

Other People's English: Code-Meshing, Code-Switching, and African-American Literacy, by Vershawn Ashanti Young, Rusty Barrett, Y'Shanda Young-Rivera, and Kim Brian Lovejoy. New York: Teachers College P, 2014. 192 pp.

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I'm sitting in an auditorium in Bryant University, listening to Vershawn Ashanti Young open up the floor for questions after his keynote address to the 2014 Northeast Writing Centers Association Conference. Young had just finished arguing that through a pedagogy of "code-switching," the burden of discourse assimilation invariably falls on African American students. Instead of positioning students to switch between codes based on setting and audience, Young had proposed to the audience his term, "code-meshing." Code-meshing, he explains, is an approach to writing and interpreting texts that advocates for blending language codes in the classroom, rather than switching from one set of linguistic codes to another, depending on the "appropriate" social and discursive contexts. Young wraps up his slides, and there is an energy in the big room, like the moment before you take a deep breath. The first question is a familiar one, almost boilerplate: "But how can I let a student, who had come to see me for help, walk out without my having shown them the way the school wants them to write?" At least a dozen hands shoot up. The responses that follow, some echoing this anxiety, some responding critically to the implicated assumptions, are indicative of a tense, decades-old pedagogical impasse in language and writing studies. In *Other People's English: Code-Meshing, Code-Switching, and African American Literacy*, published in 2013, Young and his co-authors Rusty Barrett, Y'Shanda Young-Rivera, and Kim Brian Lovejoy offer a new way into this tension, unprecedented in its translation of theory into a practical teaching road map.

While teachers and scholars in language and writing fields are trying to understand the viability of code-switching, *Other People's English* unpacks the fluidity, mobility, and heteroglossia of English through the possibilities of code-meshing, and outlines what structures of racism code-switching reconstitutes, despite the good intentions by which it is deployed. Blending linguistics and composition theory with curricular applications in K-12 and higher education, this four-part book is "a conversation," as Victor Villanueva puts it in the foreword, "not in your face, not in demand of a conversion, but a conversation based on personal experiences, classroom experiences, and decades of research and scholarship" (x-xi). The goal of *Other People's English*, a direct reference to Lisa Delpit's *Other People's Children*, is to give readers "analytical snapshots" of how code-meshing is already being used in classrooms at several levels of

education, as well as to present the exigency of code-meshing as an alternative to code-switching, as effective and inclusive as the latter may seem. Young continuously points to the elision of the ways in which code-switching is connected to racial self-understanding, and suggests further that code-switching is not just an isolated school practice, a necessary way into success, but rather another social construct “perpetually thrust upon Blacks to prove themselves when communicating, particularly in the mainstream and/or with non-Blacks” (5). Code-switching is then an act of racial compromise for African American English users, one that code-meshing pedagogy desires to move beyond.

In the following four sections, the book sets up theoretical, personal, and pedagogical approaches to code-meshing. In “African American English and the Promise of Code-Meshing,” linguist Rusty Barrett lays the groundwork for the subsequent, pedagogically oriented sections by articulating two organizing ideas related to language and power: first, the *who*—the physical body doing the writing and speaking—matters a great deal in terms of how much value is assigned to undervalued codes like African American English; and second, no language, Standard English included, is a static, neutral, code. In “Code-Meshing or Code-Switching?”, Young argues that code-switching, despite well-intended goals of inclusion, is in practice a vestige of legalized segregation, and “an educational strategy that forces African Americans to view their language culture and identity as antithetical to the U.S. mainstream” (9). It is not enough, then, to “value” African American English in schools. The system is such that black students must constantly “limit their display of African American cultural styles and use of African American language to sites that are near exclusive to African American people, and they must keep these out of the academic, economic, and professional spheres” (59). Indeed, that Black English is often seen merely as a way to inflect writing with some sort of “authentic” but always marginal identity obfuscates the ways in which this undervalued discourse influences and spills over into other forms of English, including Standard Academic English. It is imperative, Young says, that we ask whom this narrow notion of English serves.

