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Recoveries and Reconsiderations: Linguistic Justice and Storying Resistance to Generative AI

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Abstract: In this piece, we argue that linguistic and algorithmic oppressions are inextricably linked to one another, a relationship illuminated by the work and experiences of Timnit Gebru. To begin, we briefly trace the history of calls for linguistic justice within writing studies, with specific attention to the adoption of Students' Rights to Their Own Language. We then connect the need for linguistic justice to calls for algorithmic justice in the context of generative AI, large language models, and machine learning. Then, using a feminist research approach that emphasizes storytelling and centers the lived experiences of women, we tell the story of Gebru's experiences resisting harmful AI at Google and combating institutional whiteness within the tech industry. We conclude by connecting Gebru's fight for an AI ethics that centers the lived experiences (and languaging) of historically marginalized groups to writing studies' disciplinary investment in language variation and linguistic justice and argue that algorithmic justice requires linguistic justice.

Keywords:: algorithmic oppression, linguistic justice, generative AI, storytelling

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Introduction: Linguistic and Algorithmic Injustices

The generative AI moment brings to the fore how linguistic injustice and algorithmic injustice are intertwined. White language supremacy – characterized as it is by insidious notions of singular correctness and the destruction of the cultural and social dimensions of languaging – is deadly, particularly for marginalized communities. Generative AI – characterized as it is by environmental devastation (Hogan and LePage-Richer), labor exploitation (Merchant), and the elimination of marginalized languages and language varieties (Owusu-Ansah) – is similarly devastating, frequently to these same communities to more serious degrees. These two threats rely on one another for their continued perpetuation, and we understand the urgency to combat linguistic and algorithmic injustice to be aligned with the movement for GenAI refusal in writing studies (Sano-Franchini, et al.). In sketching these conversations, we hope readers will reconsider how to engage with linguistic justice in their research and teaching with the grave realities of algorithmic oppression in mind.

Linguistic variation and justice have, of course, long been of concern to scholars and teachers in

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rhetoric, composition, and writing studies. In March 1974, the Conference on College Composition and Communication adopted the *Students Right to Their Own Language* (SRTOL) resolution. The main text of the resolution itself is brief; it reads

> We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language -- the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. 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. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.

SRTOL was the product of significant work by Black women in the discipline: Geneva Smitherman was one of the key authors of the resolution, and her work, as Smitherman notes in her retrospective on the development of SRTOL, built from the work of Ernece Kelly, particularly Kelly's "Murder of the American Dream," as well as Kelly's leadership of the NCTE Taskforce on Bias and Racism.

As Staci Perryman-Clark, David E. Kirkland, and Austin Jackson make clear in the introduction to *Students' Right to Their Own Language: A Critical Sourcebook*, supporters of SRTOL believe that "unless students' rights are affirmed in full in classrooms and beyond, students will be unfairly positioned in our academies and our economies to fail. That is, these scholars see a direct relationship between language awareness, rights and respect and social, academic, and economic outcomes" (5). The argument of SRTOL is that as literacy educators, we have a specific set of responsibilities to our students, including the responsibility to help them develop the tools that allow them to achieve their own rhetorical goals and express themselves in the forms and in conversation with the communities that are meaningful to them. We have a responsibility to understand the language we teach, including how its varieties and dialects function, how that language is acquired, and what it means to support the linguistic expressions of all the students whom we teach.

To illustrate the significance of algorithmic justice for rhetoric and writing studies, we consider the story of Timnit Gebru, who has been one of the most important voices articulating AI ethics and the sociocultural harms of Large Language Models (LLM). Our telling of Gebru's story is informed by feminist research methodologies that center the lived experiences of women, particularly women of color (Jones, Bramlett, Plange). We highlight Gebru, because she is one of several Black scholars and activists who have been at the forefront of the conversation about artificial intelligence and algorithmic oppression (O'Neil; Noble; Benjamin; Broussard; Gebru and Buolawamini). Gebru's work – particularly in her co-authored article "On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big?" ("Stochastic Parrots") – also highlights the ways that algorithmic oppression and linguistic oppressions are inextricably linked and part of a longer history of eugenics (Gebru and Torres). Likewise, we believe Gebru's story tells us a great deal

about the importance of lived experience in feminist and anti-racist projects, including the work to resist the inevitability of artificial intelligence.

