4

"SCOFF NO MORE"

I titled this chapter "Scoff No More" because it is a direct response to the point Carter G. Woodson made in 1933 about Black students being taught to despise their mother tongue instead of learning about it and Geneva Smitherman's call for critical language awareness.

> In the study of language in school pupils were made to scoff at the Negro dialect as some peculiar possession of the Negro which they should despise rather than directed to study the background of this language as a broken down African tongue—in short to understand their own linguistic history, which is certainly more important for them than the study of French Pho netics or Historical Spanish Grammar.
>
> *(Woodson, 1933, p. 10)*

> Critical Language Awareness pedagogy seeks to develop in students a critical consciousness about language, power, and society. It seeks to heighten their awareness of the stakes involved in language attitude and policies of cor rectness and strives to impart knowledge about their own language, its social and linguistic rules, its history and cultural connection. Instead of just accepting language as a gate keeping check on race and ethnicity, instead of capitulating to "that's just the way things are," … Critical Language Aware ness pedagogy helps students examine and account for why things are the way they are.
>
> *(Smitherman, 2017, p. 10)*

In the spirit of linguistic justice, this chapter shows the praxis of the Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy, specifically illustrating how I used critical consciousness raising to

help the students at Leadership Academy (LA) challenge, interrogate, unlearn, and work toward dismantling Anti Black Linguistic Racism. Chapter 4 has two major functions. As a resource for language and literacy educators, this chapter illuminates what an Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy looks like on the ground (aka in the classroom). For language and literacy researchers, it illuminates how theory, research, and practice can operate in tandem in pursuit of linguistic and racial justice. This chapter also offers ethnographic snapshots of how Black students responded to some of the Black Language Artifacts that comprised the Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy. As you read this chapter, I ask you to consider the following questions: Why is it pivotal for Black students to learn about their own linguistic backgrounds? In what ways are the students beginning to critically interrogate and consistently resist white linguistic hegemony and Anti Black Linguistic Racism?

The sections that follow are divided by Black Language Artifacts 2–7. Under each artifact, I provide a background component that explains information that foregrounds each artifact. Next, I provide a description of the artifacts and include an ethnographic snapshot (when available) that reveals how the students at LA responded to the various topics. I also include materials (worksheets, resources, links, etc.) that I used to engage the students.

"I Never Knew the History Behind Black Language": The Historical Underpinnings of Black Language Matters

Background

Five hundred years ago, European enslavers and African middlemen raided vil lages and homes in various parts of Africa to abduct African people for the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In addition to kidnapping, beating, abusing, and sexu ally exploiting African people, enslavers used *language planning* as a tool to separate captive Africans who spoke the same language as a way to minimize rebellion (Baugh, 2015). Women, men, and children were separated from their loved ones and loaded onto slave ships leaving behind their freedom, their humanity, their homelands, their families, their cultural traditions, and their languages. After a traumatic journey from West Africa to the New World, enslaved Africans who survived the Middle Passage arrived to the Caribbean, the Americas, and various parts of Europe chained together, without a shared language to communicate with one another, or the ability to communicate in their oppressor's language (Baugh, 2015). In her book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Free dom*, hooks (1994) thinks about the trauma enslaved Africans must have felt about the loss of their language and the terrifying sound of the English language:

> I think now of the grief of displaced "homeless" Africans, forced to inhabit a world where they saw folks like themselves, inhabiting the same skin, the same condition, but who had no shared language to talk with one another,

> who needed the oppressor's language … When I imagine the terror of Africans on board slave ships, on auction blocks, inhabiting the unfamiliar architecture of plantations, consider that this terror extended beyond fear of punishment, that it resided also in the anguish of hearing a language they could not comprehend.
>
> *(hooks, 1994, p. 169)*

In addition to linguistic isolation, enslaved Africans who were dispersed in the United States were intentionally denied access to literacy by law. Still, they needed to learn the language of the land to help build the physical, cultural, and intellectual foundations of this nation (Thomas, 2018). Despite losing contact with their native language and it being illegal to teach them to read and write, enslaved Africans created a language out of remnants of their mother tongues and pieces and parts of the English language. This language not only provided a way for enslaved Africans to communicate among each other, but it also provided the means of communication that could not be fully understood by their oppressors (Baldwin, 1979). Fast forward to today, Black Americans are being penalized for using the counter language that their ancestors were forced to create instead of White Mainstream English, the language of conquest and domination (hooks, 1994; Baugh, 2015).

As hooks points out, an "unbroken connection exists between the broken English of the displaced, enslaved African and the diverse Black vernacular speech Black folks use today" (hooks, 1994, p. 171). Yet, as Woodson noted in 1933, this connection and linguistic history is not typically included in the language education that Black students, or any student, receive in school. Smitherman (2006) argues that:

> [The] lack of knowledge about our history … is at the root of the problem of miseducation of Black youth today. They have no sense of their role and purpose in history, no understanding of where they came from, and conse quently, no vision for where they're going.
>
> *(Smitherman, 2006, p. 143)*

Learning about the history of Black Language matters! Within broader discussions about enslavement, there is not much discussion about language. By ignoring this deep connection, we are not only contributing to the miseducation of Black students, but we are also contributing to an oppressive structure that serves as the catalyst to the erasure of Black linguistic history.

Black Language Artifact 2: Language, History, and Culture

Black Language Artifact 2 was created in response to Woodson's 87 year old call to teach Black kids about the history of their native language. In this section, I

illustrate how I translated the linguistic history underpinning Black Language into a learning experience that was accessible to the students at LA. I also provide ethnographic snapshots of how the students responded to the artifact. Before jumping into the activity, the students and I reflected on their responses to the attitudinal assessment that they completed under Black Language Artifact #1, and we discussed their background knowledge about Black Language.

> "How many of you know that language sample A is an actual language?" I asked.
>
> Many of the students nodded in response to my question.
>
> "Do you know the name of the language?" I asked.
>
> "Slang," a few of the students said in unison.
>
> "Well … slang is not a language. Slang is almost like a style of speaking that is generational or goes in and out of style. Whereas a language is a rule based linguistic system," I replied. "We will complete an activity in a few days that will help us explore this further. Does anyone else know what the name for language sample A is?" I asked.
>
> "Ebonics," Fetti blurted.
>
> "Ebonics! That's right," I responded.
>
> "Didn't Ebonics come from slaves?" Fetti asked.

What is striking about my discussion with the students is that it reveals that only one student actually knew the name for his native language—though it has roots as deep and grammar as consistent as Scottish English, Irish English, and other world Englishes (Baugh, 2015), and it was once the most studied and written about variety of English in the world (Gilyard, 2005).

Our discussion made for an organic segue way into the inquiry based activity I developed to immerse the students in a language study that examined the historical underpinnings of Black Language. As seen in Figure 4.1, the worksheet was a conversation about the history of Black Language, and it included three characters that were designed to contribute a specific point of view to the discussion. For example, the first character in Figure 4.1 states, "But Black Language seems unprofessional, ghetto, and uneducated in comparison to White Mainstream English?" This character represents the uniformed perspective of Black Language typically held by the general public and was initially held by the students at LA. The second character in the conversation was created to interrogate dominant assumptions about language. That character questions, "Why is Black Language always treated as if it is the 'good for nothing' cousin of the English language—as if it has no rules, and is substandard to White Mainstream English? Isn't Black Language linked to the enslavement of African people? We hardly ever talk about the history of Black Language or its richness and how it reflects the ingenuity on the part of enslaved Africans." The third character in the conversation was positioned as the knowledge holder that provided an informed

perspective about Black Language's linguistic history, which I included in the background section above. Finally, the worksheet includes a blank section that provides space for the students to contribute their ideas, thoughts, and perspec tives to the conversation.

