Book Review of Other People's English:
Code-Meshing, Code-Switching, and African American Literacy

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Deposited 10/3/2019

Citation of published version:

Grammar(s), Performance, and Application: Contextualizing Code-Meshing and African American Literacy

Other People's English: Code-Meshing, Code-Switching, and African American Literacy. By Vershawn Young, Ashanti, Rusty Barrett, Y'Shanda Young-Rivera, and Kim Brian Lovejoy. New York: Teachers College Press. 2014. 190 pages.

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If you are looking for a *definitive* answer that resolves the questions surrounding African American literacy, code-meshing, or code-switching then this is not the book for you. *Other People's English* is a book that unsettles many of the commonplaces about African American English and the use of multiple languages in the classrooms. The book confronts language ideologies and stereotypes, provides a blueprint for incorporating critical pedagogy, and suggests areas of potential research. As Vershawn Young explains in the Introduction, "This book is designed to help multiple groups [. . .] understand [. . . and] advocate that African American English speakers [should] be allowed to blend African American language styles together with Standard English at school and at work" (1). *Other People's English* tackles questions and concerns that intersect at the disciplinary boundaries of language, education, rhetoric, and composition.

Scholars working in education and literacy studies are familiar with the concepts of "contact zones" and code-switching. Whereas code-shifting is defined as switching between two or more languages within particular contexts, the term "code-meshing" is the combination of multiple languages *and identities* within a fluid motion, formal and informal. For Vershawn Young, Ashanti, Rusty Barrett, Y'Shanda Young-Rivera, and Kim Brian Lovejoy, "code-meshing" offers new insights into language practices, pedagogical dynamics, including student-teacher dialogue, and useful lesson plans that

incorporate code-meshing and code-switching. The editors clarify ambiguities surrounding code-switching and code-meshing, including basic definitions, language structure, and how to implement these language practices in the classroom. *Other People's English* also contextualizes lesson plans through debates about language, such as the 1974 National Council of Teachers of English position statement Student's Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL). The SRTOL position statement remains useful for pre-service teachers, tenure-track and to retired teachers, and graduate students.

Other People's English mediates between theory and practice. Each of the editors compose four chapters connecting their area of concentration to the useful and pragmatic perspective of current language debates common argument regarding African American English. The grounding theme across all four sections, addressed as "units," is that they are "keenly aware that African American English has consistently been and remains a powerfully important topic in national conversations about literacy" and that "our book is informed by the same motivations that [some] linguist" take on, that is to uncover general (and even academic) misconceptions of linguistic myths (9). *Other People's English* also works toward equality in language politics for diverse language speakers, particularly speakers of African American English.

Moreover, the co-authors' areas of concentration range from African American studies, English, Linguistics, and Education. All of these areas are seen supporting the argument of linguistic variation, which is brought to the forefront of this texts' conversation about language practices in an African American context. Rusty Barrett is the author of unit one—"African American English and the Promise of Code-Meshing." His experience comes from his years as an associate professor in the linguistics program

housed in the English department at the University of Kentucky. For instance, readers interested in linguistic approaches to grammar(s) and a disciplinary perspectives surrounding African American English might read Rusty Barrett's chapter "Rewarding Language: Language Ideology and Prescriptive Grammar" for a discussion focusing on syntax variation and error. Although Barrett discusses a number of topics, he emphasizes the effect of sociolinguistic impacts African American English and code-switching. Barrett begins, in his first chapter, by advocating a more broad and global outlook of language. He particularly condones the misperceived notion of a "Standard English." Barrett, rather deconstructs ideas of "good" writing and "errors" within "Standard English."

Keeping in this line of thought, Barrett applies a reconstructed and expanded idea grammar(s) and "good" writing to social and cultural influences. He notes that the ideas of bilingualism and code-switching are beneficial and "This [types of code-switching] distinction is useful in studying grammar, but it doesn't tell us much about the social aspects of alternating between languages" (29). What can we learn about the Mayan culture and language when trying to understanding the transactions of languages between Mayan, Spanish, and English? What is lost? If this dynamic exchange of language is occurring outside of the classroom, then what is the classroom potentially missing? These are the types of questions that faces Barrett in not only this chapter but also fundamentally underline his unit and the rest of the book.

