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Book Review of *Culturally Contested Literacies: America's "Rainbow Underclass" and Urban Schools* by Guofang Li

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Many words and phrases are used by the popular press to describe literacy achievement in urban American schools: *emergency, failing, crisis, achievement gap, in need of reform*, just to name a few. It seems as though reporters in the media do not think very highly of urban education in America. Each of these terms implicitly references the unique, decontextualized literacy practices often valued in American schools, such as reading passages in order to correctly answer questions, silent reading for set amounts of time, and writing essays using specified formats and topics. Students are considered successful in school literacy if they are able to perform well on standardized tests, whether the privileged literacy of schools matches the literacy practices of students in their lives outside of school or not. If students in urban schools are to succeed, educators and curriculum writers need to use students' home literacies as bridges to the concepts being taught in the curriculum that is so highly valued by educational institutions. Ideas about utilizing students' home literacies are among several of the key concepts about literacy education and practices explicated in *Culturally Contested Literacies: America's "Rainbow Underclass" and Urban Schools* (2007) by Guofang Li.

Contextualizing the Study

This text is an ethnographic description of the literacy practices of six diverse families whose children attend an urban school referred to as Rainbow Elementary in Buffalo, New York. Through her use of semi-structured interviews and participant observation, Li provides the reader with rich descriptions of each family's literacy practices, cultural values, and racial identities. The careful analysis of the data, combined with her understanding of literacy instruction in urban schools, allows the author to understand and describe how the values found in each home work against the practices of the school, thus rendering student's home literacy practices as "culturally contested" (Li, 2007, p. 25). Li's use of this term highlights the mismatch between home and school, stating that the "power struggle between school and home is in a constant flux" (p. 25) and that there are "tensions around the literacy and culture duality... underlying the mismatches between school and home" (p. 163).

The opening of Li's book describes the current state of both literacy education and diversity in urban American schools. Li sees the increasing diversity within urban classrooms as a reason to reevaluate approaches to literacy instruction currently used to increase student achievement. In the next chapter, Li describes Buffalo's history and demographics, providing background about the research setting to the reader. She described clear racial divisions between neighborhoods, with economic and educational resources funneled to the more affluent White areas, whereas minority-dominated areas were allotted fewer monetary resources while also dealing with greater crime, drug problems, and gang activity. Similar to the city itself, the school system was racially segregated. The district faced many challenges typical of large urban districts, including the low retention of high quality educators, inadequate budgets, low standardized test scores, and an increase in English language learners.

Li focuses on the frequent tension between the urban student's home and school literacy practices. She includes families from three different ethnic and racial backgrounds, which she terms *Vietnamese*, *Sudanese*, and *economically disadvantaged White*. Li's study also investigated how power structures and cultural norms shaped literacy practices within urban minority families. Finally, the book works to describe how schools can facilitate students' learning when there is a mismatch between home and school literacies.

Claims and Arguments

Culturally Contested Literacies presents three central arguments based on Li's investigation. The first of these arguments is that through their home literacy practices, urban families both resist and conform to the dominant discourses of society. Second, the resistance of the dominant culture can result in feelings of cultural dissonance for children who attend urban schools. Without mediation, students are often unsuccessful at reconciling their home and school literacy practices. This particular argument is introduced early in the text through relevant scholarship, such as the work of Weis and Fine (2004), Baumann (1996), and Gee (1996); Li expands on this scholarship later in the text as she describes the literacy practices found in each of the six homes. Finally, Li presents her concept of *culture pedagogy*, which she claims can be used to capitalize on students' cultural ways of knowing while also teaching students to question the dominant structures that result in feelings of cultural dissonance.

Within the seven chapters of the book, Li builds her arguments, leading to her conclusions about the use of *culture pedagogy* as a way to bridge home and school literacy practices. Guiding Li's work is Gee's (1989) definition of literacy as an "identity kit," the idea that cultural groups enact their own forms of literacy. These forms include the discourse practices associated with using language, which are tied to the beliefs and values held within the worldview of a particular group, and thus connected to one's identity.

