

## BOOK REVIEWS

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H. SAMY ALIM & GENEVA SMITHERMAN, *Articulate while Black: Barack Obama, language, and race in the US*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. xviii, 205. Pb. \$24.95.

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*Articulate while Black: Barack Obama, language, and race in the US* addresses the impact of Barack Obama's candidacy and presidency on language and racial politics. H. Samy Alim & Geneva Smitherman combine in-depth sociolinguistic analyses of Obama's language across a range of rhetorical situations with a metalinguistic approach in addressing discourse related to Obama's ways of communicating. In addition to drawing on key scholarship in language and culture studies, the authors use a range of popular resources including conversations and surveys with younger members of the Obama Generation, responses from mainstream media outlets, and Hip Hop culture texts. Even as Alim & Smitherman offer examples of the president's styleshifting, the authors themselves employ a range of discourses throughout the book, intermingling academic jargon with Black English syntax.

Ch. 1, "'Nah, we straight': Black language and America's first black president", presents the book's goal of *LANGUAGING RACE*, equally valuing language's role in the racial politics of the United States (3). Alim & Smitherman argue that Obama's ability to integrate elements of White and Black English in his speech was central to his being elected the first Black president. They also take the position that Obama's way of using language has been an important tool in his navigation of a racially charged political landscape. The authors pair detailed analysis of Obama's language use with a more general sociolinguistic discussion of Black

language. They also point out that Black Americans they surveyed evidenced more awareness of Obama's styleshifting and his integration of Black English features (including slang, inflection, copula absence, and signification) than White Americans, who expressed a lack of sensitivity to these features. Alim & Smitherman see this inability to recognize the distinctiveness of Black language as the basis of a White cultural hegemony they aim to reveal and disrupt.

In Ch. 2, "A. W. B. (Articulate while Black): Language and racial politics in the United States", the authors take a metalinguistic approach, discussing popular media responses to Obama's language practices. Their analysis in this chapter also includes a consideration of the role language serves in contemporary US racial politics. Alim & Smitherman then offer an analysis of mainstream uses of *articulate*, a reference that is often construed as complimentary to Black speakers of mainstream White English (including Barack Obama), but at its core reveals a racist legacy connecting language use to negative ideologies about Black Americans. Alim & Smitherman next connect the historical function of *articulate* in the policing of black language and black bodies to the contemporary practice of language-based racial discrimination. The authors also consider multiracial and multilingual respondents' understandings of *articulate* in describing their use of mainstream White English. The authors note that a closer look at the use of *articulate* reveals the presence of a more savvy kind of racism (what Tim Wise terms "Racism 2.0") that takes such forms as linguistic profiling and forced cultural assimilation. Rather than yielding to exceptionalizing discourse that undervalues language diversity and works in the service of more subtle (but no less pervasive) forms of racism, Alim & Smitherman advocate for language practices indicative of a more inclusive and democratic society.

Ch. 3, "Makin a way outta no way", focuses on Obama's "A more perfect union" speech and the critical events leading up to and following the address. Alim & Smitherman open their discussion by locating the sermons of Rev. Jeremiah Wright within the American Jeremiad tradition. Here they offer a counternarrative to the widespread misreading of Wright's intended message. By focusing on public interpretations of the Wright sound bites, the authors outline the rhetorical situation for Obama's response, which they note called for an address that was neither overly sympathetic to Black Americans' marginal status, nor overly supportive of the racial status quo. The authors note that in the speech Obama referenced the traditional Black proverb "to make a way outta no way", but that "Obama articulated this vernacular idiom in the formal voice of the LWC (Language of Wider Communication, or as some would have it, the Language of Whiter Communication)" (76). Thus, Obama was able to synthesize elements of Black and White language use to engender a wider audience. Similarly, Alim & Smitherman locate Obama's speech both within the Jeremiad frame and also beyond the tradition, in order to address the needs of the present racial and political climate and this particular rhetorical situation. For example, instead of drawing on the Jeremiadic element of forecasting doom, the speech calls for racial solidarity to address the nation's lingering practice

of black disenfranchisement and racial discrimination. As such, Obama shows a rhetorical and linguistic responsiveness that exemplifies a new way to address racial issues in the US.

