

Is the Communication Center Racist? An Inquiry into Black Linguistic Justice, Anti-Racism, and Assimilation

Nimisha Ladva
Haverford College

“The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work.”

— Toni Morrison, *New York Times*, August 6, 2019

Background

What is the core of communication center work and how does racism distract from it?

In the opening paragraphs of *Linguistic Justice*, April Baker-Bell (2020) deftly separates the conflation between speaking standard or academic English, or what she calls White Mainstream English (WME), and the presumed protection this English confers on Black bodies. The conflation between this English—the kind of English I teach in my writing classes, the kind of English we hear in our communication centers, the kind of English I speak—and the humanity, the basic respect, that such speech presumably confers on all its speakers is a lie evidenced again and again in police killings:

If y’all actually believe that using “standard English” will dismantle white supremacy, then you not paying attention! If we, as teachers, truly believe that code switching will dismantle white supremacy, we have a problem. If we honestly believe that code switching will save Black people’s lives, then we really ain’t paying attention to what’s happening in the world. Eric Garner was choked to death by a police officer while saying “I cannot breathe.” Wouldn’t you consider

“I cannot breathe” “standard English” syntax? (p. 5)

Both the form and content of this passage struck me. I hadn’t connected my privileging of WME to basic human respect until this moment. Or rather, I assumed the respect that WME confers to be equal and universal. As someone who spoke a different English with my immigrant parents than I did on campus, both as a student and later as a faculty member, I was clear about the advantages that WME had produced for me. I accepted WME as the English that gave me and others who spoke it, as the particular version of English that grants access to all sorts of social goods: better jobs, more leadership, fuller lives. I also tracked my reaction to Baker-Bell’s use of Black Language (BL). Certainly, I did not understand her less because of the way she wrote, but I did notice that she used it. BL’s presence in her text foregrounded for me its profound absence in my academic world in the things I read and almost everywhere on the small liberal arts college campus where I teach. BL was absent in the predominantly white college classroom, in tutoring appointments for speaking, in the hallways, even when Black students were present. Most revealing, however, was that by not questioning this absence before, I always expected and accepted its absence. How is the absence of BL connected to

communication studies and communication center work?

Writ small, the core of communication center work is to support students (and others who use our centers) to speak their truth in college and beyond. My ignorance in accepting the absence of BL, or active engagement with its absence, is a form of anti-Blackness that affects both Black and non-Black students. We owe all our students a way to understand what is at stake when we continue to tolerate the absence of BL in the communication center.

Writ large, the core of communication work is justice. This is not a paper written to shed light on what to do in individual interactions in the communication center, whatever the role the individual, whether the speaker of BL or not, plays: director, consultant, student user, or other. Put differently, this is a paper that seeks to reframe those individual interactions within a larger disciplinary context that privileges whiteness and that exists as a consequence of the enslavement of Black Africans, one of the two original sins at the center of this nation. The other sin, of course, is the genocide of Indigenous people. Indeed, I write this sitting in my office at Haverford College on land that was occupied by the Lenni Lenape peoples. I regret that this paper will not account for the specificity of how this other original sin intersects with the presence of Black people in the U.S. and the idea of the U.S. itself. I acknowledge that in limiting my scope, I enact an erasure again. I hope another scholar will remedy this deficit with their own contribution.

I believe that Laura Greenfield's (2019) work on writing centers and justice can apply to speaking centers, too:

The current paradigm of writing centers, I argue, leaves us in a bind. Our privileging of writers over righteousness risks in both small and large ways our

field's complicity in enabling or even promoting systems of injustice many of us personally reject. In her critical history of writing centers, *'Our Little Secret': A History of Writing Centers, Pre- to Post-Open Admissions*, Elizabeth H. Boquet juxtaposes the ways many writing center people "find it difficult to believe that the writing center may be a site of regulation rather than liberation, though it is often that" yet at the same time fail to "envision it as a source of radical or liberatory pedagogy, though it is often that." (Boquet, 1999, as cited in Greenfield, 2019, p. 5)

My contention is that in its current form, communication center work—like writing center work—is racist and it enacts anti-Blackness. Our work in our speaking centers, like the work in writing centers referenced above, in "small and large ways" promotes injustice that "many of us personally reject" (Greenfield, 2019, p. 5). Importantly, that is also to say it is possible "to envision [our work] as a source of radical or liberatory pedagogy" (Boquet, 1999, as cited in Greenfield, 2019, p. 5).

In *How to Be an Anti-Racist*, Kendi (2019) argues that "there is no such thing as a non-racist or race-neutral policy. Every policy in every institution in every community in every nation is producing or sustaining either racial inequity or equity between racial groups" (p. 18). If he is right, then communication centers in particular, and speaking pedagogy in general, must confront the possibility that, in the absence of an explicitly anti-racist agenda, *they are racist*. This charge is uncomfortable. Kendi makes it clear that it is simply not enough to say, "I am not a racist," a tactic that he points out "Richard Spencer, an avowed white supremacist uses, and that is reflected in Trump's declarations that he is 'the least racist person'" (p. 9). Trump's claim

contradicts his well-documented characterization of non-whites in racist terms (see Graham et al., 2019). Instead, Kendi argues, it is imperative that one works actively to dismantle racism. Given that, on the whole, our centers' staff, our centers' directors, our readership, and our scholars are overwhelmingly white, our work is incomplete. In the absence of working to dismantle racism in every hire, in every tutor session, in every workshop, in every paper, communication centers and the structures that support them have contributed to upholding racial inequity.

