

Black Language Matters!

Now, more than ever, White academics have a responsibility to make sure their work credits and supports the scholarship of Black colleagues.

By Mike Metz, University of Missouri

In the summer of 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic, the longstanding injustices waged against Black people in the U.S. once again gained national attention. In response to the police killings of George Floyd and Breanna Taylor, among others, nation-wide protests against police brutality were sustained for weeks. The Black Lives Matter movement, #BLM, which began after the killing of Trevon Martin in 2012, held a prominent role in those protests. The foundational statement, *Black lives matter*, became a rallying cry at the protests. Counter protestors took up an alternative mantra, *All lives matter*, arguing, incorrectly, that saying *Black lives matter* denies the value of other lives.

Against this backdrop, I sat at my kitchen table - self-quarantined - working on a manuscript for *Language & Education*. My mug of coffee steamed as a CNN correspondent narrated the ongoing Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the background. I tapped out ideas about teacher's language ideologies on my laptop.

"Dad! You've got a package," my daughter called, moments before sliding a padded manila envelope across the table.

My pre-ordered copy of April Baker-Bell's book, *Linguistic Justice*, had arrived!

I set aside my computer to explore this esteemed colleague's latest and greatest work on language, literacy, identity, and pedagogy (Baker-Bell, 2020). Dr. Baker Bell's laser-tight focus on anti-black linguistic racism shone through from the cover art, to the chapter headings, to the end notes and index.

As my gaze moved from the TV screen, showing BLACK LIVES MATTER painted in huge yellow letters on the street outside the White

House, to the printed page, describing an anti-racist approach to teaching Black Language, the connection of Baker-Bell's work to the lived experience of our country was abundantly clear. Her scholarship needs to be held up, disseminated, and expanded upon in English education programs around the country.

Turning back from reading about anti-racist Black Language pedagogy to my own manuscript in process, I paused. Given the state of the country right now, given the needs of the Black community, what role does my own scholarship play in the present moment? Juxtaposed with the urgency of directly addressing anti-black linguistic racism, does my own scholarship on broad concepts of communicative repertoires and language ideologies support, or undermine, this goal? As Baker Bell's scholarship calls out *Black Lives matter!* Does my work respond with a misguided *All lives matter?*

Black Lives Matter

As teachers of language and literacy, we value analogies. A good analogy can make a complex idea understandable in ways that exposition cannot. I've seen lots of recent analogies that try to explain why the statement, *All lives matter*, is an incongruous response to the statement, *Black lives matter*.

One analogy compares racial injustice to a bleeding wound. If a woman is bleeding from the head, and people call for aid saying, "Get first aid. She's hurt. Her life matters." Replying, "What about my head? Doesn't my head matter? Don't I get a bandage?" doesn't make much sense. It is irrelevant at best. More likely, it is distracting and potentially damaging. And for folks caring for the person in real danger, it is insensitive and hurtful.

As someone who studies discourse, I prefer thinking about the issue as turns-of-talk. The statement *Black lives matter* is not the first turn-of-talk in this conversation. It is not a statement generated without context. The statement *Black lives matter* is a **response** to previous statements from the U.S.

For example, by enslaving Black people for 400 years the U.S. stated a clear belief that Black lives don't matter. By enacting 100 years of Jim

Crow laws, the U. S. asserted a belief that Black lives don't matter. Through the racist implementation of the GI Bill, accompanied by redlining, U.S. society reiterated a belief that Black lives don't matter. The abhorrent history of lynching in the U.S. continued the claim that Black lives don't matter. Current policies of unequal funding for public education, overinvolvement in the criminal justice system, unequal healthcare, etc. maintain the mantra that, in the U.S. society, Black lives don't matter.

In short, since its founding and through the present, the U.S. has proclaimed loudly and repeatedly a belief that Black lives don't matter. In *response* to these statements, the current movement *speaks back* to the U.S. by proclaiming, *Black lives matter*.

