1

Introduction

> I am in the paradoxical position of deploying what is conventionally known as an antihumanist discourse for humanist means. That is, my emphasis on complexity, power, contradiction, discursive production and ambiguity is invoked in part to demonstrate complexity and irony in the lives of the people I knew, in order to complicate and dismantle the ready stereotypes that erase complexity in favor of simple, unitary images.
>
> —Dorinne K. Kondo, *Crafting Selves*

It is passing time at Dynamic High School.[1] Along with approximately 1,500 students, I am trying to navigate my way through the school to the next class without jostling too many people or running into the heels of the students in front of me. Amidst the din of students greeting each other and trying to have conversations by shouting over their peers, I am quietly thinking about the end of my year-long research at the school. With only a few weeks left before the end of the school year, I am anticipating missing the students who have been a part of my daily life for 9 months. I think about the Lao American students whom I have followed closely. I think about their Hmong American, African American, White American, and Liberian American peers and friends. As I recall the stories that they shared and the inside school and outside school activities that I witnessed, I think about the ways dominant understandings of urban education confine and constrain their identities as students and human beings. I think about the adolescent girls with children who are understood pejoratively as "single mothers." I think about the adolescent boys struggling to belong, who are understood simplistically as "gangsters."

This book grows out of a compelling need to understand and explicate the complexities of the experiences of urban, immigrant students. In my work at Dynamic High School, I discovered that in many ways the experiences and identities of the students I came to

© 2010 State University of New York Press, Albany

know reproduced the familiar representations of urban and immigrant students. However, and significantly, I also found that dominant understandings of urban education failed to account for the incongruities and complexities of the identities and lives of students. In large part, this is due to the framing of urban residents and immigrant identities within restrictive, binary oppositions.

Background

Discourses About Urban Identities

Popular images about urban life depict a depressing picture of urban schools and communities. They portray youth idling on street corners and communities scarred by graffiti and litter, with buildings and homes in disrepair. Informed by research on the inner-city family (Moynihan, 1965), the culture of poverty (Lewis, 1969), and the urban underclass (Wilson, 1987), these prevailing ideas about urban communities and residents are marked by a language of social pathology. Urban communities and residents are described as "welfare-dependent," "crime-ridden," and "violence-prone." Likewise, the dominant ideas about urban students and schools include "run-down," "gang-ruled," "failing," and "not meeting standards." Ironically, these deficit discourses come from research that attempted to illustrate the challenges faced by urban students and families. Opponents of this research have criticized the implicit message that the social and economic problems faced by urban residents are directly and causally linked to their cultural values and characteristics (Haymes, 1995). Despite such criticism, the widely circulated negative narratives continue to define urban communities, schools, and students as failing and dysfunctional. The residents of the "ghettos" are positioned as responsible for their own social and economic situation.

A second widespread understanding of urban schools and communities is informed by the response from educational researchers to this early deficit-centered research. Rather than holding urban families culpable, education researchers attempted to elucidate the impact of social inequalities (Kozol, 1991); school reform (McNeil, 2000); in-school sorting (Oakes, 1985); racism (Lee, 2005); and subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) on the reproduction of social inequality and school under-achievement. Other researchers sought to highlight the successes of urban schools and residents. Ladson-Billings (1994), for example, illustrated the success of "culturally relevant" teachers and

© 2010 State University of New York Press, Albany

practices in the achievement of African American students. Similarly, others underscored the ways urban teachers and students are able to overcome challenges and obstacles to achieve success (Corwin, 2000; Michie, 1999).

Today, the influence of this work is reflected in two dominant discourses about urban education. On one hand, there is a tendency to emphasize dysfunction and failure; and on the other hand, there is a tendency to emphasize resilience and success. Media stories abound that highlight poor test scores, gangs, drugs, poverty, and violence in depictions of urban schools. These dominant representations point to the presence of poverty, substance abuse, crime, unemployment, early pregnancy, and gang involvement as contributing to the increase of urban social problems in general and the failure of urban education in particular. At the same time, images and rhetoric about urban triumph also dominate the popular imagination. Popular films such as *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *Stand and Deliver* (1988), and *Freedom Writers* (2007) ubiquitously spotlight the dedication of teachers and the perseverance of students that allow them to "beat the odds" and achieve success. While these films reiterate and reify urban problems, they also exemplify the penchant to underscore urban "success stories." On the whole, these dominant discourses have created an understanding of urban education and experiences that are characterized by binary frameworks of success/failure and functional/dysfunctional.

Discourses About Immigrant Identities

In much the same way, pervasive notions of immigrant students and families frame their experiences and identities within dualistic categories. We can see this in the numerous media accounts of the resettlement and socialization experiences of recent immigrants to the United States. The storylines are familiar, as they echo decades of news reports by emphasizing a binary division of differences between immigrant cultures and U.S. culture. As the stories usually go, immigrant families are contending with a "clash" of cultures, and immigrant youth are caught or torn "between two cultures." Ubiquitous headlines inscribe the quandary: "Generation 1.5: Young immigrants in two worlds" (Feagans, 2006), "Taking on two worlds" (Do, 2002), and "Mother's fray: Culture clash puts special strain on immigrant moms and daughters" (Wax, 1998).