My claim may seem unfair. After all, many communication centers, professional organizations, and indeed this journal itself, made statements in direct support of, and supported action for, the Black Lives Matter movement and the protests that erupted nationally after May 25, 2020 when George Floyd was killed by a Minneapolis police officer. Further, while this special issue makes diversity, equity, and inclusion its centerpiece, any keyword search within its pages shows that this is not the first time these pages have sought to engage the conversation around racism in this country. But we can and must do more. We can and must do better. Where to go from here? I assert here that we start by surfacing the anti-Blackness in our discipline and praxis and engage what Baker-Bell has called "Black Linguistic Justice."

Baker-Bell was a member of the 2020 Conference on College Composition & Communication's (hereafter CCCC) "Special Committee on Composing a CCCC Statement on Anti-Black Racism and Black Linguistic Justice, Or, Why We Cain't Breathe!" The members of this committee in addition to Baker-Bell are Bonnie J. Williams-Farrier, Davena Jackson, Lamar Johnson, Carmen Kynard, and Teaira McMurtry. (See also Turner, 1949, cited in

Smitherton, 2006 for evidence of repeated calls for a reckoning with Black Language). Significantly, the result of their "composing a CCCC statement" is not a statement; it is a set of demands posted on the CCCC website in July 2020. The demands are as follows:

We DEMAND that:

1. teachers stop using academic language and standard English as the accepted communicative norm, which reflects White Mainstream English!
2. teachers stop teaching Black students to code-switch! Instead, we must teach Black students about anti-Black linguistic racism and white linguistic supremacy!
3. political discussions and praxis center Black Language as teacher-researcher activism for classrooms and communities!
4. teachers develop and teach Black Linguistic Consciousness that works to decolonize the mind (and/or) language, unlearn white supremacy, and unravel anti-Black linguistic racism!
5. Black dispositions are centered in the research and teaching of Black Language! (CCCC, 2020, para. 4, numeration mine)

The language of "demand" is disruptive and echoes the language of workers' rights and labor strikes. For me, it echoes language used less than a month ago by Black student leaders who led a general student strike here at Haverford College—no going to classes, labs, jobs, no business as usual—and delivered a set of demands to the campus administration (see Anderson, 2020). The word "demand" signals disruption. Given the BLM protests in our country over the summer, given the demands made in the CCCC document, given the strike that students just ended at

Haverford (and that has since spread to Bryn Mawr College and Swarthmore College as of this writing), I write with urgency for education in higher education. Further, given that we just ended a presidential election cycle where 70 million plus Americans voted for what could be argued is an explicitly white supremacist version of America and another 75 million Americans voted for a ticket with a Black and South Asian American woman as Vice President, I write with urgency for our democracy. Fong (2020) argues for the necessity of learning about those moments in American history when anti-Blackness has been confronted, when demands by Black Americans have needed to be faced. He notes that “two of the most important moments of political struggle against racial injustice in America, about which every student getting a liberal arts education ought to learn [are] the anti-slavery movement of the mid-19th century, and the civil rights movement of the mid-20th” (Fong, 2020, para. 9). If the abolition of slavery and the civil rights movement were two moments that, *in meeting the rightful demands made by and for Black Americans*, brought America closer to the truth of its promised democracy, we may presently be in the midst of a third such moment. Yet the truth is, whether we are or not, disruption is here. We must face it. One thing I learned from the young Black leaders of the Haverford student strike is that disruption can be productive. How can the demands made by the authors of the CCCC statement be disruptive and productive for our work? How can the way we face these demands turn our work explicitly towards justice?

My objective here will not be to meet these demands per se, but to examine what it means to stop “business as usual,” to meet the urgency of the moment. My method will be to offer a “reading” of the

CCCC demand statement as a preliminary though necessarily incomplete step towards reckoning with them. The demands are not made to teachers in a particular field: the demands are made to “teachers.” I read this as a call on all educators, in all fields, including ours—including me. I write from a place of *becoming*, not of having arrived, and welcome discussion that will fill out the narrative for all of us as we continue to commit to anti-racism in the work we do.

I will use the term racism, but more often will use the term anti-Blackness to expose its particular contours. When I use the term “we,” I mean all of us engaged in communication center work, knowing full well that our individual positions, circumstances, and identities impact the work we do in multiple ways.

What are the conditions that create a context for racism, and anti-Blackness in particular, in communication studies and communication center work?

