BOOKS

The language of black America


Geneva Smitherman

Black English is not substandard American, but influenced by speech patterns and world view of Africa.


George Coleman

TALKIN AND TESTIFYIN, The Language of Black America
By Geneva Smitherman
Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1977, $8.95

Geneva Smitherman is a professor of speech communication and a director of the Center for Black Studies at Wayne University. From the battlements of this academic eminence she is firing light and heavy artillery at the proponents of "standard American English" and their brainwashed allies in the black community.

Talkin and Testifyin is not what is usually considered "a work of scholarship" although Smitherman's scholarship is evident. It is a very angry book, especially in its first chapters. (A jacket note explains that Dr. Smitherman was forced to take a speech correction class to qualify for a Michigan teaching certificate despite her degrees from Wayne and the University of Michigan.)

The anger may light fires in her readers, in which case the minor distortions it causes will not matter. Or it may turn readers off, in which case they will be the losers. For building on the work of distinguished predecessors like linguist Lorenzo Turner and famous contemporaries like Imamu Baraka, Smitherman makes a convincing case for two important propositions:

First, that black English is not "substandard" American English but a dialect as legitimate as any other, including what passes for "standard"; influenced by the language patterns and world view of Africa; superbly suited to communicating the reality of black American life.

Second, that children who have been exposed to black English up to the ages of five or six have learned it as their native speech and are "disadvantaged"—or educationally frustrated—by the insistence of school authorities that they learn to read and speak another American dialect.

Granting that competence in "standard" English is necessary for the survival of black youth in the U.S. today, Smitherman has some advice for teachers on how to make the transition from early education in the children's "native" speech to familiarity with the majority dialect. She is very high indeed on the possibility that teachers can "help mold American society into a humane and pluralistic social universe," although there are passages in her analysis of the chauvinism of the dominant culture that seem to conflict with this optimism.

Her final chapter includes an attack on the present reluctant inclusion of black studies (or other ethnic minority culture) programs in schools with predominantly non-white populations as short-sighted. In her view, black, Latino, Asian and Native American students "need to study white mainstream culture as well as their own to prevent their obtaining a distorted picture of the real world of the U.S.A.

"On the opposite side, white mainstream students need to know about nonmainstream cultures to prevent a similar distortion. (In fact, they very badly need black and other ethnic studies since whites are a numerical minority in the world."

And finally she "strongly recommends that white students learn the fundamentals of black communication...not only to be able to understand and communicate with blacks, but [because] in the process they will be turned on to other linguistic-cultural minorities within America. Such a perspective will go a long way toward retarding linguistic-cultural chauvinism, which is surely the greatest impediment to world citizenship."

For those who accept the challenge, *Talkin and Testifyin* is a splendid first reader despite—or because of—the substitution of Langston Hughes' Jesse Simple for the successors to Dick and Jane.

—Janet Stevenson

Un-Simple Langston Hughes

GOOD MORNING, REVOLUTION
By Langston Hughes
Edited by Faith Berry, with a foreward by Saunders Redding
Lawrence Hill, paperback, $3.95

During his lifetime, Langston Hughes became known as "the black Whitman" ("I, too, sing America") and "the poet laureate of the Negro race." Unknown to most of his readers was another Langston Hughes, an angry man whose polemical poetry and prose addressed the problem of being black and poor in Depression-ridden, Jim Crow America.

Good Morning, Revolution is a collection of Hughes' writings of social protest, most of which did not find their way into anthologies of his work. (According to Saunders Redding, this was largely by Hughes' own choice.)

The selections have been culled from black, Communist and "fellow traveler" periodicals. The poetry included is too stark, too topical and prosey to satisfy most contemporary readers of verse. Sometimes, however, the poems bristle with sardonic humor or, as for example, "Advertisements for the Waldorf-Astoria," which contrasts with biting wit the luxury hotel and the jobless and hungry on the street outside.

Occasionally Hughes is guilty of doggerel, witness the last stanza of "Lenin":

Lenin walks around the world.
The sun sets like a scar.
Between the darkness and the dawn
There rises a red star.

