LINGUISTIC JUSTICE

Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy

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"BLACK LANGUAGE IS GOOD ON ANY MLK BOULEVARD"

I grew up in the D! My mother tongue, *Black Language*, was the dominant language I came up on. I have always marveled at the way the Black people in my community would *talk that talk*. From *signifying* to *habitual be* to *call and response*, my linguistic community had a way of using language that was powerful, colorful, and unique. My mother still remains my favorite linguistic role model. As a young girl, I would "try-on" my mother's speech styles in conversations with my siblings, friends, or in instances where I needed to protect myself and others. This language, this Black Language, is the language that nurtured and socialized me to understand the world and how to participate in it. Morgan (2015) emphasizes the importance of the mother tongue. She says it is the first language learned as an infant, child, and youth. It is the first source to impart knowledge and insight about language and culture. Growing up, I was fascinated with Black Language and culture. I would often write stories, poems, and cards that were flavored with Black Language. When I was younger, I made my siblings play school, and yes, yours truly was the teacher. My young teachings incorporated writings by Black authors like Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Langston Hughes, and Amiri Baraka. In middle school, I created my own family newsletter that was modeled after JET and Word Up! Magazines. Black Language was never a place of struggle for me. I don't recall any memories of personally being corrected by teachers or my parents telling me to code-switch for opportunity or success, though I would peep my mom and dad "changing their voices" every now and again to sound more white when they were conducting business over the telephone. During my junior year of high school, I remember catching wind of the *Oakland Ebonics Controversy* (Rickford & Rickford, 2000), which created tension within the Black community about the way we talk. I recall overhearing my Black math teacher criticize Black Language by referring to it as poor grammar

and ignorant. My parents took a different stance on the issue. They were sick and tired of the relentless shaming of Black people—the way we talk, the way we walk, the way we dress, the way we eat, and the way we live. I was personally unbothered by the debate and the demeaning messages about a language that my lived experiences had already validated. Black Language for me has always reflected Black people's ways of knowing, interpreting, surviving, and being in the world.

Seeing Language in Black and White

Throughout *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*, I deliberately use the terms ***Black Language*** (BL) and ***White Mainstream English*** (WME) to foreground the relationship between language, race, anti-Black racism, and white linguistic supremacy. It was through my research with Black youth in Detroit that compelled me to begin using terms that more explicitly captured the intersections between language and race. In the study that this book is based on, I did not originally use Black Language or White Mainstream English as language descriptors. Back then, I was still using African American Language in place of Black Language and Dominant American English (DAE) in place of White Mainstream English. The term Dominant American English is another descriptor used in place of standard English or White Mainstream English, and it was coined by Django Paris (2009) to imply power. Even so, when using this term with the Black youth in the study, I found DAE to be a challenging term to use when trying to offer an analysis of linguistic racism. Despite discussions about language and power, it took some of the students a while to understand that DAE was not more important than Black Language. The use of the adjective "dominant" in the descriptor oftentimes reinforced the white linguistic dominance it was intended to deconstruct.

By linking the racial classifications Black and white to language, I am challenging you, the reader, to see how linguistic hierarchies and racial hierarchies are interconnected. That is, people's language experiences are not separate from their racial experiences. Indeed, the way a Black child's language is devalued in school reflects how Black lives are devalued in the world. Similarly, the way a white child's language is privileged and deemed the norm in schools is directly connected to the invisible ways that white culture is deemed normal, neutral, and superior in the world.

Smitherman (2006) describes Black Language as:

> a style of speaking English words with Black Flava—with Africanized semantic, grammatical, pronunciation, and rhetorical patterns. [Black Language] comes out of the experience of U.S. slave descendants. This shared experience has resulted in common language practices in the Black community. The roots of African American speech lie in the counter language, the

> resistance discourse, that was created as a communication system unintelligible to speakers of the dominant master class.
>
> *(Smitherman, 2006, p. 3)*

Labels such as African American Language (AAL), African American English (AAE), Ebonics, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and many others are used interchangeably with Black Language. I use Black Language intentionally in my scholarship to acknowledge Africologists' theories that maintain that Black speech is the continuation of African in an American context. Africologists argue that Black Language is a language in its own right that includes features of West African Languages, and it is not just a set of deviations from the English Language (Kifano & Smith, 2003). I also use Black Language politically in my scholarship to align with the mission of Black Liberation movements like Black Lives Matter.