Racism and anti-Blackness are related, but I follow ross (2020; the absent capitalization is theirs) who says that “racism” fails to fully capture what black people in this country are facing. The right term is “anti-blackness.” To be clear, “racism” isn’t a meaningless term. But it’s a catch-all that can encapsulate anything from black people being denied fair access to mortgage loans, to Asian students being burdened with a “model minority” label. It’s not specific. (para. 1-3)

As a dark-skinned, South Asian woman who was a first-generation, low income student, I take ross’s use of the “model minority” myth seriously. Here, their reference suggests that someone in my position, someone Asian with a terminal degree and, therefore, a mark of success, can both suffer a particular kind of harm

(pressure to conform to the model minority myth) and produce a different kind of harm. That is, my presence in the predominantly white spaces of higher education says, ‘see, this space isn’t all white, there’s a brown woman who has worked hard enough and is smart enough to have made it here.’ Of course, this dynamic is present outside academia, too.

Indeed, Nikki Haley’s comments during the 2020 Republican Convention expose an unspoken anti-Blackness when she, as a South Asian American “child of immigrants” speaks from her experience to announce that America is not racist (CNN broadcast, August 24, 2020). Her point is, how can America be racist if someone like her, someone female and brown, made it? She deploys her position as a South Asian woman with power and success, as a South Asian woman who presumably either did not encounter racism or overcame it, to deny Black Americans’ experience of anti-Blackness, the very thing the BLM protests sought to bring to national consciousness. Her presence in white spaces does not simply read as proving racism wrong. It serves as an indictment against Black people who are not present and erases the particular harm that Black Americans endure. Part of the reason Nikki Haley is where she is in life is because she benefits from anti-Blackness. Displaying the marks of success, of access to social goods, as proof that racism does not exist, is a form of anti-Blackness. Her comment reeks of privilege and ignorance.

Avoiding the harms that Black Americans face is an unacknowledged privilege among South Asians like myself. It is a privilege that works in tandem with the model minority myth. I recall that in high school, I was invited to join academic group projects with the popular students, who were also the white and richer students, but not to their parties. Yet when two popular scholar-

athlete white boys bullied the single Black girl in the “smart kid” classes, I did not stand up for her. I knew where I stood in the racial hierarchy of my high school—and America—and I didn’t want the taint of her exclusion to adhere to me. I wish I had done better then. I hope to do better now.

Let me be perfectly clear, then, about my position as a South Asian American woman writing in an academic journal in the field of communication studies vis-à-vis what McCann, Mack, and Self (2020) have called “communication’s quest for whiteness” (p. 243). They state that “the proliferation of racialized and otherwise marked bodies appearing on the pages of journals and monographs, as well as within classroom or leadership positions, reify ‘regimes of knowing that risk totalizing a field through a zero-point epistemology rooted in the logic of universality’” (p. 245). That is to say, just as Nikki Haley’s position in American politics does not prove the absence of racism in America, similarly, my explicit claim of my racialized identity on these pages does not disprove the centrality of “whiteness” to the field of communication studies. Gust Yep writes that “whiteness was, and continues to be, the standard, the ideal, and the norm in communication theory, research, and pedagogy” (2010 as cited in McCann, Mack, and Self, 2020, p. 248). But with the centering of whiteness, there is always an attendant exclusion of blackness.

The centrality of whiteness and its attendant anti-Blackness is at the foundation of American identity. As Asante (2002) notes, “the presence of a large African population in the United States from the inception of the country created, inter alia, a need for the dominant white group to distinguish itself from the black group, on the basis of color, and then permanent servitude” (p. 82). Writing in the

introductory essay of *The 1619 Project*, which memorialized the date on which Black Africans were first brought to these lands as enslaved people, Nikole Hannah-Jones (2019) makes a similar point: “No aspect of the country that would be formed here has been untouched by the years of slavery that followed” (p. 1). This presence of anti-Blackness from the inception of the country persists. She says:

[D]espite being violently denied the freedom and justice promised to all, black Americans believed fervently in the American creed. Through centuries of black resistance and protest, we have helped the country live up to its founding ideals. And not only for ourselves—black rights struggles paved the way for every other rights struggle, including women’s and gay rights, immigrant and disability rights. Without the idealistic, strenuous and patriotic efforts of black Americans, our democracy today would most likely look very different—it might not be a democracy at all. (p. 16)

Radical change demanded by and for Black Americans may, indeed, be exactly what will once more bring us closer to our ideal as a democracy. I write this after Joe Biden has been certified as the winner of the election in enough states to win the election, but Donald Trump has yet to concede and submit to a peaceful transition of power. The election of 2020 and the summer of Black Lives Matter protest that preceded it have shown that our democracy might not persist as a democracy at all. And, yes, if Greenfield is right, like writing centers, speaking centers *can* serve as agents of justice; they can serve as sites where racial justice can be enacted.

