



**American Conversations: Puerto Ricans, White Ethnics, and Multicultural Education.** Ellen Bigler. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999. 289 pp.

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Ellen Bigler's ethnography is organized by Henry Louis Gates's metaphor of U.S. culture as a contentious "conversation" about what it means to be an American. *American Conversations* treats the debate on multicultural education as an arena for this cultural negotiation, analyzing conflict in one American community as a focus for examining divisions and contradictions within U.S. society as a whole. *American Conversations* tells the story of Arnhem, an Upstate New York community polarized over charges of racism and exclusionary practices in its schools. The controversy amplified tensions between the town's long-standing European American residents and an increasing population of Puerto Ricans migrating from larger cities on the mainland. Bigler argues that the two sides in the debate (which encompassed issues of both multiculturalism and bilingualism) "reflect two distinct maps of society and two distinct discourses concerning social reality that divide Latinos and particularly Puerto Ricans from older, now largely English-speaking Americans" (p. 1). She analyzes these distinct worldviews as shaped by the experiences of differently situated social groups, one marginalized and one mainstream.

Americans agree widely on abstract ideals of freedom and equality. Yet we remain sharply divided on how these ideals ought to be achieved. Bigler's ethnography brings these divisions and contradictions to light, showing how dominant cultural ideologies of mobility and success (which celebrate education and hard work as the means by which poor immigrants have historically gained access to the "American dream") are challenged by calls for more inclusive curricula and pedagogies. At the same time, she also shows how this dominant constellation of beliefs (which presumes that all ethnic groups are "similarly situated in terms of the structures of opportunity" [p. 81] in the United States) legitimates social and educational inequalities by ignoring important differences in the historical experiences of differently positioned racial/ethnic groups. Taking a social constructionist view of racial/ethnic formation, she analyzes the debate in Arnhem (and the national debate over multiculturalism) within multiple sociohistorical contexts: tensions between the ideology of freedom and equality, on the one hand, and the realities of racial/ethnic exclusion, on the other; the role of schools in both perpetuating and challenging these exclusions; and the particularity of



immigrant and/or minority groups' experiences (and especially that of Puerto Ricans) struggling to enter the American mainstream in different historical moments.

The book's strengths lie in Bigler's articulation of these contexts with an analysis of on-the-ground social processes in the debate surrounding multiculturalism in Arnhem, the story of which "is as national as it is local" (p. 241). Its main weakness, however, stems from how Bigler theorizes this intersection. *American Conversations* explains differences in views of education among Arnhem's Puerto Rican and European American residents by differences in each group's position in the racialized social order. This mode of analysis implies a deterministic relationship between language and social structure that is not entirely consistent with the author's constructionist perspective on other aspects of social reality, such as race/ethnicity. Bigler's analysis treats public discourse as a reflection of an existing social order. As one who holds a mutually constitutive view of relationships among language and social structure, however, I would have liked to see a more complex discussion of how the language of the debate not only reflected but also helped constitute social and political divisions in Arnhem.

*American Conversations* provides a detailed account of how "individuals 'on the ground' perceive and participate in the debates about multiculturalism" (p. 123), which contributes to understanding the contexts that both provoke and enfold debates on education in the United States. It could be an excellent introductory text for teaching in both anthropology and education. Its introductory chapters provide a lucid synthesis of anthropological research on culture and education in the United States, a critical analysis of American educational ideology, and a summary of social constructionist theory on racial/ethnic formation, making it a valuable tool for introducing students to theory on difference and inequality in U.S. schools (e.g., for courses in the anthropology of education and/or sociocultural foundations of education). At the same time, the book's latter chapters speak directly, insightfully, and practically to the role of taken-for-granted assumptions (those of teachers, students, parents, and community members) in maintaining inequalities in schools, making it a resource for anyone engaged in socially transformative work in education.

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