

Review

Looking at Language to Learn about Race and Racism

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Eddy, Robert, and Victor Villanueva, eds. *A Language and Power Reader: Representations of Race in a "Post-Racist" Era*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2014. Print. 288 pages.

Because my colleagues and I are developing a new university writing program, it is *kairotic* that I have the opportunity to review Robert Eddy and Victor Villanueva's *A Language and Power Reader: Representations of Race in a "Post-Racist" Era*. We are thinking about program goals, our philosophy of language, and curriculum for the first-year writing experience, among other things. One of our core philosophical assumptions is that literacy is a social, cultural, and political process, and that to be a critical reader and writer in such processes, one must problematize one's existential language situations. This means that students must find ways to pose problems that their language practices may create when they are set next to the dominant academic discourse or when others read and judge their writing. This is most important at our school where we enroll many students of color, ESL, and multilingual students, but it's equally important for other sites and classrooms that consider the manifestations of class, gender, and sexual orientation in language practices.

Language and Power as a whole mostly attempts to address issues of racism and power in the US through a close and careful look at language. It's pitched to first-year college students, and the editors make a tacit argument that its readings offer opportunities to assess (i.e., read in order to make judgments) language and language practices as cultural and racialization processes. The explicit framing they offer centers on reading as a historically and culturally informed practice. Throughout the book, the editors prompt readers to read the texts as sites where race, culture, and power are (re)created and contested.

Their introduction, which in my estimation should be the first reading from the book that any first-year writing student does, sets up an approach

to thinking about language (from poetry to fiction to essays to newspaper articles) as a kind of racial project, in the way Michael Omi and Howard Winant define the term. While the editors mention Omi and Winant, they do not discuss the concept of racial projects. In Omi and Winant's terms, "racial projects do both the ideological and the practical 'work'" (125) of making connections between the structures and signification that constitute racial formation processes in society. In other words, racial projects are the structural and linguistic/symbolic methods individuals, institutions, and society use to (re)create race and racial formations in society; thus, they often are the machines of racism and unequal power relations. Omi and Winant define the term: "A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particularly racial lines" (125). While they do not explicitly use the concept of racial formation, Eddy and Villanueva suggest it through a statement of their purpose: "This collection is less concerned with proving or disproving race than it is with having us explore the uses of language that separate us and the uses of language that might bring us all closer together" (7). I read their purpose as a way to think of all instances of language and texts, like those collected in the book, as racial projects that are then occasions for dialogue among people with differences.

Differences are key to understanding the usefulness of this collection for writing teachers and classrooms. It is in the dialogue around differences in interpretations, in assumptions about language, and in the ways each text represents various identities and cultures that makes the collection worth considering as a reader in a writing classroom. With such differences, there is always conflict and disagreement which the editors anticipate and address. The editors show their own disagreement over the collection in their introduction and use it as a way to validate multiple responses that may be heated and passionate, showing how important it is that folks of goodwill, who see things very differently, can argue and disagree but must keep dialoguing if change or progress is to be made. This point comes from a chapter by Carmen Kynard and Robert Eddy, "Toward a New Critical Framework," in which they argue for "hostage negotiation" work among students and teachers, that is, a pedagogy that requires students and teachers to continually negotiate, even argue, over the ideologies and scripts that make meaningful their worlds in order to remake the world into a more equitable and safer place for everyone (277). This dialoguing and reworking is continual work.

To accomplish their purpose, the book has twenty-seven chapters that are mostly non-fiction by various poets, writers, students, and essayists and

is organized in four sections, which I discuss below. The editors offer a short introduction to each section that provides key terms, problems, and questions for readers to consider when reading the selections in that section. These key terms and questions offer ways to see why these texts might be read together under the theme of, say, “Defining Language and Culture.”