The students responded to this activity in a variety of ways. Most of them were bewildered after learning about the rich history of Black Language. The most common response to the activity was "I never knew that Black Language was a mixture of Black English and White Mainstream English." Other students such as Lola questioned "why people don't let us use Black Language?" Allistar com mented "I did not know we spoke like that. I think the language should be preserved because this language helped us form American culture."

Following our discussion about the activity, I provided the students with addi tional historical context about Black Language. In particular, we discussed language planning, the origins of Black Language, and coded spirituals. I discuss each of these topics more in detail in the section below, and I include the supplemental resources I used to provide the students with an extensive understanding of the topic.

Language Planning

I began discussing language planning by explaining how the institution of slavery would not have been successful without language planning. Baldwin states "If two black people, at that bitter hour of the world's history, had been able to speak to each other, the institution of chattel slavery could never have lasted as long as it did" (p. 1). I used John Baugh's (2015) article *Use and misuse speech diagnostics for African American students* to provide the students with an in depth understanding of the function of language planning during enslavement. Baugh explains that:

> slave traders routinely separated slaves by language whenever possible upon capture. This practice of isolating recent captives who shared a common language was intended to minimize uprisings; if [enslaved Africans] had a harder time communicating, they were less likely to be able to organize revolts. This form of "language planning" was intended to isolate the enslaved African captives from the language(s) they knew and used. More over, this linguistic isolation began in West Africa prior to the Atlantic crossing, and as a result of these efforts, no African language survived the Atlantic crossing completely intact.

I then prompted students to think about how enslaved Africans were thrust into a linguistic situation where they lost their relationship with their native language but had to learn the English language. The students were eager to know how enslaved Africans developed Black Language if they did not know the English language and were linguistically separated as a result of language planning. This led to a discussion about the origins of Black Language.

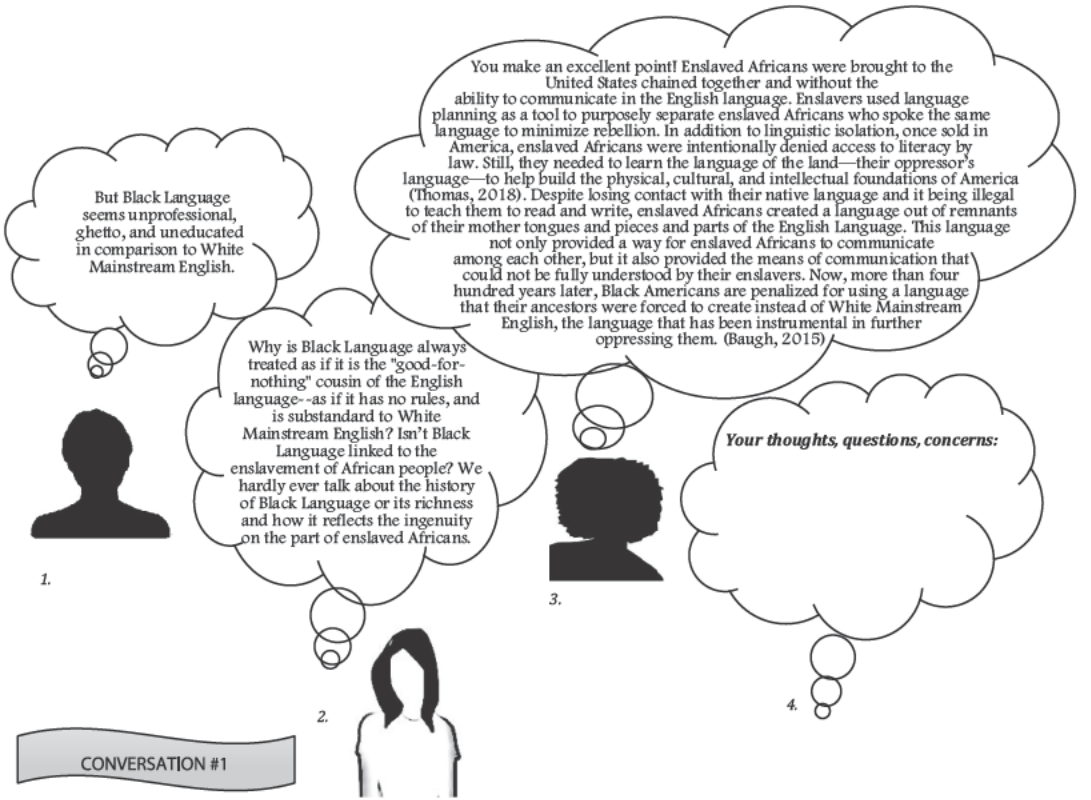

FIGURE 4.1 Conversation about Black Language Worksheet #1

Origins of Black Language

To begin our discussion about how enslaved Africans developed their own language, I used Lisa Green's (2002) book *African American English* to provide the students with historical accounts of the development and origins of Black Language. We began the conversation by discussing how some linguists believe that Black Language is a hybrid of English and West African Languages. According to Green (2002):

> Some historical accounts of the development of AAE [or African American English] have taken the position that the distinctive patterns of AAE are those which also occur in Niger Congo languages such as Kikongo, Mande, and Kwa. In effect, the view is that AAE is structurally related to West African languages.
>
> *(Green, 2002, pp. 8–9)*

Smitherman (2006) confirms this when she states, "a dominant African linguistic presence survived in the African style of speaking; in other words, using English words with an African linguistic FLAVA" (p. 19). I build on this discussion by having students watch a short clip from the 2005 documentary *We Speak Amer ican*. [1] In the clip, linguist John Baugh explains the practice of language planning and the early origins of what we now call Black Language.

After we watched the clip, many of the students were curious about how enslaved Africans cultivated Black Language, especially in the face of enslavement. To explore their curiosities, I had the students come up with their own theories about how the language evolved. We then read a few pages from the introduc tion to Smitherman's (1994) Black dictionary, *Black Talk*. I used the reading to emphasize Smitherman's salient point about the Black church and Black music being two significant forces that have nurtured and preserved African cultural traditions. Baldwin (1979) explains that enslaved Africans "began the formation of the Black church, and it is within this unprecedented tabernacle that Black Eng lish began to be formed" (p. 1) Indeed, the Black church functioned as a social and religious unit that "has stood as a rich reservoir of terms and expressions in Black Language … [because] it has not had to capitulate to the sociocultural pressure of Eurocentric culture and the language of white folk" (Smitherman, 1994, pp. 22–23). We also discussed Smitherman's insight about Black music being a major force in the formation and development of words and phrases within the Black speech community. We had an opportunity to explore this insight more when we discussed coded negro spirituals.

A Counter-language

After discussing the origins and development, I had the students read bell hooks' chapter titled "Language: Teaching New Worlds/ New Words" from her book

Teaching to Transgress to give them perspective about how traumatic and dehu manizing the practice of language planning and its aftermath was for enslaved Africans. The chapter also helped the students understand how enslaved Africans reinvented and remade the English language to speak beyond the boundaries of conquest and domination. hooks (1994) explains:

> In the mouths of Black Africans in the so called "New World," English was altered, transformed and became a different speech. Enslaved Black people took broken bits of English and made of them a counter language. They put together their words in such a way that the colonizer had to rethink the meaning of the English Language. Though it has become common in con temporary culture to talk about the messages of resistance that emerged in the music created by [enslaved Africans], particularly spirituals, less is said about the grammatical structure of sentences in these songs. Often, the English used in the song reflected the broken, ruptured word of the slave.
>
> *(hooks, 1994, p. 170)*

This passage allowed for me to show the students how Black Language functions as a counter language that allows the communication of simultaneous double meanings. To back this up, I had the students read and interpret the coded negro spirituals *Wade in the Water, Swing Low Sweet Chariot,* and *Steal Away to Jesus* to make sense of how the covert messages were being passed through spirituals to facilitate escape.

