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We Been Knowin: Toward an Antiracist Language & Literacy Education

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Abstract: This essay asserts the importance for English/Language Arts educators to become conversant with the features of Black Language and the cultural and historical foundations of this speech genre as a rule-bound, grammatically consistent pattern of speech. These features go beyond grammar to include such conventions as a reliance on storytelling as a means of communicating ideas. The author proposes a set of issues for educators to consider so that they may produce antiracist scholarship, praxis, and knowledge that work toward transformation and social change in service of addressing racial, cultural, and linguistic inequities in language and literacy education. The essay concludes with ten framing ideas for generating an antiracist Black Language Pedagogy in order to produce a society founded on respect and appreciation for the historical, cultural, political, and racial underpinnings of Black Language.

Keywords: anti-Black linguistic racism, antiracist critical media literacies, anti-racist pedagogies, Black Language, White Mainstream English



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Introduction

For Black folks, teaching--educating--is fundamentally political because it is rooted in antiracist struggle.

--bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*

I open with the above quote by bell hooks because it accurately describes when, where, and how I enter academia. I am a storyteller and teacher-scholar-activist committed to antiracist work. Richardson (2003) reminds us that “storytelling remains one of the most powerful language and literacy practices that Black women use to convey their special knowledge” (p. 82). Throughout this article, I will tell stories about histories, personal encounters, and my teaching and research experiences as a way to reflect on the urgent need for an antiracist language and literacy education.

My scholarly career is rooted in the multiple identities I occupy and the stories that contextualize my family’s history with racial violence and oppression. My paternal great-grandparents migrated to Detroit, Michigan in the 1950s to escape the racial terror and violence they endured in the south. My great-uncle once shared a story with me about my great-grandparents bringing him home from a hospital in Tennessee two days after his birth and discovering that someone who had access to the hospital’s maternity ward, had written “nigger baby” on his buttocks. My parents’ educational experiences were negatively impacted by racial integration. As elementary school students, my parents were bussed to predominantly white schools and taught by teachers who reinforced racial stereotypes and upheld racist assumptions of Black intellectual inferiority. These intensely negative racial

experiences eventually led to both of my parents leaving high school without graduating.

In November of 1992, I was awakened by my father’s reaction to the brutal murder of [Malice Green](#) at the hands of two white police officers. I can still visualize the angry tears rolling down my father’s face as he called the Detroit Police Department, at least 10 times, to protest and condemn them for their actions. I recall returning to my middle school the next day looking for an opportunity to process Malice Green’s murder, my father’s anger, police brutality, and what it meant to be Black in that social and historical moment. To my dismay, all of my teachers were silent about the incident, as if schools and literacy learning stood on the outside of racial violence.

My family’s history with racial violence and oppression has shaped how I see the world, and their stories and actions have taught me how to speak back to and against racial injustice--this is what inspired me to become a teacher. When I began my teaching career as a high school English Language Arts (ELA) teacher on the eastside of Detroit, I wanted to give my students the kind of racial literacies and awareness that my family provided to me. I 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 (1994). But my motivation and inspiration to enact a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance did not coincide with the preparation (or lack thereof) that I received from my English Education program. I would have never imagined that my teacher preparation would contribute to me reproducing the same racial and linguistic inequities I was aiming to dismantle (Baker-Bell, 2020). The miseducation (Woodson,

I acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this article I use

pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

1933) I received during my time as a preservice teacher informs the types of questions I now answer as a language and literacy researcher—questions such as:

- How can I produce antiracist scholarship, praxis, and knowledge that work toward transformation and social change?
- How can language and literacy research and teaching work against racial, cultural, and linguistic inequities?
- What does racial and linguistic justice look like in language and literacy education?
- How can theory, research, and practice operate in tandem in pursuit of justice?

We Been Knowin

The title of this article is inspired by the 2020 JoLLE Winter Conference theme, “Doing the Work: Moving Past What We Already Know to Enact Change in Language and Literacy Education.” The conference’s co-chairs, Tamara Moten and Stacia L. Long, invited attendees to come together “to create and share different pathways for justice in an unjust world through language and literacy education.” I titled my keynote presentation for the conference and this article *We Been Knowin* to suggest that we, the field of language and literacy, BEEN₂ knowin what to do move toward an antiracist language and literacy education. The real question is this: *What are we waiting on to do the work?*

² My use of *been* in the phrase *We Been Knowin* reflects the stressed BIN feature used in Black Language. Spelled *BIN* among linguists, but pronounced *BEEN* by Black Language users, the adverb is used to mark the remote