After the opening chapters situating the study in terms of research context and recent scholarship, chapters three through five are dedicated to the families Li researched during her study. Each chapter introduces two families, detailing their home literacy practices, cultural values, beliefs about the school, and their conceptualizations of racial identity. These chapters provide the reader with Li's data from her study with such detail, it is possible to begin to understand the contestations of literacy practices described in earlier chapters. Chapters six and seven describe disconnections between home and school literacy practices that urban students often face. Li presents her conclusions, detailing the conceptual framework of *culture pedagogy* as a way for educators to address the contested literacies of urban students to facilitate learning.

The chapter “Being Vietnamese, Becoming Somebody” introduces the Phan and Ton families. The parents in each family worked long hours and their own English proficiency limited their ability to be involved with school literacy. Traditional gender roles were evident: the female children assisted with household chores and child care, limiting their abilities to socialize with their peers, while the male children had no such expectations and were given more freedom. Vietnamese language and culture were prevalent in each household, and home literacies included watching television, reading story books, reading newspapers in English and Vietnamese, and using Vietnamese as the primary language within the homes. Often viewed as the “model minority” despite their own struggles, the families viewed middle class White America as the ideal, viewed social problems as a result of violence, and perceived abuse of the welfare system by Blacks. The home was where traditional cultural beliefs and values intersected with American ideals of success. However, when the values of home, school and the seemingly elusive American dream did not align, the families met with repeated frustration.

For the Sudanese Torkeri and Myer families, both of whom were refugees, ideas about culture, race, and literacy in the home worked against the ideas and practices of school. Although the families did not see themselves as a part of the African American community, they were typically associated with African Americans by others. The families’ beliefs about the promise of education and the value of hard work were not realized in their own experiences. At various times, each family struggled to obtain housing, maintain employment, and stay connected to their Sudanese culture, traditions, and values. In these families, the limited English proficiency and work schedules of the parents regularly made it difficult for them to facilitate their children’s learning; however, homework was a valued form of literacy in both homes. There were also obstacles and frustrations when working with the teachers and administrators at Rainbow Elementary. Limited access to dominant cultural knowledge and institutional barriers made it difficult for parents to be involved in the educational process, leaving the children underserved and overlooked by the school system.

The last families introduced to the reader are the working class White Sassano and Clayton families. Li asserts that working class White children often experience cultural dissonance in school, similar to racial and ethnic minorities. Each of these families struggled with how they were racialized as the majority, despite the fact that they were the racial minority in their low income neighborhood. Each family stressed literacy as a shared practice of the family, a belief that is not often valued in individualistic American schools. In these families, home literacy practices included reading newspapers, making grocery lists, making family trips to the library, and reading books together. The parents in each family lacked economic resources and knowledge bases to facilitate academic learning, but they also desired for their children to be successful. Similar to the other families, in these homes the internalized racial hierarchy was constructed with middle class Whites at the top and Blacks at the bottom with assumptions about social problems being caused by Blacks. Due to their status as low income urban Whites, these families shared the majority of the struggles that the rest of the community faced; however, through the eyes of other groups in the neighborhood, they were still seen as closer to the top of the racial hierarchy.

Implications and Culture Pedagogy

Despite the fact that the small sample of six families does not allow the study to be broadly generalized, there are several implications for Li’s work. First and foremost, there are lessons about the mismatch between home and school that educators may consider when

working within their own contexts. Among these lessons are that cultural ways of knowing used in the homes of urban students are often different than those used in schools. Additionally, within immigrant families generational gaps are often exacerbated by language proficiency differences. Students' backgrounds and academic needs are typically not well understood by teachers and school administrators who may make assumptions based on culture, race, and/or class (Apple & Weis, 1983; Mercado, 2005; Noguera, 2003). The final lesson educators can take from Li's book is that within these six families there was a strong feeling held by parents that the school environment was not a caring, friendly, or helpful place.

