

BLACK LANGUAGE AND EQUITY IN EDUCATION

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This paper argues that the educational system in the United States has shown little interest in educating African Americans. This lack of interest is most evident in public responses to Black language, which has shown repeatedly that this language and those that use it are subjects of derision. Derision of any culture, particularly of one so integral to the nation's foundation, teaches disrespect for racial and ethnic differences and fosters inequities in a nation and an educational system considered to uphold ideals of equality and equal opportunity. This issue of disrespect and its potential impact on students has too often been eclipsed in debates about definition. What is the linguistic form associated largely but not exclusively with Black people? Can this form be considered a language, a dialect, or is it something else altogether? Can or should it be used in educational settings, and how? Important though these questions may be, they typically overshadow the questions posed here, which I draw from the writer, James Baldwin (1979). Can and should a nation seek to teach a people for whom they have shown consistent disrespect? Can and should a people seek to learn from a nation that has consistently disrespected them?

Introduction

The central issue put before the court in *Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children et. al, v. Ann Arbor School District Board* (1979) was how this school system could most effectively teach its students. The plaintiffs argued that the linguistic forms of the students in question posed a barrier to their equal participation in the instructional programs offered them, and that the district had not done enough to help these students overcome this barrier. Smitherman (2000), a central figure in the decision as an expert witness noted: "The trial proceedings established that the school district had failed to recognize the existence and legitimacy of the children's language, Black English" (Smitherman, 2000, p. 135). Additionally, she noted that these proceedings gave legal credence to Black English as "...a systematic, rule-governed language system..." (Smitherman, 2000, p. 135) a definition that had been solidly supported by academic research (Labov, 1969, 1972).

James Baldwin's (1979) contribution to this discussion was to suggest that if Black English could not be defined as a language, particularly given the history encoded in it, then no

given definition of language could be trusted. He concludes that the question of importance is not what this language is, but, rather, what it does, which is function as a repository of experience, of history, of struggle, and of survival, an experience which the general public despises. Further, Baldwin asserted:

A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled. A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be black, and in which he knows that he can never become white. (p. 70)

While it seems to me that despising a child's language is tantamount to despising his experience, I understand that Baldwin is attempting to shift the discussion away from language to what he sees as the real issue in question, which is what our attitudes toward the language user portend, conceal, and reveal. Following Baldwin, I too shift from the customary discussions of what Black language is or is not, a question that seems to arise time and again despite a clear and documented answer. I take as a given here that the linguistic form used by Black (African American) speakers is a fully functional language - whether it be called Black English, Black English Vernacular, African American Vernacular English, Ebonics, Bad English, Incorrect English, a version of Southern English, a dialect of English, or any other name. For the sake of simplicity and continuity, I use the term Black language when possible. Like Baraka (1997), I do not think of Black language as an English language, since it is no more English than it is any of the other languages from which it arises (p. 9).

Shifting from the debates about what Black language might be to what those debates reveal is the central focus of this essay. In light of the central question of this issue, which is whether our educational system is equitable, I have chosen to reframe Baldwin's statement that the Black child's experience is despised, as a question: Is the experience of Black children despised, and if so, is this attitude toward the Black experience evident in discussions of Black language? I examine discussions about Black language for answers, and to provide a genealogy of approaches and responses to the education of Black people in order to suggest an historical dimension to the question of equity in education, particularly as it relates to the experiences of Black people. If my answers to the questions above are yes, and the evidence points in this direction, then the following questions will be addressed as well. Can and should a nation seek to teach a people for which they show disrespect? Can and should a people seek to learn from

a nation that has consistently disrespected them? And how might we address these attitudes toward Black experience to move us toward a more respectful and thus equitable treatment of Black children in education?