Following this activity, we watched a short clip on coded spirituals.[2] The clip, narrated by author and public historian Rev. Velma Maia Thomas, breaks down some of the coded messages represented in the spirituals. For example, she explains how the coded spiritual *Wade in the Water* contained hidden meanings that signaled to escaping enslaved Africans to get off the trail and into the water so that the dogs used by enslavers could not pick up on their scent. hooks (1994) posits:

> even as emancipated Black people sang spirituals, they did not change the language … of our ancestors. For the incorrect usage of words, in the incorrect placement of words, was a spirit of rebellion that claimed language as a site of resistance.
>
> *(hooks, 1994, p. 70)*

I also included the following passage from James Baldwin's (1979) *New York Times* article to help us think more about language as a site of rebellion:

> There was a moment, in time, and in this place, when my brother, or my mother, or my father, or my sister, had to convey to me, for example, the danger in which I was standing from the white man standing just behind me, and to convey this with a speed, and in a language, that the white man could

> not possibly understand, and that, indeed, he cannot understand, until today. He cannot afford to understand it. This understanding would reveal to him too much about himself, and smash that mirror before which he has been frozen for so long.

This passage from Baldwin helped us think more deeply about why it was necessary for Black Language to be a linguistic survival strategy and how it was a tool for enslaved Africans and their descendants to resist, rebel, and reclaim their power in the context of domination.

"Ebonically Speaking": An Antiracist Approach to Teaching the Grammatical and Rhetorical Underpinnings of Black Language

Background

Black Language is a complicated linguistic system that "crosses boundaries of age, gender, region, religion, and social class" (Smitherman, 1994, p. 1), and it is spoken by millions of Black people in the U.S. Though Black Language is viewed as a symbol of linguistic and intellectual inferiority and is devalued, despised, and rejected in many classrooms, communities, and sometimes in the context of home, like "every naturally used language, Black Language is sys tematic with regular rules and restrictions at the lexical, phonological and gram matical level" (Rickford, 2002, p. 1). As discussed previously, Black Language is not merely "a set of deviations from the 'standard'" that can be classified as solely slang or street talk. Just like the slang in every language, Black slang is transitory and represents the new and short lived vocabulary of Black Language. For example, the word *drip*, as in *his outfit is full of drip*, is a slang item in Black Lan guage used among younger generations. Smitherman (1994) posits that "Black slang is Black Language, but all Black Language is not Black slang" (p. 2). In fact, Black Language encompasses words (*ashy*), distinctive patterns of pronunciation (*mah/my*), and grammar that are more systematic (*They be at home),* deeply rooted, and stable over time. In addition to its grammar, meaning, and sound, Black Language is unique for its rich rhetorical style. Features such as signifyin', semantic inversion, and call & response are a few examples of the Black cultural modes of discourse that have survived for generations in the Black community.

Though linguists have produced detailed accounts of the pronunciation and grammatical system of Black Language since at least the 1960s (Rickford & Rickford, 2000), Black children are often not formally taught the linguistic fea tures of their own language in the context of school. It is well known within multilingual education that literacy development and language learning should not happen at the expense of the loss of one's mother tongue. Black students are not exempt from this theory although they are often excluded from it. Undoubtedly, there are numerous examples of Black students' linguistic features

being viewed from a deficit perspective with the goal to eradicate it and replace it with White Mainstream English. However, Smitherman (2017) argues:

> Students will end up being mis educated about language if they aren't taught that all human languages and language varieties (yes, even African American Language and Arabic!) have inherent grammatical patterns and are systematic and rule governed. Even though humans are "born to speak," that is, lan guage is a part of human beings' genetic make up, they are not born speak ing a particular Language.
>
> *(Smitherman, 2017, p. 6)*

In the section below, I describe how I used a critical and cultural approach to teach the students at LA the rules of our native tongue.

Black Language Artifact 3: Study of the Grammatical and Rhetorical Features of Black Language

Black Language Artifact 3 was created in the spirit of putting the linguistic knowledge back in the hands of the linguistic community that owns it. In other words, what good is linguistic research on Black Language if it is not reaching the community it is intended to serve? In the face of Anti Black Linguistic Racism, it is not only necessary for Black students to know that they are communicating in a valid linguistic system, but it is just as important for them to be able to pinpoint and name the features of their own linguistic system. As seen in Figure 4.2, the language instruction began with the students engaging in an inquiry based activ ity I developed to immerse them in a conversation about the grammatical struc ture and rhetorical features of the language.

The students' responses to this activity revealed so much about their previous language education. Lola wrote the following comment on her sheet: "I did not know it was good definitions to Black Language. I always thought it was bad." Chasse wrote: "I never knew that it was legitimate. I also didn't know that it was connected with a history of oppression." Other comments included: "I thought the way African Americans talked could be considered street talk or slang, but I also noticed that different races used this type of language also." The students' comments illustrate that Black Language is not acknowledged as a valid, rule based linguistic system in their curriculum nor is it treated as a linguistic resource that is necessary for their language and literacy development, to maintain rela tionships with family and community, to feel assured in their sense of self, or to express their identity.

When discussing the features of Black Language, I was careful not to reinforce culturally irresponsible approaches to language instruction by treating the students at LA as if they were not experts of their native language. They use the language everyday just like me; therefore, I wanted our study of the grammatical and

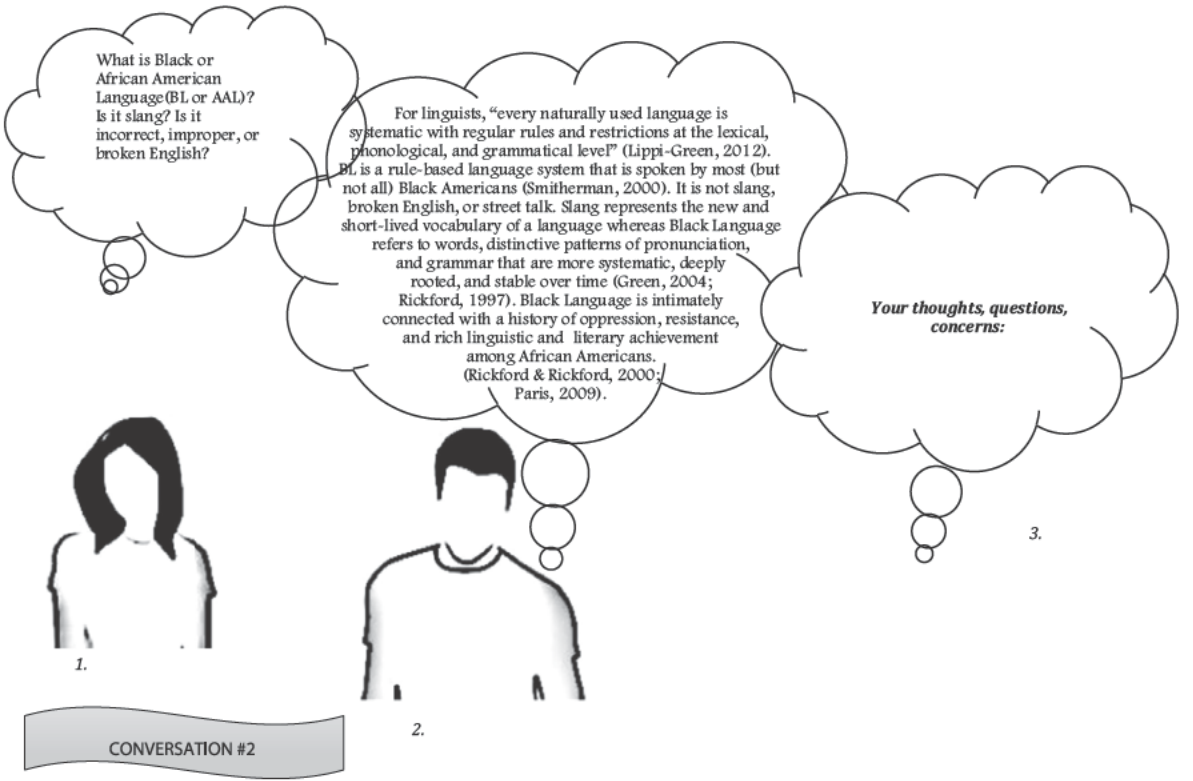

FIGURE 4.2 Conversation About Black Language Worksheet #2

rhetorical features to reflect our collective knowledge. To begin our language study, I displayed the features shown in Figure 4.3 on the projector screen which included patterns of Black Language and terminology that is typically used by linguists to describe those patterns. For each feature, we discussed its function, meaning, and a speaker's intention for using it. I include a snapshot of our dis cussion in the section below.