> [We are] committed to struggling together and to imagining and creating a world free of anti-Blackness, where every Black person has the social, economic, and political power to thrive. Black Lives Matter began as a call to action in response to state-sanctioned violence and Anti-Black racism. Our intention from the very beginning was to connect Black people from all over the world who have a shared desire for justice to act together in their communities. The impetus for that commitment was, and still is, the rampant and deliberate violence inflicted on us by the state.
>
> *(Black Lives Matter statement)*[1]

No doubt, the *Anti-Black Linguistic Racism* that is used to diminish Black Language and Black students in schools is not separate from the rampant and deliberate anti-Black racism and violence inflicted upon Black people in society. 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.

Following Alim & Smitherman (2012), I use the term **White Mainstream English** in place of standard English to emphasize how white ways of speaking become the invisible—or better, inaudible—norm. In a conversation with me about how White Mainstream English gets normalized as standard English, race-radical, Black-Feminist-compositionist Carmen Kynard once said:

> WME means something different from standardized English. Many white people think they are speaking standard English when they simply are not; they are just normative so the moniker of standard follows them from the flow of white privilege.

Echoing this school of thought, Smitherman (2006) makes it clear that the only reason White Mainstream English "is the form of English that gets considered 'standard' [is] because it derives from the style of speaking and the language habits of the dominant, race, class, and gender in U.S. society" (p. 6). I discuss White Mainstream English and whiteness more explicitly in chapter 2.

Entering the Language Wars

Despite growing up loving Black Language, I did not develop a full understanding of language politics until I started teaching English Language Arts (ELA) at a high school on the eastside of Detroit, which is really a damn shame given (1) the legacy of Dr. G aka Geneva Smitherman's pioneering work on Black Language in Detroit and around the world; (2) some of the most influential Black Language research happened in the D (see Wolfram, 1969; also see Smitherman's foreword of this book); and (3) the landmark 1977 Ann Arbor Black English case took place in Ann Arbor, Michigan—only an hour away from where I grew up and taught (see Smitherman, 1981, 2006). There really is not a legit reason why any teacher in the state of Michigan should walk out of a teacher education program unaware and ill-prepared to address Black Language in their classrooms, but here we are! This is why *Linguistic Justice* is personal. I see this book as an opportunity to speak back to my 22-year-old self, a young Black teacher who wanted to enact what bell hooks describes as a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance—a way of thinking about pedagogy in relation to the practice of freedom. I would have never imagined that the preparation (or lack thereof) that I received from my teacher education program would contribute to me reproducing the same racial and linguistic inequities I was hoping to dismantle.

To keep it all the way real, I credit my students for my entry into what Dr. G refers to as the "language wars." Just like most Black people who lived in the D, the students I worked with communicated in Black Language as their primary language—it was reflected in their speech and writing. On the one hand, as a *speaker of Black Language myself, I recognized that my students were communicating in a language that was valid and necessary at home, in school, and in the* hood, but I was receiving pressure from school administrators to get the students to use the "language of school." I personally found this problematic given that the language arts methods that I received from my teacher education program catered to native speakers of White Mainstream English and assumed that every student entering ELA classrooms spoke this way. At that time, I did not have the language to name the white linguistic hegemony that was embedded in our disciplinary discourses, pedagogical practices, and theories of language, nor did I have the tools to engage my students in critical conversations about Anti-Black Linguistic Racism. I can still recall having a conversation with students in one of my ELA classes about code-switching when one of them flat out said, "What I look like using standard English? It don't even sound right." Other students

joined in and insinuated that using "standard English" made them feel like they were being forced to "talk white" and many questioned why they had to communicate in a language that was not reflective of their culture or linguistic backgrounds. My own cultural competence as a Black Language-speaker knew my students were speaking nothing but the TRUTH, but as a classroom teacher, I was ill-equipped to address the critical linguistic issues that they were raising. What I learned early on in my teaching career was that many of my Black students resisted the standard language ideology because they felt it reflected white linguistic and cultural norms, and some of them were not interested in imitating a culture they did not consider themselves to be a part of.

