

An open letter to the editors of the *Journal of Language and Sexuality*

Nikki Lane

Spelman College, Atlanta, USA

In this open letter, I ask the editors of the Journal and its readers, to reflect on the Journal's relationship to studies of language and Black sexuality, and consider new ways to reach scholars of Black life, culture, and language. Studies of Black language practices rarely deal with the ways that Black language practices are often complicated by gender/sexuality. And yet, there *are* scholars doing this work, but like Queer Linguistics, it often doesn't "look" that way that typical studies of language are *supposed* to look. This is because linguistics and linguistic anthropology as disciplines have often failed to capture the imagination and attention of these scholars; it is not because studies of Black sexuality and language do not exist. I encourage the Journal then to seek out these studies and to do so with a sense of urgency.

Keywords: black languages, black feminisms, black sexualities, ratchet, queer linguistics

On this occasion of the Journal's 10th year anniversary, I am writing this open letter to ask you, the editors, to reflect on the journal's relationship to studies of language and Black sexuality, and consider new ways to reach scholars of Black life, culture, and language. Based on my knowledge of the journal and its editors, to engage in this reflection would strongly align with your values, and could be incredibly constructive as you continue to build your audience and reach. My suggestions are for how you might become a site for an emerging set of young scholars interested in Queer Linguistics *and* Black Linguistics which has been described as being "committed to studies of Black languages *by Black speakers* and to analyses of the sociopolitical consequences of varying conceptualizations of and research on Black languages" (Ball, Makoni, Smitherman & Spears 2003). As you well know, the fields of linguistics and linguistic anthropology were relatively devoid of issues of gender before the 1970s, sexuality before the 1990s (Motschenbacher 2012), and at least conventionally, remain elitist and colonialist (Ball, Makoni, Smitherman, Geneva & Spears

2003). Unfortunately, however, when there are studies of Black language practices, they rarely deal with the ways that Black language practices are often complicated by gender/sexuality.

While my interest is primarily with issues of Blackness in the United States, Black people live all over the world. Scholarship on Blackness abound within a variety of contexts including South America, the Caribbean, Africa, Europe, and Australia. This issue of Blackness (and anti-Blackness) then is relevant to scholars outside of the context of the United States. What remains consistent is that Black and Brown bodies have historically been the “subjects” of linguistic analysis while rarely considered their own language’s “experts.”

I would venture a guess that there are only a handful of Black graduate students in linguistics programs or on linguistic anthropology tracks, and I am making a generalization here, but in my experience, many Black scholars interested in language, race, and sexuality typically have chosen disciplinary routes such as English, African American Studies, or Women’s Studies. This is not to detriment of the journal, however. There are people doing this work, but like Queer Linguistics, it just doesn’t look that way that typical studies of language are *supposed* to look, but only because linguistics and linguistic anthropology have failed to capture the imagination and attention of these scholars; it is not because studies of Black sexuality and language do not exist. On the contrary, LaMonda Horton Stallings work, including her first book, *Mutha is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture* (Stallings 2007) examines Black women’s subjectivities and the way that they appear within certain tropes that in African American folklore. Her work has always been deeply invested in language-practices and Black sexuality. Similarly, Marlon M. Bailey’s performance ethnography *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (Bailey 2013) seriously treats the linguistic practices of the ballroom community in Detroit. Further, because Black language practices quickly evolve, many of these projects on Black language practices are reported in popular media (see Boylorn 2020, Cooper 2007 and Lewis 2013, on the word “ratchet”) and are often written by Black feminist scholars who are also interested in issues of language, race, gender, and sexuality.

Online blogs have been compelling and rich sites for Black feminist scholars to discuss the ways gender, sexuality, and Blackness collide within the realm of popular culture, and thus few see the *point* in discussing these things in the realm of a stuffy academic journal, but they are the exact kind of analysis that I long to see in the pages of this journal. So, what if you weren’t *just* a stuffy academic journal? What other formats (such as forums, symposiums, interviews) might this journal use to extend its reach? These could be attractive, and academically rigorous, avenues for young *and* established scholars to showcase their work on topics that are ripe for analysis.

I have a special relationship to the *Journal of Language of Sexuality*. It has been one of few academic spaces where I find studies that address the major themes that my work explores. Each issue, I look for the work that highlights Black language practices, but these have been few (and I wrote one of those few). I do not consider this to be a “fault” of the Journal as much as I see it as an opportunity. Queer Linguistics sometimes fails to always recognize the work that cutting-edge Black feminist and queer scholars are doing on language, and Black feminist and queer scholars of African American literature and culture, often do not view their work as “linguistic,” even when it is. This is related to the elitist nature of to the field of Linguistics more broadly. It doesn’t *feel* like it’s for us. The Journal simply must continue to set itself apart, particularly when it comes to dealing with issues of Blackness.

I take pride in making Linguistics, Linguistic Anthropology, and studies of language more broadly, understandable as viable avenues of inquiry for my students. I know the editors feel the same. But what needs to be taken up even more seriously is *changing the narrative* of Queer Linguistics so that it also is in firm *allyship* with the work of Black feminist, Black queer theorists, and practitioners of Black Linguistics.

It is my hope that this letter has *encouraged* you and your readers to think more about what the Journal can do to be an ally in this moment. The *lack* of studies of Black language is stark in this journal. For you not to continue to reinforce the elitism and colonialism of the discipline of Linguistics, the Journal need to prioritize publishing more studies of Black people within these pages *by Black people*. I hope to that you will consider encouraging established scholars, non-academics, and graduate students (and maybe even advanced undergraduate students) to co-produce scholarship for the Journal. Produce special issues, symposia, and even interviews with scholars of Black life on issues of language/sexuality. I hope you’ll consider these alternative forms for the Journal’s pages, especially as we are living through “Pandemic Time,” and a time of unparalleled civil unrest and police violence. Black scholars are experiencing a new kind of precarity. And, as you always have, continue to push on the boundaries of what is considered “linguistic.”

Enclosed is a \$ 200 gift to the Journal to use for a prize for an exceptional piece of writing that deals with issues of Black language and sexuality by a Black person to be published in the Journal. I would ask that the award be named after my grandmother, whose words I had handed down to me by my mother: Billye Lane.

Yours in the struggle,
Nikki Lane
Atlanta, GA
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Address for correspondence

Nikki Lane
Comparative Women's Studies Program
Spelman College
350 Spelman Lane
Atlanta, GA 30314
USA
calane@spelman.edu