Timnit Gebru, Stochastic Parrots, and the Fight for AI Justice at Google

Timnit Gebru is an Eritrean-Ethiopian computer scientist who has been a prominent voice in the ethics of artificial intelligence since the late 2010s and who is perhaps best known for being fired by Google in December 2020 after documenting racism and sexism inherent in the company's approach to artificial intelligence. While her controversy at Google made Gebru a public figure of AI skepticism, Gebru's career as a major voice in the ethics of artificial intelligence did not begin at Google. In 2017, Gebru collaborated with MIT researcher Joy Buolamwini while she was working as a researcher at Microsoft. Together they published the groundbreaking paper, "Gender Shades: Intersectional Accuracy Disparities in Commercial Gender Classification," which revealed the gender and racial biases embedded in commercial face recognition systems. In 2018, Gebru was hired to co-lead the Ethical AI group, which was charged with investigating the social implications of artificial intelligence, including generative AI, at Google in 2018. Two years later, Gebru was fired over the paper that would become the now widely-cited "Stochastic Parrots."

Countering the so-called intelligence of artificial intelligence, this paper – co-authored by Emily Bender, Gebru, Angelina Major-McMillan, and Margaret Mitchell – characterized language models as *stochastic parrots.* Stochastic–from the Ancient Greek *stokhastikos*, which means "guesswork"– describes the randomness of language models, how they comprehend language or make meaning of their training set data but instead generate randomly plausible language. In this article, Bender and her co-authors challenged the project of LLM research by pointing to the various ethical problems with this technology, including the enormous environmental and financial costs, the lack of diversity in the training data, and the risks of homogenized AI-generated language. Specifically, AI-generated text represents the language practices of wealthier countries and communities and "overrepresents" younger Internet users and men (613). While this research was presented at the Association for Computing Machinery Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency in 2021, it was first shared with Google in 2020 while Gebru worked for the company. After reading its damning findings about the nature of LLMs, Gebru's supervisors demanded that she retract the paper and its findings. Although the research paper had undergone an extensive review process–more rigorous than most research, according to her colleagues–Gebru was ordered to retract the paper from consideration. Gebru refused and asked for an explanation about how the retraction order had been determined and for a clear "understanding of research parameters, what can be done/not, and who can make these censorship decisions" (Gebru).

In the days after Gebru's unceremonious and disrespectful dismissal–in which she returned from vacation to find that she had been locked out of her company email– Gebru went public with her experience at Google. Jeff Dean, Google's head of artificial intelligence, refuted Gebru's account, claiming that she had resigned and explained that the research paper had not been submitted with enough time for it to be approved

for public presentation. Gebru shared online that this was not the case. Soon after, members of her Ethical AI team joined Gebru online to counter the company line that she had resigned. They published a letter and petition, titled "Setting the Record Straight #ISupportTimnit #BelieveBlackWomen" on the Google Walkout Medium account, in which they refuted the lie that she had resigned and demanded transparency about Gebru's termination, transparency about the decision to censor the research paper, and renewed commitment by Google to academic freedom and research integrity. This letter was signed by 2,695 Google employees and 4,302 supporters from academia and industry. Despite the broad support for Gebru and clear evidence that her dismissal was retaliatory and unprofessional, Google representatives did not apologize or acknowledge the research or evident institutional oppression.

