

Book Review *Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and the Learning of Latinidad*
by Jonathan Rosa

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Several decades of research in writing studies has detailed how scholars have rejected the notion that linguistic variations of English often associated with minoritized populations are somehow lesser, “bad” versions of English (Delpit; Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez; Smitherman and Alim), pushed against the erasure of home languages for Standard English (Cummins; Moss), and furthered our notions of language difference in multilingual contexts (Horner and Trimbur; Matsuda). Recent research in anti-racist, Black-language pedagogies (Baker-Bell; Condon and Young) and decolonial language pedagogies (Cushman) continue to push the field’s understanding of how literacy instruction is impacted by the social constructions of race and racial identities. In the 2021 Conference on College Composition & Communication (CCCC) Statement on White Language Supremacy, scholars from the field and across decades described White Language Supremacy (WLS) as an ever-present, yet “unseen, naturalized orientation to the world,” highlighting the ways that language serves to produce both insiders and outsiders, particularly in educational setting (Richardson et al.).¹ In line with much of this research is Jonathan Rosa’s *Looking Like a Language, Sound Like a Race: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and the Learning of Latinidad*, an in-depth ethnographic investigation into the co-constructions of race, ethnicity, and language. While examining a K-12 context, Rosa’s monograph represents a deep contribution to the field of writing studies as he complicates the many ways that language and racial identity are entangled and provides a stark reminder of how education can act as a vehicle for language supremacy.

To construct this text, Rosa uses participant observation and interviews with faculty, students, and administrators in a newly founded Chicago Public School (CPS) called New Northwest High School (NNHS). Rosa speaks to the ways in which racialized identities and language are co-constructed and naturalized in “modern governance, such that languages are perceived as racially embodied and race is perceived as linguistically intelligible” (2). Through understanding and following the experiences of students of NNHS, who were classified as 90% Puerto Rican and Mexican, Rosa unpacks the ways in which Latinx linguistic practices are constructed through racioethnic identities.

This ethnography builds from Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa’s work on raciolinguistic ideologies, which critiques assimilationist approaches to language instruction that requires students to use “appropriate” language practices rooted in white hegemony as a means of gaining legitimacy. Rosa expands on the impact of raciolinguistic ideologies describing how students designated as learners of English, and particularly standard academic English or what Baker-Bell calls “White Mainstream English” (9), are perpetually positioned as at a deficit and requiring remediation to acquire the dominant language practices. As Rosa details, this practice is reified and consistently

systematized in institutions through the co-naturalization of race and language. Instead, Rosa seeks to denaturalize these categories and provide historical context to the creation of Latinx identities.

To start, Rosa describes the ways in which the CPS system uses the premise of “school choice” to combat educational underachievement, despite the ways in which it serves to sort and isolate students by race and therefore perceived ability; school choice then reinforces agency as a vehicle for equity, a connection which needs to be problematized. In dialogue with NNHS’s principal, Dr. Baez, Rosa interrogates the principal’s mission to transform “gangbangers and hoers” into “Young Latino Professionals” (42), a mission “that seeks to combine upward socioeconomic mobility with the maintenance of one’s ethnoracial and cultural identity” (43) and requires students to enter a binary of identity using a strict uniform policy and an emphasis on detracking. In exchange for homogenizing their appearance and classroom experience, students were granted access to similar experiences; however, as Rosa describes, these policies worked to frame their identities as inherent barriers to success and recognize the differing needs of students.