"I want to remind you all that we are not discussing these features because they are wrong. Just like there are rules and structure to languages like Spanish and French, there are rules to Black Language. There is a right and wrong way to use Black Language too," I said as the students' eyes were fixated on the projector screen.

"These are not all of the rules, but just some of the features to get us talking about the structure of the language. So let's look at the first sen tence," I said as I pointed at the screen.

"*Habitual Be* is a pattern in Black Language. We *be* at Rouge Park hoopin' on Saturdays. What does the verb 'be' mean in this sentence?" I asked the students.

"It means that's what you do," I heard a voice from the back of the room say.

"But on the real Ms. Baker Bell, don't nobody be hoopin at Rouge Park[3] no more," Fetti said.

(We all laughed.)

"I know. I know," I laughed. "They did back in my day, though."

"But, why is the *'be'* there," I asked the students again.

"It's like … it happens on a regular basis. They play at Rouge all the time on Saturdays," Allistar responded.

"So what happens if we change the verb *'be'* in the sentence to *'are'* as in 'We are at Rouge hoopin,'" I questioned.

"Then it means you are there hoopin right now.," Janel suggested.

"Okay what changed about the sentence," I said.

"It's no longer something you do all the time," Lola answered.

"Right, so this feature is important because …" Before I could finish, Chasse cut me off and said, "It is needed to explain when you are always doing something."

"Exactly! So let's look at the sentence under zero copula. It says, '*You right about that*.' Let's look at it and see what's goin on with it," I said.

"In White Mainstream English, you'd be expected to say 'You *ARE* right about that,'" Janel responded. (Emphasis hers)

"Right, but in Black Language it's perfectly fine to not use the '*are*,'" I said. "It communicates the same message, right? Remember what Baldwin said about Black Language? One of its functions is to communicate a message with speed."

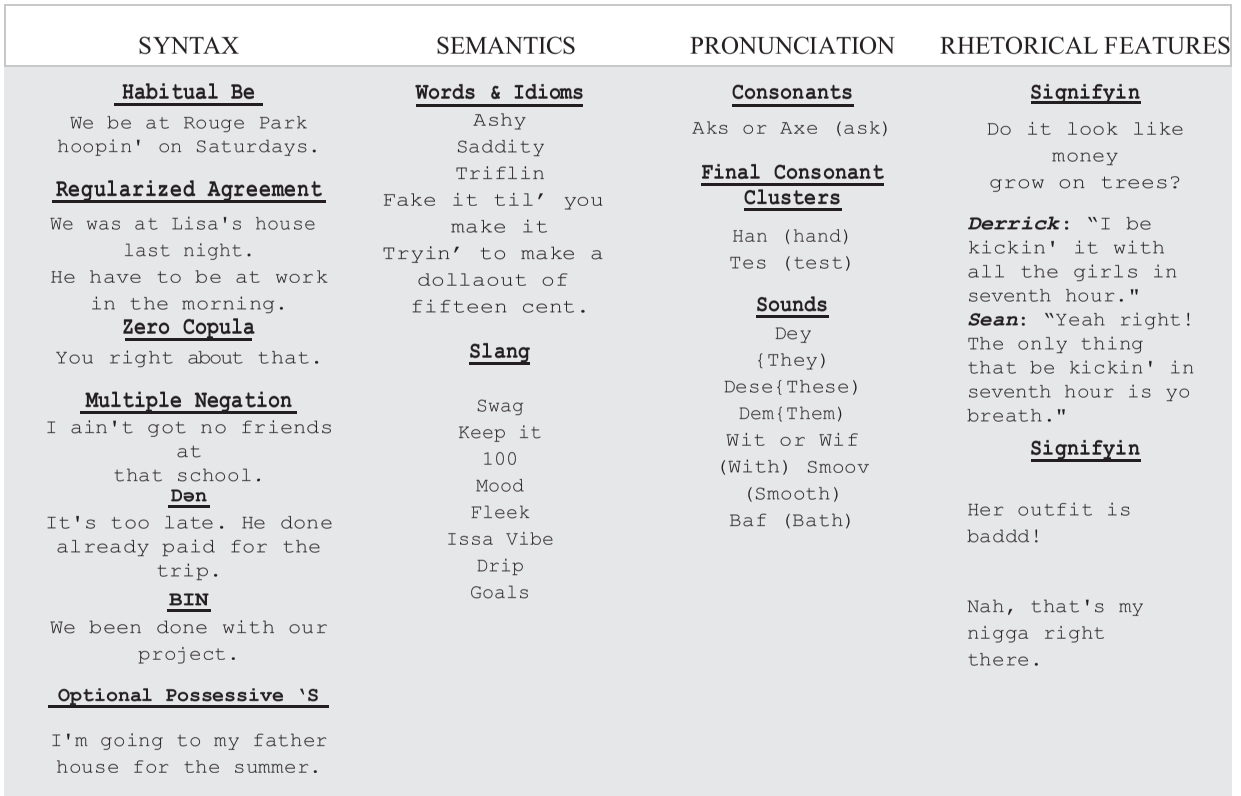

FIGURE 4.3 Features of Black Language

> "That's righttttt. It's a quicker way of communicating," Lola responded.
>
> "So as you all can see. There are several rules to Black Language. Instead of calling it 'slang,' 'ghetto,' or 'street talk,' we are going to acknowledge it as a language in its own right by referring to it as Black Language, African American Language, Ebonics, etc."

Our conversation about the remaining features of the language mirrors this snap shot. As illustrated in the above snapshot, my approach to grammar was not pre scriptive nor did it involve me simply telling the students how language works. Instead, my approach involved the students observing, exploring, describing, and discussing language based on the literacies they have of their native language. For the purposes of this chapter functioning as both a window into how the students at LA engaged the Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy and a resource that put tea chers up on game, I offer an overview of each feature listed in Figure 4.3.

Rickford & Rickford (2000) note that while there is still much to be uncov ered about the linguistic features and attributes of Black Language, linguists already know enough to present an informed picture. I present some of what is known about the syntax, semantics, and phonology of Black Language below.

Syntax

Syntax refers to the arrangement of words and phrases to create well formed sentences in a language.

- ***Habitual Be*** *(also known as invariant be)*: The habitual be is one of the most celebrated features of Black Language. It indicates habitual meaning or a recurring state or activity and suggests that something regularly or usually happens. The *be* incorporates past, present, and future activity. Examples used by the students at LA: *Everybody be talking like that.*
- ***Regularized Agreement*** (also known as absence of third person singular pre sent tense *S*): Within the Black speech community, third person singular verbs do not require third person singular subjects as in "*It seem.*" Regularized agreement is also being used in this example by Allistar: *He don't want anything.*
- ***Zero Copula*** (also known as copula absence): Oftentimes marked by linguists using this symbol Ø, the copula verbs are not required in some instances within the Black speech community. Here is an example used by a student at LA: I picked her because she Ø nice and calm.
- ***Multiple Negation***: Green (2002) explains that multiple negators such as *don't, no*, and *nothing* can be used in a single sentence. The pattern can be illustrated in the following example: *I ain't* got *no* friends at this school.
- ***Dən***: The dən feature, pronounced *done*, marks the completed nature of an action, and/or its relevance to the present. An example of the dən feature is shown here: *He done already paid for the trip.*

- ***BIN***: The stressed BIN feature, pronounced as been, is used to mark the remote past, as in *we been done without our project*. The way been is used in this sentence does not make it clear how long it's been since the project was complete. It could have been completed 2 hours ago or 2 days ago. How long it's actually been since the project was completed is not the speaker's purpose; rather, the purpose is to communicate that the activity occurred in the remote past.
- ***Optional Possessive 'S*** (also known as absence of possessive 'S): Black Language users do not have to rely on 's to indicate possession; instead, the juxtaposition of two nouns indicate possession (as in father house).

