Youth Poets [Book Review by E. Dixon-Roman & D. Vasudevan]

Korina Jocson, University of Massachusetts - Amherst
Reviewed by Ingrid Pufahl, Center for Applied Linguistics

White Kids: Language, Race, and Styles of Youth Identity examines how White teens at a multiracial high school use language to construct, display, and transform their identities while aligning themselves with both youth and race cultures. The book not only provides an interesting and enlightening portrait of the language of teenagers in the 1990s but also demonstrates how the analytical and conceptual tools of sociocultural linguistics can be applied to the study of identity in other disciplines. The interdisciplinary approach assumes that identity is a social and relational construct, jointly produced through interaction with others, rather than an “inherent, essential quality of individual psychology or demographic background” (p. 10). Because language is the primary vehicle of accomplishing social actions, Bucholtz focuses on two aspects in her analysis: first, the semiotic resources that create three distinctive White youth styles: preppies, hip hop fans, and nerds; second, the discursive strategies young Whites use when talking about race and racial conflict. Although adults still live in relatively segregated social worlds, public school populations have become increasingly “majority minority,” thereby putting young people at the forefront of an ongoing ethnoracial shift. Thus, examining how White teenagers negotiate their identities in a multiracial setting allows Bucholtz to shed light on the complexity of the social phenomenon of “Whiteness” in the United States.

Chapter 1 introduces the underlying analytical approach, reviews previous studies on language, race, and identity, and discusses the power and flexible context of Whiteness, that is, “how [it] works as the anchor of the racial system as well as how social actors work whiteness in local situations” (p. 17). Chapter 2 discusses the local context, a large urban multiracial public high school in the 1990s in the San Francisco Bay Area. It also describes the methodology, combining ethnography, interactional analysis, quantitative methods used in variationist sociolinguistics, and research in youth and race. Using participant-observation, the main data sources are audio recordings of students’ interactions and ethnographic interviews, maps of the schools drawn by students, field notes of informal interactions, and written data, including graffiti, yearbooks, and student notes. Bucholtz also addresses the ethical questions and challenges she encountered as a White woman conducting research on racial identity in a multiracial school.

Chapters 3–7 are detailed analyses of White teenagers’ language use. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on how teens use lexical resources, specifically, explicit social labels and slang, to create three different stylistic identities that can be aligned along three dimensions: preppy (mainstream, white-oriented, cool), hip hop (nonmainstream, black-oriented, cool), and nerdy (mainstream, white-oriented, uncool). Chapters 5–7 discuss in detail the semiotic resources associated with preppies, hip-hop fans, and nerds. Examining elements of style, such as clothing, geographic location in the school, and the use of innovative linguistic structures, Bucholtz provides an insightful description of preppies, in particular, the popular “mean” girls, who are highly visible through their involvement in academics and extracurricular activities and use the quotative marker “be all” to display their cool mainstream White style. In contrast, hip hop fans create their style by borrowing from Black culture and language, in particular, a subset of phonological, lexical, and grammatical features that are strongly associated with African American Vernacular English.
(AAVE), for example, the monophthongization of the dipthong /aj/ in buy or multiple negation. Finally, nerds deliberately reject coolness, positioning themselves as hyperwhite in the racial and stylistic order at the school. This is expressed by flouting sexual and gender norms in clothes and avoiding slang and innovative linguistic forms in favor of superstandard English to display their intellect.

Chapters 8–10 examine how, despite these distinctive styles, White teens share discursive practices when talking about race and interracial relationships, thereby displaying their White identities. Chapter 8 discusses the discursive strategy of colorblindness, that is, evading racial terms, disavowing racism, and displacing race by other issues, to assert nonracism in interviews with the researcher. Chapter 9 continues with teens’ narratives of racial conflict, in particular, reverse racism and perceived racial danger from their Black peers, thus denying the racial disparities at their school and constructing Blacks as more advantaged and powerful than Whites. Chapter 10 addresses the ethnoracial labels White teens use for self-description, indicating that they regard being made aware of their Whiteness as unpleasant and view Whiteness as an absence of culture, in contrast to their peers of color, “who regularly expressed ethnic pride” (p. 234). Thus, what was initially intended as a simple background question about ethnicity or race revealed race as a high-stakes issue in students’ daily lives at school.

Chapter 11 summarizes the book’s contributions to sociocultural linguistics and the understanding of the interrelationship of language, identity, and race. Considering that the data were collected in the mid 1990s, Bucholtz’s book is of less interest to those who want to learn more about today’s youth identity. However, Bucholtz’s detailed analyses show how race, or any dimension of identity for that matter, is complex, variable, and socially situated, and therefore requires a nuanced and holistic approach. Her analytical tools that examine various co-occurring linguistic and semiotic resources in social interaction should prove useful for linguists, anthropologists, social scientists, educators, or anyone interested in the construction of identity.

