

their refusal to stay narrow – they consistently try to draw connections and explore relationships between things not always studied together (e.g., different levels of context, different cultures or nationality, native vs. non-native speakers of a language, different types or genres of texts, the relationship between spoken and written discourse, and the documents that are produced and the people who produce and use those documents) – this breadth is achieved at the cost of theoretical consistency, data adequacy, and methodological rigor.

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GENEVA SMITHERMAN, *Word from the mother: Language and African Americans*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Pp. xiii, 172. Hb \$80.00.

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Intended for specialists and general readers alike, this book draws upon linguistics and cultural studies to describe African American Language (AAL). Smitherman details the linguistic, cultural, and social forces AAL is both embedded in and embeds.

In chapter 1, “African American Language: So good it’s bad” (pp. 1–19), Smitherman introduces the reader to AAL by covering past debates over the nature of AAL, linguistic research on it, and the corresponding efforts to change educational curricula to suit the needs of AAL speakers. In chapter 2, “Words and expressions, proverbs and familiar sayings” (20–48), she lists words or phrases constituting a core of “Black Semantics” which serves as a “litmus test of Black Linguistic Knowledge” (20). In chapter 3, “The N-words” (49–63), Smitherman delves into the history of three N-words, *negro*, *nigger* and *nigga*, to explain their range of meanings, which hinge crucially upon the identities of the speaker and listener in addition to other aspects of the context of use. In chapter 4, “Honeyz and playaz talkin that talk” (64–81), Smitherman illustrates the AAL tradition of linguistic creativity by explaining the AAL notions of “play” and “game,” and the practices of signifying, the dozens, and trash-talking.

In chapter 5, “‘I used to love H.E.R’: Hip Hop, in its essence and real” (82–107), Smitherman samples key moments and artists in the history of Hip Hop to argue that members of the culture can and should effect political changes through social critique and action, despite the sometimes counterproductive influences of commercialism and materialistic consumption. To explain that we can best understand socially raw or sexually explicit Hip Hop lyrics in the context of the Black Oral Tradition, she places current artists in dialogue with those in prior genres as well as novelists and poets who draw from this tradition. In chapter 6, “‘All around the world, same song’” (109–120), Smitherman provides the historical context to the crossover of elements from Black Language and Culture to White America and the rest of the world. She argues that though such crossover always took place, it is now more rampant than ever. While she acknowledges positive aspects to this development, she observes that the predominantly commercial nature of the crossover, coupled with the economic plight of many African Americans to this day “call into question ... [its] value ... to African Americans” (119).

In chapter 7, “‘Negro dialect, the last barrier to integration?’” (121–145), Smitherman draws upon a range of scholars and studies to argue that while the economic, social, and educational situations of African Americans have in some ways advanced, they have in other ways deteriorated or stayed the same; she further explains the significance to policy of her notion of “linguistic push-pull”; and she proposes a number of changes to current educational policies, which include adopting a national policy of bilingualism or multilingualism and introducing the study of AAL to high school students. Sociolinguists are likely to find Smitherman’s proposals appealing. In the context of negative public attitudes about AAL, the problem continues to be getting these policies implemented.

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