Since her dismissal from Google, Gebru founded and has served as the executive director of the Distributed Artificial Intelligence Research Institute (DAIR), an interdisciplinary, globally-situated research center that refutes the "inevitability" of artificial intelligence, and co-founded Black in AI, a nonprofit organization that strives for the Black representation and inclusion in the field of AI. Ultimately, Gebru's experiences before and after her controversial firing from Google point to the importance of lived experience in technological advancement. In an interview with Rolling Stone, Gebru shared that while she never anticipated her career trajectory, the problem of race in AI research became apparent when she attended conferences. "There were no Black people — literally no Black people," Gebru said. "I would go to academic conferences in AI, and I would see four or five Black people out of five, six, seven thousand people internationally.… I saw who was building the AI systems and their attitudes and their points of view. I saw what they were being used for, and I was like, 'Oh, my God, we have a problem'" (O'Neil). Her current efforts work to center marginalized experts in artificial intelligence research, an important step to countering the kinds of oppressive outcomes outlined in "Stochastic Parrots." Prior to her firing in December 2020, Gebru was one of very few Black women who worked for the company, amounting to only 1.6% of total research scientists (*Diversity Annual Report - Google Diversity Equity & Inclusion*).

Gebru's story helps us to see how algorithmic oppression and linguistic oppression are linked, not just via the language models that perpetuate homogenized language, but via white institutions that maintain white supremacy via hiring, firing, and silencing. Within the context of the technology industry, this hostility can be traced to the myths of meritocracy and postracialism that are strongly embedded in the predominantly white male culture of Silicon Valley with implications for hiring practices (Noble and Roberts). Safiya Noble and Sarah T. Roberts demonstrate how "postracialism does not end at hiring and representation in employment ranks" (122). Rather, a "racially, educationally, and class-wise homogeneous Silicon Valley technological elite" perpetuates colonialism, imperialism, and Western extraction through "design and manufacturing choices [that] have implications for populations across the globe" (122). [1] As Sara Ahmed

1 Since 2010 (Luckerson), increased demand for cobalt and copper to manufacture "clean" energy sources, like rechargeable batteries, and smart devices like iPhones and MacBook Pros, has been directly directly linked to genocide and human rights violations in Congo (Imray). The hidden costs of mineral extraction and increased emissions from data centers typically are paid by communities of color first (Kerr), although it is evident that unchecked climate crisis, which is worsened by the expansion of LLMs, concerns us all.

reminds us, "The struggle to recognize institutional racism can be understood as part of a wider struggle to recognize that all forms of power, inequality, and domination are systematic rather than individual" (44). Consequently, to critique racism and whiteness as it is embedded within technology and institutions, as Gebru did, is very challenging within a company such as Google that can more easily identify Gebru and her research as the threats to their algorithmic technologies, rather than the more intrinsic, foundational nature of racism.

Linked Oppressions: Algorithmic White Language Supremacy

Reconsidering the story of Gebru's fight for AI justice at Google is instructive for how we can combat white language supremacy within rhetoric and writing studies and in higher education at large by resisting the inevitability of this racist technology. We must recognize how white language supremacy (Inoue) is embedded and encoded in LLMs, and as Antonio Byrd argued in his recent piece, "[l]inguistic punishment includes violence against bodies and land: colonialism, imperialism, genocide, and slavery paved the way for English dominance in contemporary global economies" (136). LLMs continue a long history of violence through the English language and perpetuate a whole host of linguistic injustices. These injustices include, among many material consequences, linguistic profiling, which have deadly legal consequences, as well the erasure of marginalized languages. In "Defining Moments, Definitive Programs, and the Continued Erasure of Missing People," Alfred L. Owusu-Ansah offers a critical reminder of the limitations of LLMs for supporting linguistic diversity, gesturing to interactions with ChatGPT which reveal its inability to represent Ghanaian English; in doing so, ChatGPT perpetuates the erasure of language variation of peoples who "do not have the global capital to increase the volume of their utterances" (146). And so, Owusu-Ansah asks us to consider the people who are left behind by LLMs, whose languages and identities are erased by the proliferation of LLM writing outputs: "Shall we lower the voices of the machines for a moment and hear the voices of 'we,' the missing people. Or, as we listen to the machines, we can pause and reflect on how they are defining us using the same values, characteristics, and meanings that colonialism has placed on us for centuries" (146). For those of us who are critical of generative AI, we must remember language bias, too, and its varied material consequences for our students.