Semantics

Semantics is concerned with the meaning of words and word relations. There are certain words and phrases that carry unique meaning in the Black speech community. When I discussed semantics with the students at LA, I brought in a copy of Smitherman's (1994) Black dictionary *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corners,* and let the students read through it. Many of them were astonished to learn, in Allistar's words, "that there is an actual dictionary for the way that my people talk."

- ***Ashy*:** describes the whitish, grayish, or dryish appearance of skin due to exposure to wind, cold, or not using moisturizer.
- ***Fake it til' you make it***: Have confidence in whatever it is that you are doing until it becomes your reality.
- ***Saditty***: describes a snooty, uppity acting person.
- ***Trying to make a dolla out of fifteen cent*:** Trying to make ends meet with little financial resources.
- ***Triflin/Trife***: Describes a person who fails to do something that they are capable of doing; irresponsible; out of pocket.

Slang

For the slang section, I had a discussion with the students about the kind of slang they were using at the time. They offered the following words and descriptions:

- **Swag**: a person who dresses cool and acts cool.
- **Keep it 100**: Keep it real; be honest.
- **Vibe**: Feeling, atmosphere, energy, positivity.

Phonology

Phonology describes the system of sounds within the Black Language system. Rickford & Rickford (2000) explains that the pronunciation of consonants often distinguishes Black Language from the ways that other ethnic groups in the United States speak.

- ***Ask*** (pronounced as aks or axe) is one of those distinguishing features. This feature is widely stigmatized and is often seen as a reflection of poor speech.
- There are also some consonants in White Mainstream English that are not present in Black Language and there are some consonants that are replaced. For example ***han/hand*** and ***des/desk***. Additionally, there are some con sonants that are replaced like in the case of ***th*** by ***t, f, d,*** **or** ***v***, as in ***they/dey, bath/baf, with/wif, smooth/smoov***.
- There are also voiceless final consonant clusters like ***pt*** (as in ***kep/kept), st*** (as in ***bes/best), ld*** (as in ***col/cold), ct*** (as in ***ac/act), ft*** (as in ***lef/left***), and ***nd*** (as in ***spen/spend***).

Rhetorical Features

Oftentimes language scholars and language teachers get so caught up on the gram matical properties of Black Language that they overlook the rich rhetorical features, also referred to as cultural modes of discourse. I describe a few of these features below.

- ***Signifyin***: This feature describes a genre of linguistic performance in the Black speech community that allows for the communication of multiple levels of simul taneous meaning, usually involving wordplay and misdirection. Black Americans have used signifyin as a vehicle to express Black cultural knowledge, humor, or a serious social critique. For Black Americans navigating hostile and racial oppres sion, signifyin has offered a site of resistance and allowed double voiced and encoded communication. Just as important as what is said is how it is said. Signifyin requires verbal dexterity (skill & quickness), wit, and wordplay for it to be suc cessful. Here is an example of the feature "***Everybody and they momma*** *at the car wash this morning*." Everybody and they momma is signifying that there are an excessive number of people at the car wash that morning.
- ***Semantic Inversion***: This feature describes the process whereby Black Language speakers take words and concepts from White Mainstream English lexicon and either reverse their meanings or impose entirely different meanings. Semantic inversion was an act of linguistic empowerment as Africans in America took an alien tongue and made it theirs; simultaneously, they created a communication system that became linguistically unintelligible to the oppressor, even though it was the oppressor's language. One example of semantic inversion is the example from Figure 4.3, which says "*Her outfit is* ***baddd***!" The baddd is an example of semantic inversion because it actually indicates that the dress looks fabulous, which is the opposite of how bad is used in White Mainstream English.
    - Another example of this is with the term ***nigga***. Whether we agree or disagree that the term is appropriate, most Black Language speakers understand that nigga has a variety of meanings and has a different meaning from ***nigger***. As Smitherman (1997) points out:

> the inversion that has taken place with "nigger" is often misunderstood by people outside of the African American community and is castigated by some African Americans. When used by [Black Language] speakers, nigger has a different pronunciation, spelling, and meaning. In the [Black Language] speech community, the term nigga has a variety of positive meanings. It can mean best friend/your homey, boyfriends/lovers, a really cool associate.
>
> *(Smitherman, 1997, p. 19)*

- There are negative associations with the term nigga in the Black com munity as well, but it has a different nuance from the racial epithet nigger.
- After discussing semantic inversion of the term nigga, the students wanted to have more discussion about who gets to use the term, etc. Though this video was unavailable when I worked with the students at LA, I would recommend that teachers who are interested in having critical engagement about the term beyond semantic inversion share a clip[4] by Ta Nehisi Coates about why certain words don't belong to everyone.

- ***Playing the Dozens*** (also known as yo momma jokes): There are many ways of engaging in the art of verbal insult. "Playing the dozens" is the most common approach. Playing the dozens is a game—during the game, which is in the call and response format, two opponents make derogatory remarks about each other and each other's family members. Participants usually play the game with some one they know. To stay within the boundaries, they use exaggerated statements that, in reality, may not actually characterize the opponent's family members and family life. The audience judges the opponent's verbal comebacks in determining the actual winner. To discuss the history behind playing the dozens, I showed the students a very brief clip[5] of rapper KRS One explaining the roots of the feature.
- ***Call and Response***: The call and response feature describes the rhythmic exchange between addressers and listeners. The listeners' response during the exchange provides the addresser with cues that the listener is fully engaged in the conversation, which encourages the speaker to continue. One classic example of call and response within the Black speech community occurs at church when the pastor calls out, "can I get an amen?" and the members respond "Amen, Pastor! Hallelujah."
- ***Cultural Reference***: The cultural reference feature references cultural items/ icons that usually carry symbolic meaning in the Black community. For example, "becky with the good hair."
- ***Linguistic Inventiveness | Verbal Creativity***: Verbal inventiveness describes the linguistic improvisation and manipulation of language; the use of language to mark personal style and creativity; the ability to play with and on the word.

Following our discussion about features of Black Language, I had a discussion with the students about how some aspects of Black Language do not translate

into White Mainstream English as they communicate unique aspects of the Black experience. To explore these ideas further, I had the students analyze features of Black Language used by Detroit native hip hop artist Big Sean during an interview. I specifically selected Big Sean because many of the students viewed him as a hometown hero, and some of his language use was specific to the Detroit community. I asked the students to work in groups and cull features of Black Language from the interview and explain how it reflected Big Sean's theory of reality. Next, I asked the students to translate the interview into White Mainstream English to see if it held the same weight and/or if the message lost its meaning, richness, or flava once translated. The activity about Big Sean's use of language also moved us into a deeper conversation about how Black Language does not get credit for its contributions to the broader English language. I provide a snapshot of this conversation below. In this snapshot, the students, Ms. Helen, and I are discussing the etymology of the word "hoodie."

"What about hoodie? Is hoodie White Mainstream English?" I asked.

Chase responded, "Yes."

"Okay there is a debate going on," I said to the students. "Some of y'all are saying that the term hoodie is a term that emerged from Black culture …"

"It is," a few of the students quickly responded.

"But some of y'all are saying hoodie is White Mainstream English," I added.

Several of the students responded, "Yesss."

"White people say hoodie. It goes both ways. They be like I got my hoodie on," Allistar pointed out.