Having established the context for anti-Blackness in communication studies and communication center work, for the

remainder of this paper I will attempt to confront the absence, for the most part, of a theorized, critical engagement with Black Language. Without such a confrontation, the communication center will continue to be a racist space. In what follows, I will engage the demands of the CCCC Black Linguistic Justice Demand statement—preliminarily and incompletely—to help advance the conversation about BL in our field. The particular parts of the demands that connect to communication studies and communication center work are that:

- “teachers stop using academic language and standard English as the accepted communicative norm” (from demand #1)
- “teachers develop and teach Black Linguistic Consciousness” (from demand #4)
- “teachers stop teaching Black students to code-switch!” (from demand #2)

Each of these demands likely generates its own set of counter-arguments and resistance. I will seek to address those as well.

“Teachers stop using academic language and standard English as the accepted communicative norm”

The writers of the CCCC document demand “teachers [...] stop using academic language and standard English as the accepted communicative norm” (CCCC, 2020). As written, the demand seems unreasonable. It is! As a demand, as a rhetorical act that shares in the history of work stoppage, strike, and the disruption of things as they are, this formulation is effective. As it occupies the first position, it also carries extra power as being read as the most important. Can the writers be serious that teachers stop using WME “as the accepted communicative norm”? Perhaps

they are. The purpose of a demand is to be noticed, to interrupt.

I can imagine at least two different responses to this demand. One is outrage: how can you ask people to stop using a language? Another is shock or surprise that produces an interruption, a break in the frictionless, automatic comprehension that comes from a first read. In this space there exists the possibility of a productive response.

First, demanding that someone stop using the language they are familiar with, that they use automatically, is precisely what is asked of BL speakers when they are expected to produce WME on campus, at work, wherever. The CCCC demand puts readers—however briefly—in the position of having their placidity disrupted. It introduces friction where there may not have been any before. Second, the emphasis on “norm” reveals the privilege of WME being assumed as a frictionless vehicle that enables the communication between people. But it is not frictionless. For those who are speakers of BL, there is, at the very least, friction experienced from conforming to a norm. Worse, there could be a diminishment of their equal personhood. What I am saying is that while I cannot know if the writers of the CCCC document expect its audience to stop speaking WME, I can say that their formulation is canny: It disrupts. It interrupts the centering of WME. And disruption can be productive. In this case, the disruption opens a space and forces a reckoning with, or a recognition of, a heretofore invisible norm. Now, what do we do in the space opened up by disrupting the norm and producing a space for reckoning? The short answer is to explicitly engage with BL and theorize a relationship with it as it relates to communication studies in general and speaking center work specifically.

“Teachers develop and teach Black Linguistic Consciousness”

How do teachers develop and teach Black Linguistic Consciousness?

I include myself and the work I have done as having been equally lacking in critical engagement with Black Language and absent any idea, really, about Black Linguistic Consciousness. I want to be clear that what I’m discussing here is the absence of theoretical and critical engagement with BL. I am not discussing individual BL speakers per se. I make this distinction to affirm that not all Black Americans speak BL (some are recent immigrants, others speak WME as their only English, etc.). We would do well not to assume that all Black-identifying students speak BL. BL is an epiphenomenon of the particularities of America’s past enslavement of Black people. I am arguing that all Americans, Black or non-Black, would benefit from understanding the particular place that BL occupies in the United States.

My understanding of Black Language has been limited and limiting. I considered BL, a synonym for African American Vernacular English (AAVE), or previously, Ebonics, as a kind of English spoken by Black Americans *in* Black American communities. I recognized that this English showed up (often as cultural appropriation) outside Black communities—in entertainment, in popular culture generally—but it did not thrive in the academic world or the professional world for which I thought I was preparing my students. Yet BL scholars have argued for decades that BL is a language worthy in its own right. In fact, the CCCC issued its first statement on the issue in 1974 in the CCCC/NCTE “Students’ Right to Their Own Language Resolution.” That 1974 statement notes that “the claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an

attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans” (CCCC, 1974, p. 1).

Following Smitherman (2006) I argue that BL, in its preservation of linguistic connections to the African languages that enslaved people spoke, is a throughline to a past, a record of connection to a past that has otherwise been actively destroyed. In this way, BL has features that not only make it equal to other languages, but make it especially worthy of protection and value, and that this protection and value must accrue to it if we as a nation are to reckon with the fundamental anti-Blackness that is rooted in the nation’s inception. I am arguing that BL has a special status that has been ignored too long. We are in a moment that can end this ignorance and we, in communication studies and communication center work, are well positioned to effect this change.

Smitherman (2006) notes that BL comes out of the experience of U.S. slave descendants. “This shared experience has resulted in common speaking styles, systematic patterns of grammar, and common language practices in the Black community” (p. 3). As an immigrant, I have always had access to Gujarati. I have always been allowed to speak it to my family and use it to connect to my extended family, my ancestors. By contrast, African enslaved people were punished, sometimes unto death, for speaking their languages. Enslavers made it a point to separate those who appeared to be able to communicate with one another.