We recognize that this is a fraught conversation, even within writing studies. For example, a recent MLA/CCCC working paper on writing and language instruction during the AI age highlights both the risk LLMs pose to linguistic diversity, as well as arguable benefits that LLMs might offer to "[w]riters who come from diverse and various linguistic and educational backgrounds [who] may benefit from the more sophisticated grammar, style, and genre editing capabilities of LLMs by receiving access to the 'language of power'" (Working Paper 1). It is true that students from a variety of linguistic backgrounds feel pressures (from within and beyond the academy) to erase their own varieties and dialects in the face of racism, xenophobia, and classism, but such erasures should not be necessary. As writing scholars, we should reject the racist and xenophobic premise that English varieties of all stripes lack "sophisticated" grammars, styles, and genres. Power circulates via particular kinds of dominant Englishes, but we reject assertions that our role as educators is

to further reinforce those problematic power structures and language assumptions. And we also reject the notion that a tool that reifies these language assumptions adds value to writing classrooms, as Kynard and Baker-Bell do in their work.

Some corners of writing studies and English education have long been complicit in furthering these racist, classist, and xenophobic assumptions about so-called good writing. As Carmen Kynard reminds us, writing studies' widespread use of rubrics and outcomes that prioritize, privilege, and even demand so-called "academic" English is part of the reason that students turn to generative AI tools in the first place: "It shouldn't come as a surprise that students will turn to AI to write [the] white-standardized essays" most likely to be rewarded by writing courses, programs, and teachers. We know of course that this focus on standard English also dominates classrooms outside of writing studies, but we feel the need here to account for how our discipline, specifically, is complicit in the erasure of linguistic variety even as it proclaims its ongoing commitment to linguistic justice via SRTOL and the more recent This Ain't Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!, which was released in July 2020. This Ain't Another Statement makes clear that "socially constructed terms like academic language and standard English are rooted in white supremacy, whiteness, and anti-Blackness and contribute to anti-Black policies (e.g., English only) that are codified and enacted to privilege white linguistic and cultural norms while deeming Black Language inferior" (Baker-Bell, et al.). Any tool that further codifies these white linguistic and cultural norms – as generative AI tools do – does active harm to students, who speak and write in a whole host of Englishes.

Some might consider the fight against generative AI to be an unwinnable uphill battle, or a fight that belongs to teachers and scholars invested in the study of technological change and artificial intelligence/machine learning. The truth is this work belongs to all of us invested in linguistic justice. SRTOL – which remains the official position of CCCC – centers the needs, rights, and experiences of linguistically diverse students in a way that articulates writing teachers' responsibility to all of our students; it also emphasizes the power that teachers have to support or do lasting harm to students. In a moment of AI hype, SRTOL serves as a reminder to resist homogenized language–the kind of language prompted and spat out by LLMs–and to defend linguistic diversity (which calls on teachers to make space for language varieties in their assignments and assessments) and to fight for linguistic justice (which requires teachers to also acknowledge the ways that racism and xenophobia have shaped classroom language expectations and redress those wrongs; see Baker-Bell and Inoue) in our classrooms and beyond. As Stephanie Jones reminds us, counteracting linguistic injustices requires an increasingly "a human-centered approach," one that centers lived experiences and languages in practice.

How long will we affirm what we know about students' rights to their own language before we make these statements matter in pedagogy and policy? How long will technologists and ethical computer scientists reveal the impacts and implications of algorithmic oppression before regulatory bodies take action? While those of us in writing studies may not have the influence of technocrats like OpenAI's Sam Altman, Twitter/X's Elon Musk, and Apple's Tim Cook, among others, the urgency for linguistic justice offers