As I continued my teaching journey, I became interested in understanding the language wars outside the contexts of my own experiences. I visited other schools and classrooms in Detroit and its surrounding areas to inquire about how other teachers were responding pedagogically to their Black students' language practices. I learned that some classrooms operated as cultural and linguistic battlegrounds instead of havens where students' language practices were affirmed, valued, and sustained. I listened to stories from teachers who faulted, punished, and belittled their students for showing up to school with a language that was deemed incompatible with the literacy conventions expected in the academic setting. As I compared these practices to the counterstories I was hearing from Black students about the deficit and culturally irrelevant language education they were receiving in schools, I found it important to speak back to these injustices by working at the intersections of theory and praxis.

"You On The Wrong Side of History, Bro." *Linguistic Justice* Is For Teachers Like You!

> In order to dismantle white supremacy, we have to teach students to code-switch!—Teacher
>
> If y'all actually believe that using "standard English" will dismantle white supremacy, then you not paying attention! If we, as teachers, truly believe that code-switching will dismantle white supremacy, we have a problem. If we honestly believe that code-switching will save Black people's lives, then we really ain't paying attention to what's happening in the world. 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? —Baker-Bell

This heated exchange occurred during a presentation that I co-facilitated with four of my former students (now classroom teachers) at the 2017 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) annual convention. For those of y'all who don't know, NCTE is one of the most celebrated, long-standing professional organizations for English teachers, and it prides itself and its members on using the power of language and literacy to actively pursue justice and equity for

all students. Yet, there I was in a session where some of the organization's members were representing and advocating for a racist, punitive, anti-Black youth kind of linguistic politics. Let me paint a bigger picture of the problem: NCTE and its constituent, Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), has been "a forum for linguistic debates and language issues of various kinds" since the early 1950s (Smitherman, 2003). In 1974, NCTE/CCCC adopted the Students' Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) resolution, which states:

> We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.
>
> *(Students' Right, 1974)*

Yet, nearly seven decades later, we still have English teachers out here perpetuating and advocating for Anti-Black Linguistic Racism. Now let's circle back to what happened during the presentation. The presentation was supposed to illuminate how teachers can work against racial and linguistic inequities in their classrooms. The exchange happened after one of my former students provided attendees with the sociolinguistic receipts that showed the validity of Black Language, and she illustrated how so-called "standard English" is a hypothetical construct. During the activity that followed, a young Black teacher stated that while he agrees that teachers should do more to value Black Language in the classroom, in order to dismantle white supremacy, we have to teach students to code-switch. I was not surprised by what the young man said because many teachers do not realize that standard English is a byproduct of white supremacy. It also did not surprise me that this sentiment was coming out of the mouth of a Black teacher. Internalized anti-Blackness is REAL, and it will have you on the frontlines reinforcing a system of white supremacy and upholding racist policies and practices that legitimize your own suffering and demise. Elaine Richardson aka Docta E said it best in a Facebook post, "white supremacy lives in all of us, but we all ought to be tryna unlearn white supremacy." What was troublesome to me, especially given the current racial and social climate in the U.S., was that he is probably telling his Black students that "standard English" could dismantle white supremacy or save Black people's lives. I'm not sure if I was more upset

because the young teacher who said this was Black and miseducated or if it was because he said this in a room full of white teachers who seemed to have felt a sense of relief by his comment. My point here is that the white teachers in the room could use this Black teacher's anti-Black sentiments as justification for racist language policies, practices, pedagogies, and classrooms. This is one of many examples that underscores the need for *Black Linguistic Consciousness*, and it is the impetus for this book.

"We Want to Be Linguistically Free Too": What Do I Mean by Linguistic Justice?

In her book, *Cultivating Racial and Linguistic Diversity in Literacy Teacher Education: Teachers Like Me*, Marcelle Haddix (2015) argues that the notion of social justice has become a co-opted term—a buzz word—among teacher education researchers. No doubt! I think this is an important critique, and as a teacher-scholar-activist, it is essential that I discuss what I mean by Linguistic Justice. *Linguistic Justice*, the book and the framework, is about Black Language and Black Liberation. It is an antiracist approach to language and literacy education. It is about dismantling Anti-Black Linguistic Racism and white linguistic hegemony and supremacy in classrooms and in the world. As a pedagogy, Linguistic Justice places Black Language at the center of Black students' language education and experiences. Linguistic Justice does not see White Mainstream English as the be-all and end-all for Black speakers. Linguistic Justice does not side-step fairness and freedom. Instead, it affords Black students the same kinds of linguistic liberties that are afforded to white students. Within a Linguistic Justice framework, excuses such as "that's just the way it is" cannot be used as justification for Anti-Black Linguistic Racism, white linguistic supremacy, and linguistic injustice. Telling children that White Mainstream English is needed for survival can no longer be the answer, especially as we are witnessing Black people being mishandled, discriminated against, and murdered while using White Mainstream English, and in some cases, before they even open their mouths.