Further, Smitherman (2006) reveals the persistent traces of African languages in English despite efforts to eradicate this connection: “the tote in tote bags, from Kikongo, *tota*, meaning to carry; cola in

Coca-Cola, from Temne, *kola*; banjo from Kimbundu, *mbanza*; banana, from Wolof and Fulani” (p. 3). When these persistent traces extend beyond new vocabulary, the description of those traces reveals an anti-Black bias. As far back as 1949, Turner notes that

The English inter-dental fricative *th* does not exist in Gullah nor in the West African languages... In pronouncing English words containing this sound, both the Gullah speaker and the West African substitute [d] and [t], respectively, for the voiced and voiceless varieties of it. (Turner, 1949, cited in Smitherman, 2006, p. 16)

Here, Turner’s description of Gullah and West African speakers’ substitution of [d] and [t] for the voiceless “th” can be read as a defense. I argue that the reason he uses this example is because saying “dem” for “them” has been/is used to indicate a Black, racialized way of speaking that is also considered *less than* other ways of speaking English. For example, I substitute an “ah” sound in “tomato” because of my British upbringing. My substitution has never been a signal for my intelligence, or if it has, it has inflated it, not diminished it. My point is, those traces in BL that have preserved a connection to African languages, those traces that connect back to the languages spoken by the first Blacks to be forcibly brought to this country, are a historical record worthy of everyone’s attention. These connections to Africa were actively destroyed by enslavers, and are precisely what confirm the importance and value of BL.

I understand that BL, like other languages, will change, that these details I note here may not be what the speakers of BL eventually retain in the future. Some of the changes that BL will reflect will be the result of its exclusion and devaluation.

Additionally, I do not wish to reduce a rich field to a few details. I offer them here because I believe there is anywhere between easy ignorance (like mine!) and willful indifference to having any consciousness about BL. I am not an expert in BL, but I will venture that does not take an expert to recognize that the facts of BL are worth knowing, and that they are a record of “resistance discourse,” (Smitherman, 2006, p. 3) a discourse that we who are charged with supporting all speakers would do well to elevate and rather than exclude. If we take up this charge, we can start doing the work of Black Linguistic Justice.

I myself have not previously taken this charge, or even considered its existence. Until recently, I did not consider what the impact of including an understanding of BL in my communication work could do. But I am aware of what can happen for a student when their experience is not only tolerated, or respected, but deemed worthy of intellectual inquiry and attention. I recall sitting in my first post-colonial literature class in graduate school. As a child educated in England, I grew up learning about “the spice trade” and about India as a place where such trading occurred. It had not occurred to me before that my understanding of “the spice trade” meant I had learned about the East India company, but never about the Indians who sold or grew or transported those spices. Up until that first class, it had never occurred to me that my education had failed me, that it failed to make me aware of the worth of my own experience. I entered graduate school as an aspiring Shakespearean—just as my British education might have predicted. That class on post-colonial literature changed my understanding of my place in the world forever.

This semester, I taught two chapters from Baker-Bell’s *Linguistic Justice* (2020)

in class. A student reported that he was shocked “that how I speak at home was being talked about in class.” I am excited to discover what careful attention to Black Linguistic Justice can do for all my students.

Do we “disadvantage” Black students when we raise consciousness about Black Linguistic Justice? Addressing a counter-argument

Writing a position piece for the conservative leaning James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, Matthew Stewart (2020) articulates the counter-arguments for much of what I say here in “Disadvantaging Black Students with a Demand for ‘Linguistic Justice.’” His title masks outrage in the language of concern for Black students. I’ll return to outrage later. I have articulated my position that BL deserves special attention. Stewart (2020) argues that BL is excluded because it is “nonstandard,” like many other types of Englishes, not because it is “substandard” (para. 10). He makes two moves here. First, he rightfully disagrees with the idea that BL is *less than* in some way. Here, he agrees with Michael Eric Dyson, a critic with whom I doubt Stewart has much other agreement. Dyson notes, “Every conversation about Black speech is a conversation about Black intelligence and ultimately Black humanity” (Dyson, 2009, cited in Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 11). Dyson leaves unsaid the cruel truth that Black Language has been used in the conversation about Black intelligence because BL has been used to signal *lower* intelligence.

The tautology is damning. BL is excluded from education, from academe, because it doesn’t belong in educational contexts, and because it is excluded from educational contexts, its absence proves its distance from the signals that indicate a person is educated. Indeed, Stewart (2020)

states that “one can appreciate that dialects and vernacular usage have long been wrongly associated with a lack of intelligence or taken as signs of coming from an inferior culture. Black English speakers have suffered a particular burden in this regard” (para. 22). He follows, however, with this statement: “But they are hardly alone” (para. 22). This is his second move. He flattens the particular harm endured by Black American speakers of BL to presumably analogous harms suffered by those whose other Englishes keep them from access to social goods. Baker-Bell makes it clear that speakers of BL are not just kept from social goods, they live in mortal danger (2020). Yes, others, like poor whites or Southerners with a drawl, “have long been associated with a lack of intelligence” (Stewart, 2020, para. 22). Still, this taint of a lack of intelligence does not also confirm a basic indifference to violence that can extinguish and kill, a violence with which Black Americans continue to live.