Methods

The methods employed here, derived in part from critical discourse analysis (Hodge & Kress, 1979) and metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), are intended to expose and confront what Mehan and Wills (1988) refer to as the politics of representation. That is, I treat language as indicative of personal and social perspectives, and language utterances to expose understandings and experiences concerning the social entities in question. I examine the language of a select number of respondents who have expressed views on Black language in public forums for what they reveal about public attitudes towards it. I consider these views as constitutive of a social perspective that influences pedagogy, policy, research, and theory in education. Also, I employ a genealogical approach to stress a history of the educational considerations and conditions for Black people proffered in the United States. I suggest that this perspective is often lost or subsumed in public discourse, or in considerations concerning the education of the populace in question. For some, this approach may serve simply as a reminder, but for others I hope that it will serve as a different way to consider the history and trajectory of education, as well as the purposes for which it has been given and taken. Additionally, it should be noted that any reference to a racialized entity is meant to function as a form of identification, rather than as a statement of identity. Last, it is necessary to point out my literary roots, as this is my primary professional focus, and my use of literature as a window into a world and point of view that the presumably objective perspectives of empirical methods do not, typically, offer (Minow, 1990; Clifford, 1986). I struggle with the concept of objectivity, given the problematic nature of the claims of detachment and distance that often accompany it (Minow, 1990; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Rabinow, 1986). I do not intend to suggest that empirical methods are irrelevant, but rather that they be treated with a critical skepticism, and that the objective be fairness, honesty, and accuracy concerning the issues in question, with an eye toward understanding and revealing how ones subject position influences the perspectives taken on the matters in question.

A Take on Black Educational History

At least part of the answer to the question of whether the experience of Black children is despised, and whether these attitudes impact their education suggests the need for an historical perspective. So, while my primary focus of analysis will be the discourse(s) surrounding Ebonics that circulated following the Oakland Unified School District's attempt to classify Black language as a language in 1996, a history preceding this moment will be provided prior to this analysis. In this history, I intentionally present alternative interpretations of key moments in the United States, highlighting or recovering aspects of them that are typically downplayed through the ways in which the United States is represented historically (Brodkey, 1996). For example, while slavery is now largely recognized as a tragic event, the end of slavery is often swiftly introduced thereafter as one of our crowning achievements. Both perspectives are legitimate but there is so much more to examine and unpack in both historic moments, particularly concerning attitudes toward Black education.

First, during slavery, the education of Black people was not considered to be in the best interest of the nation. A condition of that enslavement was a categorical and explicit denial of education for fear that education would make those enslaved unfit for lives as slaves. The humbling and horrifying accounts of slave narratives, such as that of Frederick Douglass (1845) highlight this point quite well. Douglass recounted learning how to spell and having that learning forbidden because it was illegal and dangerous, since it would make him unfit for enslavement. The slave codes of the era suggest that prohibitions against education for Black and enslaved people was widespread (Ingersoll, 1995; Anonymous, 2009). Second, after slavery officially ended in 1865, the prohibitions against education for the formerly enslaved remained. The work of Booker T. Washington (1915) and W. E. B. Du Bois (1903), among others in the early 1900s were grounded in debates about whether, how, and why Black people should be educated (Minow, 1990). These works were also grounded in, indeed struggling with, the Jim Crow experience that sought to suppress what little progress Black people had made in the era erroneously called, Reconstruction, given how quickly the changes wrought therein were rescinded (Martin, 1998), and replaced by what, perhaps more appropriately became known as the Southern Resurrection. This take on such matters was highlighted, satirically, in George

Schuyler's novel *Black No More* (1931), whose central characters found their way to whiteness through Dr. Crookman's incredible machine that turned Black people whiter than White people, and who then in turn face discrimination for being too white, leaving them, more or less, where they began. Ralph Ellison offered another satiric example in the first chapter of *Invisible Man* (1947) (pp. 19-35). Here, the central figure's attempts to gain an education were tied to the phrase "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running," a phrase suggesting that the education provided him was designed primarily to keep him occupied (Ellison, p. 35).

While Schuyler lambasted virtually every political figure of his era, his work offered a particularly pointed critique of the position taken by Du Bois, which was that black people should aspire to whatever identities white society kept for white people. This position was challenged, of course, by Du Bois's move to Africa, thoroughly disillusioned with the opportunities the United States offered black people to achieve the positions white people inhabited, and primarily kept for themselves (West, 1996). Ellison's story can be seen as a response to Washington's primary position, which was that black people should assimilate to whatever identities white society offered them as opposed to reaching for those positions reserved for white people, a position for which Washington received much white support. The important point here is that Washington, Du Bois, Ellison, and Schuyler found it necessary to discuss and critique how black people might carve out some small chunk of the national space beyond that already assigned to them, as well as a modicum of dignity. An education that might uplift their social and economic position plays no small part in their deliberations, and all suggest in one way or another that the United States was more of a hindrance than a help in this mission.

