

Up Against Whiteness: Race, School, and Immigrant Youth by Stacey J. Lee. New York: Teachers College, 2005. 152 pp. ISBN 0-8077-4574-X

Given the dearth of critical examinations on Asian American student experiences in education, Stacey Lee's ethnography of Hmong American high school students in Wisconsin is a welcome addition to the body of literature which focuses on Asian American subgroups. Lee details how first and second generation Hmong American students undergo racialization within their school and community lives. Her primary data comes from interviews and observations of students and school officials at "University High School" (UHS) over a year and a half. Additionally, observations about her role as an outsider to this community and as an East Asian American academic provide valuable insight for other researchers hoping to engage with similarly complex communities.

In contrast to previous studies on poor schooling environments (Valenzuela, 1999; Zhou & Bankston, 1998), Lee's site is a highly resourced school with a tradition of high academic achievement. However, she argues that both first and second generation Hmong American students are largely excluded from this excellence, marginalized in a school culture of whiteness. As the book title suggests, these students are "up against" a dominant culture that privileges the activities and achievements of white students.

Within this dominant culture, to school officials, *good* students are those who emulate white academic and social achievement. Drawing on interviews with teachers and school officials, in her second chapter, Lee argues that the school's perpetuation of white privilege blocks the school from meeting the needs of Hmong American students. These students are continuously *othered*, or harmfully differentiated from the rest of the UHS student population, against the school's ideal of white academic and social success. School officials view Hmong students through lens of difference and deficit, approaches that allow them to deem students' needs as being beyond their control. While the school's English as a Second Language (ESL) program benefits from culturally sensitive teachers, Lee documents how other teachers view ESL as a catch all for culturally different students. ESL absolves them of responsibility for integrating them into their classrooms; even non-ESL students get referred to ESL. Second generation youth are also distinguished from the white norm as a culturally deficient and inferior group.

While recognizing diversity among student experiences, in her third chapter, Lee explains how students label themselves: first-generation students are "traditional" and second-generation students are "Americanized." Although she presents a few students who maintain identities drawn from both spheres, most students are resolute in their membership in a single group. The labels mark more than just immigrant status; they become categories that essentialize the behavior

of Hmong American students to both students and outsiders. For instance, she observes that when a “traditional” student punches a white student for calling him a derogatory name, the principal labels his behavior as “Americanized.”

Lee devotes the fourth chapter of the book to examining how gender contributes to identity construction of Hmong American youth. Traditional males are cast as passive, females as victims of early marriage and patriarchy. Americanized youth are defined by their delinquency: Gangs for males, teenage pregnancy for the females. These gender identities complicate how traditional and Americanized young women and men are viewed by the school, their communities, and themselves. For instance, early marriage is one of the few distinctive traits of the Hmong recognized by non-Hmong. Lee recounts how school officials blame Hmong culture for the practice while ignoring the intersectional role of race in young women’s lives, as well as the complex choices that these women face.

Throughout the text, Lee comments on how Hmong American students are racialized vis-à-vis other racial groups, as well as other Asian Americans. She draws on Aihwa Ong’s (2003) notion that the Hmong and other Southeast Asian Americans have been “ideologically blackened,” as “culturally, intellectually, and morally inferior to Whites” (p. 15). This classification distances them from East Asian Americans, whose educational identity is dominated by the model minority stereotype of success. However, Hmong students are lumped into this stereotype when their quietness is mistaken for understanding the material. Lee observes that most traditional youth work hard and are grateful for public education. Embracing the model minority ethic becomes a strategic decision, preferable over the other identity option offered to them at UHS, that of Americanized youth.

Americanized youth are completely distanced from any associations with the model minority; they are the group that has been the most “blackened.” Lee frequently comments on how Americanized youth exhibit oppositional behavior through attire, music taste, and attitudes towards school. She makes an important point in critiquing previous work on first and second generation immigrant youth (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou & Bankston, 1998) which frame the Americanization process as negatively leading to downward assimilation.

Although overall a highly valuable text, Lee’s main shortcoming is that even while arguing against cultural deficit perspectives and for a broadened recognition of structural racism, she does not directly address the problematic nature of the oppositional culture model itself. The drawback of the model (Ogbu, 1987; 1992) lies in how it normalizes Whiteness and casts other races as deviant failures. Lee’s use of Ong’s (2003) language of how Southeast Asian Americans have been “ideologically blackened,” in contrast to whites and East Asian Americans, is understandable. It depicts how dominant society has situated Hmong Americans within the racial spectrum, and critiques the white power

structure that racializes new Americans in this fashion. However, such language is dangerous for two reasons. First, it implicitly perpetuates a model that holds that Blacks, Latinos and Native Americans are culturally deficient. Second, it situates Asian Americans within a framework which requires us to answer the question of “who are we not?” before we get to even ask “who are we?” *Ideological blackening* for Southeast Asian Americans and *ideological whitening* for East Asian Americans are two sides of the same risky coin.

The language of the oppositional culture framework is limited in its effectiveness to challenge how society has situated Hmong Americans in a binary that privileges whiteness. In order to truly go “up against” whiteness, whiteness itself must be de-centered. Lee’s arguments could be strengthened by utilizing different frameworks that more directly challenge the oppositional culture model. For example, within the context of critical race theory, Tara Yosso (2005) presents a cultural wealth model that challenges the deficit framework, as well as narrow utilizations of Pierre Bourdieu’s (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) work on social and cultural capital that normalizes white, middle class culture. A cultural wealth model recognizes the unique tools that communities of color use to counter racist schooling practices and white hegemony. Within this lens, the ways in which Hmong American youth resist structural racism, creatively drawing upon various sources to reconstruct different ways of being Hmong and Hmong American, can be valued as assets. Furthermore, such an approach removes other minorities from the bottom of the racial hierarchy, de-centering the hegemonic white standpoint in racial conversations about schools. Finally, the broader critical race theory lens draws structural racism in schools to the forefront, creating a space in which multicultural educators can follow Lee’s recommendation for confronting racism, structural inequality and whiteness. This example was published after Lee’s text, so I reference it not to downplay the significance of her work, but to offer suggestions for how future work on students of color, particularly Asian Americans, could be theorized.

As suggested by Lee, multicultural educators can greatly benefit from reading the text’s analysis of how hegemonic whiteness found within schools harms immigrant youth. It is important to understand how students of color can suffer just as much in affluent schools as they can in low-income areas. Scholars in education and Asian American Studies can also build on this conversation by asking what kind of language can be used to talk about Asian American students in relationship to white students or students of color without reverting to an oppositional culture model that affirms cultural deficiency. New language, tools, and theory will hopefully make it possible for us to ask “who are we?” without having to answer first “who are we not?”

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Reviewer

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