In a story about two Lao immigrant students, for example, academic achievements were celebrated as the accomplishments of immigrants who "have worked past roadblocks to grow into strong students and 'great people' who are both bilingual and bicultural" (Denn, 2000,

© 2010 State University of New York Press, Albany

p. B1). According to this story of bicultural success, the students were able to demonstrate the mastery of the "traditional" and "modern" aspects of their identities through the ability to perform "a traditional Laotian dance 'beautifully, gracefully' one day and then . . . hip-hop dances the next" (p. B1). In a different tone, another story (Taylor, 1998) about Somali immigrants in the United States explained how Somali families were "working through the clash of cultures." According to this narrative on the adaptation of Somali immigrants, while "drugs don't appear to be a major problem among Somalis," domestic violence is prevalent because "[s]ome men may be reacting violently if their wives don't adhere to traditional ways" (p. 1A). In the collision between U.S. and Somali cultures, the adherence of Somali men to "tradition" gives rise to acts of domestic violence.

Similarly, a special series about Hmong youth bemoaned the fact that Hmong girls who have been raped by Hmong gang members have been "shamed into silence" (Louwagie & Browning, 2005a, 2005b) by Hmong culture and so do not report their experiences of sexual abuse. Pitting notions of Hmong cultural beliefs against those of U.S. society, the story explained the "shame" of one Hmong girl:

> By losing her virginity without marriage—even violently, against her will—she had violated a basic tenet of her Hmong culture. If her family found out, they would feel forever shamed. She feared her culture would require her to marry one of her attackers to save her reputation (Louwagie & Browning, 2005a, p. 1A).

As Louwagie and Browning (2005b) allege, "culture clash can stymie help" (p. 11A) for Hmong girls who have been raped by Hmong gang members. In their explication of the culture clash, the journalists underscore the role of cultural difference:

> Adapting any non-Western culture to the United States is a formidable task. For the Hmong community, which hails from isolated mountain villages in Laos and refugee camps in Thailand, settling in urban areas such as St. Paul has meant a bigger change (Louwagie & Browning 2005b, p. 11A).

Here, the identity and culture—beliefs, behaviors, and values—of immigrants such as the Hmong are characterized as traditional and rural, in contrast to a highly modern and civilized U.S. society. Of particular concern are the differences between the first-generation (parents) and

© 2010 State University of New York Press, Albany

second-generation (youth) that create a clash between the "traditional" values of immigrant parents versus "modern" values of youth who are influenced by contemporary U.S. practices:

> The problem comes in mixing Hmong traditions with American culture, many agree. While Hmong refugees are struggling to survive in a culture foreign to them, their children are adapting more quickly and disobeying what they see as their parents' antiquated rules (Louwagie & Browning 2005b, p. 11A).

Implicitly and explicitly, the values and practices of Hmong immigrant parents are depicted as "antiquated"—backward or stuck in time. In contrast, immigrant children are positioned as "adapting more quickly." The assertion that the "problem comes in mixing Hmong traditions with American culture" constructs the cultures of different ethnic and national groups as irreconcilably distinct. Hmong and American cultures are both positioned as naturalized and static, impervious to influence and change.

Narratives about immigrant experiences that underscore biculturalism, a "clash of cultures," "traditional ways," or some sort of "basic tenet" of culture are by and large attempts to illustrate the *changes* in the lives of immigrant students and families. Instead, and problematically, they position immigrants within dualistic categories of modern/traditional or First World/Third World. As a consequence, immigrant groups are portrayed as developmentally and socially backward or suspended in time. In a similar vein, accounts about urban residents that point to the challenges of poverty and triumph over gangs, violence, and inequality are attempts to demonstrate the complex dimensions of urban life and human experiences. However, they result in either/or characterizations of urban students and families as good/bad, hardworking/lazy or functional/dysfunctional.

The experiences of the urban, immigrant students I knew from Dynamic High were messier and more contradictory than these smooth, easy storylines that have dominated our imagination. Missing from these simplistic accounts of urban, immigrant experiences are the background and context that point to unfinished, precarious identities and contested social relations. This book is an attempt to unmask and examine the stories that we tell about urban, immigrant students. It is also an attempt to highlight and work through the contradictions of identity and to unsettle the hegemony of discourses that frame identities within discrete, binary categories.