The key idea here is to emphasize that the phrase *All lives matter*, while true, is distracting, counterproductive, and hurtful in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement. As social beings we must take social meaning into account when we use language. The statement, *Black lives matter*, speaks back against a historical and ongoing legacy of dehumanization of Black people in the U.S. When used in response to the statement, *Black lives matter*, the statement, *All lives matter*, has come to mean a denial of that legacy and a desire to uphold the legacy of White supremacy. Because it has been used to counter the statement that Black lives matter, the phrase *All lives matter* now indexes anti-Black racism.

Black Scholarship Matters

Just a day prior to Baker-Bell's book arriving, my family marched through the streets of Columbia, MO to protest anti-Black police brutality. My daughter's handmade #BLM sign rests on display next to our front door. As a White father in a mixed-race family with brown-skinned children, the material consequences of racial discrimination stay at the forefront of my consciousness. When my middle-school-aged son goes for a run by himself through the streets of our mid-Missouri town, I worry he will get harassed or harmed. Still, I find myself wondering if my own scholarship does enough to explicitly address racist tendencies in our society. By not explicitly focusing on anti-Black racism, do I allow systemic racism to persist?

As I ponder this question, I reflect on the role of Black Language scholarship in the broader struggle for linguistic justice. For decades,

linguists, educators, and activists have been screaming, *Black Language matters!* This call is an effort to halt the harm perpetuated on Black children by language instruction focused myopically around standardized forms of English while denigrating the many forms of Black Language use. These scholars uphold the validity of Black Language, highlight the violence and trauma inflicted through schooling practices that ignore or demonize Black Language, articulate the role of language in perpetuating anti-Black racism, and offer solutions to making language instruction humane.

Although White scholars have participated productively in the movement to end linguistic discrimination, the nature of the subject calls for clear recognition of the Black scholars seeking linguistic justice. If you want to learn more about Black Language, and Black Language in schooling, check out the following trailblazers and contemporary innovators (listed in a loosely chronological order of their scholarship) – Geneva Smitherman, John Rickford, Arnetha Ball, Lisa Green, Lisa Delpit, Theresa Perry, Carmen Kynard, Valerie Kinloch, H. Samy Alim, Marcelle Haddix, David Kirkland, Anne Charity Hudley, Django Paris, Vershawn Young, April Baker-Bell, Sharese King, and Patriann Smith, to name a few. This list is markedly incomplete. These are the scholars influencing my own work most heavily, but there are many more Black scholars doing the daily work of promoting linguistic justice through honoring Black Language. The discrimination against Black scholars through citations of White scholars is yet another manifestation of institutionalized White supremacy in academia.

As with other aspects of civil rights, the fight for Black Language rights is the most pressing and the most serious. For this reason, the research on Black Language is the most robust. Black Language scholars lead the way into political and legal efforts to address disparities in how language is taught in schools through the Ann Arbor Case (Ball & Lardner, 1997) and the Oakland Ebonics event (Perry & Delpit, 1998). NCTE's statement on *Students Right to the Their Own Language* stems from the Black Civil Rights movement and is driven by scholarship on Black Language (Perryman-Clark et al., 2014). Scholars from other racial/ethnic backgrounds dealing with racialized language stigma have played key roles in moving school language rights forward, still, scholars of Black Language champion the work that benefits all speakers of historically stigmatized English varieties.

As a White scholar working on issues of linguistic justice, it is my responsibility to continually check myself. I must ask, over and over, am I providing proper credit to the scholars of color, and the communities of color, who make my own scholarship possible?

My advancement of sociolinguistic principles to drive fundamental changes in how we teach about language in schools extends past the borders of Black Language (Metz, 2019). But my ability to talk about those principles stems from the efforts of Black scholars working on behalf of the Black community. Just as other historically marginalized groups benefited from the Black Civil Rights movement, it is important to acknowledge that the Black Language movement pioneered key advances in the broader linguistic justice movement.

Black Linguistic Justice Matters

As part of the process of self-reflection, as a White scholar, I must also ask whether my scholarship helps or hinders the project of Black racial justice. Although my life experience and scholarly pursuits drive me to uphold the call for validating, honoring, and magnifying Black Language, I find myself arguing through my research for a broader vision.

