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Doing the Work

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Doing the Work: Enacting an Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy

12/2/2020

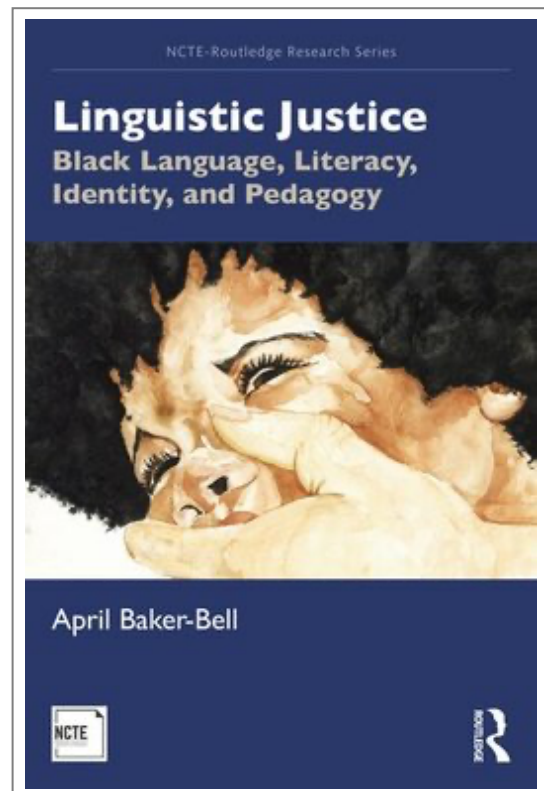
By Madison Williams

On Wednesday, October 21st, UW–Milwaukee hosted a long awaited and much anticipated virtual talk with [Dr. April Baker-Bell](#) on her book, [Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy](#). During her talk, Baker-Bell discussed how Anti-Black Linguistic Racism and white linguistic supremacy are normalized through teacher attitudes, curriculum and instruction, and pedagogical approaches. Her talk was followed by a critical discussion with participants, facilitated by Baker-Bell, to engage in more intimate conversations about Anti-Black Linguistic Racism and how to implement Antiracist Language Pedagogies in the classroom.

With over 100 attendees from all over the country, Baker-Bell's virtual talk was undoubtedly a huge hit—and it couldn't have come at a more kairotic moment. The urgency of Baker-Bell's call for an Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy is proven critical given everything that's happening in the world right now: the recent protests against racial inequality and police brutality; exacerbation of inequalities as a result of the pandemic; toxic partisanship in the U.S. along racial, ethnic, and religious lines; and increased attention to systemic racism nationwide. *Linguistic Justice* is a call to action in pursuit of Black Language liberation through the critique, resistance, and reconstruction of the linguistic status quo.

A Call to Action

In her book, Baker-Bell presents 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” (Baker-Bell 8) in schools and in everyday life. Using ethnographic examples to illustrate how Black students navigate and negotiate their linguistic and racial identities across multiple contexts, Baker-Bell demonstrates the negative impact traditional pedagogical approaches have on Black students' language education and self-



Imagery featured on the cover of Baker-Bell's book, *Linguistic Justice*

perception. As a response to this injustice, Baker-Bell makes space for a new way forward through Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy, a pedagogical approach that intentionally and unapologetically places Black language at the center to critically interrogate white linguistic hegemony and Anti-Black Linguistic Racism.

Dr. April Baker-Bell began her virtual talk by discussing the importance of raising critical consciousness and recognizing Black Language as a language in its own right. Baker-Bell emphasized the way Black Language represents lived experience, beginning with her positionality having grown up in Detroit with Black Language as her mother tongue. It wasn't until she began teaching that she was faced with the "myth of standard English" and developed a full understanding of language politics at the intersection of language, race, and power. Baker-Bell argued that little has changed over the past 80 years in pedagogical approaches to Black Language education, as English teachers are still expected to teach (and privilege) White Mainstream English (WME).

According to Baker-Bell, previous Black Language Pedagogies (such as Eradicationist and Respectability approaches) share common features in that they center whiteness and perpetuate anti-blackness. The counterstories shared by Baker-Bell's students in her book challenge existing pedagogies and common beliefs that code-switching functions as a strategy for survival, as Baker-Bell indicates, "These instances are clear reminders that code-switching into White Mainstream English will not save Black people and cannot solve racial or linguistic injustice, and we cannot pretend that it will" (31). Therefore, antiracist pedagogies cannot be centered on whiteness, which is why Baker-Bell's Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy takes a transformative approach by centering Black Language instead.

In navigating pushback to this pedagogy, Baker-Bell explained the need to critically engage in conversation to show understanding and do the contextual work so that students (and parents) understand the historical, political, and cultural context surrounding Black Language and White Mainstream English. She demonstrated how "what we want to believe to be true" (like doing well in school will translate to equality and equity) hasn't worked in past approaches to Black Language Pedagogy, and if the classroom doesn't mirror the facts of existence in the real world, we're doing pedagogy wrong. As Baker-Bell powerfully articulated during her talk, "Black lives in your classroom won't matter if Black Language doesn't."

Doing the Work

Baker-Bell prefaced the critical discussion following her talk by stating that she would not be answering questions that recentered whiteness because we need to dismantle the system, not adjust to it. While fielding questions about how to implement an Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy in the classroom on an individual level, especially within institutions that may be resistant to the idea, Baker-Bell maintained that the work of Black Linguistic Justice is both micro and macro. She supports anything that goes against typical language standards because any move in the right direction is valuable, no matter how small—we need to take the

opportunity wherever and whenever it presents itself.

Many of the participants were concerned with how to deal with pushback to this pedagogy, especially from parents. Baker-Bell pointed out that code-switching hasn't helped or changed anything so far; we can't make it work just because we want it to, so we need to do something different. Moreover, when dealing with people who are explicitly racist, Baker-Bell explained: "If you come up against racist nonsense, you have to put it in a box and avoid it." Although participants taking part in this critical discussion were located all over the country, we all shared a common interest in learning how, as teachers, we might utilize our individual privileges to further social justice pursuits and push for Black Linguistic Justice within our various contexts with the resources we have available.

In both her book and virtual talk, Baker-Bell consistently emphasized the gravity of this call to action for linguistic justice within the current racial and political climate, advocating for "linguistic, racial, and educational justice for Black students" through her framework for an Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy (34). Baker-Bell contends, "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" (3). Baker-Bell challenges us all to go beyond limited ideas about what writing is, where it happens, and what counts as "good" writing by responding to her call to action for Black Linguistic Justice. To learn more about Baker-Bell and her work, watch the book trailer for *Linguistic Justice* [here](#).