© 2010 State University of New York Press, Albany

Theorizing Immigrant Identity

Criticism of the notion of identity and cultures as unitary, immutable, isolable entities is not new. For the past several decades, social and cultural theorists have pointed to the existence of multiple, intersecting, and competing identities as well as the ways in which cultures and identities are essentialized (e.g., Du Bois, 1953; Anzaldua, 1987; Hall, 1990; Bhabha, 1994; Lowe, 1996). Anzaldua's (1987) work, for example, has played a critical role in revealing the experiences of living on the "border" between two cultures, and the ways border identities are fractured by race, class, gender, and sexuality. Writing about the Asian American immigrant experience in the United States, Lowe (1996) elaborates on the difficulty of using an "Asian American identity" as an organizing and political tool because of the tendency to fix culture and identity. Instead, Lowe argues for an understanding of Asian American identity as socially constructed and situationally specific, emphasizing its "heterogeneity, hybridity and multiplicity" (p. 60).

A major problem with viewing cultures and identities as coherent wholes is that it overlooks critical inequalities, contradictions, and differences. As Ladson-Billings (2000) points out, "each [ethnic] group is constituted of myriad national and ancestral origins, but the dominant ideology of the Euro-American epistemology has forced each into an essentialized and totalized unit that is perceived to have little or no internal variation" (p. 260). The totalization of Asian American identities, for example, lumps fifth-generation Chinese Americans with first-generation Lao immigrants in the same Asian American success story. Advocating the need to uncover the "complexities of difference," Ladson-Billings (2000) pressed educational researchers to "work in racialized discourses and ethnic epistemologies" (p. 271).

Despite the continual denial of culture and identity as discrete, immutable wholes, we still struggle to speak and teach about culture in ways that affirm its fluidity. In various contexts, the "culture" of different groups is still conceptualized discursively and pedagogically as some "thing" that is naturally occurring and fixed in time. The academic achievement of students of color, for example, is often explained by culture-based arguments that underscore ideas about discrete, unitary cultures of different racial and ethnic groups. These arguments contend that African American boys do not do well in school due to a "cult of anti-intellectualism" (McWhorter, 2000); while Asian American students achieve academic success because of "traditional" family values and a strong work ethic (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1991; Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

© 2010 State University of New York Press, Albany

For immigrant students, a hallmark of the efforts to make sense of their particular experiences is revealed in the discourse of students being torn "between two worlds." As we saw in the news stories above, the struggles of immigrant students with peers, parents, and U.S. society are understood to arise from the tensions between disparate cultural norms and expectations. One dimension of this bimodal framework sets up a dichotomy of immigrant culture versus U.S. culture. The decisions of immigrant students to drop out of school to marry, for example, are viewed as choices that align with values that are different from those of dominant U.S. society. The identity and cultures of immigrants and that of mainstream society are viewed to be in conflict. Another dimension of the "between two worlds" discourse creates a first-generation (parents) versus second-generation (youth) dichotomy that manifests in a preoccupation with "intergenerational conflict." Disputes that immigrant youth and adults have over clothes or dating restrictions are construed to be conflicts between the values of immigrant parents that are still tied to "traditional" beliefs and those of immigrant youth who are influenced by contemporary U.S. practices.

While I want to recognize that this research on cultural conflict has been essential to advancing our understanding of the challenges faced by immigrant students and families, I also want to talk back to and extend this literature. Problematically, as Lowe (1996) persuasively argues, "the reduction of the cultural politics of racialized ethnic groups, like Asian Americans, to first-generation/second-generation struggles displaces social differences into a privatized familial opposition" (p. 63). This focus on the "generation gap" deflects attention from the politics of exclusion and differentiation that are experienced by immigrants. Further, explanations of immigrant experiences and identities as connected to "traditional" cultural values set up binary oppositions between traditional and modern, East and West, and First World and Third World. Culture and identity are reified into immutable, unitary entities at the same time that they are inscribed with priority and hierarchy (i.e., good/bad, ours/theirs). Ultimately, the experiences of immigrant youth are represented as if they are seamless, without contradictions and change.

Within the research on the identities of immigrant students, a small body of literature has been important for advancing knowledge on the multiplicity of student identities. For example, Lee (1996) challenged the monolithic identity of Asian American students as a "model minority" by demonstrating the variation in experience and achievement of students from different Asian ethnic groups. More recently, Lee (2001) argued that Hmong American students are more than model

© 2010 State University of New York Press, Albany

minorities or delinquents, by pointing to the ways structural forces and relationships inside and outside schools shape their attitudes toward and experiences in school. In their classic piece, McKay and Wong (1996) illuminated the multiple and shifting identities of adolescent immigrant Chinese students as they are shaped by and react to discourses about achievement and language learning.

Especially pioneering research specifically rejected the idea that immigrant students are either simply internalizing the dictates of their families and communities or those of mainstream society and emphasized instead the ways the identities of immigrant youth are fragmented, and how they change across different social contexts. British-Sikh immigrant students in Hall's (1995) study viewed themselves as neither entirely English nor entirely Indian. Hall put forth the notion of "cultural fields" to stress the situational aspect of identities, highlighting identity as positional and subject to change. The cultural fields that make up the lives of British-Sikh adolescents are composed "of constellations of power and authority, cultural competencies and influences" (p. 253) specific to each cultural field. As Hall (1995) further elaborates, the

> practices in a cultural field both reproduce and create cultural expectations for bodily gestures and dress, for appropriate manners and signs of respect between the generations and the sexes, as well as the cultural knowledge people use to interpret social interactions (p. 253).