In the first section of the same name, for instance, Eddy and Villanueva begin by ruminating on the etymology of the word *race* as one that once referred to a measurement of things such as spices and roots. (The editors offer the example of “a race of ginger.”) They then move to thinking of more contemporary uses of the term that come from the eighteenth century and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach’s anthropological work that formulated the racial categories we most often think of today. From there, they discuss the word *ethnic* and its Greek origins in the concept of the heathen, then its association over time to Jews. The section’s introductory discussion pushes readers to read with this kind of attention to language and ends by posing directly a way to engage with the readings. They explain:

So the task in this section is in non-Aristotelian, non-dictionary defining: in looking at how the authors regard themselves and their roots, their cultures, their language ways without reducing them to essences, yet arriving at some general principles. What do they *tend* to have in common? How are they different, not only in their descriptions but in their ways of describing? What does all this say about language and culture? (26–27)

Each section has a similar kind of introducing piece that is well informed and gently leads readers by offering similar kinds of interpretive material, often around race, cultural discussions, or racism. After each selection, the editors provide brief commentary on the piece and writing activities that move through “Prewriting,” “Writing,” and “Revision” that help students think about issues of racial and cultural difference found in the selection. This means that the collection works best if classrooms consider the editors’ introductions and follow-up discussions after each reading just as carefully as they might the reading itself since the editors’ discussions help students read and think through the readings as racial projects (language projects with cultural, racial, and power implications).

While there are two standout chapters in each of the four sections, the second and third sections, “Complicating Identities” and “Crossing Cultures,” are the most potentially provocative for writing teachers who might adopt this reader for a first-year writing classroom. The standouts give some indication of the flavor of this collection. In the “Defining Language and Culture” section, Leanne Howe’s story “Blood Sacrifice” and Darrell H.

Y. Lum's story "Beer Can Hat" are powerful and provocative. Howe uses Choctaw language, a recursive and looping storyline that drifts back and forth through generations of women, and narrations of ceremony and ritual to explore a Native American woman's sacrifice, while Lum's story uses Hawai'ian pidgin exclusively to narrate a story about a boy and his friend, Bobo, who is "lolo in da head" that explores contradictions in stereotypes, particularly the intellectually disabled.

In the second section, "Complicating Identities," the standouts bookend the section. Janet Campbell Hale's "The Only Good Indian" is an essay that explores the complicated persona of John McLoughlin, founder of Oregon City who was also known as the "King of the Columbia," "Emperor of the Northwest," and the "Father of Oregon" and who was the author's distant relative who married a Native American (97). Jon A. Yasin's "Keepin' It Real: Hip Hop and El Barrio" is an encomium of rap and hip hop music, arguing for its use in schools and classrooms as a way to teach language and academic writing that might be useful set next to something like CCCC's 1974 statement on Students' Right to Their Own Language, which was reaffirmed in 2006.

The third section, "Crossing Cultures," offers several chapters that discuss many kinds of crossings. Peter Lamborn Wilson's essay, "Against Multiculturalism," is a well-reasoned opinion essay that argues against the theory of multiculturalism that informs curricula and decisions made in various institutions in society, instead favoring "cross-culturalism," a "non-hierarchical, de-centered web of cultures, each one singular, but not alienated from other cultures," a concept that he takes from poet Nathaniel Mackay (227). Min-Zhan Lu's "Representing and Negotiating Differences in the Contact Zone" argues for negotiating cultural and racial differences together and avoiding what she calls "cultural tourism," a practice that keeps others at arm's distance and maintains power relations by dictating who gets to talk and who must listen (233).

The last section, "Balancing Color Blindness and Identity," is perhaps the weakest of the sections, not because of the selections in it, but because the theme read too broad for me, particularly when I thought about how I'd explain its more disparate texts to students or use them in a classroom. Nevertheless, two selections stand out: The chapter that included four newspaper articles on cultural mascots (for example, using Native American names, slurs, and images as school mascots) offers an interesting array of news coverage, all of which point to language as popular cultural racial projects in an accessible and clear way. Victor Villanueva's "*Memoria* Is a Friend of Ours: On the Discourse of Color" is an argument and demon-

stration of the crossings that memory and biology offer us next to academic discourse, if we allow them to enter into the texts that we create.

