



Unresolved Identities: Discourse, Ambivalence, and Urban Immigrant Students (SUNY series, Second Thoughts: New Theoretical Formations)

Bic Ngo

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Explores the ways that immigrant youth identities are shaped by dominant discourses.

In her ethnographic study of Lao American students at an urban, public high school, Bic Ngo shows how simplistic accounts of these students smooth over unfinished, precarious identities and contested social relations. Exploring the ways that immigrant youth identities are shaped by dominant discourses that simplify and confine their experiences within binary categories of good/bad, traditional/modern, and success/failure, she unmask and examines the stories we tell about them, and unsettles the hegemony of discourses that frame identities within discrete dualisms. Rather than cohesive, the identity negotiations of Lao American students are responses that modify, resist, or echo these discourses. Ngo argues that while 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 youth as confused, backward, and problematic. By illuminating the discursive practices of identity, this study underscores the need to conceptualize urban, immigrant identities as contradictory, fractured, and unresolved.

“Ngo’s perspective on this study reflects her own immigrant roots, permitting her to infuse her experiences as she comes to understand the students in her study.” ? *CHOICE*

“*Unresolved Identities* is a truly illuminating and thoughtful book. Ngo writes with a distinctive voice and with trenchant insight about the contradictions of existence and experience in the urban context. With her ethnographic intervention, she documents the urban center as a pivotal site of diasporic, postcolonial, and globalizing energies. This is a book about the unmaking and remaking of identities in the urban center. Ngo recognizes, as did the great Marxist, postcolonial philosopher C. L. R. James, that the problem of late-capitalist society is the problem of social integration into modern institutions and modern life.” — Cameron McCarthy, coeditor of *Transpersonal Perspectives on Culture, Policy, and Education: Redirecting Cultural Studies in Neoliberal Times*

“In this book Bic Ngo opens up significant new insights into young people’s lives. Focusing on immigrants, and on Lao students in a Midwestern U.S. city in particular, this book helps us understand just how inadequate our category systems are, and how limited and limiting our ways of thinking are, when it comes to difference. Binary thought leads us to classify young people as American *or* Lao, so blinding us to the real complexity of the subjectivities of young people who cross borders continually between one kind of limiting category and another. Ngo works beyond familiar normative ways of understanding identity, and shows the way in which ‘who one is’ is ongoing and emergent within multiple and complex human relations.” — Bronwyn Davies, coeditor of *Pedagogical Encounters*

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From reader reviews:

Annie Hendricks:

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