According to Hall, the shifts in the practices and relations of power from one social context to the next allow second-generation British-Sikh youth to "play" with cultural identities. In each cultural field, such as school, home, shopping mall, or temple, the adolescents participate in and create different cultural forms. As a result, British-Sikh youth construct "not one unitary cultural identity, but rather multiple cultural identities that acquire situationally specific meanings and forms" (Hall, 1995, p. 253).

Similarly, Sarroub (2005) found that Yemeni adolescents adapted their identities to the cultural spaces they inhabited. These adolescents strategically used Arabic in school for "important functional and religious purposes as students attempted to maintain dual identities" (p. 61). Likewise, the Indian American students in Maira's (2002) study switched among multiple identities as they moved between the spaces of school, work, and family, changing from baggy pants and earrings they wore with peers to more conservative attire for work and family gatherings. According to Maira, Indian American youth are creating a

© 2010 State University of New York Press, Albany

"cut 'n mix" style that is neither like the music, fashion, and practices of their parents nor that of dominant U.S. society.

Taken together, this growing body of literature on immigrant students highlights the identities of immigrant youth as those that respond to ideological, cultural, and structural forces in schools and society. Importantly, it points to the various discourses and practices that inform and shape the experiences and identities of students in ways that are multiple and shifting. However, this literature on the multiplicity and fluidity of immigrant identity has primarily focused on identity shifting across various *social contexts*. My research with the urban, immigrant students at Dynamic High School suggests that immigrant identities are much messier and conflictual than notions of "multiple," "situational" or "fluid" identities. Moreover, and importantly, my work illuminates the ambivalence—contradictions, uncertainty, fractures—of *individual* identities, where the subject position of a person shifts with each speaking, from one moment to the next. From this perspective, identities are not just "multiple," "hybrid," and "situated," but significantly, they are also subdivided, inconsistent, and temporary.[2]

Discourse, Identity, and Ambivalence

In this study, I draw on the work of poststructural and postcolonial theorists to understand the experiences and identities of urban, immigrant students through the conceptual lens of ambivalence. I use *discourse* to refer to spoken and written language as well as images used in popular and academic arenas. As a network of power relations and knowledges, discourses are more than simply a group of statements or images. Weedon (1987) lucidly explains this Foucauldian definition of discourse:

> Discourses, in Foucault's work, are ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and the relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the "nature" of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern. Neither the body nor thoughts and feelings have meaning outside their discursive articulation, but the ways in which discourse constitutes the minds and bodies of individuals is always part of a wider network of power relations, often with institutional bases (p. 108).

© 2010 State University of New York Press, Albany

More than language or ways to understand our world, discourses are a set of historically grounded, yet dynamic statements and images that have the power to legitimate and create knowledges, identities, and realities. The power of discourses to constitute the identities of Asian Americans through the discourse of the model minority is illustrative. According to the discourse of the Asian American model minority, the achievements of Asian Americans are attributable to cultural values, familial support, and a strong work ethic (Lee, 1996; Osajima, 1987). It emerged in the 1960s in the midst of the Civil Rights movement and was often used to contrast the experiences of successful Asian American "minorities" against "troublemaking" ones (e.g., African Americans and Latino Americans) (Osajima, 1987). The discourse of the model minority positions and legitimates Asian Americans as "successful" minorities, while simultaneously blaming other racial groups for their underachievement. As this example illustrates, discourses are never neutral but are imbued with and reflect political positions, values, and social practices (Hall, 1990; Weedon, 1987).

An important assumption of my understanding of discourse is that some discourses have become so ingrained through repeated circulation that they have become institutionalized and reproduced in social, cultural, and political processes (e.g., law, education, medicine, social welfare) (Davies, 2000; Weedon, 1987). These dominant discourses are so frequently employed in our social and discursive practices that they seem to be "natural" or self-evident. The naturalization of dominant discourses masks their *social construction* and conceals the existence of competing, alternative discourses (Mills, 1997; Weedon, 1987). For instance, the dominant discourse of Asian American success prescribes and defines the experiences of a "normal" Asian American as obedient, quiet, passive, and academically successful (Lee, 1996). These discursive frameworks define the parameters within which Asian ethnics can negotiate what it means to be Asian American. Because dominant discourses have the power to confine and control what it means to be Asian American, behaviors of Asian American women and men that fall outside the discourse of the model minority are understood to be unnatural and deviant. Hegemonic discourses obscure competing accounts of academic struggle, social marginalization, and other possibilities and realities of being Asian American.

When considering *identity*, I understand it as a dynamic process of "production" that is constructed, negotiated and constituted through discourse and representation (Hall, 1990, 1996; Davies, 1993; Weedon, 1987). As Hall (1996) explains,

© 2010 State University of New York Press, Albany

> precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity (p. 4).