Ultimately, this collection is a solid and unique one. While there are others out there that offer students readings on race, racism, class, and gender, such as Margaret Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins's *Race, Class, and Gender* (7th edition in 2009), most do not focus students' attention on language as consistently as this one. Andersen and Collins's book is a more comprehensive collection but focuses on topics that such intersections complicate or construct in society, not on the way language might be *the* racial project. This collection is clearly pitched to writing courses, and it treats race as a multidimensional (more than black and white), complex, and historically dynamic set of formations that can be read in language. It treats racism as a phenomenon that is systemic and often embodied in our discourses.

While at times I felt more instruction was needed in the writing prompts after each chapter, the framing that Eddy and Villanueva do in each section and after each selection is always very helpful and thoughtful. Their glossing is needed, as they have no chapters that directly address racism in or through language use, with Villanueva's own chapter being the closest one. Additionally, there are no chapters on the judging of language as racialized or racist nor on the ways dominant white middle-class languages are valued in US culture hierarchically. Furthermore, I wish the collection had more consciously code-meshed readings, chapters that meshed more than one kind of discourse self-consciously (again, Villanueva's being the only one to do this), or at least discussed a few chapters as potentially code-meshed. Discussing this practice would acknowledge what most who have discussed it tell us (Canagarajah, 2006; Young, 2007, 2011; Young and Martinez, 2011). Because we all code-mesh to some degree, a chapter in each section that explores these kinds of language and judging-of-language questions would have gone a long way toward deepening the discussions that the collection invokes. For example, Vershawn Young's "Nah, We Straight: An Argument Against Code Switching" would have been a good code-meshed example of a chapter whose topic was language and racism. A single chapter on whiteness that was self-conscious of its own use of Standard Edited English as a white discourse could have been a good code-meshed chapter as well. Then again, perhaps this latter wish is a hard one to fulfill, as I'm not sure what would be appropriate to include. An excerpt from something like Catherine Prendergast's *Literacy and Racial Justice* or James Ray Watkins's *A Taste for Language: Literacy, Class, and English Studies?* It is difficult to say. Despite these gaps, there is more to like than criticize in this collection, and it is encouraging to see that the collection tries very hard to honor

multiple ways that students may respond to the texts in it and to their peers' responses of those texts.

The collection is well worth using in a first-year writing course, if for no other reason than its editors' attention to language and what it produces among diverse readers. Would it fulfill my own program's need to teach racially and linguistically diverse students to problematize their language situations? Yes, but with careful instruction, with ground rules. Kynard and Eddy's chapter, along with the introduction, are good places to begin thinking explicitly about classroom ground rules, as is Helen Fox's "*When Race Breaks Out*" which would be a good partner to this collection.

This collection is important and significant. It does two things that most in the field of composition studies say are important for writing classrooms to engage with. First, the collection makes the argument that language is a racial project that not only constructs our notions of who we are racially and in other ways but also helps us interrogate racism and unequal power dynamics by looking closely at language. This is more than simply a connection between language and personal identity. It is an argument about language and socialized identities, larger constructs in society, connections between the personal and the social. This goal is vital in a racially divisive world where we see represented in media—and some of us experience first-hand—racialized tragedies in society, such as those around Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and Trayvon Martin (to name just a few recent and known cases). Second, the collection promotes a version of the writing about writing (WAW) pedagogy that has gained much influence in recent years (Downs and Wardle), arguing that writing classrooms can be designed around texts and questions from the field of writing studies (see Wardle and Downs for a reader that does this). Eddy and Villanueva's version of WAW focuses students' attention on race, racism, and power dynamics in such discussions. The collection will not engage students in complex discussions of racism in the way the field of composition studies discusses language or conceives the teaching of it, but it can engage students in discussions about such dimensions in language practices more generally, helping students see all texts as a part of larger, societal, racial projects. Ultimately, Eddy and Villanueva's collection shows what we can do about understanding race and racism in language practices in the writing classroom while still holding our commitments to the study of rhetoric and writing.

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