"Stylin' and Profilin'": A Black Language Theoreticum

The style and organization of *Linguistic Justice* is just as important as its contents, and it reflects how Black Language lives in my life. I assembled the book using a collection of images, dialogues, charts, graphs, instructional maps, images, artwork, stories, and weblinks to capture the multifaceted ways that I see, understand, and interact with Black Language on a daily basis. Indeed, engaging in multimodal practices provided me with space to fully capture the richness, complexity, and dynamism of Black Language. *Linguistic Justice* also pushes the boundaries of many academic book genres by remixing multiple modes and styles of writing. While reading, the book might feel like a manifesto, a theory reader, and a collection of

critical praxis—all within one book. As a result, I present *Linguistic Justice* as a Black Language Theoreticum, a theory meets practicum book. This book also pushes beyond the limitations of what teachers have traditionally called lesson plans. Referring to the learning experiences that I curated for the students as lesson plans will have teachers reducing the *Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy* to a step-by-step guide to language instruction versus a commitment to eradicating Anti-Black Linguistic Racism. As such, I share the learning experiences that I curated as Black Language Artifacts of my Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy.

Linguistic Justice is a teacher-scholar-activist project I did with young people in Detroit that explored their experiences navigating and negotiating their linguistic and racial identities across multiple contexts. In particular, the book reveals how traditional approaches to language education do not account for the emotional harm or consequences these approaches have on Black students' sense of self and identity. In the book, I offer Anti-Black Linguistic Racism as a framework that explicitly names and richly captures the type of linguistic oppression that is uniquely experienced and endured by Black Language-speakers. In response to this, I introduce Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy, a pedagogy that comprises of seven critical inquiry-based learning experiences that provided Black students with an opportunity to learn Black Language, learn through Black Language, and learn about Black Language (Halliday, 1993) while simultaneously working toward dismantling Anti-Black Linguistic Racism.

In chapter 2, I offer Anti-Black Linguistic Racism as a framework that helps explain precisely how Anti-Black Linguistic Racism gets normalized in and through our research, disciplinary discourses, curricular choices, pedagogical practices. This chapter also shows how damaging these decisions are on Black students' language education and their racial and linguistic identities. I then theorize and offer some framing ideas for what I am terming Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy as an approach that confronts Anti-Black Linguistic Racism in teacher attitudes, curriculum and instruction, pedagogical approaches, disciplinary discourse, and research.

Chapter 3 centers the voices and counterstories of the Black students I worked with. I illustrate how listening to their stories and linguistic experiences counter the dominant narrative about what Black students need in a language education. Their counterstories affirm that eradicationist and respectability approaches to Black Language education do not account for the emotional harm, internalized Anti-Black Linguistic Racism, or consequences these approaches have on Black students' sense of self and identity. I argue in this chapter that Black Language-speakers' voices and stories matter! And as educators and researchers, we must listen and engage their perspectives in our research, theories of language learning, and in our pedagogical practices.

In chapter 4, I show the praxis of the Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy, specifically illustrating how I used Black Linguistic Consciousness-raising to help the students challenge, interrogate, unlearn, and work toward dismantling Anti-

Black Linguistic Racism. This chapter has two major functions: (1) it demonstrates what an Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy looks like on the ground (aka in the classroom); and (2) it illustrates how theory, research, and practice can operate in tandem in pursuit of linguistic and racial justice.

Chapter 5 presents composite character counterstories that reflect how the students were beginning to develop a Black Linguistic Consciousness following the Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy. This chapter also offers implications that highlight the necessity of an Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy in our current historical, political, and racial climate.

Finally, chapter 6 functions like a bonus chapter. It was not part of the study that I describe in chapters 2–5, but it illustrates how I use Angie Thomas' book *The Hate U Give* to approach Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy in my English education courses for preservice teachers. Through several Black Language Artifacts, I show how African American literature can provide a rich foundation for students to explore how identity is conceived through language expression and how African American literature is an important vehicle to work toward dismantling Anti-Black Linguistic Racism.

Note

1 Black Lives Matter website, https://blacklivesmatter.com/

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