Instead of naturally given, identity is produced through discursive practices that take place within specific historical and social contexts and power relations. Because identity is constructed through the play of power and exclusion within social and discursive practices, identity is a discursive *positioning* that is unstable, incomplete, and always changing (Hall, 1990, 1996). From this perspective, characterizations of immigrants as traditional, patriarchal, and resistant to assimilationist demands are not simply natural, harmless representations. Instead, they reflect the dynamics of power relations and are the product of repeated expression and circulation in public and academic discourse. For example, discourses about Asian Americans as the "yellow peril" and "model minority" have historical roots in U.S. labor and civil rights movements, respectively (Lee, 1999). Likewise, the ever-present discourse that immigrants are a burden on the U.S. economy is grounded in social welfare standpoints and political motivations.

Identity invokes a history of ideas and images—discourses—of who we are (Bhabha, 1994; Davies, 1993, 2000; Hall, 1996) as a point of "temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us" (Hall, 1996, p. 6). From this point of "temporary attachment" we depart and respond—in our identity constructions—to practices, discourses, and representations that have already identified us (Davies, 1993). The ways we respond may echo, contradict, modify, or resist how we have been represented. Identity thus involves a double action, where in one movement we are *put* in subject positions by others who draw on available, powerful discourses to identify us; and in another movement we *take up* subject positions by drawing on available discourses ourselves. In other words, identity can be constituted in two ways. First, one can position or identify another individual by adopting a discourse that draws on a particular cultural stereotype (e.g., as an Asian American model minority) to identify the person as a particular kind of subject (e.g., as high-achieving). And second, one can position oneself by taking up storylines to locate oneself within

© 2010 State University of New York Press, Albany

a specific identity. For instance, Asian American students may choose to identify themselves as anti-school. In both cases, positioning is not necessarily intentional (Davies, 2000). Moreover, due to the existence of multiple discourses that say numerous, even contradictory things about who individuals are or can be, the identities or positioning of individuals are continuously constituted and susceptible to disagreement and inconsistency.

In this book I examine this double movement of identity, specifically how Lao students work with—rework—discourses that have already identified them. According to Bhabha (1994), the meaning of identity and culture is not tied down permanently, but forever bears the traces of other meanings. Because meaning has no fixity, it opens up a space for ambivalence and re-articulation. Bhabha (1994) maintains that "we should remember that it is the 'inter'—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (p. 38). This space of translation or identification enables other identities to emerge by constituting the discursive conditions where "the same signs [discourses, representations] can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). Identities that are shaped in and come out of this space of translation are therefore new, "neither One nor the Other but *something else besides, in-between*" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 219). As I make sense of the experiences and identities of the students (and teachers) at Dynamic High School, I pay particular attention to the ways that discourses and representations are (and need to be) read anew.

To emphasize that identity and identity work are "fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (Hall, 1996, p. 4), I specifically employ the notion of *ambivalence* to describe and make sense of the identities of Lao immigrant students. Cultural theorists such as Bhabha (1994) have theorized culture and identity through interchangeable terms of "ambivalent space," "hybridity," "third space," "in-between," "liminality," "meanwhile," and "supplementary." In the following pages, I give preference to the term *ambivalence* to underscore that the space of identity work is not a fixed location, with originary ideas of identity and culture as pure, discrete points of departure (Bhabha 1990). *Ambivalence* is able to signal the continual fluctuations, contradictions, incompleteness, and uncertainty of identity work that, for me, terms such as "hybridity" and "in-between" do not capture as well. For example, "in-between" suggests that the identities of Lao students are perhaps *between* Asian and U.S. cultures. Problem-

© 2010 State University of New York Press, Albany

atically, it recasts dualisms that my work seeks to unsettle. The term *ambivalence* is better able to disrupt the framing of urban, immigrant identities within binary oppositions. It is better able to emphasize the multiple, fragmented, and inconsistent identities that urban, Lao American students create as they draw on a range of (competing) discourses in their meaning-making.

Collecting and Telling Stories

"Hanging Out" Research

> *Lori, Nikhong, Coua, Somkiat, and I are all sitting at the booth today. We are crowded together, with Lori and Somkiat sitting on one side of the booth, and Coua and me on the other side. Nikhong is sitting in a chair that she has pulled up to the end of the booth. We're discussing what we did during "Issues Day" yesterday. There's a consensus among the students that the day was boring in general, but good because the regular classes were cancelled. As we begin to talk about the different workshops the students attended, Somkiat loudly complains that he got classes that he didn't want because he didn't sign up for any of them. And to make matters worse, he was also late to school. After a brief moment where Coua, Lori, Nikhong, and I glance at each other with suppressed grins, Coua says, "Well, duh!" We tease Somkiat a little more, and then he tells us that he went to workshops such as HIV and safe sex, which were just "okay." Lori shares that she went to one on rape and dating violence, but didn't like it at all. She thought that it would focus more on protection and prevention, but instead, the focus was on what to do after the assault. Nikhong then gushes about how much she loved her Fun with Chemistry class, mainly because they got to make ice cream. More quietly, she also mentions that Vong was in the class with her, but she didn't talk to him. When I ask why, Nikhong blushes and reminds me that she's still too embarrassed that he knows that she wanted to ask him to the Sadie Hawkins dance. As I lean toward Nikhong to tell her that it is really brave to ask someone out, I accidently knock over Somkiat's Coke. Coua leaves us to get napkins to help me clean up the spill. As he walks away, Phongsava runs over to our booth and plops down next to me, where Coua was sitting moments before. She immediately takes out a bunch of pictures that she had taken with Somkiat and Lori.*