In Ch. 4, the authors analyze dominant public responses to black cultural communication. This chapter shifts its focus toward discourse that is originally issued within and for Black publics and then taken up in the White dominant public. The authors use Barack and Michelle's 2008 "fist bump heard 'round the world"—what most Black Americans know as "giving a pound"—as means to focus "on the social process of how Black communication **becomes** controversial" (121, bold in original). Here, Alim & Smitherman draw on two concepts coined by linguist Arthur Spears, *UNCENSORED MODE* and *NORMALIZATION*, to challenge the assessment of certain Black gestures and language use as taboo. By way of example, the authors reference previous discussions of the terms *nigga* and *muthafucka* as semantic expressions that carry contextually specific meanings. They trace the varied meanings of the terms from Smitherman's *Talkin and testifyin* (1986) to contemporary uses within Black publics and Hip Hop culture. The authors flip the script in noting that the controversies about Black language, rather than revealing something about the people who speak the language, evidence the diminished social status of the speakers of that language.

Ch. 5 addresses the relationship between Hip Hop culture and Barack Obama. Here the authors situate rapper Young Jeezy's music video "My president" as a Hip Hop cultural text that is sensitive to multiple audiences. The images and the lyrics, they assert, position Young Jeezy as a voice for youth in Hip Hop culture. Their reading of the text reinterprets the so-called glorification of drug culture as a sociopolitical critique of poor black disenfranchisement from mainstream formal economies. The authors then return to a metalinguistic frame to address criticisms of "My president" and other Hip Hop and Black cultural responses to Obama's election. More than just a cultural connection, Alim & Smitherman argue that the relationship between Obama and Hip Hop also bears witness to the marginalized political and physical location of poor Black Americans.

Ch. 6 restates Alim & Smitherman's main goal of the book, "to *language race*—to think about the linguistic dimensions of race—in order to move the national conversation on race forward" (169). The first part of the chapter draws on an interview with a well-meaning White high school teacher as an example of mainstream views of Black language and, ultimately, its speakers. The authors note that the demand made by educators for Black students to codeswitch from their home language to Standard English merely reinforces White cultural and linguistic hegemony. In offering examples of Black students' inventiveness and creativity with language, Alim & Smitherman propose that a more developed sensitivity to these practices will benefit students, teachers, and the educational system as a whole. The authors use the remainder of the chapter to present examples of lessons designed to help students develop more awareness of language variation and engage them in reflexive ethnographic research of language use in their communities. The aim

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is to move students and teachers toward more critical understandings of the relationships between language and structural racism, such that they can face the challenge of more complex social and political relations.

*Articulate while Black* is accessible to both general readers and researchers interested in the influence of Obama and his presidency in the US, especially with regard to relationships of race, language, and culture in the postcivil rights era. The book has much to offer to the areas of sociolinguistics, cultural studies, and rhetorical scholarship, and Ch. 6 is particularly useful for teachers and teacher educators who are interested in developing more critical pedagogies with regard to language diversity. Overall, *Articulate while Black* is a work that reveals and challenges the contemporary landscape of language and race in the US, while offering an example of the democratic use of language which the work advocates.

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BETTINA MIGGE & ISABELLE LÉGLISE, *Exploring language in a multilingual context: Variation, interaction and ideology in language documentation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xi, 359. Hb. \$76.36.

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Using the quest for a definition of ‘Takitaki’ as an organizing principle, Migge & Léglise lead us on a cool, informative tour of western French Guiana. From the gripping introduction, which immediately sets up the relevance of their study, through a discussion of the urgent need to study and theorize from this community (§7.5), to the final chapter, which brings together many aspects of sociolinguistics in a well-written critique, this tour-de-force is a monumental description of a set of inter-related communities, languages, and interaction processes. Connecting Critical Discourse Analysis, Variationist Sociolinguistics, and Language Documentation, they triangulate among multiple methods to investigate a set of phenomena, none of which has a clear definition as its starting point. In the book, they describe (309):

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