"But where did it come from? Have you ever looked at websites or gone into the store looking for what we call hoodie and it being called a what? What was it called? I heard Lola say what it is called," Ms. Helen chimed in from behind her desk.

"A hooded sweater or a hooded shirt?" Janel asked.

"Okay so then we took the term hooded sweater and called it hoodie, and it became so popular that non Black people are using it now," Ms. Helen explained.

"And this is a very good point right here," I added. "John Rickford, a Black linguist, said that many Black people don't realize that our use of Black words differ from other Americans. And to Ms. Helen's point, a lot of Black vocabulary gets used by White Mainstream English speakers. Some linguists call this 'crossover.' I think the issue is that white American culture participates in the linguistic and cultural absorption of blackness without any acknowledgement of where it originated from or how Black Language contributes to the broader American English."

"Yep," Ms. Helen added.

"True! Because words in White Mainstream English are usually longer. Like hooded sweatshirt vs. hoodie. I was also thinking that hoodie could also be a play on our use of the word *hood*," Janel explained.

"So basically hoodie might be one of them examples of how we take a term from White Mainstream English and make it our own," I replied.

"I know this language, but I been speaking it all my life. So I cannot tell the difference or did not realize there was so much difference between the two," Chasse commented.

The dialogue between the students, Ms. Helen, and I illustrate why it is necessary for language arts teachers to move beyond simply focusing on the technical dif ferences between Black Language and White Mainstream English. An Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy must include what Jackson (2019) is calling *critically conscious talk* or *CCT*, which is a kind of talk where teachers and students ques tion, interrogate, and dismantle dominant narratives that contribute to Black people's racial suffering.

The final activity the students engaged in for this Black Language Artifact was an activity that asked the students to do an ethnographic analysis of how they use language in their life. Inspired by a unit from Alim's (2007) critical hip hop lan guage pedagogy, I asked the students to document their communication behavior over the weekend.[6] When the students returned on Monday, many of them shared how surprised they were by how many members of their family actually communicated in Black Language. For instance, Allistar said "At first, I did not think my parents used Black Language, but that's because I thought Black Lan guage was like the slang we use. They [Allistar's parents] don't like that, but they use the real Black Language." Similarly, another student wrote, "Learning how people actually talk and how Black Language isn't just slang showed me that the language is used among different types of people."

Language + Race + Power

Background

It is important to continuously interrogate and exploit the intersections of lan guage, race, and power. Instead of perpetuating linguistic racism in classrooms, language arts teachers should engage their students in critical questioning by asking questions like those included below by Alim and Smitherman (2012), which shows how language is loaded with power.

> "Which languages are preferred in which contexts? By whom? Which groups are included—or excluded—by these decisions? Who benefits? … why must Black Americans shift toward styles considered White in order to be 'successful'?" These questions show that the way we talk can either grant or deny us access to social, political, and economic opportunities (think jobs, schools, etc.).
>
> *(Alim & Smitherman, 2012, p. 26)*

In addition to unpacking these questions, it is important to interrogate the notion of "Standard English." Linguists contend that a standardized language is hypothetical and gets constructed and reconstructed on an ongoing basis by those in positions of power. Lippi Green (2012) explains that although "non linguists are quite comfortable with the idea of a standard language … the term has been variously defined and heavily politicized" (p. 57). Indeed, this notion of Standard English is hypothetical and socially constructed (Lippi Green, 2012); is maintained through arbitrary ideas that reflect language superiority (Haddix, 2015); is a myth that is used to justify discrimination on the basis of "language markers that signal alliance to certain social groups, primarily those having to do with race, ethnicity, [gender] and economic factors" (Lippi Green, 2012, p. 15), and it reflects and legitimizes white, male, upper middle class, mainstream ways of speaking English (Alim & Smitherman, 2012; Lippi Green, 2012).

Black Language Artifacts 4 & 5: Language, Race, and Power

Black Language Artifacts 4 and 5 were created to get the students at LA to critically interrogate how language, race, and power are interconnected. I started this lesson off by asking students to work in small groups to define "Standard English." This activity was inspired by Lippi Green's (2012) comment that "non linguists are quite comfortable with the idea of a standard language, so much so that the average person is very willing to describe and define it, much in the same way that most people could draw a unicorn" (p. 57). My goal for this activity was to get the students to make sense of how an ideology of standardization empowers certain individuals and institutions to make arbitrary decisions about which language is considered standard and impose them on others (Lippi Green, 2012). The variation in the groups' definitions of Standard English revealed for the students, Ms. Hudson, and I that there were some inconsistencies in our understandings of Standard English and many of our beliefs were not based on linguistic facts. To speak back to some of the myths that arose during group discussions, I read passages from Lippi Green's (2012) chapter "The Standard Language Myth." Following this discussion, the students engaged in an inquiry based activity (Figure 4.4) to help them think more deeply about the intersections between language, power, and race.

The activity elicited a variety of responses that illustrated that the students were beginning to challenge language ideologies and problematize the intersections between language, race, and power. For example, Chase said "I feel like if you don't have scientific background on why you have a negative attitude about Black Language, then you shouldn't argue about it just because you feel it's bad and improper." Similarly, Lola added "my concern is that it is not always a bad language because IT IS considered a language." On a follow up activity,[7] the students continued to problematize the intersections between language, power, and race by examining beliefs that underpin code switching and language appropriateness. Allistar noted that code switching and appropriateness approaches empower White