© 2010 State University of New York Press, Albany

Lori picks out a picture of her and Somkiat to keep and Somkiat takes a picture of him and Phongsava. As we talk about the pictures, I learn that Phongsava used to date one of Lori's older brothers. While we pour over the pictures, Coua comes back with the napkins and hands them to me and leaves again to sit with some of his Hmong friends.

Suddenly, in her usual frenetic manner, Phongsava turns to me and tells me that she's leaving Dynamic to go to an alternative school. Ms. Jefferson referred her to the school because she doesn't have enough credits to pass the year. As Phongsava tells me she's supposed to leave as soon as possible, I think back to the numerous days she skipped school and the attempts by me and Ms. Sanders to encourage her to come to school more. Phongsava tells us that she doesn't want to go, but that she has to because of her grades. Sensing our concern, she assures us that she'll try to come back to Dynamic next year. Somkiat then breaks in with his own news, sharing that he and his mom are moving to one of the southern suburbs in June. Even though it will be almost an hour from his dad, siblings, and friends, Somkiat announces that it will be good, since they'll be living "in a kind of circle" near three other aunts. Lori and I point out it will be different living so far from the city and Somkiat declares, "I'm going to be white-washed!" When I ask him to explain, he tells me that the city will have mainly White people, and that his family will be the only minorities. . . . With a few minutes left in the lunch period, Somkiat asks me where I'm going next. I tell him that I'm going to Civics with Lori and Nikhong. He makes a disapproving noise of "Mmm" and then asks, "Why don't you go to class with me?" More than words, his tone conveys that he thinks it'd be much better than going with Lori and Nikhong. I glance at Lori and Nikhong, and tell Somkiat that I already made plans with the girls to go to class with them. In an attempt to lessen his disappointment, I suggest that I could go to class with him tomorrow or anytime after today. Still unhappy with me, Somkiat gives me a disapproving look, makes another "Mmm" and then grudgingly agrees (FN 3/6/02, 2nd Lunch).

The process of doing ethnography is one of learning about the lives of others, your discipline, and ultimately, yourself (Glesne, 2005). Perhaps more than anything, ethnography is an engagement of social relations that muddles who we think we are as "researchers."

© 2010 State University of New York Press, Albany

Over the course of the 2001–2002 academic year I spent an extensive amount of time with Lao students inside and outside Dynamic High School.[3] In school, I followed the students through various activities that included attending class, lunch, and school-sponsored dances and sports games. Outside school, I was invited to spend time with students at family gatherings, church, restaurants, parks, or in their homes. This "hanging out" research, as a friend called it, involved engaging with students on a personal level as individuals, and not simply as research participants or "informants." Indeed, as a refugee of the Vietnam War who came to the United States as a young girl, my life experiences were very similar to those of my participants. My interactions with the Lao American students challenged insider/outsider notions of researcher identities.[4] Rather than positioning myself as a "fly on the wall," in my work at Dynamic, doing ethnography was about immersing myself in the day-to-day experiences of students, and opening myself up to the activities, interests, worries, and emotions of their lives. As the above fieldnote illustrates, the ethnographic experience of "being there" includes being present for the unfolding of Nikhong's crush on a boy, for the sharing of news about Phongsava's move to an alternative school, and for the routine of having lunch with students. My presence during this particular lunch hour, where Somkiat shared that he went to a workshop on safe sex and HIV during *Issues Day*,[5] offered me a glimpse of his identity as a gay person that did not play out more deeply until almost two months later.

More importantly, by "hanging out" with the Lao American students, I was able to observe the tensions, shifts, and contradictions in the negotiations of culture and identity within the particular historical and social context of Dynamic High. Lao American students such as Lori, Nikhong, Somkiat, and Phongsava, among others,[6] helped me to understand the inadequacy of our normative, cohesive, binary discourses about their identities as urban, immigrant students. In the following pages I explore the contradictions of their identities, guided by three central questions: (1) How do dominant discourses frame urban, immigrant students? (2) How are the identities of immigrant students partial, unresolved, and more complex than dominant representations? and (3) How is an understanding of "unresolved identities" important for thinking about curriculum and pedagogy? This ethnographic study highlights and represents the experiences of Lao American students as a case for understanding the experiences of immigrant students in general, and for understanding the way identity is constructed more broadly in U.S. schools and society (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 1995).

