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Raven Jones Stanbrough

Michigan State University, [jonesrav@msu.edu](mailto:jonesrav@msu.edu)

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

by Raven Jones Stanbrough

Baker-Bell, A. (2020). *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*. Routledge: New York, NY. ISBN: 978-1-138-55101-5

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 instances where I needed to protect myself from others.

—Baker-Bell, *Linguistic Justice*

For such a time as this, Detroit native and scholar April Baker-Bell’s *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy* (2020) is more than just a book or publication that should be affixed on your bookshelves or downloaded on your computers. It is an intentional call to action for every individual to take notice that Black folks and the culture we represent, including our language choices and practices, ain’t going anywhere! ‘*Real Talk!*’ It is your favorite Sunday morning sermon or sacred ritual text, in which “Hallelujahs” and “A-she’s” effortlessly fill your lips and spirits. It is thee playlist of playlists—the one you cue up in all seasons for all things. From cover to cover, as a reader and audience member, you can expect to be informed and moved. To be shaken to your literary core. More than that, you can expect to be empowered to do more than what you might already be doing, in your home, (virtual) community, or workplace to address the mainstream antiracist ills and harms that are often committed against Black students and their language and linguistic identities.

*Linguistic Justice* is for the culture and anyone who is concerned with how Black Lives Matter—in all places and contexts, including in education and schools.



Raven Jones Stanbrough



Connected to this, Baker-Bell states, “Indeed, the way a Black child’s language is devalued in school reflects how Black lives are devalued in the world” (p. 2). She does more than offer knowledge and insights from her own teaching experiences and witnessings; Baker-Bell comes thru—straight #Wakanda style—and blesses the world with her timeless #BlackGirlMagic by way of poetic prose. Fully understanding that her own linguistic introductions were and are rooted in family and Black joy, she paints a picturesque canvas—one in which her mother was her foundational language muse and her siblings and other loved ones served as her paintbrushes and brushstrokes. Taken together, they all collectively contributed to *Linguistic Justice*, a work of art worth adorning a sacred space in every class, school, museum, and Institute. As a fellow native Detroiter and Black

Language user, I am beholden to Baker-Bell's succession of Black Language scholarship, realness, activism, and brilliance.

With six chapters inclusive of ethnographic descriptions and analyses, *Linguistic Justice* provides a blueprint that teachers and educators can glean from for their Monday morning teaching. Whether learning from a photo, story, chart, or other artifact, the stories and counterstories of Black youth are illuminated and centered. In Chapters 1 and 2, "Black Language Is Good on Any MLK Boulevard" and "What's Anti-Blackness Got To Do Wit It?" Baker-Bell breaks down Black Language (BL) and White Mainstream English (WME) and unpacks their interconnectedness with language, anti-Black racism, race, and white linguistic supremacy. She also underscores Dr. Geneva Smitherman's groundbreaking BL work and fight towards language and linguistic freedom in Detroit and around the world, which began over 40 years ago. Next, Baker-Bell offers practical implications for educators and outlines her Anti-Black Linguistic framework, which succinctly examines how linguistic oppression can be situated and normalized by people and pedagogical practices.

Akin to this, in Chapters 3 and 4, "Killing Them Softly" and "Scoff No More," stories are told through various artifacts, such as attitudinal assessments, drawings, and conversation language worksheets. Each artifact includes elements of students' reactions to both BL and WME. Drawing from Kirkland and Jackson's (2008) study about the attitudes of Black students, Baker-Bell explains how the attitudinal assessment offered deeper understandings related to the students' pre and post thinking and attitudes. Next, Chapter 5, "Black Linguistic Consciousness," centers the varying and shifting perspectives of her Black youth participants. Baker-Bell coined this shift as, "Black Linguistic Consciousness, "which characterizes how the students are beginning to critically interrogate and consistently resist white linguistic hegemony and Anti-Black Linguistic Racism" (p. 93). With this realization, in Chapter 6, "THUG LIFE": Bonus Chapter: Five Years After Leadership Academy, Baker-Bell includes how *Linguistic Justice* can be used as a framework in English

Teacher Education courses. Specifically, she highlights seven "Black Language Artifacts" that indicate how she has used Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy to prepare preservice English teachers to disrupt Anti-Black Linguistic Racism. Each Black Language Artifact contains a description, activities, and supplementary resources teachers can engage their students in. Here is an example that I will utilize this semester in my teacher education courses.

## Black Language Artifact 1: Black Language and Identity

**Description:** For this artifact, students examine the intersection of language, culture, and identity within the Black community.

### Activities

- Have students explore the linguistic identity of the characters in THUG by performing a linguistic analysis. Have the students examine how, when, and where Starr uses language.
- Have students examine how Black Language reflected the character's ways of knowing, interpreting, and surviving the world.
- Have students examine the relationship between Black Language and Black culture in the novel.
- Have the students examine the tension Starr experienced with language and race throughout the novel.
- Have the students write a linguistic memoir that examines their racial and linguistic identities. For example, students might consider writing about how language is used within their families and communities, their experiences with linguistic racism, etc.

I have already recommended *Linguistic Justice* to colleagues, students, family members, and other community members. My undergraduate pre-service teachers will also be reading it in my teacher education and literacy courses. I highly recommend it to anyone who is ready to affirm the linguistic identities of Black youth, while also disrupting Anti-Black Linguistic Racism. I implore every individual—those ready to provide equitable pathways and opportunities for Black

## Must Read Texts

children to thrive and be (linguistically) free—to read this superbly crafted text. Baker-Bell has written a brilliant book. She has used her words as her canvas. As hip hop scholar, Jeezy, suggested, she has “put on for her city” and Detroit is proud. Now, it is up to all of us to experience, feel, and spread the joy of such beautiful literary Black art.

## References

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## Author Biography

**Raven Jones Stanbrough** is an assistant professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Michigan State University. Her teaching, research, and publications focus on literacy, culture, race, equity, and the educational and lived experiences of students of color in urban contexts. Dr. Jones Stanbrough creates and facilitates debate education programs to promote and expand the educative and creative engagement that debate offers. She is also the Co-founder of *The Zuri Reads Initiative (TZRI)*, which provides and organizes literacy-related events and resources for Detroit-area children, students, and families. Dr. Jones Stanbrough is a lover of all things Detroit, Scrabble, and The Clark Sisters, and resides in Detroit with her partner, Darryl Jr., and their daughter, Zuri Hudson. She can be contacted at: [jonesrav@msu.edu](mailto:jonesrav@msu.edu).