Reviewed by Ezekiel J. Dixon-Román and Deepa Vasudevan, University of Pennsylvania

In Youth Poets: Empowering Literacies In and Out of Schools, Korina Jocson illuminates the role that reading, writing, and performing poetry plays in shaping young people’s lives. The author provides critical insight into adolescent literacy development, approaching her work from her perspective as a multicultural theorist, urban ethnographer, radical poet, and young educator. The book also serves as an ode to the Poetry for the People (P4P) program and its impact on college and high school students in California over the past decade. Founded by the late African American studies professor and poet June Jordan, P4P is a college course at UC Berkeley designed for the reading, writing, and teaching of poetry. Under the auspices of the course, college students become the teachers in the P4P’s high school programs. Jocson deftly builds a case for poetry in the classroom through sharing the voices of seven students involved in P4P at Bellevue High School, a racially diverse school with a conspicuous racial achievement gap. As one of the program facilitators (also referred to as student–teacher–poets), Jocson acts as both participant and observer, experiencing first hand her students’ growth through their engagement with poetic form.

This ethnography responds to existing theoretical frameworks of learning, literacy, communication, and empowerment. Jocson views her personal history within U.S. schooling as well as her work as a practitioner in the P4P program as assets as opposed to
liabilities in her qualitative research. She does not alienate herself from her ethnographic study, allowing her a certain “insider” perspective, nor does she romanticize the struggles of her students, as their experiences resonate with her earlier life. By acknowledging and exposing her relationship with her research, Jocson challenges her readers to embrace the value in and complications of practitioner ethnography. Additionally, Jocson contests and expands conventional definitions of literacy, recognizing “multimodal and multiresearch processes” that are part of youth’s daily lives, such as movies, music, video games, and the internet, each of which inform her students’ knowledge of the world around them (p. 23). By recognizing the various forms of youth information consumption, she contends that pedagogical practices should be in conversation with relevant societal issues that affect youth, particularly for students who are marginalized through the school system. In Youth Poets, hip-hop and spoken word become more than a vehicle for students to learn verbal and written skills; they become a way in which students can express and engage in both their individual and collective positioning with(in) society.

In the P4P high school program, education empowerment is achieved through honoring student voices, providing access to spaces where youth voice is permitted and celebrated, and encouraging an ongoing dialogue about current issues affecting youth. As a true advocate for “youth voice” in educational spaces, this book features several poems of Bellevue students alongside detailed dialogues between youth in the program. Jocson studies students’ interaction with poetry as process, product, and practice. She analyzes her students’ progress in writing and rewriting of original poems and presents their analyses of each other’s poetry, exhibiting the complexity of their language and thought processes.

Although this book celebrates the Poetry for the People model, it also shares strategies of teaching poetry that inform all educators. Jocson offers practitioners tangible resources, such as the “Poetry for the People Toolbox,” that includes guidelines and lesson plans. The book also offers several examples of revolutionary poets, hip-hop artists, and poetry that teachers can incorporate into their curriculum.

Readers looking for a connection between the P4P program and the public school language arts classes will find Jocson alluding to the existing poetry curriculum and the disconnect between the current English canon and students of color. Although these references are helpful, it would have been more compelling to see where P4P specifically intersects, complements, and challenges conventional language arts educational practices in California public schools. Jocson could further explore the concept of youth empowerment through studying the out-of-school time poetry programs and performance spaces that her students independently seek after the P4P program. By employing the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia—that is, real spaces in society where the dominant spaces and culture are “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (1986, p. 24)—we suggest that these youth spaces might have pointed toward the richness, complexity, and transformative possibility of youth-mediated and -constituted sites of comprehensive education. Also, whereas Jocson indicates the difficulty in assessing the impact of P4P on academic development, the stories of her students already demonstrate a change in their literary maturity and sense of individual agency. Future research could measure individual change within poetic spaces, such as students’ affinity to school (class attendance, level of enthusiasm for class before and after the program), self-esteem, and locus of control that could be reported more comprehensively with the assistance of students, parents, and participating teachers.

We admire Jocson’s ability to weave a variety of textual formats, such as poems, classroom dialogue, music, and emails, in her ethnography. Certain chapters become alive like the script of a video documentary. The transformative experience of these seven students and others like them could truly come to life through an audio-visual
presentation of this research. Based on the nature of this project, we hope that Jocson continues to push orthodox understandings of literacy in and through her future work and perhaps by sharing her rich ethnographic work in a visually transformative multimedia documentary.

