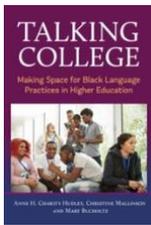


# Talking College: Making Space for Black Language Practices in Higher Education

Reviewed by Monique Inez Liston



## Talking College: Making Space for Black Language Practices in Higher Education

**Author:** Anne H. Charity Hudley, Christine Mallinson, and Mary Bucholtz  
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On December 5, 1985, at the 84th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Signithia Fordham presented a paper entitled *Black Students' School Success: Coping with the "Burden of 'Acting White.'"* Fordham analyzed data collected from academically successful and unsuccessful Black students from a predominantly Black high school in Washington, D.C., and concluded that some academically successful students “cope with the burden of acting White” as they go through their daily school context. Several behaviors describe “acting White,” but the first one listed and most commonly discussed is “speaking standard English,” and Fordham eloquently established that, due to this burden, Black children struggle with conflict, contradiction, and uncertainty with language while attempting to achieve academic success.

Thirty-seven years later, *Talking College: Making Space for Black Language Practices in Higher Education* speaks directly to the next generation of students from Fordham’s study as they matriculate through their higher education experience. Authors Anne H. Charity Hudley, Christine Mallinson, and Mary Bucholtz share findings and insights from their study through a highly educative, accessible, instructional, and inspirational text. This book exemplifies what it means to share the results of a high-quality, multi-year, community-based scholarly study while practicing academic activism. Through this work, the authors carefully craft a perspective and

mindset shift for Black students to minimize the threat of “acting White” by “speaking standard English.”

Unapologetically written for “Black college students and those who love, sustain, and support them” (p. 149), *Talking College* uses intentional linguistic and stylistic modalities to affirm Black students and their language practices. For example, since the book is written for Black students, the pronoun “you” is used to demonstrate familiarity and connection, and harkens back to Fordham’s assertion of “fictive kinship” defining the relationships between Black students at school. Further, the authors use a framework of “deserving” to share linguistic knowledge about Black students directly with Black students. With this text, the authors are disrupting the practice of academic writing, speaking only to other academics and shifting knowledge power from those who have already earned their credentials to those seeking them. One of the undergraduate researchers on the team shares this sentiment quite simply: “Imagine if a lot of us knew?” (p. 7).

The authors are diligent about expressing their positionality as raced, classed, and gendered human beings. Furthermore, this book reflects their care and intention as community-engaged scholars since their voices are a part of the text but take up no more space than other research team members or participants.

Language justice isn’t just discussed in this book; the authors practice it. Sharing from the “Students Right to Their Own Language” issued by the National Council of Teachers of English and the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1974, the authors assert that “Having the right to your own language means that you, as a Black student, deserve to know about the linguistic principles underlying Black language practices” (p. 41). This deservingness is shown throughout the book, as the authors do not take a step back from ensuring that the language and structure of this text are both accessible and affirming for Black students. Readers may feel that these chapter sections are informative and therapeutic. Each section provides an opportunity to know that Black students’ dignity should be protected no matter how they use language to articulate the world around them.

Vignettes are used to illustrate the practices discussed throughout the book. By reading, you get to hear from many voices, including other members of the research team who range from undergraduate students to tenured professors. Each vignette gives a short story from someone’s experience encountering linguistic racism and finding a way toward language justice. While African American English is discussed most thoroughly, there are mentions of Black ASL and other languages spoken by Black students.

The book also provides notes to improve practice for faculty members. Even though the book does not let up on its core audience, Black students, the notes for faculty provide tangible and practical resources for transforming their learning spaces to ensure that language justice, and especially the affirmation of Black students’ use of verbal and written language, are affirmed. However, considering these teaching notes and the core audience, the authors have given students the power to challenge professors in classrooms for not upholding language justice in daily practice. This book reminds us of the true power of the written word.

As a pleasant reprieve, code-switching is discussed but does not take center stage in the book. Too often, code-switching seems to be the only language practice discussed in the academic literature about Black American college students. However, the authors offer an opportunity to demonstrate Black annotation, redaction, and refusal by offering varying perspectives on language demonstrated by section headers such as “Students Who Mostly Use African American

English and Are Unbothered” (p. 96), “Students Who Use Standardized English and Who Also know African American English but Ain’t Tryna Claim It” (p. 99), and “Students Who Mostly Use African American English Who Are Encountering Standardized English and Who Are Sorting Out the Sociolinguistics of It All” (p. 94). The book provides constant validation of many language practices among Black students, and that is a welcome change from the monolithic approach to linguistically understanding Black people and culture.

The book’s last chapter focuses on liberatory linguistics and how linguistic justice can help dismantle the quotidian oppression of higher education for Black students. While the burden of “acting White” remains present in educational contexts that are inherently racist, this book provides Black students and those who love them a set of tools and strategies to maintain their sense of dignity no matter their language practice.

## **References**

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## **Author Biography**

MONIQUE INEZ LISTON, Ph.D., is the Founder, Chief Strategist and Joyful Militant at UBUNTU Research and Evaluation. She is a Black woman born and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She is the daughter of Ursula, granddaughter of Gracie J. and Bernice, and great-granddaughter of Inez. She is an experienced facilitator, evaluator and program designer with over 15 years of experience in the fields of leadership, education, and public health. She is proud alum of Howard University with a BA in Sociology and the University of Delaware with a Masters in Public Administration. She obtained her PhD in Urban Education from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.