

SOCIETY FOR LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

## Notes from JLA's Outgoing Book Review Editor

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For the past three years I've served as book review editor for the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology (JLA)*. As my tenure in the position comes to a close, I've been invited by the editors of this column to comment on any themes in topic or style emergent from the books our sub-discipline has produced over the last few years, as well their accessibility to undergraduates (as book-length works are often geared toward classroom teaching). Our discipline has a theoretical commitment to studying the emergence of meaning from contextualized interaction, and book length works are well suited for providing complex ethnographically grounded analyses of this process. During the past several years, linguistic anthropologists have produced books detailing how social actors in a wide range of contexts work to tailor communicative practices for their audiences and the (intended or unintended) interpretations and pragmatic effects that result. I will be unable, in a short column, to capture the richness and scope of these books. However, being asked to write this column prompted me to notice a trend. All linguistic anthropological works are collaborations produced in relationship with their research participants (though the nature of those relationships varies as does the representation of participants' voices in the final product); however, recently the *JLA* has been sent a number of books in which the social categories of their ethnographic participants overlaps with that of the authors and/or their primary projected audience. The convergence between the roles of subject, author and audience in such texts allows them to not only describe but also explicitly recapitulate the meaning-generating processes mentioned above.

For example, Leanne Hinton's *Bringing Our Languages Home: Language Revitalization for Families* (2013) is both largely by and for parents who are working to raise their children to use an endangered or previously "extinct" language. Most of the book consists of autobiographical pieces written by families attempting this process, while the voice of the scholar is relegated to brief and accessible framing in the introduction and a concluding "how to" section based on lessons derived from the participants' reflections. This approach downplays the explicit theorization provided in recent more traditional ethnographies concerning language revitalization (eg, Meek 2012; Nevins 2013). However, the overlap between subject, authors, and—ideally—readers may invite those engaging with the work to envision themselves as generating practice and producing knowledge concerning this subject.

I now turn to two ethnographies in which college students in the United States are both ethnographic subjects and a primary intended audience: Chaise LaDousa's *House Signs and Collegiate Fun: Sex, Race, and Faith in a College Town* (2011) and Ilana Gershon's *The Break-up 2.0: Disconnecting over Social Media* (2010). (In the former, undergraduates also helped to collect and analyze the data.) LaDousa's book focuses on humorous signs displayed on rental homes of students in a college town. While the residents who created these signs saw them as inconsequential in-jokes, LaDousa and his student research assistants explored what varying interpretations of these images can reveal about social relations on campus and local ideologies about intentionality, responsibility and meaning. Gershon's book focuses on how students at her university converged and or diverged in their assessments of the semiotic, pragmatic and moral significance of the media through which information about relationships was conveyed. In both cases, the authors encourage their undergraduate readers to be aware of, and potentially change, their own dispositions towards the relevant practices. I took advantage of my position at the journal to keep watch for books to assign in my classes and have taught with both of these texts. As a result, I have made some observations about some potential effects of the convergence between the groups studied and the groups reading and studying the resulting work.

While using college students as research subjects is commonplace in some disciplines, this is an unusual practice within linguistic anthropology. Though some have expressed concern that the extensive use of undergraduates as research subjects can work to inappropriately universalize the (presumptively generic) experiences of college students, the books discussed here situate those experiences in the context of college sociality and complicate any singular "college student" category, thus working against the treatment of such groups as unmarked. This had a clear effect in my classrooms where some (though certainly not all) of the students whom I have taught in anthropology courses have had the luxury of seeing themselves as belonging to an unmarked social category. For such students, seeing groups and practices with which they may identify treated to detailed ethnographic description and linguistic anthropological analysis was productively unsettling; they were more eager to engage critically with the anthropologist and to actively seek out ways to counter their analyses. Moreover, when the author was successful in influencing the students' prior dispositions toward the topic, this change was more profound. I also found that after working with these texts, when reading ethnographies dealing with groups and topics more distant from their immediate experience, my students were more likely to work to identify with the ethnographic subjects and extend this critical engagement to their readings of the work.

Though the books I've discussed here have been unusual in format or subject and hence not, in those terms, representative of the books linguistic anthropologists have produced over the last several years, the theoretical issues they raise resonate with the field's commitment to situate meaning as emergent from social interaction. In addition to detailing these issues in their particular ethnographic contexts — examining the social semiotic processes by which children may be

encouraged to adopt a heritage language, use house signs to reflect on and produce local relationships, or manage friendship and romance through social media – the unusual participation frameworks of these texts may encourage readers to reflect on the role of these semiotic processes in the creation and reception of the works themselves.

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