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Book Review - Lee, S. (2005) Up Against Whiteness: Race, School, and Immigrant Youth

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Book Review

Lee, S. J. (2005). *Up Against Whiteness: Race, School, and Immigrant Youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.

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**Reviewed by
Chang Pu**

University of Texas at San Antonio

Issues of race, social class, and gender become critical in the field of education, as the number of linguistically and culturally diverse students increase dramatically in the United States school system. The changing demographics in schools bring up questions about how to provide appropriate educational services. Given the dearth of research critically analyzing Asian American students' schooling experience in the United States, Stacey Lee's book *Up Against Whiteness* is important and timely. Published in 2005 this book helps educators contest stereotypes of Asian American students.

Through the use of an ethnographic approach, Lee explores the experiences of 1.5 and second-generation Hmong American students in University Heights High School (UHS) in the state of Wisconsin, a school well known for its excellent academic reputation across the state. Lee's research aims to investigate how Hmong American students negotiate and react to dominant messages from the school and the larger society regarding race while the students are in the process of forming their identities in the context of the school and in response to their school experiences. In other words, Lee's primary goal is "to demonstrate the way racism informs and constrains identity options" for Hmong American students at UHS (p. 21). She argues "race occupies the central role in Hmong American student experiences and significantly affects their understanding of what it means to be Hmong in the United States" (p. 1). Lee does not lump all Hmong American students of different generations into one category and treat them as one homogeneous group. She uncovers the complex and various coping strategies adopted by Hmong American students to respond to the racial barriers they encounter on a daily basis, making this

Stacey J. Lee
Foreword by Lois Weis

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study unique and instrumental to educators who work with ethnic minority students. Lee contributes to Asian American studies by focusing on the Hmong ethnic minority group which is usually “invisible” among Southeast Asian ethnic groups because the Hmong’s history is relatively unknown in the United States.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the study, introducing the central concern of the study (i.e. identity formation), research questions, data collection methods (i.e. participant observation, semi-structured interviews and artifact collection), and major arguments in the book. In order to help readers understand the backdrop of the study, Lee provides a thorough overview of the immigration history of Hmong people in the United States as political refugees and their status as Asian Americans as well as how they are perceived in the larger United States society. This overview fills the gap of limited understanding about Hmong immigrants in multicultural education in the United States. In addition, Lee reviews different assimilation theories which provide lenses to view and understand Hmong American students’ different coping strategies which are discussed in the later chapters. Lee devotes the last part of Chapter 1 to describing her research site, the participants, and the research process.

In Chapter 2 Lee explores White privilege and White culture at UHS. She uncovers the way that the culture of “Whiteness” at UHS shapes the teachers’ definitions of “a good student” and “a good parent” and the way this culture “marks Hmong American students as racialized outsiders” (p. 24). For example, “good students are defined as those who are enrolled in college preparatory classes and involved in school-sponsored sports or other [high-status] extracurricular activities” (p. 28). Based on classroom observations and interviews with faculty at UHS, Lee argues that teachers reinforce the U.S. mainstream cultural norms (i.e., middle class, White culture), by using these norms to evaluate students from different cultural backgrounds. Lee also observes that multicultural education is not central to the school’s curriculum, reflecting the inferior status of students of color at UHS. Lee reports that teachers and White students at UHS have limited knowledge of multiculturalism and diversity. They did not see the necessity of teaching and learning multicultural education because “the high achievement of many White middle-class students confirmed that the schools were doing their jobs; students of color who fail are doing so because of their families’ shortcomings and their own lack of effort” (p. 41).

According to Lee, many UHS educators used this explanation to free themselves of any responsibility for serving and educating Hmong American students. Such a blaming-the-victim view reflects institutional racism and encourages stereotypes about students of color. Lee further argues that racism is not limited to overt verbal or physical hostility, but also includes institutional racism which is implicit and invisible within education.

Chapter 3 focuses on illustrating the intragroup differences among Hmong American students as well as their individual academic needs. Within the Hmong community, traditional students are usually members of the 1.5 generation or are first generation immigrants; these students are close to their Hmong communities and they are usually placed in ESL classes at UHS. Traditional youth at UHS typically hold an optimistic attitude towards life in the United States because of their previous bitter experiences in their home country, whilst maintaining and valuing their heritage culture. The American schooling system provides them more educational opportunities compared

to their homeland, thus further validating their positive attitudes towards education. The ESL program at UHS also provides traditional Hmong students a comfortable learning environment because of the caring and culturally sensitive ESL teachers, despite the fact that it socially segregates ESL students from mainstream students. The traditional Hmong students resist the dominant group's characterization of their culture as backward by presenting the model minority identity.

