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Book Review - *Coming of Age in U.S. High Schools: Economic, Kinship, Religious, and Political Crosscurrents.*

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BOOK REVIEW

Hemmings, Annette. *Coming of Age in U.S. High Schools: Economic, Kinship, Religious, and Political Crosscurrents*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004. 200 pp. ISBN 0-8058-4667-0, \$24.50.

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Annette Hemmings' research on U.S. high schoolers' identities and their negotiation of economics, kinship, religion, and politics is important. Yet, it is better exemplified in her excellent *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* piece, "Lona's Links: Postoppositional Identity Work of Urban Youths" (Hemmings, 2000:152–172), than in this uneven and sometimes difficult-to-follow book, which is a fuller treatment of the same research presented in the article. While logical and consistent with the original research design (see Endnote 15, p. 190), her choice to organize the book according to themes instead of school or student made it difficult to keep track of who was who and what were the particularities of the settings they were negotiating. This, in turn, interferes with the book's intended emic orientation (she pledges early on to "foreground the emic experiences of the research participants" [p. 16]) because it scatters the moments when her high school senior informants share their experiences, observations, and perspectives.

According to the methodology description, this book is about a study that Hemmings conducted of ten seniors at three high schools in the mid-1990s. However, some of the ten, like Adam Willis, seem to get little attention, while students who were not the study's focal point, like some of Lona Young's friends, e.g., Ashley, Paul, and Naomi, feature memorably. This deviation from the original design occasionally could be rational-

ized according to the logic of snowball sampling. But if this isn't just the study of ten selected students, then why forefront that as the purported design?

Hemmings has found interesting information, but rarely is a student focused upon for more than a page. Consequently, intriguing features of their biographies and cosmologies also stay far apart. Therefore, the chance to explore the multiple implications of a detail, like an Asian American student's rejection of his parents' Christianity in favor of Confucianism, is reduced. Her main commentary on this topic fits into the religion chapter (p. 125), but that student's participation in a diversity and tolerance club is referenced in an earlier chapter (pp. 98–99) in the family/kinship segment. These pieces fit together—they are part of the same life—yet they do not read that way. The absence of an index with the students' pseudonyms impedes keeping track of a student's biography and impedes juxtaposing their experiences and perspectives. Readers who do decide to persevere through this volume to find its nuggets (and there are nuggets) are encouraged to generate their own indices for the students.

Hemmings notes early on that the three schools attended by the ten students are similarly organized and structured but serve distinct populations: Ridgewood is 88.9% white, has less than 3% of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, and has a 97.8% graduation rate; Central City High is 81% African American, 64% low-income, and has less than a 60% graduation rate; Jefferson High fits between these socio-demographic extremes and is also in the middle in terms of graduation rate (44% white, 54% African American, 49% low-income, and 79% graduation). She then devotes chapter 2 to further comparing the schools. But, after that, the expected emphasis on school experience becomes intermittent, appearing in snippets like her penetrating analysis of the difference between counselor and student perspectives of the CASE program. That she instead focuses on other topics not particularly related to high school is fine, even good (Hemmings notes that anthropological inquiry at school sites rarely include non-schooling issues), but it becomes another example of where the set up was out of sync with the follow through.

Successfully conveying emic perspectives is hard, and here the loudest voice is Hemmings'. She dominates not just because the students' voices are split into fragments but also because, to set up each of her categories of analysis, she offers an overview of the topic (e.g., kinship) that requires five or more pages. Maybe her louder voice is appropriate. After all, she has chosen the core domains that she wants to get student per-

spectives on (although she notes that the category of religion was added after it seemed so pertinent to many students). But somehow it gets in the way of helping the reader access the adolescents' worldviews.

Given the glimmer of exciting or harrowing details enmeshed in her analysis—e.g., relating a teacher's passive acceptance that lower track students will not engage in math (p. 52) or describing a computer class taught with typewriters (p. 61)—I wish this volume flowed more easily. As I paged through this book, I thought of similar scholarship that kept me more successfully engaged and wondered why they differed from this one. In Hemmings' (2000) *AEQ* piece, she devoted multiple pages to Lona, describing without interruption her clique, her role in it, and other issues. This steady focus provided readers with a cumulative sense of Lona and why Hemmings was so intrigued by her. In two other books that engaged me much more, Guadalupe Valdés' (2001) *Learning and Not Learning English: Latino Students in American Schools* and Patricia Hersch's (1999) *A Tribe Apart: A Journey Into the Heart of American Adolescence*, the design is similar—both focused at length on a small number of students. But the biographies and cosmologies of the adolescent subjects are told at length with few interruptions, holding the reader to the various points being raised. I wish Hemmings had shared this account that way.