Ellison's text, *Invisible Man* (1947) predated *Oliver Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954) by seven short years in which, it seems, not much progress had been made concerning Black education. The Supreme Court had to mandate the integration of Black people - who had thus far been largely educated (and I use "educated" loosely) in separate and seriously deficient educational facilities - into generally better and largely white public schools (Minow, 1990). Although the cases that made up the body of petitioners in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision involved segregated schools that were, by most quantifiable measures, equal, the vast majority of segregated schools were still quantitatively and qualitatively unequal (The Library of Congress, 2004). Both *Invisible Man* (1947) and *Oliver*

Brown v. Board of Education (1954) highlight a highly separate, unequal, and inequitable system, both in and beyond education. The failure of that mandate to have any profound or lasting impact, and the invisibility of the plight of black and poor people in United States culture, beyond, of course, *Cops* and similar programs, highlights it still (Martin, 1998). By the 1960s, when notions of the United States as a melting pot in which its various racial and ethnic groups melded into something like a white cheese fondue, it was clear that black people were not melting well (Kozol, 1991). Also, it was or should have been clear that Black people were being asked to blend with people who did not want to blend with them, keeping in mind that this is the heart of the civil rights movement, the horrendous backlash against it, the passage of civil rights legislation in 1965, and the assassinations of virtually every civil rights and black power leader with the moxie and momentum to make a difference. Indeed, there were still at least a dozen states with laws that actively prohibited interracial marriages until the United States Supreme Court declared such laws unconstitutional in *Loving v. Virginia* (1967). The majority of these laws prohibited intermarriage between whites and others, but carried no similar bans against intermarriage between non-whites of different racially demarcated groups.

Efforts to address this problem, many of which focused on whitening the people that might darken the melting pot's contents, began to shift toward the salad bowl metaphor of cultural pluralism or multiculturalism, in which various "subcultures" presumably maintained some cultural distinctiveness within a larger subsuming frame (one in which the term *subculture* is a problem in itself since it presumes a hierarchy in which certain linguistic forms are less than others). Still, an attempt was made to move away from the blending and whitening assumptions embedded in the melting pot metaphor. In *No one model American: A statement of multicultural education*, the Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (ACTE, 1972) suggested that a multicultural approach to education be adopted by all educational institutions (as cited in Ornstein and Levine, 1993). Not long thereafter, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC, 1974) followed this multicultural approach to education and published *Students' right to their own language*. In writing this statement, CCCC sought to aid Black students entering an academy that still largely excluded them by insisting that these students had a right to "...their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style" (CCCC, 1974, p. 2). Additionally, it asserted, any derogation of a fully functional linguistic form is an act of

domination that “leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans (CCCC, 1974, p. 2-3). And yet again even following these courageous forays into the mess of race relations in this country, the questions asked and answered in the statements above were again open to question in *Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children et. al. v. Ann Arbor School District Board* (1979).

The call to recognize Black people (their language, culture, and experience) as legitimate even as a crouton in the salad bowl of U. S. cultural life was, for many, a seemingly appalling request. John Simon (1980) spoke volumes about how some felt about even considering the efficacy or functionality of Black language. Simon said, for instance, that people were suffering from the idea that in a democracy “language must accommodate itself to the whims, idiosyncrasies, dialects, and sheer ignorance of underprivileged minorities, especially if these happen to be black” (p. xiv). I cannot resist quoting a bit more of what Simon said about Black language, given his virulent eloquence: “As for ‘I be,’ ‘you be,’ ‘he be,’ etc., which should give us all the heebie-jeebies, these may indeed be comprehensible, but they go against all accepted classical and modern grammars and are the product not of a language with roots in history but of ignorance of how language works” (pp. 165-6). I cannot say that I am seeing a lot of love here for black language, or the people who speak it. The irony is, that Simon recognized Black American language as a language, even an understandable one, even as he made it clear that it was in no way an acceptable linguistic form. And since the people that use it are the history-less base of ignorance about language from which this language springs, they are clearly not acceptable either. It requires little effort on anyone’s part to think that Simon thought Black people - their language, their experience, and their lives - are a despicable waste.

Thomas J. Farrell displayed a less overt but nonetheless denigrating view of Black language and people in “IQ and Standard English” (1983). Based on admittedly circumstantial evidence culled from examinations of Black children raised by White families, Farrell concluded that these children needed to learn the grammar of Standard American English in order to acquire the higher level abstract thinking skills embedded in it (Farrell, 1983, p. 477). The research examined showed that Black children raised by White parents did better on standardized tests than Black children raised by Black parents. If one follows Farrell’s logic a more plausible conclusion might be that both the test makers and the white parents used

Standard English and thus, Black children raised by white parents might do better on standardized tests written in a linguistic form with which they are accustomed. There is utterly no need or logical clarity to the attached notions that one form provides a higher level of abstract thought. In fact, one could just as easily argue that the logical absurdity of Farrell's argument suggests some problems with the level of abstraction that Standard English assumedly brings, and with greater validity. The gist of Farrell's comment was really its adoration of White thought, its derogation of any Black thought, and its sense of Black language as deficient, without some form of white-out correcting it.