a chance for us to act and push back against technochauvinism, which has been articulated by Meredith Broussard as the "technolibertarian" belief that technological advancement can solve all problems (8). Critically, Broussard demonstrates how technochauvinism is being carried out by "a small, elite group of men who tend to overestimate their mathematical abilities, who have systematically excluded women and people of color in favor of machines for centuries, who tend to want to make science fiction real, who have little regard for social convention, who don't believe that social norms or rules apply to them…and who have adopted the ideological rhetoric of far-right libertarian anarcho-capitalists" (85). From where we sit now, it's easy to see how the culture of technochauvinism has set the stage for technofascism[2] (McElroy). At this moment, we think of Asao Inoue's 2019 CCCC keynote, in which he urged us to "stop justifying White standards of writing as a necessary evil" because students "only need it because we keep teaching it" (364). Similar justifications are circulating about the need to teach AI literacies (see the MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI's *Student Guide to AI Literacy*). Inoue has made it clear that White Mainstream English is deadly, but its death toll only increases with the age of generative AI. Bias for White Mainstream English has enabled the proliferation of generative AI, both in writing classrooms and beyond, and leaning in to teach so-called "ethical" AI literacies will only worsen this bias and its impacts on our students and our planet. What is the human cost of White Mainstream English? What is White Mainstream English's carbon footprint? And how do we measure the harms of institutional whiteness and the refusal to listen to experts like Timnit Gebru? When is enough enough?

Next Steps: Moving Beyond White Mainstream Language Parrots

Following the example of Gebru and AI ethicists, it isn't too late for teachers–writing teachers or teachers across the university–to take up the call to promote not just linguistic diversity but linguistic justice in their classrooms and to resist tools and technologies built on algorithmic injustices. In fact, the AI moment is an opportunity for *all* of us to do better by our students. Ultimately, centering linguistic justice is also a way to do algorithmic justice. It is also a way to reject the shared eugenic enterprise of linguistic oppression and artificial general intelligence (AGI), which Gebru and Torres explain is rooted in eugenic frameworks of IQ. So, how do we champion linguistic diversity during the generative AI moment? We would point here to the work of April Baker-Bell, whose book *Linguistic Justice* highlights how monolingual and Whitestream-only approaches to literacy education do harm to students, particularly Black students. Both *Students' Right to Their Own Language* and *This Ain't Another Statement* offer important frameworks for welcoming linguistic diversity and promoting linguistic justice. As one step toward more linguistically just classrooms, *This Ain't Another Statement* explicitly calls on faculty to stop using White Mainstream English as the single standard against which they judge student writing. We call attention to the organizational commitments and scholarship about linguistic justice because we recognize the way that the outputs of LLMs flatten language variety and disconnect language practices from their historical and cultural underpinnings, as we

2 Erin McElroy uses the language of technofascism to describe both "the mechanisms and technological fantasies through which fascist conditions of possibility materialize"(100) and "the technologies, for instance eugenic techno-science, co-constitutive with fascist future making" (135). GenAI, with its hype-fueled attention to efficiency and destruction of all difference (including linguistic difference), reflects the goals and values of technofacism McElroy articulates here.

discussed above. These frameworks have implications for course design (including reading lists), assignment and assessment design, and faculty approaches to feedback. Moving toward ecological approaches to writing assessment (Inoue) and embedding students' and teachers' lived experiences into writing assessment decisions (Tinoco and Barrera Eddy) allow teachers to create more equitable assessment spaces for students from all linguistic backgrounds.

White mainstream language kills, as we've been reminded time and again. It is imperative that we recognize that linguistic justice is also environmental justice, racial justice, gender justice, and disability justice. Linguistic justice is necessary to redress settler colonialism, and linguistic justice is necessary for a healthy democracy that works for everyone. In January 2025, Gebru spoke to Bloomberg News about generative AI hype and whether the realities around AI have changed since the publication of "Stochastic Parrots," saying "[t]he academics who should be informing the public are not doing their jobs. Academics should be making claims that should be substantiated." As writing teachers and writing studies scholars, we deeply understand the importance of linguistic variation and justice, with its roots in our earliest disciplinary documents, and the eugenic histories and consequences of linguistic homogenization and erasure. We can answer Gebru's call in writing studies by championing linguistic justice and rejecting the eugenic project at the heart of generative AI.

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