Let me be clear. It is wrong that poor whites are ascribed a lack of intelligence, a lack that is signaled by their non-standard English. I do not question Stewart on that. However, raising their harm in this argument, to draw the reader’s attention away from the specific harm that Black Americans face, rhetorically enacts “what-about-ism.” “What-about-ism” enables a deft substitution of attention on one harm to another. Yes, the other harm is wrong. But looking at that other harm in this moment stops further engagement with the specific harm being brought to the reader’s attention. What the protests this summer confirmed—for non-Blacks, at least (Black Americans never needed confirmation)—is that Black Americans live lives of heightened danger in this country, lives lacking equal justice as human beings. Looking at the harm that poor whites face (one of the examples that

Stewart uses) does not help us reckon with the harm that Black Americans face. Worse, it permits a collective denial that enables such violence to persist.

In case the charge of collective denial seems abstract to the work of communication centers, I’d like to address the denial about the perceived inferiority of speakers of BL in the tutor/student relationship. The example that follows comes from writing center research, but I would venture the findings hold for speaking centers, too. The differential attitudes toward Black students—when they speak in a non-standard way—and English Language Learners—when they speak in a non-standard way—underscores why Stewart’s efforts to eliminate the taint of the substandard to BL is wrong. In her study of tutor attitudes towards errors in writing, Wilson (2011) found that

AAL [African American Language, or BL] markers became indicators of some fundamental flaw in the writer. For example, in the survey, tutors wrote of AAL sentences, “This sounds like a two year old talking,” and “This sentence appears childish and unprofessional.” In contrast, when respondents sensed the writer was an English Language Learner (ELL), both faculty members and students were forgiving of any deviation from Edited American English (EAE). Clearly the issue was not simply with the English used, but the individuals associated with that English variety. (p. 178)

Speakers of BL don’t just speak nonstandard English, their nonstandard English carries a burden that diminishes their humanity. Wilson goes as far as to say that BL’s “stigmatization has been proven so often that further research would seem to be moot at this point” (p. 180).

The analog, of course, expecting WME in a written academic paper, is very similar to expecting WME in an oral presentation in the communication center. The comparison is not exact, however—and the difference is worth noting. In a writing appointment, whatever your manner of speaking, what is written on the page is the object that receives the “treatment” provided by the student-educator in the writing center. There is some space between the physical person and what is on the page. Further, the time that the tutor takes to read the paper (if the practice is to read during the meeting) creates a distance between the paper that seeks improvement and the writer who wrote it.

Cuny (2018) calls for “connecting with speakers nonverbally and verbally when they [enter] our main door” (p. 41). It is reasonable to make the space of the communication center feel comfortable and friendly. Yet this desire for comfort and friendliness is not neutral. I want to be clear that I am not advocating for a change to this recommendation that speakers be greeted, but to examine what is at stake when they are. After all, a greeting calls for an answer. For the Black student who has multiple forms of English fluency, that student has to engage in a speech act immediately. They have to decide how they will answer the greeting. As soon as they do, they have to make the decision to conform to the expectations of WME or delay conforming with a non-verbal response. The stress of the engagement is immediate. Or, the use of WME is so internalized that its use is automatic. In either case, BL will most likely be absent.

Engaging in friendly conversation can, for Black students who speak BL, require a quick decision, conscious or conditioned, to conform to the prevailing norms of WME. This decision will impact

the kind of language the student will use in their presentation. After all, when we seek to support “effective presentation skills,” we do not often expose these skills as consistent with and upholding WME. We will not notice that BL is absent. We will not know that we contributed to its absence.

“Teachers stop teaching Black students to code-switch!”

Do teachers teach students to “code-switch”? If they do, why should they stop?

The claim that Black students “who do not learn Standard English will be at a disadvantage” (Stewart, 2020, para. 13) once again depends on centering WME as the norm. I have already discussed this penchant for centering. But there is more. I would argue that Black and non-Black students are at a disadvantage when the “norm”-ing of WME and the exclusion of BL are accepted and ignored. There is something important to be gained by students leaving our campuses with a fuller, more critical understanding of what it means to speak WME—or choose not to—and to include a critical engagement with BL in the discussion about WME. Stewart’s argument depends on understanding WME as a fixed entity. But all language changes. Frankly, as a nation, as a discipline, as practitioners who teach speech in our centers and classrooms, we have not committed to critically examining the norming of WME *with* an attendant attention to critically engaging BL. What could it mean for our BL speakers to have their language be deemed worthy of inquiry and engagement? What would it contribute to an understanding of the fuller story of America for all students, for the discipline, to acknowledge the importance of BL? The “slippage of instruction” that Stewart fears is possible only if we fail to engage the questions above.