Reference Cited

Foucault, Michel

Reviewed by Yuki Imoto, Keio University

Studies on Japanese education in the English language have declined in number in the past two decades. This is not surprising when considering the global context where the country’s politicoeconomic status has moved into China’s shadow, making Japanese education a less attractive model for comparative researchers to draw on. As scholars attuned to and implicated in such discursive trends, in Reimagining Japanese Education, Willis and Rappleye propose ways of bringing Japan into the “global conversation” (p. 32). Broadly, they aim to do this first through highlighting change in Japanese education by explaining how these are connected to global forces; thus they show that Japan is not an isolated case, but a viable and valuable model for comparison. Secondly, the editors suggest the need to move away from the view of Japanese education as a bounded object defined against an Other, so that it can be reconceptualized as a “dialogic space” (p. 37) that allows for the “co-production” (p. 38) of knowledge among Japanese and foreign scholars.

Following Willis and Rappleye’s proposition, the nine contributing chapters trace and analyze the eduscapes (taken from Appadurai’s notion of -scapes; p. 32) that flow into Japan. The volume thus provides valuable empirical data in the English language on contemporary issues such as the controversial 2002 yutori reforms that relaxed the education system to make room for the growth of creativity and individuality (ch. 6); the ongoing attempts by the Ministry of Education to improve English education in schools (ch. 5); the revisions of the Fundamental Law on Education in 2006 that brought increased emphasis on Japanese moral education (ch. 3); and the Global 30 project introduced by the government in 2009 to make universities more globally competitive (ch. 8)—all of which are linked to global flows of educational policy discourse.

Although at the macro level of policy, all contributors tell their story of change, their nuanced analyses generally seem to suggest that at the level of practice, global discourses are translated to fit local contexts, or they are simply resisted or ignored. Bjork (ch. 6) for example, argues that despite the implementation of the yutori reforms and the subsequent controversies of failing standards, little change had in fact filtered down to the classroom level. Miller (ch. 7), writing about the reception of Western scientific ideas in the realm of sports policy, describes how these ideas have been resisted or adapted at the ground level by coaches and athletes, who often continue to use indigenous Japanese approaches to sports education—derived from symbols such as the samurai code and Zen Buddhism. Aspinall (ch. 5) points out that although private sectors of English language education are reacting to global trends by offering communicative language learning, institutional and ideological constraints leave national educational policy immune to change. Tsuneyoshi, in her study of newcomer immigrants (ch. 4), argues that while at the margins of the state,
multiculturalism can be observed as a reality, ideologies of a monoethnic Japan are still sustained by the state, ironically in part through policies of internationalization, which are often about enhancing the English and IT (information technologies) abilities of Japanese citizens. The chapters overall show the multiple ways in which ideas within the eduscapes are received and interpreted by policy makers, academics, teachers, and administrators, making the volume a valuable resource for scholars concerned with the global transfer and consumption of ideas.

As part of their mission to connect studies of Japanese education to the wider academic discourse, the editors call for theoretical innovation, offering conceptual tools such as the distinction and the relation between the imagined and the real. In my view, however, the innovation of the volume is to be found in its strategic presentation that embodies the complex process of coproduction. Tensions and contradictions in the conceptualizations of Japanese education are presented through the different positionings of each of the contributors, who as international scholars, carry varying levels of nativeness and foreignness vis-à-vis Japan.

Sato Manabu, a leading Japanese educationalist, for example, takes a native standpoint in addressing innovation in local teaching practice and calling for educational reform (ch. 9). This stance contrasts with analyses by Roesgaard (ch. 3) and by Willis and Rappleye (ch. 1) that are more oriented toward Western theoretical discourses. Tensions are perhaps most vividly seen in the impressive final chapter by Keita Takayama, an Australian-based Japanese sociologist of education. The chapter critiques past studies on Japanese educational reform by major foreign scholars as adhering to “methodological nationalism” (p. 254) and “exceptionalism” (p. 267), and argues for their need to engage with native scholarship instead of remaining as the outside Other. It is interesting that whilst positing coproduction, Takayama’s Othering of foreign (nonnative) scholars through the text seems, in fact, to reinforce dichotomies, rather than transcend them. This suggests the need for us to reflect on the structures of Western academic language within which scholars are implicated, and the politics of power inherent in the act of writing itself.