We Been Knowin also signifies that communities of color, especially women of color, queer and trans people, people with disabilities, and people living in poverty BEEN knowin what has and has not worked. Our lived experiences have continually taught us how to think about freedom and collective liberation, and have laid the foundation for what must be done today. Though this article will reflect Black people’s epistemologies and language and literacy practices, I want to point out that systems of oppression that perpetuate anti-blackness

“Our lived experiences have continuously taught us how to think about freedom, collective liberation, and have laid the foundation for what must be done today.”

are interconnected with and cannot be separated from how other communities of color experience racism, systemic injustices, and inequities. I also agree with Carruthers (2018) thinking that “it is an aspiration and liberatory politic that Black folks must take up for the sake of our own

collective liberation and acts on the basic notion that none of us will be free unless all of us are free” (p. 10).

Indeed, sexism, classism, ableism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, and other forms of oppression do not serve our collective liberation. This complexity suggests that an antiracist language and literacy education has to be intersectional.

past. The feature stresses that something happened some time ago.

Antiracist Critical Media Literacies

The urgent need for an antiracist language and literacy education became clearer to me following the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. As I was trying to learn more about the circumstances surrounding Trayvon's death, I recall reading mainstream media news stories and social media posts that portrayed Trayvon as a thug, criminal, and troublemaker who got what he deserved. I remember seeing compromising photos of Trayvon, some that were not actual pictures of him (like the one highlighted in red in Figure 1), floating around social media that criminalized him and suggested that he was the cause of his own death. Meanwhile, the pictures that were circulating around social media of George Zimmerman, Trayvon's murderer, portrayed him as an "upstanding," "positive" person.

At the same time, I was witnessing the ways that Black people were using antiracist critical media



Figure 1: Screenshot of an image from social media immediately following Trayvon Martin's death.

literacies³, and Black digital activism (McIlwain, 2020) to disrupt the media's role in anti-Black racism, racial violence, and the maintenance of White supremacy. In particular, I observed how Black youth and Black activists used antiracist critical media literacies grounded in our communities' knowledges to counter and rewrite the damaging narratives that were being used to project Trayvon, and by extension, other Black boys, as dangerous others (Mahiri, 2004). For instance, I learned about activist groups like the [Black Youth Project](#) (BYP) and [Dream Defenders](#) whose counter-stories and analysis exposed the critical role that media consistently plays in the "debasement of Black humanity, utter indifference to Black suffering, and the denial of Black people's right to exist" (Jeffries, 2014). I was also watching Black Twitter become a powerful voice and new form of social activism for Black people. Social justice-driven hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, #AmINext, #ShutItDown, and #ICantBreathe were being used to control our narrative, control our images, produce counter-narratives, express our opinions, voice our concerns, and locate more reliable news and information about the Black community (Baker-Bell, Jones Stanbrough, & Everett, 2017).

In 2019, following the Christchurch Mosque shootings in New Zealand, [Bree Newsome Bass](#), a Black woman artist and activist who drew national attention in 2015 when she climbed the flagpole in front of the South Carolina Capitol building and lowered the Confederate battle flag, took to Twitter to teach people about the urgency of antiracist

³ I am describing antiracist critical media literacies in this article as an approach where Black people play an active role in highlighting, deconstructing, and addressing patterns of media injustice, and engage in Black digital activism to raise awareness of the crisis of racial injustice.



Figure 2: Bree Newsome Bass Tweet Part 1



Figure 2: Bree Newsome Bass Tweet Part 2

critical media literacies (see Figures 2 and 3). Like many of us, Newsome Bass observed how mainstream media news outlets used the *lone wolf characterization* to describe the White supremacist gunman who killed more than 50 people at Christchurch. The lone wolf characterization is used “to shift our attention away from how these violent acts are part of a legacy of terrorist attacks committed by white supremacists” (Baker-Bell et al, 2017, p. 134). In response, Newsome Bass tweets:

Notice how whenever a Muslim commits a terrorist act, the white political class & news media immediately make it a referendum on the religion of Islam & millions of Muslims. But when a white nationalist murders people & write a manifesto, no one interrogates the notion of whiteness...we are taught to view the daily violence of white supremacy as normal. SO, when the incident occurs in NZ, we have to pretend it is totally different and disconnected from things like racist police violence, racial segregation, racist policies, and racism itself.

This tweet is just one of many representations that illustrate how Newsome Bass and other activists are developing and using Black digital activism to challenge and resist societal narratives that perpetuate Whiteness and uphold White supremacy.

