

All the women are White, all the Black people are men, but some theories are brave: On the importance of Black feminist epistemology for the study of language

Agata Janicka
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave – the title of this seminal collection on Black women’s studies, first published in 1982 (Hull et al. eds.), continues to reflect the obfuscated status of the lived experiences of African American women today, including their linguistic and interactional behaviour.

African American English (AAE) may have “commanded more attention on the American sociolinguistic scene than any other language variety in the United States” (Alim 2003: 50), but there seems to be a continued lack of sufficient insight into the ways African American *women* specifically communicate. In other words, the ways African American women communicate that are *different* from White women’s language *and* African American men’s language continue to be underrepresented in linguistic research (Troutman 2001). This is not at all because of the lack of distinctiveness and validity of African American women’s modes of communicating. African American women’s language (AAWL) as an emerging linguistic concept (e.g. Morgan 2015) states that there is a specific type of communication that occurs among Black women when they are in informal conversation exclusively among one another (Rahman 2015). An *alternative* theory for studying Black women’s discourses and everyday talk that has been emphasized as extremely valuable by various qualitative language and communication scholars (e.g. Bucholtz 1996; Houston and Davis 2002; Evans-Winters 2019) is Black feminist epistemology (Collins 2000). At its core, there are four dimensions: (1) lived experiences as criterion of meaning, (2) use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, (3) the ethics of caring, and (4) the ethics of personal responsibility. Importantly, it facilitates positioning one’s participants as authorities on their own language behavior and places their interactions in a specific social context thus allowing to read the particular features of their communication as analytically significant rather than incidental or negligible.

With this paper, I attempt to further contribute to underscoring and elevating the importance of Black feminist epistemology in the study of language by applying it as a central social theory in the critical sociolinguistic (Mullany 2007) analysis of the interactions occurring during an informal bonding event of a group of college-aged African American girls. During the one-hour recording session, the girls engaged in organized activities. At the same time, they engaged in everyday informal conversations. Preliminary analysis has shown that the girls employed some of the features described as characteristic of AAWL in their interactions: they smart-talked, they signified, they used culturally toned diminutives; they used bawdy language boldly and confidently, displayed self-assurance during the event, held each other accountable, negotiated self-definition. They discussed a variety of topics, such as

sex, contraception, and family. They voiced their opinions regarding their own language behavior as well as perceptions of that behavior (including that of the researcher).

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