Negative responses to multiculturalism circulated long after its introduction in large part, seemingly, because of its tacit endorsement of Black language and experience. The response of noted historian and cultural critic, Schlesinger Jr., to multiculturalism is clearly reflected in the title of his popular book *The Disuniting of America, Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (1988). Schlesinger's response to Black people is exposed when he asks, "...what good will it do young black Americans ... to learn by music and mantras, rhythm and rapping, to reject standard English, to hear that because their minds work differently a first-class education is not for them?" (Schlesinger, 1988, p. 94). The idea that embracing more than one language and culture means the rejection of Standard English, and, I presume, white culture, is telling in its false dichotomization. It is also clear that his sense of Black language and culture is absurdly reductionist, and his link between Standard English and a first-class education is absurdly expansionist. By citing Simon, Farrell, and Schlesinger, I attempt to make clear that as late as the mid 1980s, notable scholars at best belittled and at worst showed that they despised Black people, insisted that they abandon their language and culture, and called for them to assimilate to a culture and a language of what was undoubtedly considered a more highly evolved people, based on the comments above.

An Analysis of the Discourse of the Ebonics Debate

Given the history above, the Oakland Unified School District was probably not surprised when their attempt to validate the language and experience of its Black students was met, nationwide, with derision. Or, perhaps, it was the case that this derision had become so much more deeply embedded, more polished, more hidden, more naturalized, in large part because, it had acquired hegemonic status (Omi & Winant, 1994). The Oakland Unified

School District argued that providing its Black students a quality education required recognizing the validity of their language and the codes of self and social identification in it (Perry & Delpit, 1998). Arguments against the district's position largely held the view that these varieties of language were at best degraded forms of Standard or Edited American English, and at worst simply unintelligible gibberish that did not deserve recognition. Republican Senator Ray Haynes (California) suggested that the use of Black language in schools was an unconscionable, a racially, and ethnically divisive affront to education (Wilke, 1997, A-4). California's former governor, Pete Wilson, remarked that schools should only teach Standard American English (Wilke, 1997, A-4). John Baugh, Stanford University Professor of Education and Linguistics, asserted that at best teachers should teach about but not in Black language to avoid lowering students and educational institutions on the evolutionary scale (Golden, 1997, A-8).

The voices in the Senate Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations' Special Hearing (1997), led by subcommittee chairperson, Senator Arlen Specter reflected similar perspectives, with one notable exception. Specter focused the hearing on three questions: whether (1) Black language was "a language or a dialect of English," whether (2) the Oakland School District could use federal funds for bilingual education in "ebonics-based programs," and whether (3) "ebonics was to be brought into classes" (Ebonics, 1997, p. 2). The answers to these three questions are in some ways interdependent. If Black language is a real language then, in theory, its speakers can be considered bilingual, thus opening the door for funding slated for bilingual education. If Black language is not a real language then question two is moot. If Black language is a real dialect of English, then while it may lose access to funds slated for bilingual education, it gains status as a real linguistic form that can be used in classes. If it is neither a language nor dialect, then Black language is, aside from being a cultural curiosity, not relevant as a linguistic form that can be used or funded in education in any serious way. These issues expose a leading and, indeed, a misleading presumption, which is that they presume the absence of Black language in a space in which it is already present, brought their by the students the Oakland Unified School District sought to help, and, quite possibly, by a number of their educators. In other words, the question functioned as a kind of wish-fulfillment fantasy, or nightmare, in my view, of the desired absence of an undesirable presence.