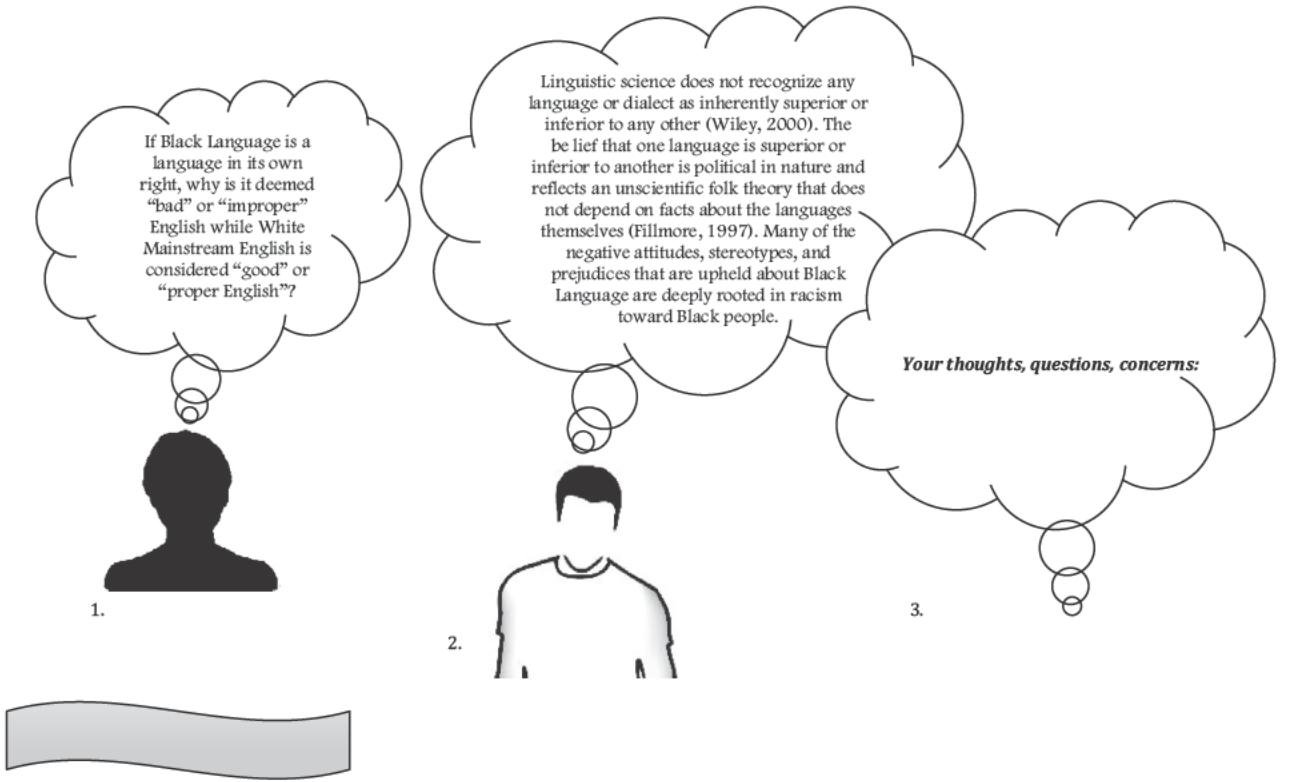

FIGURE 4.4 Conversation About Black Language Worksheet #3

Mainstream English speakers and disempower Black Language speakers because these approaches suggest that Black Language should be restricted to informal contexts such as outside, the beach, and the mall whereas White Mainstream English is privileged in nice restaurants, interviews, etc. Allistar goes on to say that these approaches "might make you lose confidence and might make you want to change who you are." Janel responded to the activity by writing:

> Black Language is disempowered by language appropriateness approaches because it's saying you have to be at home or dressed casual to speak Black Language while White Mainstream English is empowered making it seem right to speak in an interview or a church. They're saying White Mainstream English is better than Black Language. This is saying that if your culture is involved with Black Language, then you need to keep it hidden, while if you're speaking White Mainstream English, it is the appropriate culture to show anywhere. This may make a person who speak in Black Language feel bad or that their language is not as good as White Mainstream English.

The second half of this lesson was designed to raise students' awareness of how lan guage, race, and power intersect by exposing them to the ways that Black people have been racially profiled based on the way they speak. I invited the students to the activity by having them participate in an online test that was created by ABC News on *lin guistic profiling*. [8] The test[9] (displayed in Figures 4.5 & 4.6) asked the students to listen to a short piece of audio and describe the person's race or ethnicity based on the speech they heard. Once the answer is entered into the answer box, the test reveals the race or ethnicity of the speaker. Before beginning the activity, I asked the students if they think they can determine a person's race or ethnicity based on how they sound. While most of the students pondered on my question, Fetti responded, "sometimes I can with Black people because their voice is a little deeper." Allistar added, "Nine times out of ten, I could identify a person's race based on how they sound."

Following the linguistic profiling quiz, the students viewed four short YouTube video clips to continue to examine the intersections of language, power, and race:

1. A 20/20 special on Black Americans who were denied housing as a result of sounding Black.[10]
2. A public service announcement from HUD (US Department of Housing and Urban Development).[11]
3. A clip of a documentary about the Ann Arbor Black English Case[12] that shows how Black students successfully sued the Ann Arbor schools for lin guistic discrimination.[13]
4. A clip of linguist John Baugh describing linguistic profiling.[14]

These YouTube video clips provided the students with more foundation about lin guistic profiling in housing and linguistic discrimination in schools and how these

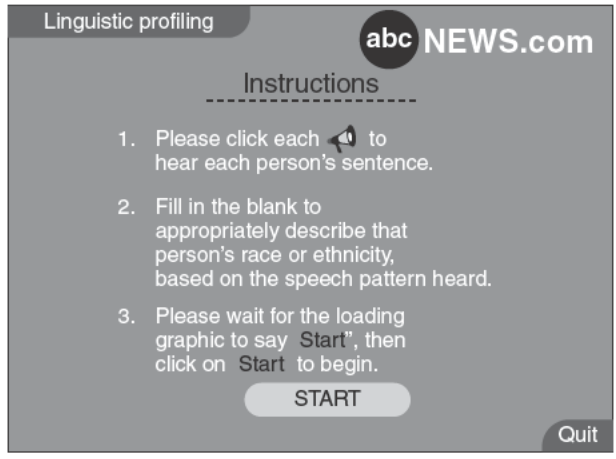

FIGURE 4.5 Linguistic Profiling Quiz #1

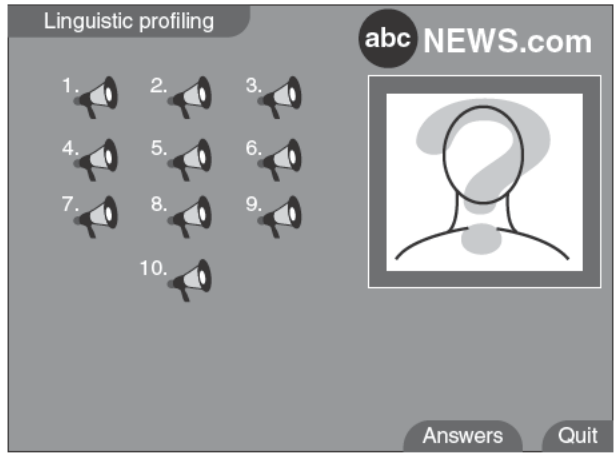

FIGURE 4.6 Linguistic Profiling Quiz #2

instances perpetuate what I am now calling Anti Black Linguistic Racism. In the sec tion below, I provide a snapshot of how the students responded to the clips.

> "Based on what you see in the videos, what might language have to do with race? How is it connected just based on these examples?" I asked.
>
> Lola replied, "So from what I saw in the video about housing, they are able to tell that someone is Black based on the sound of their voice … so they told her [the woman in the video] that the place was no longer available because they could tell that she was Black, and basically they don't want Black people living in that area."

> "These clips show that it's not necessarily about the language, but who is speaking the language," Janel said.
>
> "Yeah, all of these videos show that they were discriminated on because of their race," Allistar concluded.

The activities that were included in lesson 4 and 5 speak to Alim's (2007) thinking that by learning about the full scope of their language use and how language can be used against them, students become more conscious of the communicative behavior and the ways "by which they can transform the condi tions under which they live" (p. 167).

Beyond Consciousness-Raising: Developing Student Agency & Taking Action

Background

While developing students' linguistic consciousness is crucial to their sense of self and identity, awareness is not enough to bring about social change. An Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy is designed to provide Black students with critical lit eracies and competencies to name, investigate, and dismantle white linguistic hegemony and Anti Black Linguistic Racism. Moreover, it is important for stu dents to have an opportunity to create change within their communities. Alim and Smitherman (2012) recommend that language educators motivate youth to:

> engage in community activism around issues of linguistic discrimination. Youth are not only thinking critically about language, but they are also putting their knowl edge to work for their communities by developing consciousness raising cam paigns. These campaigns help provide resources for community members for members to engage in the transformation of their neighborhoods.
>
> *(p. 188)*

Unfortunately, my time at LA ended before I could engage the students in community activism. I was, however, able to use this approach in my teacher education courses,[15] which I believe would have been applicable for the students at LA. I provide a brief lesson and recommended activities in the section below.

Black Language Artifact 6: Language, Agency, & Action

This lesson moves the students toward thinking about developing agency, taking a critical stance, and making political choices that support them in employing Black Language for the purposes of various sorts of freedom, including dis mantling Anti Black Linguistic Racism.

Recommended Activities

- Students can create a social media campaign using Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram that promotes linguistic justice by exposing Anti Black Linguistic Racism and Black linguistic appropriation.
- Students can create a public service announcement using YouTube or some other digital tool based on their learning from the Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy.
- Students can facilitate a town hall to discuss the impact of Anti Black Lin guistic Racism on their education, sense of self, and identity.
- Students can write to their school district administration about their language policy if it perpetuates Anti Black Linguistic Racism and white linguistic hegemony.
- Students can create children's books, graphic novels, zines, etc. that promote linguistic justice for younger children.
- Students can create and facilitate workshops at their schools, community centers, or local libraries that promote awareness of Black Language and Anti Black Linguistic Racism.
- Students can write letters to their governors and state commissioners of education about linguistic racism and how it is embedded in standardized curricula, test, and language standards.