Here’s the thing...*we been knowin* about the media’s agenda for Black people. Indeed, our ancestors and elders taught us long ago that “the media ain’t never loved us.” Malcolm X warned in 1964 that the press is irresponsible: “It will make the criminal look like the victim and make the victim look like the criminal (Breitman,1965, p. 93). Historically, media has been instrumental in reinforcing anti-Black racism and maintaining White supremacy. As hooks (1992) argues:

The institutionalization of white supremacy via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all black people. Long before white supremacists ever reached the shores of what we now call the United States, they constructed images of blackness and black people to uphold and affirm their notions of racial superiority, their political imperialism, their will to dominate and enslave. From slavery on, white supremacists have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination. (p. 2)

The Black community has long cultivated a deep and thoroughgoing skepticism regarding traditional news narratives. The antiracist critical media literacies practices that we are seeing Black youth and activists use today are part of our ancestral memory and knowledge of our predecessors (Carruthers, 2018). As Roberts noted:

Many of the heavyweights behind some of the most well-known activist hashtags are Black. Take Tarana Burke, who first launched the #MeToo movement, or April Reign, creator of the #OscarsSoWhite hashtag. This type of Black digital activism mimics the tenacious efforts of, for example, Ida B. Wells, to speak truth to the real experiences of Black people in a society that is eager to suppress conversations about institutional racism that exists today. (2018)

This notice should serve as a radical wake-up call to language and literacy educators of the kinds of antiracist critical media literacies and Black digital activism that many Black students bring with them to the classroom. Yet, too often critical media pedagogies overlook the literacy practices that youth are already engaging in that speak back to agents and forces within media that work to stigmatize, characterize, and marginalize them. To move toward antiracist critical media literacies in the classroom, language and literacy educators must build on the already-existing critical race media literacies that Black students bring with them to their classrooms. We must also create space in our disciplinary discourses, curricular choices, and pedagogical practices for antiracist critical media literacy educators like Bree Newsome Bass, the Dream Defenders, and BYP, who exist outside of the confines of literacy “teacher education.”

Antiracist Language Pedagogies

“If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me What Is?”

—James Baldwin, 1979

Despite there being decades of research on Black Language⁴, despite its survival since enslavement, and despite its linguistic imprint on the nation and globe, many ELA teachers leave their teacher education program without knowing that Black Language is a rule-based linguistic system that includes features of West African languages and has roots as deep and grammatically consistent as Scottish, Irish, and other world Englishes. This lack

⁴ 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” (p. 3).



Figure 4. Image on front cover of Baker-Bell's forthcoming book *"Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy."* Art by Dr. Grace Player

of awareness, among many things, oftentimes contributes to the anti-Blackness that Black Language-speaking students experience through the curriculum and instruction, and through their teachers' attitudes (see Figure 4).

My thinking about antiracist language pedagogies stems from my being ill-prepared to address my Black students' language and literacy practices when I worked as a high school ELA teacher in Detroit. I recall having a conversation with my students about code-switching when one of my students flat out responded, "What I look like speaking standard English? It don't even sound right?" Some of the students questioned why they had to communicate in a way that was not reflective of their culture or linguistic backgrounds. My own cultural competence as a Black woman and Black Language speaker informed my understanding of why my students were asking these critical and important questions, but as a classroom teacher, I was ill-

equipped to address the critical linguistic issues that they were raising.

My research over the last ten years has helped me to better understand that Black students, and Black people in general, are in need of language that explicitly names and richly captures the types of linguistic oppression that is uniquely experienced and endured by Black Language-speakers. Because of anti-Blackness and linguistic oppression, the field of language and literacy is in need of antiracist language pedagogies that can respond to the following questions:

- What is the purpose of language education in our current racial and political context?
- How can language education speak to and reflect our current times?
- How do we move beyond traditional approaches to language education that do not view students' racial and linguistic identities as interconnected?
- What is the purpose of a language education if it cannot be used for various sorts of freedom or save students' lives?

These critical questions have led me to examine the relationship between anti-Blackness and language, which I am now referring to as *anti-Black linguistic racism*. Anti-Black linguistic racism describes the linguistic violence, persecution, dehumanization, and marginalization that Black Language speakers experience in schools and in everyday life. Anti-Black linguistic racism as a framework is important, especially because linguistic racism as experienced by Black people tends to get overlooked or is undertheorized in broader critical race scholarship and pedagogies. In my book, *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*, I illustrate precisely how anti-Black linguistic racism

gets normalized in and through much research, disciplinary discourses, curricular choices, pedagogical practices, and teacher attitudes, and I show how damaging these decisions are on Black students' language education and racial and linguistic identities.

