council of Teachers of English annual convention where teachers advocated for code-switching as a means to dismantle white supremacy. The remark, Baker-Bell notes, came from a young Black teacher and fails to “realize that standard English is a byproduct of white supremacy” (6). Discomforted by the way the comment fostered a sense of relief for the white teachers in the room, Baker-Bell argues for “the need for *Black Linguistic Consciousness*” to prevent such anti-Black statements to serve as further justification for “racist language policies, practices, pedagogies, and classrooms” (7).

Vital to chapter one also is the definition of key terms and Baker-Bell’s linguistic choices throughout the book. She intentionally uses Smitherman’s Black Language instead of African American Language or African American Vernacular English to both demonstrate Black Language’s standing as its own language that includes features of West African Languages in an American context and align her work with the mission of Black Liberation movements. Likewise, she uses Alim and Smitherman’s White Mainstream English instead of Dominant American English, standard English, or academic English to make visible the racial component to language and destabilize this concept that this iteration of English is more important than Black Language. It is these moments of definition-setting that Baker-Bell makes her theoretical imprint

and unites her audiences, demonstrating the importance of our rhetorical choices in scholarship and in the world at-large.

In chapter two, “What’s Anti-Blackness Got To Do Wit It?,” Baker-Bell describes Anti-Black Linguistic Racism and its quotidian persecution and dehumanization of Black Language-speakers and its relationship to the marginalization, colonization, and policing of black bodies. Positioning this type of linguistic oppression as unique, Baker-Bell highlights how Anti-Black Linguistic Racism is routinely evident in our “research, disciplinary discourses, curricular choices, pedagogical practices, and teacher attitudes” (12). It is here that Baker-Bell provides the theoretical backbone to *Linguistic Justice*, weaving together Critical Race Theory, sociolinguistics, and pedagogy. These theoretical underpinnings ultimately scaffold into three approaches to language pedagogy: eradicationist language pedagogy, respectability language pedagogy, and antiracist Black Language pedagogy. Labeling the first as a lack of acknowledgment of Black Language and the second as a “surrender to whiteness,” Baker-Bell defines the third as centering Black Language (28). She envisions an approach that destabilizes white linguistic hegemony and undoes Anti-Black Linguistic Racism and the internalization of it by students.

Chapter two, in its conclusion, also finds Baker-Bell providing ten framing ideas for an Antiracist Black Language Education and Pedagogy. She argues that it is vital that the ideas be “embodied in any transformative approach that seeks to dismantle Anti-Black Linguistic Racism and student’s internalization of it” (34). At their core, the ideas all “(1) center blackness; (2) confront white linguistic and cultural hegemony; and (3) contest antiblackness” (32). It is here where Baker-Bell makes highly explicit the harms of code-switching and other appeasement and respectability language education policies. It is also here where Baker-Bell provides the seven critical inquiry-based Black Language artifacts, such as Black Language & Identity and Study of the Grammatical and Rhetorical Features of Black Language. These artifacts inform the practical application component of the book, powering the lesson plans Baker-Bell describes throughout the remaining chapters with each artifact coming with a student learning outcome.

In chapter three, “Killing Them Softly,” Baker-Bell starts with a “Detroit literacy practice,” as the students at Leadership Academy “ask a series of questions that help them place each other on a map and/or distinguish *the real* (those who lived/lived in Detroit) from *the fake* (those who claim Detroit but have never lived there or did not live there pregentrification)” (42). A native New Yorker, this literacy practice warmed my heart as we use a very similar test to figure out the very same thing. Baker-Bell narrativizes the beginning of her work at the Leadership Academy, demonstrating that she is not, indeed, one of those “hit it and quit it’ researchers that enter into schools and classrooms, collect data, and bounce” (41). She argues for educators to listen to the voices of Black Language speakers and proceeds to center the voices of her students through composite character counterstorying, which she defines as “a critical race methodological tool that allows researchers to merge data analysis with creative writing to expose patterns of racialized inequality and deepen our understanding of the ways race and racism affect the lives and lived experiences of people

of color as individuals and as groups in schools” (44). Through these counterstories, Baker-Bell demonstrates the unaccounted effects of eradicationist and respectability language pedagogy, namely Anti-Black Linguistic Racism and linguistic double consciousness and the need for a revised literacy and language education.