Specter began by noting that there had “...been considerable discussion, really controversy and concern, as to whether ebonics is a separate language, and as such undesirable or whether it is a teaching skill and a bridge for some to perfect and learn language skills” (Ebonics, 1997, p. 1). Here, again, Black language is already defined as undesirable, since “a” language is by definition “a separate language, and as such undesirable” (Ebonics, 1997, p. 1). It is also not considered a language skill, since the question of whether to use it as a means of learning language skills established it as not itself a language skill worth learning. Additionally, if considered a language or even a language skill, then Black language might need to be considered something more or other than “a bridge” that one might cross to reach “language skills.” Specter’s invocation of the Clinton administration’s position on Black language presented by the then Secretary of Education, Richard Riley, follows a similar line of reasoning in its assertion that: “elevating black English to the status of a language is not our way to raise standards of achievement in our schools for our students.... The administration’s policy is that ebonics is a nonstandard form of English and not a formal language” (Ebonics 1997, p. 2). Like Specter, Riley denied Black language status as a language. Unlike Specter, he positioned Black language as a “nonstandard form of English and not a formal language.” While this language was seemingly better than that which considers Black language as substandard, the assertion that this linguistic form was “not our way to raise standards of achievement” suggested that Black language, rather than attitudes toward it such as those this official statement expresses, was just not good enough to merit use, respect, or recognition.

Senator Launch Faircloth was bluntly derisive in his comments concerning Black language. Faircloth remarked: “I simply want to say that I think Ebonics is absurd. As Rev. Jesse Jackson said, it was teaching down to people, and that is the last thing we need to be doing” (Ebonics, 1997, p. 3) Faircloth advocated discipline, as in failing those who don’t measure up, expelling those who cause trouble, and uniforms to reduce clothing costs and increase self respect (Ebonics, 1997, p. 4). Faircloth and, apparently, Rev. Jackson (at the time) interpreted Black language as a hindrance rather than a help in education, and its use in education as teaching “down” and lowering “standards.”

The comments by United States Congressperson and chair of the Black Caucus, Maxine Waters, differed significantly from the views expressed above. Waters recognized Black language as a legitimate linguistic form. Still, she maintained that Black students will be

ignored because “people will not listen to what they are saying,” but rather to the differences evident in their language (Ebonics, 1997, p. 5). Also, she implied that the use of Standard or Edited American English by these students would minimize or prevent them from being ignored. I could not disagree on this point more. This might be so if language was the singular attention getting factor in educational or work place settings, and certainly the use of Standard American English in these settings is not likely to hurt, but responses to other visible signs of difference are not likely to be non-factors here. Even so, for Waters, the Oakland Unified School District attempted to recognize, “that there are these language patterns...and we are going to have to teach our teachers and...help everybody not only to recognize that these language patterns exist, but we must all work together to correct them so that in the final analysis the students will speak standard English” (Ebonics, 1997, p. 5). While I see no need to “correct” Black language patterns or Black people, I do see a need for teachers and students to work together in understanding them, and how, when, where, for what reasons, and for whom they function. I concur with Waters’ assertion that: “Oakland’s decision is credible, it is rational, and a potentially effective way to improve the academic standards of its students” (Ebonics, 1997, p. 6). As near as I can ascertain, however, this potentially helpful method of improving the academic conditions of these students was radically rejected. In fact, with a few exceptions that seem to have slipped under the “what else can we do to show how much we despise the Black experience” radar, few methods of improving the academic or lived experiences of these students that recognize the validity of this experience and the language forms that express it have been accepted. Certainly, in the time of this special hearing, assimilation and self-erasure - of a person’s assumedly non-standard American English linguistic cultural markers - was still in vogue.

For example, in his comments, Specter recalled his history as an immigrant growing up in a Yiddish-speaking house. He noted: “I can recall the difference of my father’s accent, and it was different. And in our melting pot society, we all like to fit in and be similar and not stick out or be unusual. But at the same time, we all have pride in our own backgrounds, a great deal of ethnic pride” (Ebonics, 1997, p. 3). Specter adopts the melting pot analogy to describe the immigrant experience and in so doing delineates a still powerful and pervasive ideological stance toward difference in the United States. Maintaining ethnic pride is incompatible with fitting in or melting in the melting pot of the nation, however, particularly if fitting in means

jettisoning the evidence of your ethnic identity. How much pride can you have in an ethnic identity that you choose to jettison or hide in order to fit in? Moreover, the call for assimilation is so strong here that its mandates are reiterated as if a prayer or a method of modifying behavior in the terms “melting pot...fit in...be similar...not stick out or be unusual.” Difference from whatever the normative linguistic specter might be here is just not desirable, not even apparently, and this is the kick, by the people that desire it. The very hearing on Black language suggests that this linguistic form is desirable to some, but Specter’s litany of assimilation denied the very desire on which the hearing rested; apparently, for him, no one in this nation desires their differences, including the people who are asking that their differences be given respectful recognition.