Unit two, "Code-meshing or Code-Switching" speaks directly to Barrett's critical commentary. Vershawn Young draws on his experience as both an academic and performer to address African American English in social and cultural contexts. Young

has analyzed passing novels, a comedian, and black cultural issues in one text.[1] He is an associate professor at the University of Kentucky in the African American Studies and English departments. Young describes types of biases and influences impacting linguistic behaviors in his performances, critiques, and chapters. Here, Young explores the costs of code-switching/code-meshing as social and psychological. The literature used in Young's unit builds upon theoretical, pedagological, and fundamental concepts like W.E.B. DuBois' "double consciousness" and Geneva Smitherman's linguistic "push-pull" articulation (58).

Young's exploration of language within a sociocultural identity construction for African American English users encourages identifications between sociocultural environments of linguistic behavior particularly to educational policies and practices. "However," Young asserts, "despite this widespread resignation to linguistic intolerance, code-meshing presents an alternative vision of language to teachers, one that offers the 'disempowered' a more egalitarian path into Standard English, a route that integrates academic English with their own dialects and that simultaneously seeks to end discrimination" (56). His view of code-meshing not only incorporates Barrett's attention to grammar and attention to context but also entwines a critique of performativity embedded within language. This aspect of performativity (found though out the unit) along with acknowledging dynamic and ever-changing contexts serves as a means to reconstruct methodologies for conceiving of code-meshing, code-switching, and African American Literacies in the 21-century.

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[1] "So Black I'm Blue." *Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy, and Masculinity*. Detroit. Wayne State Press, 2007. Print.

Y'Shonda Young-Rivera, a M.Ed. from Loyola University Chicago and an independent educational consultant, is the co-author of unit three, " Code-Meshing and the Responsible Education in Two Middle School Classrooms." She has over 20 years of experience in the education system particularly urban settings. Young-Rivera's background continues to develop the concepts put forward by Barrett and Young (along with their supporting and grounding scholars mentioned in their respective chapters). The chapter "Reimaging the Classroom: Code-Messing and the 21st-Century Student" by Young-Rivera connects Piaget's Formal Operational Stage of Development with metacognitive rhetorical theory and audience analysis. She describes differences between lesson plans for 4th/5th graders and 8th graders in which code-meshing is explicitly built-in to communicate language variations and ideologies. Young-Rivera's approach to interpretation of code-meshing's implications will be of use to educators, linguists, rhetoricians, and advocates of alternative or multiple English(s).

These supporters of code-meshing, code-switching, and African American Englishes and Literacies, like Young-Rivera, will find more in-depth knowledge because of multiple centers of focus, like building classroom communities and scaffolding time for journal writing or self-reflection, and practical applications beneficial across disciplines and within disciplines—in terms of language use and understanding. For instance, the question and conflict of encouraging SRTOL within classrooms are taken up at the intersection of language identity construction and pedagogy in "Lesson 2" and "Lesson 3." Young-Rivera looks closely at the relation to school and home language as it affects perceptions of race, class, and possibly even gender (98-101). Meta-critiques of language stereotypes and misidentifications are addressed in these lessons. What does it

mean to speak in certain ways? How can we incorporate language diversity without being exclusionary or poignant? Like the other co-authors (and many other authors in the field of English), Young-Rivera challenges traditional models of literacy enabling the dismantling of some power behind the politics of language used as a gatekeeping tool (i.e. common core standards) in traditional educational settings.

The last unit, unit four "Code-Meshing and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy for College Writing Instruction," is authored by Kim Brian Lovejoy. Lovejoy is an associate professor of English at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis where writing and literacy remain a focus of interest and research. His initial chapter of the unit, "Code-Meshing: Teachers and Students Creating Community," explores the newly re-centered ideology of language(s) that included code-meshing. By using student narrative and class interactions within college-level discourses, Lovejoy builds on the previous units' arguments of incorporating code-meshing into lesson plans and classroom dialogue.

