

**Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race:  
Raciolinguistic Ideologies and the Learning of Latinidad. By  
Jonathan Rosa. Oxford University Press, 2019. 312 pp.**

Reviewed by Sarah Glessner<sup>46</sup>

Jonathan Rosa's book is the result of an extensive ethnographic project he conducted between 2007 and 2010 at New Northwest High School (NNHS), a predominantly Latinx school in Chicago, a mid-west city, which is the third largest city in the U.S., where Blacks and Latinx people make up about 60 percent of the population. This text, adopting a "raciolinguistic perspective" (Rosa and Flores, 2017), argues that what Rosa calls the "co-naturalization of language and race" (2019: 2) is an integral feature of colonialism and control resulting in why his student subjects come to *look like a language* and *sound like a race*. Rosa argues that language is generally viewed as being "racially embodied" (2019: 2) in the Latinx community, meaning race and language are inextricably linked. Race, therefore, becomes influenced and defined by linguistic practices and vice versa. Ideologies surrounding forms of English and Spanish communicative practices within the Puerto Rican and Mexican Latinx subgroups at NNHS determine the relationships and perceptions of similarities and differences between these student populations. Rosa analyzes these ideologies alongside links between language and race as a way to prove how co-naturalization of these identity markers influence individuals' perceptions of themselves in educational as well as broader social contexts.

The book is divided into two parts, the first of which is entitled "Looking Like a Language: Latinx Ethnoracial Category-Making." This section is focused on how students' Latinx identities are viewed and controlled by the school's administration, whose goal is to mold its students into "Young Latino Professionals," which is consequently constructed as a response to the idea that Latinx students otherwise become "gangbangers and hoes" (Rosa, 2019: 33). The first chapter explores how these "gender stereotypes about Latino criminality and Latina promiscuity" (Rosa, 2019: 34) are central concerns of the school's administration that govern how the school attempts to socialize its students. Rather than question the implications of

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<sup>46</sup> St. John's University, English Department, 8000 Utopia Parkway, Queens, NY 11439, U.S.A., sarah.glessner18@my.stjohns.edu

certain norms of behavior assumed to be “professional,” Dr. Baez, the controversial principal of NNHS, encourages students to view themselves as Young Latino Professionals and adopt traditional—i.e. middle/upper-class; steeped in colonial attitudes—behaviors and dress in an attempt to help them merge into the mainstream and be favorably viewed by society at large. The book’s first section also considers how the Mexican and Puerto Rican students at NNHS view themselves and how students navigate complicated relationships between their racial identities and their language practices in order to relate to one another or distinguish themselves from their peers based on perceived ethnoracial standards of difference.

The book’s second part, “Sounding like a Race: Latinx Raciolinguistic Enregisterment,” highlights how a deficiency model of multilingualism dictates how language is perceived and governed at NNHS. Rosa shows that Latinx language practices are often marked and judged as inadequate. The bilingual Latinx students examined by Rosa are regarded as speaking neither English nor Spanish correctly. This devaluing of language practices renders them without language, or “languageless” (Rosa, 2019: 127). In the case of the individuals at NNHS, being bilingual is not necessarily regarded as an asset, but a hindrance. By describing the linguistic insecurities of NNHS students and Dr. Baez, Rosa makes clear the racism and classism inherent in how society judges language use and multilingualism. Regarded as an impressive asset in some (white) individuals, bilingualism becomes a barrier to success for the Latinx students and administrators in Rosa’s text. Language can be seen as a resource or deficiency depending on context (Rosa, 2019: 142).

Rosa is a gifted storyteller, and a major strength of his project lies in how he writes his student subjects and narrates their identities and experiences. For an ethnographic project reliant on the experiences and vulnerabilities of young human subjects, this storytelling is key. For a book that is (especially in the Introduction) highly theoretical and dependent on intersections between complex sociological concepts, it is also deeply human, practical, and sympathetic in its approach. In chapter 5, “Pink Cheese, Green Ghosts, Cool Arrows/Pinches Gringos Culeros”: Inverted Spanglish and Latinx Raciolinguistic Enregisterment,” Rosa highlights five students in order to further investigate the language practices of NNHS students and to show how labels such as “monolingual” and “bilingual” are inadequate descriptors. Rosa highlights how the students label their own language practices (“English-dominant bilingual,” “bilingual,” “monolingual”), how the students’ races are inherently tied to their language practices (speaks “both Mexican and Puerto Rican Spanish”), and the ways the students perceive the value of their language practices (Puerto Rican Spanish is “cool” while Mexican Spanish is “correct”) (2019: 154-157). Through this in-depth analysis of particular students’ beliefs and practices surrounding their language practices, Rosa shows how in the U.S. context “bilingual” and “multilingual” labels are misleading (2019: 159). Rosa shows how students often draw on both of their languages and that bilinguals don’t always use both languages equally. Through individual student portraits, Rosa pushes us to consider a “translanguaging” framework instead. The translanguaging context can “unsettle the boundaries between and within objectified languages” (2019: 159) and provide a new lens through which students can understand how they embody and navigate between languages.

Rosa’s book asks readers to question their assumptions not only about racial identity and language use, but about the function and value of writing in general. A teacher at NNHS claims the school has a writing problem, but fails to notice the writing students constantly produce within and outside the school’s walls: texting, writing rap lyrics, poems, jokes, and tagging abound. Rosa asks us to consider what happens to a highly literate person when that person’s literacy is criminalized. NNHS student Rigo, who spends time with Rosa telling of his

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experiences with gang life and his tagging crew, explains how even the creation of “meaningful tags” (2019: 192) results in a racialized and “negative valuation” (2019: 186) of the types of writing he produces and the literacy practices in which he is highly skilled. Through descriptions of conversations with Rigo and other students at NNHS, Rosa demonstrates how students can be affiliated with both “street” and “school” identities and literacies and are often masterful in how they can navigate between the two.

This book asserts that educational spaces could benefit tremendously from a reevaluation of the linguistic boundaries that separate and limit what students can achieve through full embodiments of their identities. It is crucial to pay attention to and constantly interrogate what it means to be literate and therefore successful in accordance with the mainstream. In his final chapter, Rosa asserts that “racial capitalism” is consistently legitimized through how institutions such as NNHS regard mobility and raciolinguistic hierarchies. One way to undermine these values and the “colonial power relations” (Rosa, 2019: 213) that shape self-perceptions and social relationships within such institutions is to adopt a raciolinguistic perspective in an attempt to understand the relationships between race and language and prioritize abolishing inherently racist markers of success in favor of more equitable structures. Rosa’s book is a must-read for students and educators interested in scholarship that foregrounds race and interrogates racial categories. It is also an exceptional example of an ethnographic study that analyzes the formation and naturalization of Latinidad in the United States.

## Reference

Rosa, J., & Flores, N. (2017). Unsettling race and language: Toward a raciolinguistic perspective. *Language in Society*, (46)5, 1-27. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404517000562>