On the other hand, he knows how to unsettle the reader with an unexpected metaphor. In "A Christian Country"—a poem which brought charges that he was anti-Christian—the poet portrays God as just another poor wino:

God slumbers in a back alley
With a gin bottle in His hand.
Come one, God, get up and fight
Like a man."

The prose includes Hughes' reporting from Russia, civil-war-torn Spain and China. Exhilirated by the lack of racism in the Soviet Union, he took an uncritical and unquestioning attitude toward the USSR. In a series of articles written for the *Chicago Defender* in 1946, he insisted that there was no "Jewish problem" in the USSR and that "the steps toward an earthly paradise reach higher today on the soil of the Soviet Union than anywhere else"—this at the very time Stalin was inaugurating the "black years" of Soviet Jewry and consolidating the Gulag Archipelago.

The writings on Spain, on the other hand, are wonderful, rivaling Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*. Hughes gives the feel of Madrid and Barcelona during the Civil War, e.g., his vivid descriptions of Barcelona filmgoers more terrified by Chicago gangsters on the screen than by the shells falling all around them.

Best of all are Hughes' writings to and about black academics and writers. In "Cowards from the College," published in *The Crisis* in 1934, he rails against the black colleges' obsequious, soul-destroying compliance with Jim Crowism (Tuskegee Institute in the '30s maintained a guest house for whites only), repressive behavior codes and stifling religiosity: "To set foot on dozens of Negro colleges is like going back to mid-Victorian England, or Massachusetts in the days of the witch-burning Puritans."

In "Democracy and Me," he notes that blacks are the "invisible men" of American film. One sees not a single, non-toadying black character on the screen. "Hollywood, insofar as Negroes are concerned, might just as well be controlled by Hitler."

Nothing infuriated Hughes more than to see blacks patronized by romanticizing. In his 1935 address "To Negro Writers," he complained bitterly about "the contentment tradition of the O-lovely-Negroes school of American fiction, which makes an ignorant black face and a Carolina head filled with superstition more desirable than a crown of gold."

No one will ever accuse Langston Hughes of having contributed to that school of American fiction. At least not after having read this long overdue collection of his angry, passionate polemics against injustice and prejudice and his good-morning to the revolution he expected to change all that.

—David M. Szonyi

David M. Szonyi reviews frequently for IN THESE TIMES.

THRILLS, CHILLS AND SPILLS AT THE U.S. GRAND PRIX

By Bruce Pringle

WATKINS GLEN, N.Y.—Mike Keavney stood outside his tent, shivering in the rain that was turning his campsite into an ankle-deep mudhole. But Keavney, a 28-year-old tavern owner from Pennsylvania, was smiling. "Where else can you see anything like this?" he asked.

Less than 100 yards from the spot Keavney had picked as his weekend residence, screaming cars became blurs as they descended a hill on a narrow stretch of racetrack. It was the final qualifying session for the next day's Grand Prix of the United States, an annual automobile race that attracts the attention of sports fans around the world.

Millions watch it on television. Perhaps 100,000 defy the frequent harshness of October weather in upstate New York to see it in person.

"Just like a spectator in any sport, I guess, I dream of being out there competing," Keavney said. "But I'd be scared to death to try this. Before I came here for the first time, Woodstock was the biggest thing I'd ever attended. But it didn't top this. Anyone with enough talent can play music. But Grand Prix drivers need more than talent. They need heart."

Struggle to survive.

Grand Prix drivers may well be under more pressure than any other athletes. Theirs is not only a struggle to win, but to survive as well. On a tour that takes them to five continents, they compete less than 20 times each year; yet rare is the season in which one of their members does not die in a crash.

Grand Prix race courses, in fact, are designed to tempt death. Unlike the flat oval layouts on which most American car races are held, Grand Prix tracks are twisting collections of hills and valleys that tolerate only the slightest human or mechanical failure. The intricacy of the course, each

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Photographs by Mel Evans Jr.