It would be short-sighted to contain Lovejoy's grounding argument to proving that code-meshing can work in a college-level English classroom. He challenges us to seek ways in which we engage "voice" in any college-level classroom and ultimately argues that the moments when "voice" seeps in are also moment in which we can call for code-meshing be that activities, directions, assignments. Lovejoy posits:

> On the one hand we tell kids and urge other teachers to value students' home languages, saying that their language is their identity, and to assault one is to assault the other[2]. Then, on the other hand, as Vershawn argues, we essentially undermine this effort by insisting that they edit out their

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[2] Recalling Gloria Anzaldúa

Englishes on high-stakes standardized tests and writing. I have come to wonder: Is this really the double speak we wish to preach?

In "Code-Meshing through Self-Directed Writing," Lovejoy speaks to this conversation about a "double speak" stigma and how to address it in the writing classroom. I argue, as other Expressivist scholars like Peter Elbow have claimed, that implementing self-reflexive activities or instructions focusing on voice can disrupt the "double speak" stigma Lovejoy addresses and the "good" grammar deficit discussed by Barrett in spaces other than the writing classroom.

The use of multiple perspectives and theoretical lenses, such as composition, rhetoric, literacy, linguistics, and education, enable the co-authors to argue for code-meshing. One theoretical lens, however, was missed or at least only noted though not fully contextualized: the work of writing centers. Although Barrett mentions various studies that account for racial bias in aural/oral speech patterns, one contemporary study by Nancy Effinger Wilson[3] more appropriately addresses race, writing, and language policies suggesting that individuals, specifically writing tutors and writing faculty, were also swayed by racial-bias (aural, oral, and written) when presented with writing samples. If writing is collaborative and dynamic like these co-authors mention, then why no discussion of writing centers? This real, dynamic, and collaborative space affects language ideologies as much as the classrooms and can bridge the space between the civil/academic/administration liminality. "Because code-meshing is a practice that

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[3] Wilson, Nancy Effinger. 2011. "Bias in the Writing Center: Tutor Perceptions of African American Language." *Writing Centers and the New Racism: A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change*. eds. Laura and Karen Rowan. Logan: Utah State Univ. Press, 177-191. Print.

students have not been encouraged to attempt, teachers need to create an environment that will invite students to trust their language," asserts Young (145). Since students are not commonly encouraged in the classroom or by teachers, why not look to writing centers as active sites for engaging in code-meshing?

With that said, Young, and the co-authors, still do a good job clarifying and summarizing general arguments regarding racial stereotypes, levels of inadequacies, (both Non-Standard, informal) contextualizations of African American English and Literacies. The authors also clarify technical descriptions like morphology and syntax as it relates to African American English. These explanations of language, literacy, and context proves helpful for readers concerned with finding specific information within a particular discourses such as linguistics, education, social behavior, and English. These succinct conversions of grand theories to digestible sentences are beneficial because the information becomes undiluted and demystified. This clarification of subjects, texts, and concepts makes information easier to understand and easier to identify rather than wading through unnecessary jargon.

The editors argue for code-meshing—"allowing black students to mix black English with an academic register"—across academia's discourses and settings (6). They describe the importance of code-meshing in developing writing skills, primarily for students aware of African American literacies or literacy conventions other than Standard English. In order to carry out this purpose, the co-authors creatively structure the entire text around a number of leading questions and concepts. (I) What is code-meshing? What is the impact of grammar(s) II) Is code-meshing the best approach (theoretical or practical) to multiliteracies? and (III). How does code-meshing effect language

ideologies? (IV). What is biliteracies and Monodidelectal and what are their respective impacts on a speaker in social and cultural contexts?

The idea of code-meshing may seem overwhelming at first. The continuing evolution of definitions and seemingly endless examples of sociocultural contexts of African American English and Literacies may add to some one's level of anxiety about taking on the role of adopting yet another linguistic diversity approach in your classroom. Nevertheless, *Other People's English's* demonstrates a continuous and growing definition of code-meshing because code-meshing can (and does) exists in many different facets. Young, Barrett, Young-Rivera, and Lovejoy propose so many different examples in which code-meshing is exhibited in so that we can understand, parse out, and challenge the regularity (or irregularity) of code-meshing and code-switching practices. If you were even slightly confused about code-meshing before, apprehensive about implementing code-meshing in your class, or only heard about code-switching then this book is worth a read.

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