By presenting such complexities, Willis and Rappleye leave the reader with an inspiring constellation of ideas that transcend existing national discursive boundaries and the dichotomies of Self and Other. As an admirable example of how knowledge about Japanese education is produced transnationally, the book is highly recommended to scholars of Japanese education both based within and outside of Japan, and more generally to social scientists situated in multiple disciplinary, spatial, linguistic, and national academic contexts.

Reviewed by Susanna M. Steeg, George Fox University, and Teresa L. McCarty, Arizona State University

“Every piece of writing reflects the disposition of its author,” Heewon Chang writes in her preface to this eminently readable book, adding that this dispositional foundation “subtly and explicitly reveals who I am and what I value” (p. 10). This statement serves not only to introduce the author to her readers but also stands as a fundamental premise for “autoethnography as method” itself. In this accessible, handbook-style text, Chang’s multicultural background and careful considerations of culture underlie her explanation of autoethnography for both the emergent researcher and for established ethnographers less familiar with this approach. Autoethnography—reflexive self-narrative—uses the author’s
own experiences for cultural analysis and interpretation. As a research methodology, autoethnography is at once ethnographic, interpretive, and autobiographical.

Chang takes the reader through each of these elements in three complementary parts: “Conceptual Framework,” “Collecting Autoethnographic Data,” and “Turning Data into Autoethnography.” As Chang explains the book’s plan, “I [wanted] to show my students and interested others one more way of utilizing personal stories for scholarly purposes. So I... decided to write a book grounded in the anthropological tradition of ethnography and a hands-on approach to instruction in research methods” (p. 10). This hands-on approach is most evident in parts two and three of the book. Before this, Chang details the foundations of culture and self-narrative forming the basis of her explanation of autoethnography. Her anthropological synopsis of these ideas unpacks the complexity of definitions and understandings presently existing in the field about narrative forms of research, including considerations of genre, authorship, and style.

This book makes autoethnography a practical and reasonable endeavor for any new or beginning scholar through application-based explanations. In part two, Chang guides her readers through writing exercises designed to tap into the personal and professional dimensions of lived experience. This is essentially the “how” of autoethnography; readers learn how to generate research questions and collect self-reflective data through writing exercises. These prompts also help readers chronicle their past through self-inventories, kinship maps, and memory journals. Throughout this workbook-oriented portion of the book, the author shares examples from her own autoethnographic endeavors, offering readers a clear roadmap of possibilities in exploring their own lives. Chang is careful to distinguish between self-observational data and self-reflective data, pointing out that data collected closer to the source of its occurrence provide much-needed detail in telling stories or events remembered from long ago. In the last portion of part two, the author explains that collecting external data is important as a way of triangulating findings and broadening an explanation of culture beyond oneself. To accomplish this, she suggests interviews, artifacts, and literature to expand cultural explanations within autoethnography.

In the final portion of the book, Chang describes how to move raw data into coherent autoethnography, guiding readers through additional exercises aimed at analysis and interpretation. Admonishing her readers to recognize that autoethnography is far more than good storytelling, she emphasizes that cultural considerations must be folded into the analysis to create true autoethnography. Chang also unpacks the various styles of autoethnography available to researchers, including descriptive-realistic writing, confessional-emotive writing, analytic-interpretive and imaginative-creative writing.

The book is useful in addressing the researcher’s situatedness in research, particularly in qualitative and ethnographic forms. Although autoethnography seems to centralize the researcher, Chang points out that autoethnography can and should have broader purposes. Beyond simply being about oneself, autoethnography can highlight one’s role as a participant-observer, or even help researchers know their biases within the contexts of qualitative research.

Although the book raises the issue of autoethnography’s acceptability by pointing out the difficulty that some autoethnographers have experienced in being published, new researchers may desire additional validation of the use of autoethnography and its potential contributions in a field that can still be skeptical of “subjective” and arts-based research. For this, readers should consult the extensive list of references (13 pp.) at the end of the book. In addition, for a comprehensive view of the forms autoethnography might take and the things it might accomplish, the appendix of book-length autoethnographies, memoirs, and autobiographies is very helpful.

Overall, Chang has written a book that is user friendly, thorough, and straightforward. Illuminating the parameters and possibilities of autoethnography, the book will make an
important addition to an introductory ethnography or qualitative methods class at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. It could also stand as the centerpiece of a course on narrative research. For those conducting autoethnographic research, it is the essential handbook. Chang’s accessible presentation makes this a valuable resource for new and experienced researchers alike. In the end, Chang encourages her readers to recognize that explorations of themselves have the potential to widen their empathy and understanding of others—the ultimate goal of any qualitative research.