Two pedagogical approaches that are commonly practiced in language arts classrooms that perpetuate anti-Black linguistic racism are *eradicationist language pedagogies* and *respectability language pedagogies*. Under eradicationist pedagogies, Black Language is not acknowledged as a language and gets treated as linguistically, morally, and intellectually inferior. The goal of this approach is to eradicate Black Language from students' linguistic repertoires and replace it with White Mainstream English. Anti-Black linguistic racism is embedded in this approach as Black Language gets interpreted as a defect of the child rather than a defect of the educational system's response to it. Although respectability language pedagogies acknowledge Black Language as a language that should be validated, affirmed, and respected, the end goal of this approach is to simply use Black Language as a bridge to learn White Mainstream English. This approach perpetuates anti-Blackness as it adheres to politics of respectability, surrenders to Whiteness, and does not challenge anti-Black linguistic racism.

As language and literacy researchers and educators, we cannot continue to push respectability language pedagogies that require Black students to project a

White middle class identity to avoid anti-Blackness, especially when they are growing up amidst Black liberation movements like *Black Lives Matter*, which stands against respectability politics and anti-Blackness. To do so is essentially to encourage Black students to accept dominant narratives that help maintain "traditions of white privilege and Black oppression" (Richardson, 2004, p. 160). In pursuit of linguistic, racial, and educational justice for Black students, I am dreaming about an Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy. In contrast to language pedagogies and research that either attribute Anti-Black Linguistic Racism to presumed deficiencies of Black students' language practices, culture, behavior

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attitudes, families, or communities (King, 2009) or respond to Anti-Black Linguistic Racism by upholding White linguistic and cultural norms, I am foregrounding *Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy* as a transformative approach to Black Language education (Baker-Bell, 2020). Within an

antiracist Black language education framework, I understand Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy in terms of its relationship to challenging anti-Blackness in theory, research, and practice. In particular, I want to underscore a salient point that Dumas and Ross's (2016) make in their theory of BlackCrit: "only a critical theorization of blackness confronts the specificity of anti-Blackness" (p. 416). As far as language education, this proposition suggests that an Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy must (1) center Blackness, (2) confront white linguistic and cultural hegemony, and (3) contest anti-Blackness.

become the invisible— or better, inaudible—norm.

⁵ Following Alim and Smitherman (2012), I use the term White Mainstream English in place of standard English to emphasize how White ways of speaking

My vision of Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy builds on the work of many radical Black intellectuals (Bailey, 1968; Fanon, 1952; Richardson, 2004; Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Smitherman, 1977; Woodson, 1933). By grounding my work in their scholarship, I am reclaiming and reconnecting with the ideas and recommendations that have already been put forth within the Black Language research tradition. Black intellectuals make it clear that linguistic and racial justice for Black students is not rooted in anti-Black language pedagogies that cater to Whiteness, but in terms of the complete and total overthrow of racist, colonial practices so that antiracist language pedagogies might begin to be imagined, developed, and implemented (Baker-Bell, 2020). It is in this line of thinking that I imagine an Antiracist Black Language education. I conclude with the following ten framing ideas below that help us move toward an Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy.

Ten Framing Ideas

An antiracist Black Language Pedagogy:

1. critically interrogates White linguistic hegemony and Anti-Black Linguistic Racism.
2. names and works to dismantle the normalization of Anti-Black Linguistic Racism in our research, disciplinary discourses curriculum choices, pedagogical practices, and teacher attitudes.
3. intentionally and unapologetically places the linguistic, cultural, racial, intellectual, and self-confidence needs of Black students at the center of their language education.
4. is informed by the Black Language research tradition and is situated at the intersection of theory and practice.
5. rejects the myth that the same language (White Mainstream English) and language education that have been used to oppress Black students can empower them.
6. acknowledges that Black Language is connected to Black people's ways of knowing, interpreting, resisting, and surviving in the world (Richardson, 2004; Sanchez, 2007).
7. involves Black linguistic consciousness-raising that helps Black students heal and overcome internalized Anti-Black Linguistic Racism, develop agency, take a critical stance, and make political choices (Kynard, 2007) that support them in employing Black language "for the purposes of various sorts of freedom" (Richardson, 2004, p. 163).
8. provides Black students with critical literacies and competencies to name, investigate, and dismantle White linguistic hegemony and Anti-Black Linguistic Racism.
9. Raises Black students' consciousness in the historical, cultural, political, and racial underpinnings of Black Language.
10. relies on Black Language oral and literary traditions to build Black students' linguistic flexibility and creativity skills. Provide students with opportunities to experiment,

“Black intellectuals make it clear that linguistic and racial justice for Black students are not rooted in anti-Black language pedagogies that cater to whiteness.”

practice, and play with Black language use, rhetoric, cadence, style, and inventiveness.

antiracist language and literacy education. The real question is what are we waiting on to do the work?”

We been knowin what to do move toward an

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