Americanized Hmong students, on the other hand, are usually American-born with poor school performance. They typically challenge the authority of their parents, dress like "gang members" (in the teachers' eyes), and also estrange themselves from their ethnic communities. As Lee reports, "traditional and Americanized youth defined themselves against each other" (p. 53). Traditional youth see the Americanized Hmong students as "bad kids" because they are too Americanized, while the Americanized youth view maintaining traditional Hmong culture as problematic in the United States. However, as Lee points out, all of the Hmong American students are aware of their "foreign" and invisible status, the racial hierarchy, and power relations between Whites and students of color both at UHS and in the larger society. Lee explains that traditional youth view such social distance as the result of language differences; however, Americanized youth view it as issues of race and culture. Lee elucidates that in negotiating their identities, Americanized youth have been "blackened" in the dominant imagination (p. 65) in terms of their dress style and counter-school attitude, but they regard this style as a form of resistance to race and class exclusion (p. 69).

Chapter 4 discusses how issues of gender interplayed with race complicate the identity construction for both traditional and Americanized Hmong youth. Lee focuses on exploring the gendered messages Hmong American students receive from their families and the larger society, and how they construct and perform their gendered identities in response to these messages. As Lee explains, Hmong American male students fail to demonstrate the forms of masculinity valued by the dominant American society because they are physically shorter, quieter in class, and not involved in school activities related to sports and music. Responding to this stereotype, Hmong American male students have developed or reconstructed a hyper-masculine identity, emphasizing toughness to gain social status and resisting the image of lack of masculinity. However, this image is perceived as a sign of "bad Americanization" and is misinterpreted as possible "gang involvement" (p. 84) by the faculty at UHS. Traditional Hmong American males need to negotiate the messages about masculinity at home such as being responsible to support the family economically. These messages may conflict with dominant mainstream views of masculinity as family duties interfere with school activities. In a milieu of conflicts, Lee observed a new ideal Hmong American masculinity that has also been developed and adopted by some Hmong men who combine and reinterpret aspects of the hegemonic masculinity valued by the dominant society with aspects of the masculinity valued by Hmong culture (p. 114).

Hmong American female students who typically are seen as sexism victims of early marriage, perform femininity differently; some of them outperformed Hmong boys academically because for girls "education is a way to gain independence" (p. 101). Americanized Hmong girls are typically viewed as being in one of two groups: "good girls" and "bad girls." Lee further explains that "good girls" respect parental authority and accept gender norms represented in popular culture, while "bad girls" resist both. Lee

concludes that “the Hmong American youth at UHS are negotiating new ways of expressing and performing their gendered identities in response to the multiple, complex, and often contradictory messages about gender they receive at home, school, and the larger United States society” (p. 121). Lee provides new insight to understanding identity construction by depicting the multi-layer influences on Hmong American students’ school performance and their identity construction. Particularly, Hmong male students are twice as challenged in that the first layer is their lack of manliness according to the White hegemonic masculinity; the second layer is the impossibility to be real “Americans” because they are viewed by members of the dominant society as being culturally different.

In the fifth and final chapter, Lee revisits segmented assimilation theories. Lee’s findings confirm the importance of the selective acculturation strategy which helps Hmong American students maintain their home culture, identity, and intergenerational relations. Additionally, she questions the definition of “good” schools. UHS has a reputation for academic success which is measured by high-stakes testing (e.g. SAT), teachers’ education levels, and number of students who plan to attend colleges/universities following graduation; yet, UHS fails to accommodate to the needs of Hmong American students in mainstream classes socially, academically, and culturally. Lee argues that the priority of schools like UHS focus on preparing elite middle class students. She calls for integrating multicultural education into the school curriculum and increasing faculties’ cultural sensitivity to gain immigrant students’ trust and to create a caring and equitable learning environment. Finally, Lee urges UHS teachers to reflect and examine White privilege in the school to raise their awareness of the existence of racial hierarchy and inequality.

Lee’s book, *Up Against Whiteness*, demonstrates how United States schooling as a cultural and racial process affects Hmong American students’ academic engagement and performance as well as their identity construction. The book explicitly addresses how some school faculty and personnel consciously or subconsciously transmit mainstream cultural ideologies to minority students and evaluate them based on mainstream norms. Lee’s book highlights the importance of educational ethnographies on language minority youth in United States schools. *Up Against Whiteness* is a powerful and instrumental book for educators and administrators who work with language minority students. It raises awareness of racial issues beyond overt insult and it suggests ways to better serve language minority students in mainstream schools by valuing all students for who they are, adopting culturally relevant teaching pedagogy, and recruiting culturally competent teachers. Finally, as a data-driven research study, Lee’s book provides insights on data collection methodology such as what data should be collected in order to gain a comprehensible understanding of students’ schooling experiences, which provides an excellent model for graduate students and scholars who are interested in educational ethnographic research in school or community settings.

About the Reviewer

Chang Pu is a doctoral candidate of Culture, Literacy and Language at the University of Texas, San Antonio. Her research interests include language minority education (heritage language education, ESL, and bilingual education), second language acquisition and learning, classroom-based research, and language teacher preparation.

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