Even if we all desire to fit in, and I think that desire depends, or certainly should depend, on what fitting in means, we may not all desire to melt, or lose every ounce of individuality that we subsequently and fervently assert that we have, much like in the way that Specter erased the very difference in which he said he and we have pride. Senator Specter’s perspective, which his response to Waters demonstrated, brings me to the ground concerning the unethical and inequitable nature of education on which I began. Specter noted: “And some of us sound different by way of our own accents. I still carry a Kansas accent, been trying to get rid of it forever, but I cannot do it. I really do not want to do it” (Ebonics, 1997, p. 7). Accordingly then our differences must be erased to fit into the United States, but clearly not all differences, for the erasure of his Kansas accent, or the lack thereof, is a point of contradiction; he really does not want to eliminate it, cannot and does not want to eliminate it, even as he has been trying to eliminate it. In addition to registering what the convoluted nature of his statement reveals, it is also worth noting that *this* difference, his Kansas accent, has not kept him from achieving social, economic, and political success. He has not had to get rid of this difference, even if he feels like he should, and yet from the beginning of this hearing the presumption has been that Black language must go somewhere other than here for Black people to have any success.

Conclusion

In sum, the dominant view on Black language, culture, and experience in the comments above is that it functions as sign, site, and sight of cultural deficiency. It is defined as a substandard or nonstandard dialect of English or as a non-linguistic entity. It is indicative of troublemaking, ignorable, incomprehensible, poverty stricken, uneducated, and potentially uneducable people; and it is a clear marker of a particular difference, that is, of Black experience, in a culture in which this difference must be erased. The meaning of erasure has run the gamut across United States history, ranging from lynching to enslavement and the denial of education to economic deprivation and inadequate educational facilities and possibilities to the advancement of a presumably talented few and the disenfranchisement of the presumably less talented many. At no point in this history have we reached a point where the claim evident in recent years in educational policies associated with the “No Child Left Behind” slogan actually referenced Black children or, for that matter, issued from a national consciousness that saw Black or poor children as children or, at least, as children worthy of our respect and of every bit of help we can give them.

My recommendations for educational change begin with this point. As a nation, we have not shown ourselves capable of helping Black children, in large part because too many of those who are in power just don't like them for what their very presence represents, which is the continuing presence of Black life - culture, language, experience, presence - and the evidence that presence provides in this oh so democratic and inclusive republic of our repeated violations of the ideals we presumably hold dear. West noted at the time of the publication of their retrospective on Du Bois, *The Future of the Race*, that while the Black middle class had grown to something like four times the size it had attained in 1968: “Simultaneously—and paradoxically ... 45 percent of all black children are born at, or beneath, the poverty line. ...[and] fully one-third of the members of the African-American community are worse off economically today than they were the day King was killed” (West, 1996, p. xi-xii). Simultaneously—and ironically—their text was published in the same year that the Oakland Unified School District Board of Education's resolution set the nation on fire, yet again. In my view, our actions as a nation are akin to telling someone to get up while someone far more

powerful than them is holding them down. Some may indeed get up somehow, someday, but most, assuredly, will not.

Additionally, I advocate expanding the cultural repositories from which we draw linguistically rather than reducing them. In other words, adding Standard American English without subtracting Black language is one route to a more equitable education. Respecting rather than rejecting Black language and experience necessarily extends from the first suggestion. Instead of correcting Black students we could correct attitudes about them by teaching their language and culture, but barring that lofty goal, we could at least not denigrate it and, perhaps, even show respect for it. Additionally, we need to consider the role that respect plays in the teaching and learning process. I do not have to like someone to learn from them, but I certainly have to respect them, and by respect, I do not mean fear, but rather the recognition that their language is of value, if not for you, then certainly for them.

Programs such as AVID appear to have had some success with an accommodationist philosophy (Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996), and this philosophy seems a move forward beyond the assimilationist philosophy still clearly in play in the late 1990s. Perhaps another step forward toward a philosophy built on acceptance is warranted. Acceptance would again rely on the respectful treatment of the Black language and experience both in education and beyond it in the nation. While a number of scholars have been forthright in their recognition of Black language as such, they have not braved the political quagmire of linguistic definition enough to cleanse those definitions of blatantly political taint. If the distinctions between languages and dialects rest upon political power, then the definition can have no pretensions of “objectivity” or, and much better to my mind, of intellectual veracity.

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