Beyond lessons that urban educators may learn and then apply to their own contexts, Li's promotion of *culture pedagogy* has larger implications as well. Culture pedagogy, as described by the author, should be used to facilitate the transition between school and home literacy practices. Within this framework, students' cultural backgrounds are seen as valuable resources for teachers that can be used to reshape the politics of identity and difference in the classroom. However, the author also recognizes that individual teacher's efforts to use the culture pedagogy approach will be insufficient unless school districts are willing to use this approach on a larger scale. Despite the fact that Li presents culture pedagogy as a two-step process for educators, without the support of the administration and larger district, the reality of working within this framework may be difficult for teachers due to the current climate of standardized testing, large class sizes, and time constraints.

The specifics of culture pedagogy allow the reader to see its potential for success. The first step within the culture pedagogy framework is *cultural reconciliation*, which is used to help students recognize dualities in their lives and the consequences of contested literacy. Teachers must know a great deal about each of their students' lived experiences and the sociocultural context of their learning in and out of school in order to best work with students. Families and teachers also need to work toward mutual understanding in order to learn each other's cultural knowledge. Li further suggests that teachers collect data to study students and families outside of school to better understand their cultures and values.

After learning about students' experiences, teachers can reconfigure school literacy practices to facilitate student learning. Li suggests valuing and building on home languages instead of silencing them, an individualization of literacy curricula, rethinking homework assignments that necessitate reading with a parent, and using students' literacy production to help students analyze sociopolitical aspects of their lives. However, she does not account for constraints on curricula that are often imposed by districts in order to streamline education, or the amount of time and effort needed to collect data on every student's family and to create an individual curriculum for each student. While there is a great deal of value found within the first step of culture pedagogy, there are also possible pitfalls for implementation of this framework.

Cultural translation is the second part of Li's culture pedagogy. The idea behind this is to assist students with the creation of new hybrids of identity. According to Li, it is imperative that the new hybrid identity will neither distance students from their home literacy nor resist the mainstream. Beyond the mere coexistence of home and mainstream, cultural translation is the strategic coexistence of the different codes with which students must work. The role of teachers is to teach students how to question aspects of their own identity at times, such as when they feel like an outsider, or when they view someone as Other. Teachers must be careful to avoid a "heroes and holidays" approach to multiculturalism in classrooms. Diversity should not be additive either. Instead, students must be allowed to examine differences, question and find their own place amongst a wide array of differences found within their communities. The benefit of

using her model is that students' lived experiences become the basis for critical thinking and questioning of the power structures in society.

Critique and Conclusion

Li's accounts of home literacy practices are very informative, providing a great deal of insight into each family's lived experiences: however, additional attention to the practices of the school would have made the book more robust. Interviews of teachers were primarily used to give contextual information at the beginning of the book, not to foreground the specific experiences of each family. Li presented the family's point of view of perceived negative incidents that occurred at the school. Knowing the school's perspective regarding the same incidents would have been informative and provide insight into how communication breaks down between home and school. Despite these critiques and other logistical limitations noted earlier, culture pedagogy appears to be a promising way to reach the diverse populations of urban students.

Culturally Contested Literacies: America's "Rainbow Underclass" and Urban Schools contains a rich description of the lived experiences, cultural beliefs and values, racial identities, and literacy practices found within six urban families. Teachers working in urban schools will undoubtedly see parallels between the lives of their students' families and those described in the chapters of Li's book. The need for schools to be more attuned to the needs, desires, and aspirations of families is made explicit in the descriptions of each family's struggle to be heard, recognized, and valued as a part of their children's education. The text reinforces that fact that it is imperative for educators to remain focused on the needs of individual students beyond what is typically tested or valued within classroom walls. Understanding and knowing families, home literacy practices, and each student's cultural values and ways of knowing will allow teachers to work more successfully with urban students, helping them navigate the idealized literacy practices of schools. Overall I found Li's text to be extremely useful and relevant, and I was able to relate the families in Li's book to those I have worked with as a middle school teacher. Teachers in all settings, especially those who work with diverse populations of students, can learn much from reading this book.

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