Addressing the many forms of linguistic discrimination is important to the project of English Education. Societal beliefs about the connection between language use and characteristics like intelligence, kindness, and morality apply universally. Lippi-Green describes this as the principle of linguistic subordination, saying that the linguistic practices of a socially prestigious group will be seen as superior to the linguistic practices of a socially stigmatized group (Lippi-Green, 2012). I have written, and continue to write, that *all* language use is valid, patterned, systematic, rich, creative, and complex. I argue that the many stigmatized language varieties, including Spanish influenced Englishes, Asian Influenced Englishes, Southern and rural White Englishes, in addition to Black Englishes, are valid and valuable and should be a part of English Education. Still, this approach sounds an awful lot like *all languages matter*. In light of the anti-Black racism associated with *all lives matter*, this parallel scares the hell out of me. Is my call for valuing all forms of language another manifestation of anti-Black racism? I don't think so, but it is an important question to ask, and to consider, and to reconsider.

As a White scholar, it is my duty to be reflective about whether my scholarship dilutes the scholarship of scholars of color. As a White scholar, it is my responsibility to consider what value, or what distraction, a broad vision of linguistic justice has in a moment where a narrow focus on dismantling anti-Black racism seems most important. By focusing on wide-ranging linguistic hierarchies, am I unintentionally undermining the work of educational linguists tightly centered on addressing the stigma placed on Black Language?

Black Language Matters

Unsurprisingly, there is no simple answer to these questions. As is true for people in all lines of justice-oriented work there are times when causes align, and times when causes diverge or conflict. My experiences have shown me the importance of reflective consideration for how my work impacts the work of others, and to always make room for those with the most pressing need to step to the forefront. As with other struggles for justice, there is room for all parties under the umbrella, with thoughtful consideration that those in the most need should be given the most resources.

As I consider my efforts to de-center standardized English in schools, I wrestle with the possibility that my work makes space for, but does not explicitly name, antiracist Black Language pedagogy. When I work with teachers or school districts to shift understandings of language use, I champion fundamental principles that support the flexible, hybrid, evolving nature of all language. Whether I am working with teachers in predominantly White rural schools, racially diverse suburban schools, predominantly Black and Latinx urban schools, or schools that don't fit any of those stereotypical patterns, we talk about intersections of language, race, and social power. Depending on the context, sometimes it is beneficial to foreground White southern ways of using language, and sometimes it is beneficial to foreground Filipino American ways of using language. Sometimes the use of Spanglish is ripe for inquiry, and sometimes exploration of Native American linguistic practices is paramount. Regardless of the context and the demographics of any particular school, I've realized that promoting idea that *all* language use is valid requires explicitly addressing anti-Black linguistic racism.

White scholarship must support scholars of color

Ultimately, as a White male academic, my racial/gender privilege allows me to ignore the struggles - and the achievements - of my Black colleagues, if I choose to. My responsibility as a White scholar is to never let that happen. I must constantly reflect on my role in relation to others. For me that does not mean that I need to emulate the work of scholars focused on Black Language, but it does mean that I need to be abundantly clear about how their hard work supports my career. I need to cite Black scholars prominently. I need to foreground Black Language scholarship even when I'm working with White suburban teachers and their White students, or with White pre-service teachers in a predominantly White institution.

And, in addition to everything I've just said about Black Language and scholarship, I have an additional duty to consider the abundance of scholarship on Latinx, bilingual, and multilingual students. Engagement with research on translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014), the struggles and stigma of students classified as English Learners (Brooks, 2019), and the broader work on raciolinguistics (Alim et al., 2016) all require constant reflexivity from White scholars. I'm grateful for these colleagues whose presence, in absentia, forces me to continually reflect on my own positionality and worldview.

White education scholars must understand that their own liberation is bound to the liberation of scholars of color, and they must work as co-conspirators toward that liberation (Love, 2019). A question I'm left with, as I look back to Baker-Bell's book on my table, and a question I urge all White education scholars to ask themselves, is, to what extent can I make my scholarship more explicitly anti-racist? In the footprints of colleagues of color, I continue to pursue evolving answers to that question with each new project I take up.



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