



# Countering anti-Black linguistic racism through critical awareness, agency, and solidarity

## Book Review

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April Baker–Bell, *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy* (1<sup>st</sup> edn.) New York: Routledge, 2020. Pp. xx + 128. Paperback \$34.36, ISBN: 9781138551022, Hardback \$120, ISBN: 9781138551015, eBook \$34.36, ISBN: 9781315147383

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*Linguistic Justice* features a painting of a Black woman covering her mouth with one hand on its front cover, an image that communicates shock and grief. This is the face of a community in the throes of a struggle – an embodied lived experience it inherits from the past, spends a lifetime carrying on, and ultimately bequeaths to its progeny. It is the face of the tired history of a battle for survival and meaning against a senseless dark force called racism. Yet, despite all the pain that despondent visage conveys, Baker–Bell’s book is not a requiem for an ideal. It is a message of fervent hope backed by viable ideas that point to an achievable better future.

The book speaks most directly to language and literacy educators, such as English Language Arts (ELA) instructors, in the United States and possibly the rest of the Anglophone world. In a broader sense, however, the book should be an inspiration for agency and action to academics and school teachers in any context worldwide where language discrimination based on race or ethnicity is an obstacle to social justice and detrimental to individuals’ sense of self.

Chapter 1 situates the denigration of Black English within the broader context of anti-Black racism, a central theme that is revisited or implicitly present throughout the book. It also stresses the need to raise Black linguistic consciousness and adopt a structured approach to dismantle Anti-Black Linguistic Racism, a step which, as the author notes, is in line with the vision of Black liberation movements, notably, Black Lives Matter. Chapter 2 underscores the adverse impact of Anti-Black Linguistic Racism on Black students’ sense of identity. It also lays out the plan for what the author terms Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy. The framework comprises seven innovative pedagogical experiences referred to as ‘artifacts’. In Chapter 3, Baker–Bell begins to touch on the fieldwork that constitutes the practical core of the book. She elaborates on the first artifact as enacted at a majority-Black public charter school in Detroit. Through a preliminary attitudinal assessment and analysis of the counternarratives elicited from the students, she brings to the fore the emotional harm caused by the nefarious ideology perpetuated through the dominant educational approach. Chapter 4 reports on the subsequent learning experiences, which historicize Black Language, invite reflection on the intersections between language, race, and power, develop student agency, and foster solidarity with other communities of color impacted by linguistic violence. The chapter affords a focused look at the praxis of the proposed pedagogy and how the theory, research, and practice can work together in productive ways. Chapter 5 confirms the intended outcome of the critical conscious-raising practice based on insights from a post-assessment and discusses the implications of such activism for the Black community and other language groups. Finally, Chapter 6 centers on the use of African American literature to portray the link between identity and linguistic expression, and how this potential could be exploited to further the aims of the pedagogy.

There has been much theorizing about the injustices afflicting human societies with the issue of race at the epicenter of the copious scholarship on inequity and inequality in the United States. What sets *Linguistic Justice* apart, however, is the very nature of the work: its pragmatic, no-nonsense approach, making it an instance of educational activism at its best. Baker–Bell is a scholar who rolls up her sleeves and goes to

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work with fixity of purpose and a methodically devised action plan informed by theory and the author's lived reality. It is a 'theoreticum' (p. 8), in Baker-Bell's own words, structured around inquiry-based activities that help Black students to become critically aware and problematize the linguistically racist assumptions institutionalized by the education system. She shows her readers what it looks like to walk the talk and get results. So, the book is a compelling call to action and an operational model to emulate across the nation.

Another equally remarkable aspect of *Linguistic Justice* is the passionate tone in which the author makes her plea. Alongside proposing a sound approach, a call to action needs to stir the right emotions. So, given the nature of the work, this heartfelt, evocative style contributes to its impact. It is, after all, one thing to know history, it is quite another to be able to reach back across the centuries and feel an experience in a palpable way. Baker-Bell's words, backed and bolstered by the works in Black history she draws on, afford a vivid sense of the horrors of slavery: a shackled man or woman, beaten down, torn apart from his/her dear ones, trying and probably failing to make some sense of this new horrendous reality forced upon him/her, and at the same time unable to share these sentiments with the fellow captives by his/her side en route to the New World and in the plantations, because, having been strategically positioned next to members of other tribes, s/he doesn't share their tongue. The author aptly ties this inability to communicate to the necessity and consequent birth of a new tongue, a language of resistance, which, against the odds, has not only continued to survive but also flourished to this day to the extent that, as the author points out, Black English constructions are readily absorbed by mainstream American culture and even appropriated for marketing purposes now.

In the book, Nehrez is cited as likening decolonization to 'an act of exorcism' (qtd. in Hooks, 1992: 1), a cogent analogy that befits Baker-Bell's argument, as antiracist pedagogy needs to involve driving out an ideological demon. This not only turns on its head the pathologizing of Blackness that we can identify across US history, but also suggests how tenaciously entrenched racism can be. When a community is constantly dehumanized, the prospects of collective growth are bleak, since devalued individuals are stripped of the desire and drive to look beyond the status quo and envision a meaningful future. In this vein, Baker-Bell rightly foregrounds the internalization of anti-Blackness by African Americans. That is how a noxious force such as racism operates. It disempowers the self by inculcating a bogus sense of inferiority and normalizing itself through unrelenting ubiquity.

Seeing Eradicationist Language Pedagogies, Respectability Language Pedagogies, and Baker-Bell's Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy as stages along a historical continuum would indicate that efforts to implement linguistic justice have come a long way, particularly in light of the fact that the last of the three models aims to subvert the dynamics

that racialize language use, rather than either reject Black English as a deficient dialect or encourage code-switching to avoid linguistic profiling and access opportunity – respective aims of the first two. Efforts to counter anti-Blackness are gathering momentum, ushering in a new tide of antiracist activism, with Baker-Bell's monograph serving as a novel pedagogical initiative, which can pave the way for manifesting meaningful change. The book reaches us at a most well-timed juncture when there is much incertitude and dissonance surrounding the issue of race. The need for inspirational, awareness-raising work can be keenly felt at present. The author calls her work a 'teacher-scholar-activist project' (p. 8), a fine testament to the transformative power inherent in grassroots agency, lending evidential support to the idea that any aware educator willing to take action in the service of linguistic justice and armed with a workable plan for the purpose is well suited to be a part of this critical, joint endeavor and respond to the pressing need for change.

Baker-Bell's pedagogical approach helps Black youth to see the value and power of their native tongue as a medium of communication as rule-governed and complex as any other language. The evidence she cites from her project suggests her approach has the potential to make a substantial, sustained impact. It is imperative to expand the reach of these efforts to conscientize the entire society. Everyone needs to be educated in Black linguistic history and get a fine grasp of the richness and intricacies of the Black Language system, which the book author elegantly typologizes: features such as *Habitual Be*, *Zero Copula* (a syntactic phenomenon born out of the necessity for rapid communication among slaves), the witty wordplays known as *signifying* (a rhetorical hallmark of Black Language), the semantic subtleties of the coded spirituals, and a host of others. The ways Black English differs from the mainstream variety must come to be understood as defining characteristics developed systematically, not erroneous deviations from an inherently 'standard' form. System-wide change will materialize if critical pedagogy and curricular reform are vigorously pursued; in view of this, schools and colleges are crucial institutional contexts for such activism.

## Reference

Hooks, B. 1992. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston MA: South End Press.



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