Kendi (2019) defines an assimilationist as “one who is expressing the racist idea that a racial group is culturally or behaviorally inferior and is supporting cultural or behavioral enrichment programs to develop that racial group” (p. 24). Most of us involved in communication center work, myself included, can easily state that they do not express “the racist idea that a racial group is culturally or behaviorally inferior.” However, to what extent does communication center pedagogy support “cultural or behavioral enrichment programs to develop that racial group”? Here I wish to consider that when we support “effective speaking skills” independent of engaging Black Linguistic Justice, we contribute to an assimilationist practice. Of course, it goes almost without saying that the one way WME is democratizing is that it assimilates all languages that are not it—the Spanish, the accented English, the other primary languages that speakers who come to the threshold of the communication center bring with them. Those other forms of assimilation are beyond the scope of this paper.

In *Difference Matters*, Brenda J. Allen (2011) explains that “to ‘fit into’ dominant contexts, members of nondominant groups may engage in *code switching*, or adapting their speech to standard English-speaking norms. When nondominant group members do not adapt, power dynamics can become visible” (p. 36). What’s important to note is that the power dynamic is almost always unidirectional. The codes being switched between are not equal, they are hierarchical. The psychic cost is paid by the non-dominant group member. Allen continues, “most organization members accept dominant ideologies and enact/reproduce them in everyday interactions until they become so embedded that they are invisible,

and taken for granted” (p. 36). From Allen’s statement that dominant ideologies become “invisible,” I seek to make visible how this domination occurs in communication center praxis.

I have been aware of code-switching and, indeed, practice it myself when I talk one way to my immigrant parents and another when I speak on campus in my professional life. I concede that “code-switching” itself may be an inadequate term when describing what speakers of BL do. (See Young, 2010 for a discussion of “code-meshing” instead.) In my classroom practice, I am explicit and transparent with my students who enter the classroom from language backgrounds that differ from WME. I tell them that our world does not yet accept our different ways of speaking as equal, but that this way, this academic way, has been the standard code of power. I believed that having access to this code conferred power and that the more this code was democratized and made available to people of color, the less it could be called a white code. I felt I was following Lisa Delpit’s (1995) recommendation in her now classic book *Other People’s Children* that the “codes of power” (p. xvi) be made available to Black students, and immigrant students, and poor students, and anyone who does not arrive at school speaking WME. I also felt that giving students access to learn the code and to give them the choice to use it or not later—after my class, outside my class—gave them agency. My attitude towards WME—as a necessary, interim step, towards increased agency—meant that I ignored the privileged position of WME. I transferred this perspective to my communication center work.

I think what might be necessary is radical transparency. On the one hand, Stewart (2020) assumes that teaching code-switching will disadvantage BL speakers

when they enter a world that expects WME. He assumes that of the readers of the CCCC statement, “a substantial percentage will remain on their current instructional track, which is essentially progressive by ordinary, non-woke standards. That is, they will continue to recognize the viability of Black English in black students’ lives but retain their belief that all students benefit from learning Standard English” (para. 20). On the other hand, the authors of the CCCC statement demand that “teachers stop teaching Black students to code-switch.” There is a narrow but necessary and productive path between these two positions. If we recognize the viability of BL without inviting it inside our classrooms and into our centers, we will persist in centering WME.

I believe that we don’t yet know what the result might be of authentically engaging Black Linguistic Justice and making our students and campuses aware of what it means that WME has been centered, what it means to know the value and special place that BL holds in our understanding of America. As I said at the beginning of this paper, my goal is not to make prescriptions for individual tutor/student interactions. My goal is to invite an engagement with the ideas with which the writers of the CCCC demand statement are asking us to reckon.

Still, I offer one caveat to illustrate how easily our practice in speaker centers might exclude BL. Cuny (2018) argues for the importance of “taking a *guide from the side perspective*” (p. 40) to facilitate learning in the speaking center. I agree that this will continue to be an important element. However, if we are to truly embrace Black Linguistic Justice, we will likely also have to mobilize the power of the speaking center as a place for radical change and justice as Greenfield suggests. This may mean that directors and staff engage in difficult conversations, conversations that

our tutors should not feel obliged to have alone (K. Lindgren, personal communication, November 5, 2020).

Conclusion

I’m writing these final words shortly after the world learned that Chadwick Boseman, the actor who played the title role in the blockbuster film *Black Panther*, had died of colon cancer. He was asked in an interview why he pushed to have his character speak with an African accent. He said:

There’s no way he would speak with a European accent. If I did that, I would be conveying a white supremacist idea of what being educated is and what being royal or presidential is. Because it’s not just about him running around fighting. He’s the ruler of a nation. And if he’s the ruler of a nation, he has to speak to his people. He has to galvanize his people. And there’s no way I could speak to my people, who have never been conquered by Europeans, with a European voice. (Guglielmo, 2020, para. 28-30, italics mine)

Boseman, in his acting choice to speak with a specifically African accent, was enacting Black Linguistic Justice. He understood the importance of hearing African sounds in an American movie. He understood that such a choice could command respect and be heard by Black children in America, and that this would make a difference to them. Boseman wanted America to hear Black intelligence, Black leadership, in a voice that was not WME.