Most notably, this collection builds on and complicates Delpit’s notion of a “culture of power” in a pedagogy that enables students to learn the discourse they will be asked to master while at the same time incorporating undervalued English into learning spaces and school texts to demarginalize it (Delpit 24). In “Code-Meshing and Responsible Education in Two Middle School Classrooms,” Y’shanda Young-Rivera offers an elementary education perspective on how code-meshing works on the ground, within several classroom contexts. Young-Rivera, previously a skeptic of code-meshing, offers revealing articulations by fourth-, fifth-, and eighth-grade students of the terms “code-meshing” and “code-switching.” She includes daily lesson plans, as well as images of the

students' written homework responses, in which the young writers identify and interpret the code-meshing they encounter in their world. This chapter serves to not only emphasize how easily implemented the frame is but also how flexible the code-meshing curriculum can be, given the imperative of a state-wide accountability project like Common Core requirements. In "Code-meshing and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy for College Writing Instruction," Lovejoy speaks from his teaching experience as a white man in a first-year college writing program and English department that are predominantly African American. By sharing assignments, student writing, and most tellingly, conversations he has had with colleagues initially resistant to any code-meshing content in the curriculum, Lovejoy teases out the multifarious implications that African American English carries especially in a post-secondary education context. Both Young-Rivera and Lovejoy fundamentally re-frame writing as an activity rooted in community and embodiment of daily experiences. The authors' narratives tackle the quandary of what we "owe" our students: we must work toward showing that "a culture of standard language ideology" exists, and moreover, that we can work to change it from the ground up (122).

That this change can happen in the classroom, as the authors of the book maintain, shifts the epistemology of writing and teaching. In *Other People's English*, the pedagogical imperative moves beyond solely teaching students what the languages of academic institutions are and how to use them. It also moves beyond Delpit's imperative to give students access to the "language of economic success" (Delpit 68). Rather than building a language curriculum that assumes a Standard Academic English code deficiency in students, educators can work with students from a space that emphasizes how their language experiences are *already* engaging with different linguistic codes, both standard and disenfranchised. As Young-Rivera demonstrates, by helping students investigate the ways in which different language codes work in the world around them, especially the ways their home languages are actively influencing languages of power, a code-meshing curriculum can work against the ongoing historical elision that languages spoken by people of color in the United States experience, and take historically disenfranchised linguistic codes out of the marginalized Other space.

The exigency of *Other People's English* should be clear: this, as Vershawn Young puts it, is a "learning and teaching" book" (10). The goal of the text is to illustrate code-meshing theories and practices accessibly. Each chapter offers visually distinct glosses reminiscent of a textbook in that each sets up an anticipated "concern" that a reader might have, offers "guiding inquiries" that raise frequently asked questions about code meshing, suggests "teaching tips" for classroom use, and presents a prompt at the end—"What are your thoughts?"—that invites readers to engage with ideas from their own perspectives. These visual aids invite readers to make code-meshing a "shared project,

one that will not only inform instructional practices, but possibly intervene into the culture of prejudices against African American English as a mainstream language variety” (10). How we, composition and language scholars and instructors, are implicated in these power systems around language is an old question. Moreover, both Delpit and Young persistently position all educators to consider what is at stake when teaching the “culture of power.” Yet through this book, Young, Barrett, Rivera-Young, and Lovejoy suggest that the project before us is about more than exposing ideologies or hidden histories. To promote the “power of language rather than codes of power” (156) means we must make space for “standard” and undervalued codes to exist right alongside each other, to mesh on the pages, and in the classrooms, and in institutions that, despite their rhetoric, go out of their way to exclude codes uttered by non-white bodies. The time for change is now, Young insists, and while code-switching offers one approach to opening up access in the classroom, it does not alleviate the marginalization of African American English. *Other People’s English* positions us to consider the ways we are inscribed by the tools we use despite our good intentions, to question our current pedagogical epistemologies and the terms we use, and to conscientiously extend our theory into practice.

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Works Cited

Delpit, Lisa D. *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. New York: New Press, 1995. Print.