

BOOK REVIEW

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

April Baker-Bell

Publisher: Routledge

Price: \$44.95

Pages: 128

ISBN: 978-1138551022

Citation:

Baker-Bell, A. (2020). *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*. New York: Routledge.

Word Count: 1226, including references

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As a Black educator, I am all too aware of the ways in which Black culture and excellence is absent in classroom spaces as well as the harm caused to Black youth due to these glaring omissions. Black youth experience symbolic, systemic, physical, curricular, and instructional violence in traditional educational spaces (Boutte et al., 2020). As Bettina Love (2019) asserts, Black children are *spirit murdered* daily when they enter school doors. At the heart of the many ways Black youth are harmed in traditional educational spaces lies Anti-Black linguistic racism, a term used to describe the ways in which systems of oppression work to prioritize White Mainstream English in lieu of Black English. Recognizing the ways in which white linguistic hegemony is embedded in educational spaces and society at large, Baker-Bell (2020) advocates for Black youth experiencing Anti-Black linguistic racism within educational institutions. Within educational spaces, Black Language is often viewed as a “symbol of linguistic and intellectual inferiority” rather than being

acknowledged as a valuable part of students' cultural identities (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 15). From the time Black youth enter the educational system, their culture is stripped from them—their ways of talking and being are stifled as they are often asked to conform to norms and standards that predominantly reflect White culture. One of the many ways in which Black youth are required to assimilate to the dominant culture is through language. Deemed *the language of schools*, White Mainstream English is often a barrier or obstacle to gaining access and achieving success for Black youth across the country. Consequently, Black Language speakers struggle with a sense of identity as they are forced to strip elements of their cultural identity to gain access to education and opportunities for success. Within *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*, April Baker-Bell (2020) confronts issues related to Anti-Black Linguistic racism and the consequential harm Black youth encounter in educational spaces.

In an attempt to problematize the ways in which language is weaponized against Black youth in educational spaces, Baker-Bell (2020) strategically challenges readers by linking racial classifications to language as a means to demonstrate how linguistic and racial hierarchies are interconnected. Within traditional classroom spaces, Black youth are “unconsciously trained to correlate blackness with wrongness and whiteness with rightness” (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 24). While “Black language reflects their ways of knowing, interpreting, surviving, and being in the world,” the institution of education and society at large rarely acknowledge Black language as an asset (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 2). “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” (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 2). Baker-Bell (2020) asserts that we are killing Black youth softly through Anti-Black language pedagogies. She states, “Without analyzing language through the lens of race and racism, we ignore how linguistic violence and racial violence go hand in hand” (p. 16). While problematizing the ways in which Black English is devalued in classroom spaces by linking racial classifications to language, Baker-Bell (2020) explores the ways in which linguistic oppression is reinforced in classroom settings. Asserting that “Children of color’s experiences navigating and negotiating language will be impacted by interlocking systems and structures of linguisticism, racism, and classism, which are interrelated and continuous shaping one another,” the author urges educators to move away from literacy pedagogies that work to reinforce white linguistic hegemony (p. 16).

Illuminating the ways in which linguistic racism occurs and is normalized in classroom spaces, Baker-Bell (2020) develops a strong argument for a counter approach. Championing racial and linguistic justice for Black Language speakers, the author provides the Anti-Black Linguistic Pedagogical framework to counter language respectability practices. Within this suggested framework, Baker-Bell (2020) urges educators to prioritize literacy pedagogies that directly address and affirm Black Language and explore the relationship between race and language. She argues that Black youth need to be exposed to inquiry-based learning experiences that center Black Language and experiences. To strengthen her argument, the author provides insight into the praxis of Anti-Black Linguistic Pedagogy by sharing her work with the Leadership Academy public

charter school located in Detroit, Michigan. The author strengthens her argument for Anti-Black Linguistic Pedagogies by moving from theory to practice, sharing her firsthand accounts of engaging in Anti-Black Linguistic Pedagogies with Black youth. Highlighting the counter stories of Black youth, Baker-Bell (2020) explores the emotional harm Black youth experience in traditional classroom spaces and offers insight as to how to implement Anti-Black Linguistic Pedagogies as a means of empowerment.

Recommendations

Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy is a timely and necessary addition to the scholarship on supporting and empowering Black youth and is a crucial resource for educators. Offering both theoretical and pedagogical principles, *Linguistic Justice* fills the void found within the scholarship on Critical Race Theory. Baker-Bell asserts that language, culture, and identity cannot be separated and, therefore, Black Language deserves space in classroom spaces to uplift and empower Black youth. The book starts off strong with an in-depth analysis of the inherent power dynamics between Black Language and White Mainstream English and slowly builds up a strong argument for Anti-Black Linguistic Pedagogy. Baker-Bell (2020) strategically navigates from theory to practice by illuminating her experiences working with Black youth in a Detroit charter school. Baker-Bell creates a compelling argument for creating inquiry-based learning opportunities that center on the experiences of Black culture, language, and literacies. Arguing that Black youth need to be given the tools to liberate themselves from oppression, the author argues that “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 towards dismantling Anti-Black Linguistic Racism (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 9). Using literature that captures Black language and identity creates rich opportunities for students to investigate and examine the ways in which language and race inform identity and experience (Baker-Bell, 2020).

As a standalone, the book is a necessary read and resource for educators. Providing insightful pedagogical practices to begin dismantling the status quo in classrooms, Baker-Bell provides a compelling argument for Anti-Black Linguistic Pedagogy along with practical strategies to support this work. For those looking for more direction to dismantling the status quo in traditional educational spaces with the intent to uplift and empower Black youth, I recommend pairing this book with *Cultivating Genius* by Gholdy Muhammad. While *Linguistic Justice* offers insight into the ways in which Black youth are harmed in educational spaces largely due to linguistic oppression and racism, *Cultivating Genius* provides a historically responsive literacy pedagogical framework that pairs nicely with Baker-Bell’s (2020) Anti-Black Linguistic Pedagogical framework. The two books in tantum provide the blueprint for beginning to dismantle oppressive systems regarding pedagogical practices and curriculum development.

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