In the following chapter, Rosa details the “multidimensional processes that demonstrate the linkages between diaspora, national (be)longing, and institutional experiences of difference” (72) associated with forming Mexican, Puerto Rican, Hispanic, and Latinx identities. Rosa’s investigation of these identities is best problematized in his discussion of capturing identity and simultaneously theorizing it as a social construct as he asks: “That is, if identity is socially constructed, then are we unable to locate and engage it analytically without merely reifying it?” (87). Rosa’s question lends to the trouble of documenting identity, in that it may serve to concretize it in the minds of readers, manifesting fixed characteristics of people, further socially constructing an identity. Rosa ultimately finds that the fixed nature of these identities is confusing for the students as their perceptions change from year to year and are complicated by questions about interracial relationships. Chapter 3 goes on to detail the embodiment of ethnoracial identities where emblems of subgroups are decontextualized into broad representations of Latinidad that serve to other and differentiate, emphasizing the “unmarked status” of Whiteness and the ways in which Whiteness “serves as a stand-in for Americanness” (105) in contrast to practices outside of Whiteness. In discussing the visibility and variability of Latinx identity, Rosa discusses the social process of identity creation and visibility as a process of “joint creation and erasure of difference” (107) broadly highlighted in the charts created by asking students to speak to the traits of the Puerto Rican and Mexican students.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 speak to the linguistic impacts of these constructions of identity, starting with the inverted conceptualization of bilingualism where the speaker is not proficient in either language in ways that matter to the standardized linguistic practices; in this linguistic paradigm, the student’s proficiency in unmarked and academic English is the only goal. This contradiction speaks to the ways in which school designations like bilingual and ELL can erase portions of identity and undermine ability in the service of a linguistic norm rooted in Whiteness and how cultural diversity initiatives (which stand in for race) are just vehicles for ensuring non-white students are assimilated. In Chapter 5, Rosa goes on to discuss raciolinguistic enregisterment that “creates a set of practices that allows them to manage these competing demands” (144) in school spaces that largely act as

“flagship institutions for language standardization” (150) using Inverted Spanish, a concept that moves past “Mock Spanish” (Hill).

Finally, Chapter 6 marks a turn toward textual literacies in forms of legitimate and illegitimate writing and reading practices that reflect the way that powerful institutions have defined appropriate and valued literacy practices and criminalized others and how students have internalized and complicated these beliefs. In this, students again enter a binary of identity possibilities: “gang banger” vs. “good kid,” which can extend out to several other identities positioned as mutually exclusive and opposed: “smart,” “confident,” “good” vs. “remedial” comes to mind. These are taught constructs that disadvantage students, but they continue because of broad rhetorics about schooling that reduce identity to binaries.

The paradigms presented by Rosa are vitally important in understanding how race, language, and identity can be conflated in their co-constructions. The intersection between race, language, and identity is made most apparent for writing instructors in Chapter 6 where we see classroom practices situated through the lens of raciolinguistic ideologies, demonstrating the many opposing forces and conflicting beliefs students negotiate in creating and understanding their literate (broadly defined) selves. Through this lens, students have adapted to taught schemas of what constitutes true writing and reading, reminding me of an old study about “schooled literacy” (Evans) where students segregate reading and writing tasks by what is valued by school and not. However, Rick Evans does not consider intersections of identity and race, leaving out conversations made famous by Shirley Brice Heath.

Rosa’s ethnographic work is a clear contribution to the field of writing studies in providing another framework for considering how language and racialized identity intersect. While this text allows us to extend our understanding around the ways that race and language are entangled, Rosa does not comment on the applications of this framework in the classroom or in education broadly, leaving room for practitioners and scholars to interpret how raciolinguistic ideologies can inform anti-racist classroom practices and policy.

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NOTES

¹ Editorial footnote: We wish to acknowledge the full list of authors who contributed to this statement: Elaine Richardson, Asao Inoue, Denise Troutman, Qwo-Li Driskill, Bonnie Williams, Austin Jackson, Isabel Baca, Ana Celia Zentella, Victor Villanueva, Rashidah Muhammad, Kim B. Lovejoy, David F. Green, and Geneva Smitherman. It is LiCS's editorial policy to name all authors of a text instead of using "et al." We do this because "et al." can obscure the full contributions of all authors, instead centering the efforts of a single author. We also recognize that when many authors have contributed to a text, the list of names in a citation can make it hard for readers to follow the paragraph they are reading. In such cases, we include a note like this one to name and make visible the efforts of all contributors.