© 2010 State University of New York Press, Albany

However, my account of the conversations, observations, and experiences of Lao students, their peers, and teachers at Dynamic does not seek to reveal the truth, actuality, or the reality of "being there." Instead, as a looking back or "second glance" (Britzman, 2000, p. 30), this poststructuralist ethnography acknowledges that its representation of Lao American students is a site of crisis and doubt. Part of the predicament, as Britzman (2000) points out, is that "ethnography [is] both a set of practices and a set of discourses" (p. 28). And because language is partial, fractured by "what cannot be said precisely because of what is said, and of the impossible difference within what is said, what is intended, what is signified, what is repressed, what is taken and what remains" (Britzman, 2000, p. 28) in writing, reading, and understanding, ethnographic narratives in themselves are partial. Indeed, they are "fictions" (Clifford, 1988) and "tales" (Van Maanen, 1988; Wolf, 1992).

Telling Stories

Let me tell a story that comes easily for me. It is a story about Trina, a senior Lao American student who was one of my primary participants. From my time with Trina at Dynamic High, I learned that the problems that the discourses of urban dysfunction emphasize are real issues that she faced on a daily basis. Like many of the students at the school, Trina contended with various personal, economic, and environmental challenges in her pursuit of education. Trina's position at the social and economic margins required household survival strategies (Tapia, 1998) that do not conform to dominant standards of household economic structures.

In Trina's experience, working multiple jobs to pay for her needs has been a part of her life from a young age. For several months during my time at Dynamic she held three jobs. As Trina negotiated the demands of getting good grades at school and earning money to support herself, time was at the forefront of her mind. This is how she balanced school and work:

> *Trina*: Okay, when I had three jobs, I have a planner and I've been carrying my planner for like forever. It takes care of my clinic appointments and school and work. So what I do is first you never get into something that you know you can't complete. So I make sure I know that I'm gonna be able to work and get my homework and still earn a good

© 2010 State University of New York Press, Albany

> grade. So that's what I go for the job. You don't ever get yourself into a mess where you can't get out of.

Trina is able to navigate the myriad responsibilities of school and work with exceptional time management. As she advised, this meant that "you never get into something that you know can't complete." The planner that she carried around "forever" helped Trina to track and make use of all of her time. As a student who was conscientious about grades, an important part of good time management included allotting time to complete her homework:

> *Trina*: And then time-wise like certain jobs I'll start not right after school, but a little bit after school. Then I can do my homework during that time or before I go to bed or wake up early in the morning and do it. But usually I do all my work at school so then I don't have to do it at home.

At another point, she also talked about completing class assignments in spare moments during the school day: "While I go to class I'll listen at the same time. But if it's really nothing big or nothing new I'll work on something else but listen at the same time." More often than not, Trina was able to complete most of her assignments at school.

Trina used the money that she earned to purchase her own clothes and school supplies and to pay for other needs. The year before my research, she was able to save money from less than a year of work to buy a new Honda sport utility vehicle for her father. In the year of my research, she bought a used Acura for herself. Additionally, Trina shared that she was considering several investment options, including War Bonds and Certificates of Deposit. When I asked her why earning and saving money was important for her, she told me that she wanted something to fall back on in case she needed money: "Something there to back me up because I don't want to go bankrupt or broke or whatever. And if I do there'll be something on the side that will be there waiting for me, that I'll be able take out and use just in case." According to Trina, investment was a good option for her because she is "very patient, especially if it's about money. So [she]'ll leave it as long as [she] want[s] to."

Trina's experiences as a poor immigrant demanded a renegotiation and reconstruction of family and economic standards. She recreated household structures and helped contribute to the economic needs of her family. While the structures of middle- and upper-middle-class

© 2010 State University of New York Press, Albany

households are set up to have parents as heads of households and as purchasers of cars for youth, the economic marginalization of students like Trina required a re-creation of household structures where youth took care of household bills and purchased cars for parents. Trina was able to do all of this while maintaining good grades that put her on the school's "B Honor Roll" for both semesters.

This story was an "easy" story for me to tell for a few reasons. It was easy because I was able to highlight Trina's strength as she negotiated the institutions of school, work, and home. It raised the possibility for another understanding of student identities that includes the role of breadwinner and other major responsibilities. I was able to highlight the challenges Trina faced as a poor immigrant, while reinforcing her remarkable strength. This triumphant, "beating the odds" story underscored the exemplary work ethic that allowed Trina to achieve in school and help her family despite extraordinarily difficult circumstances.

And yet, this is not the story about Lao American immigrant students that I want to tell. For one, it does not sufficiently illuminate the complexity of Trina's identity. In order to tell a story that underscored the positive aspects of her life, I left out elements that were problematic (cf. Lubienski, 2003). In such a feel-good account there was no room to share contradictory details of her life, like the fact that she was a student in the Comprehensive Program—the lowest academic track at Dynamic High. Even though Trina was able to attain good grades, she did not want to attend a 4-year college because she believed a 2-year degree would give her a quicker payback. Within the easy story, there was no place for incongruities like the 24-year-old high school dropout who has been her boyfriend for over 2 years.