In chapter four, “Scoff No More,” Baker-Bell illuminates how theory, research, and practice can enhance each other to pursue linguistic and racial justice while simultaneously providing “ethnographic snapshots” of how students at Leadership Academy reacted to the Black Language Artifacts (64). Structured around each artifact and also a direct response to Carter G. Woodson’s point about Black students learning to hate their own language instead of learning about it, this chapter is perhaps the crown jewel of the book. Replete with activities, worksheets, and lessons about the syntax, semantics, pronunciation, and rhetorical features of Black Language, chapter four is Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy in its full praxis glory. I found myself personally taken by Baker-Bell’s discussion of Black Language Artifact 3: Study of Grammatical and Rhetorical Features of Black Language. Employing an approach to grammar that asked students to observe, explore, and describe the literacies of their “native” language, Baker-Bell avoids simply explaining how the Black Language works (76). Instead, she provides highlights on the syntax, semantics, slang, and phonology of Black Language as on display by the students at Leadership Academy, as well as the rhetorical features such as signifying, playing the dozens, and linguistic inventiveness. Baker-Bell highlights how many aspects of Black Language do not translate into White Mainstream English, even if portions of Black Language are co-opted into the broader English language.

Linguistic Justice’s main weakness is evident in the disparity between chapters three and four. Chapter three, while certainly important due to its role in setting the scene of Leadership Academy, Baker-Bell’s place as a researcher, and outlining the book’s methodology, does not go into the same depth in its discussion of the Black Language artifacts as chapter four. Going into just two of the artifacts—compared to the five parsed in chapter four—these two chapters feel disproportionate in their delivering of the book’s overall content. This may be on purpose and understood as a strength rather than a weakness: *Linguistic Justice* is meant to be read as a book and each chapter should not be separated from the rest. However, as ideas from each chapter bleed into each other and lead to some repetition, it can begin to feel as if the takeaways from chapter four dwarf the ones in chapter three, even given the power of the counterstories in the third chapter.

In chapter five, “Black Linguistic Consciousness,” Baker-Bell continues the use of counterstory, this time focusing much further on the results of her work at Leadership Academy. While Baker-Bell highlights a shift in much of the students’ thinking around Black Language, the counterstories also show that “an Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy alone cannot solve Anti-Black Racism and white linguistic hegemony” (97). Not solely triumphant, Baker-Bell clarifies the purpose of the book: “to give Black students the tools to liberate themselves from oppression” (100). Cementing that Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy supplied her students with the ability to name their experiences with linguistic racism, the ability to interrogate linguistic

oppression, and a language and literacy education that values their backgrounds and selves, Baker-Bell concludes by directly addressing the reader, “I encourage language and literacy educators to position themselves as learners and allow your students to do their part by teaching you” (101).

In chapter six, “‘THUG LIFE’: Bonus Chapter: Five Years After Leadership Academy,” Baker-Bell blends the theories of Tupac Shakur with Angie Thomas’ 2017 novel, *The Hate U Give* as a critique of the white supremacist capitalist system. This bonus chapter is fully practical, going through each of the seven artifacts with a lesson plan, while also adding an eighth bonus artifact. A project born from her English Teacher Education courses, Baker-Bell supplies a thoughtful follow-up on her work at Leadership Academy and the most explicitly sketched out implementation of Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy.

I cannot lavish enough praise on *Linguistic Justice*. As a graduate student in his last semester of coursework, Baker-Bell’s book has served as a crucial tying together of the numerous threads in the field of rhetoric and composition. With its eye towards theory and practice, the scholarly and the activist, Baker-Bell’s book provides a trusty guide to critical teaching, demonstrating how to blend theory with practice. The book is at its strongest in the sections that weave together the counterstories of students with theory. My deepest critique is the way the book carries from chapter-to-chapter, without the clear delineation seen in other books of its ilk. That said, *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy* has helped crystallize my understanding of the relationship between what we do in the classroom and how it reverberates in the larger community. I urge you to read it, fully expecting it to have the same effect.