Language + Solidarity: Examining Linguistic and Racial Violence Across Communities of Color

Background

While it essential for Black students to learn about the roots of their own linguistic background, it is vital that they also develop a critical linguistic awareness of how other communities of color experience racial and linguistic violence and are impacted by linguistic racism. In 2017, Danny Martinez wrote a powerful article that highlights the linguistic violence many Black and Latinx youth face in English classrooms. He argues for a Language of Solidarity Framework across Black and Latinx youth:

> It means working against decades of real divisiveness and opposition that continues to hurt both communities in ways that empower dominant communities. How ever, providing a language of solidarity for Black and Latinx youth can begin with providing them with real life examples of solidarity movements that exist in their own communities, locally and nationally. As mentioned previously, countless recent examples can serve as tools to mediate tough conversations. Building on what youth bring to classrooms means that English teachers must be willing to reach into the digital worlds of youth. It means that we have to loosen up on our positions as experts to also learn from students. (p. 192)

I believe that Martinez's framework can be extended to include other communities of color as well. I did not have an opportunity to engage in language solidarity work during my time at LA, but I include recommended activities below to help language and literacy educators imagine what a lesson on language solidarity might look like.

Black Language Artifact 7: Developing a Language of Solidarity

For this artifact, students will develop a critical linguistic awareness and interrogate how other linguistically and racially diverse communities experience racial and linguistic violence and are impacted and are affected by linguistic racism.

Recommended Activities:

- Students can read linguistic narratives by non Black writers who are impacted by linguistic racism like Amy Tan's (1987) *Mother Tongue* and Gloria Anzaldua's (1987) *How to Tame a Wild Tongue*.
- Students can explore how historically communities of colors have experienced division and opposition that have negatively impacted communities of color as a whole.
- Students can develop an understanding of linguistic and cultural sharing by reading Martinez's (2017) article *Imagining a Language of Solidarity for Black and Latinx Youth in English Language Arts Classrooms,* May's (2019) *Words That Matter: Black and Indigenous Solidarity and the Right to Language*, Paris' (2009) "*They're in My Culture, They Speak the Same Way": African American Language in Multiethnic High Schools*.

"Blacker Than an Essence Fest": A Linguistic Celebration

On the last day of the Black linguistic consciousness raising component of the Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy, the students, Ms. Helen, and I decided to celebrate Black Language, Black culture, and our once in a lifetime learning experience. We brought in food, Black music, and I brought in the written and YouTube versions[16] of Jamila Lyiscott's poem *Three Ways to Speak English* (see Figure 4.7), a beautiful piece that pays homage to Ebonics and Black Multilingualism. As we watched and read the poem, many of the students shouted and engaged in call and response practices to show that they were feeling Lyiscott's words. Shortly after the video went off, I heard Janel say to Lola, "that was good," and I heard Allistar say, "I'm trilingual." As I looked around the classroom at the Black faces that seemed to be filled with joy, as I listened to them freely communicate with one another in the language that reflected our mother tongue, as I heard their Black voices rap the words to Kendrick Lamar's "Don't Kill My Vibe" in perfect harmony, I could not help but embrace that moment in space and time! This is what Black Linguistic Justice should feel and look like! For a short moment, Anti Black Linguistic Racism didn't even matter.

Today, a baffled lady observed the shell where my soul dwells
And announced that I'm "articulate"
Which means that when it comes to enunciation and diction
I don't even think of it
'Cause I'm "articulate"
So when my professor asks a question
And my answer is tainted with a connotation of urbanized suggestion
There's no misdirected intention
Pay attention
'Cause I'm "articulate"
So when my father asks, "Wha' kinda ting is dis?"
My "articulate" answer never goes amiss
I say "father, this is the impending problem at hand"
And when I'm on the block I switch it up just because I can
So when my boy says, "What's good with you son?"
I just say, "I jus' fall out wit dem people but I done!"
And sometimes in class
I might pause the intellectual sounding flow to ask
"Yo! Why dese books neva be about my peoples"
Yes, I have decided to treat all three of my languages as equals
Because I'm "articulate"
But who controls articulation?
Because the English language is a multifaceted oration
Subject to indefinite transformation
Now you may think that it is ignorant to speak broken English
But I'm here to tell you that even "articulate" Americans sound foolish to the British
So when my Professor comes on the block and says, "Hello"
I stop him and say "Noooo …
You're being inarticulate … the proper way is to say 'what's good'"
Now you may think that's too hood, that's not cool
But I'm here to tell you that even our language has rules
So when Mommy mocks me and says "ya'll be madd going to the store"
I say "Mommy, no, that sentence is not following the law
Never does the word "madd" go before a present participle
That's simply the principle of this English"
If I had the vocal capacity I would sing this from every mountaintop,
From every suburbia, and every hood
'Cause the only God of language is the one recorded in the Genesis
Of this world saying "it is good"
So I may not always come before you with excellency of speech
But do not judge me by my language and assume
That I'm too ignorant to teach
'Cause I speak three tongues
One for each:

FIGURE 4.7 Jamila Lyiscott's poem

Home, school and friends
I'm a tri lingual orator
Sometimes I'm consistent with my language now
Then switch it up so I don't bore later
Sometimes I fight back two tongues
While I use the other one in the classroom
And when I mistakenly mix them up
I feel crazy like … I'm cooking in the bathroom
I know that I had to borrow your language because mines was stolen
But you can't expect me to speak your history wholly while mines is broken
These words are spoken
By someone who is simply fed up with the Eurocentric ideals of this season
And the reason I speak a composite version of your language
Is because mines was raped away along with my history
I speak broken English so the profusing gashes can remind us
That our current state is not a mystery
I'm so tired of the negative images that are driving my people mad
So unless you've seen it rob a bank stop calling my hair bad
I'm so sick of this nonsensical racial disparity
So don't call it good unless your hair is known for donating to charity
As much as has been raped away from our people
How can you expect me to treat their imprint on your language
As anything less than equal
Let there be no confusion
Let there be no hesitation
This is not a promotion of ignorance
This is a linguistic celebration
That's why I put "tri lingual" on my last job application
I can help to diversify your consumer market is all I wanted them to know
And when they call me for the interview I'll be more than happy to show that I can say:
"What's good"
"Whatagwan"
And of course … "Hello"
Because I'm "articulate"

FIGURE 4.7 (Cont.)

In the next chapter, I include composite counterstories that highlight how the Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy impacted the students at LA. I also offer implications that highlight the importance of Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy in our current historical, political, and racial climate.

Notes

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v EPGx1icFdLQ

2 https://www.pbs.org/video/underground railroad william still story coded spirituals/
3 Rouge Park is a park located in Detroit, Michigan.
4 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v QO15S3WC9pg
5 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v Uu FaOmcSso
6 See appendix A.
7 See appendix B.
8 Linguistic profiling is based on research done by John Baugh that examines perceptual and phonetic studies of linguistic racism.
9 This quiz was available on the University of Iowa's website, but unfortunately it has been removed since the time of the study.
10 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v 3KCL97s1lJg
11 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v zup2qlFuCDc
12 During the Ann Arbor Black English case, a Federal District Court found the Ann Arbor school district responsible for failing to adequately prepare teachers to respond to the language needs of 11 Black children at the Martin Luther King, Jr. elementary school.
13 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v KKlmaFQniB0
14 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v U63FjeeHMoc
15 Example PSA that students in my Spring 2015 ENG 302 course created for their cri tical language awareness class project: https://youtu.be/r7easj7v2Yk
16 At the time of the study, Lyiscott's TED talk was not available, so we used an older video version of her reciting the poem (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v Qn m qVD 7XQ). Here is a link to her current TED talk version of the poem (https:// www.ted.com/talks/jamila lyiscott 3 ways to speak english?language en)

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