I want to tell a different story—a counterstory—to the ones that dominate our understandings of what it means to be an urban resident, immigrant, and student. I want to make visible the discourses that are deployed by ourselves and by others in the process of identity-making that constrain and delegitimize the identity claims of students. Nonetheless, there are difficulties in telling stories about culture and identity. For one, as other ethnographers have done, I want to acknowledge the difficulty in "writing culture" (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). There is a contradiction in my desire to reveal the fluidity of culture and the act of writing—attempting to "freeze" culture on paper. Writing about the identity negotiations between Lao American students and their peers and teachers essentially involves trying to capture culture in-the-making. This ethnographic telling, then, is an incomplete snapshot of the lives of students, teachers, and staff at Dynamic High. What I describe in

© 2010 State University of New York Press, Albany

the following pages are fragments of stories of what happened within a specific context and time—a time that was already passé even as I was sitting with the students jotting down notes.

What I pass on in this book is my story or interpretation of the experiences of students and staff that I observed at Dynamic High. As I do so, I will present the words or voices of the experiences of my participants. Telling stories with the voices of others is a tricky undertaking, entangled with moral and epistemological implications. As feminist researchers (e.g., Fine, 1994b; Reinharz, 1992; Scott, 1992) suggest, we cannot represent the voices (of experience) as if they "speak for themselves" and are transparent proof of our research arguments. The voices that we collect from research participants are "interpretation[s] in need of an interpretation," (Scott, 1992, p. 37) which must be contextualized and historicized. The problem with using voices, then, is not that researchers edit and select voices in making their arguments. The trouble is that researchers rarely admit that we edit, interpret, translate, and choose—but pretend that we are not politically involved (Britzman, 2000; Fine, 1994b; Scott, 1992). My presentation—rather, re-presentation—of the experiences of Lao American students is by no means a "literal representation" or "mirror" of reality (Britzman, 2000), but is infused with my identity, interpretations, experiences, and politics.

Moreover, the stories I tell in this book about urban, immigrant identities engage writing strategies that highlight our discursive practices and trouble our belief in the "real" of culture and identity. As an attempt to shift the way we think and speak about urban, immigrant identities, my stories do not seek to make radical changes to our narrative conventions (Kondo, 1990; Weedon, 1987). However, following Kondo (1990), I believe that by spotlighting the "potential conflict, ambiguity, irony, and the workings of power in the very process of constructing identities could yield other insights and other rhetorical strategies to explore" (p. 304). Further, as an incomplete account of the lives of urban, immigrant students at Dynamic High, this ethnography, like all texts, contains inconsistencies, silences, and evidence of the limits of language (Weedon, 1987). The storylines in my narrative describe fragments of lives, and are in themselves replete with gaps and contradictions. Rather than produce "smooth stories of the self" (MacLure, 1996, p. 283) or arrive at a resolution in this book, I seek to emphasize the partialness of the stories we tell and write toward an "always more to the story" (Britzman, 1998, p. 321).

Lastly, there are tensions in aiming to reveal the influence and power of discourses while telling stories to accomplish the task. Just as I

© 2010 State University of New York Press, Albany

expose and explain the discourses that frame and shape the identities of Lao American students, I also draw on and deploy discourses to do so. I am implicated in the same discursive process that I wish to spotlight. The issue is not that we draw on discourses to make meaning. Rather, the problems lie with the ways prevailing discourses simplify and confine identities and pretend that they are naturally-occurring. What I want to do is tell a story that brings attention to the hegemony of some discourses and opens up possibilities for alternative identifications. As Britzman (2000) advocates, ethnographic accounts should seek to

> trace how power circulates and surprises, theorize how subjects spring from the discourses that incite them, and question the belief in representation even as one must practice representation as a way to intervene critically in the constitutive constraints of discourses (p. 38).

Just as my ethnography is an attempt to resignify our current representations that confine and misrecognize urban, immigrant students, my account is itself a representation that should be questioned. The "doubleness" of this project (Gonick, 2003, p. 16), of highlighting the way discursive practices constrain student identities while also deploying discursive practices to create new identities, is a delicate undertaking. Indeed, my project runs the risk of reinscribing the very discourses that I want to unsettle. Nevertheless, such uncertainty and messiness are part of the story that I want to tell. As the following chapters demonstrate, even though we strive for cohesion and tidiness in the stories we tell about ourselves and others, the fractures remain.

Things to Come

In the following chapters I elucidate the various discourses and practices that inform and shape the experiences and identities of urban, Lao American high school students. I explore the ways that immigrant youth identities are shaped by dominant discourses as well as the ways that they modify, resist, or echo these discourses. I show that while urban, Lao American students are changing what it means to be "urban" and "immigrant" youth, most people are unable to read them as doing so, and instead see the students as confused, backward, and problematic.

This introductory chapter examined the dominant representations of urban, immigrant identities, and reviewed the bodies of literature and epistemological perspectives that informed the study, analysis,

© 2010 State University of New York Press, Albany