I began this paper with a reference to the lie that Baker-Bell exposes: that speaking WME confers respect on Black bodies. Just yesterday, on November 21, 2020, on Fox News, Tucker Carlson criticized reporting by MSNBC contributor and PBS White House correspondent

Yamiche Alcindor, a Black-appearing woman, by attacking her as a “correspondent who can’t speak in a grammatically correct sentence” (Welk, 2020, para. 4). After watching the clip of Alcindor’s reporting and reading a transcript of it, I was unable to locate any grammatical errors. However, I would argue that the presence or absence of grammatical errors is beside the point. Carlson, in his insult, depends on an assumed conflation between Black speakers, BL, and the stigmatization of BL. That is, he knows that his audience assumes that Black-appearing speakers use BL. He also knows that they share his assumption that BL indicates lower intelligence, less humanity, and that this subhumanness means that Black Americans, and their ideas, their intelligence, their basic humanity, can be dismissed. His comments are a disgrace.

Toni Morrison (2019) said that “the function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work” (para. 6). What is the work of the communication center when there is so much anti-Blackness and racism in our world? I don’t imagine that my suggestions above will stop police killings of Black people in this country. However, Black Linguistic Justice demands that we become protectors and value-ers of Black Language, not another space where it is excluded without thought, and where its *absence* has otherwise been expected, even demanded. The devaluation of BL is everywhere, even when BL is not present but simply assumed to be so because of the appearance of the speaker! Here, our work in communication centers can make a difference. We can interrupt such devaluation with respect towards and inquiry into BL. We can, and we must.

References

- Allen, B. J. (2011). *Difference matters: Communicating social identity* (2nd ed.). Waveland Press.
- Anderson, G. (2020, November 13). Haverford College students end strike. *Inside Higher Ed*.
<https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2020/11/13/haverford-college-students-end-strike>
- Asante, M. K. (2002). Language and agency in the transformation of American identity. In W. F. Eadie & P. E. Nelson (Eds.), *The changing conversation in America: Lectures from the Smithsonian* (pp. 77–89). Sage.
<http://doi.org/10.4135/9781452229195>
- Baker-Bell, A. (2020). *Linguistic justice: Black language, literacy, identity, and pedagogy*. Routledge.
- Conference on College Composition & Communication. (1974). Students’ right to their own language. *College Composition and Communication*, 25(3).
<https://prod-nctecd.azureedge.net/nctefiles/groups/cccc/newsrtol.pdf>
- Conference on College Composition & Communication. (2020, July). *This ain’t another statement! This is a demand for black linguistic justice!*
<https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/demand-for-black-linguistic-justice>
- Cuny, K. M. (2018). A case study of outside events verses the thriving speaking center. *Communication Center Journal*, 4(1), 39–47.
<http://libjournal.uncg.edu/ccj/article/view/1728>
- Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people’s children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New Press.
- Fong, B. Y. (2020, November 18). Teaching racial justice isn’t racial justice. *New*

- York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/18/opinion/college-antiracism-teaching.html>
- Graham, D. A., Green, A., Murphy, C., & Richards, P. (2019, June). An oral history of Trump's bigotry. *The Atlantic*.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/06/trump-racism-comments/588067/>
- Greenfield, L. (2019). *Radical writing center praxis: A paradigm for ethical political engagement*. Utah State University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.7330/9781607328445>
- Guglielmo, C. (2020, August 29). Black Panther rules Marvel's world. Literally. *CNET*.
<https://www.cnet.com/features/black-panther-chadwick-boseman-marvel-king-of-wakanda/>
- Hannah-Jones, N. (2019, August 18). The 1619 project. *New York Times Magazine*.
https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/full_issue_of_the_1619_project.pdf
- Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. One World.
- McCann, B. J., Mack, A. N., & Self, R. (2020). Communication's quest for whiteness: The racial politics of disciplinary legitimacy. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 17(2), 243–252.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2020.1770822>
- Morrison, T. (2019, August 6). 12 of Toni Morrison's most memorable quotes. *New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/06/books/toni-morrison-quotes.html>
- ross, k. m. (2020, June 4). Call it what it is: Anti-Blackness. *New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/04/opinion/george-floyd-anti-blackness.html>
- Smitherman, G. (2006). *Word from the mother: Language and African Americans*. Routledge.
- Stewart, M. (2020, October 9). Disadvantaging Black students with a demand for 'Linguistic Justice'. *The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal*.
<https://www.jamesgmartin.center/2020/10/disadvantaging-black-students-with-a-demand-for-linguistic-justice/>
- Welk, B. (2020, November 21). MSNBC contributor Yamiche Alcindor claps back at Tucker Carlson's "baseless" bad grammar claim. *The Wrap*.
<https://www.thewrap.com/msnbc-yamiche-alcindor-tucker-carlson-grammar-claim-video/>
- Wilson, N. E. (2011). Bias in the writing center: Tutor perceptions of African American language. In L. Greenfield & K. Rowan (Eds.), *Writing centers and the new racism: A call for sustainable dialogue and change* (pp. 177–191). Utah State University Press.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt4cgk6s.12>
- Young, V. A. (2010). Should writer's use they own English? *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12(1), 110–117.
<https://doi.org/10.17077/2168-569X.1095>