Growing up in transit: the politics of belonging at an international school

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Growing up in transit: the politics of belonging at an international school, by
Danau Tanu, New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2018, 296 pp., $135.00/£99.00
(hardcover), ISBN 978-1-78533-408-5.

Growing up in transit narrates the politics of belonging of transnational youth (also known as "Third
Culture Kids"), who live in transitory social environments where cultural hybridity is negotiated on
a daily basis. The book is an exceptional contribution to the theory and practice of cosmopolitanism
among privileged students with high mobility in transnational spaces such as an international school.
Using in-depth ethnographic data collected over the course of a year through "hanging out" with
students both inside and outside the campus of an international school in Jakarta, the book explicates
the ways in which local and global class structures and socio-economic hierarchies constitute the
production and reproduction of the notion of cosmopolitanism promoted by the school and experi-
enced by the students. The author, Danau Tanu, is well-positioned to carry out this study. As an
"insider" who had studied in international schools when experiencing a series of relocations while
growing up, and as a polyglot who is a native speaker of English, Japanese, Indonesian and Chinese
Mandarin, she is able to shed rare insights into the diverse social worlds and cultural hierarchies of the
students in the international school where she conducted the research.

In her oft-cited essay, Acker argues that all organizations have "inequality regimes", which she
defined as "loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and
maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations" (2006, p. 443). It has
also been argued that multiculturalism is not a natural experience in many elite private schools in
Indonesia where parents and students cocoon in their own privileged and homogeneous "bubble"
(Hoon, 2013). These characteristics are reflected in the international school studied in this book.
Despite promoting itself as a site for cosmopolitan transformation and multicultural experience, this
international school has wittingly or unwittingly become a site where such "inequality regimes" are
preserved and reproduced.

The book consists of eight chapters, excluding Introduction and Conclusion. It can be broadly
divided into two sections: The first section, which encompasses the first four chapters, interrogates
the notion of "being international" through the perspectives of the school, staff, parents and alumni.
The second section, which comprises the remaining chapters, presents an in-depth discussion from
the perspectives of the students, and describes the social dynamics among them at school.

Chapter One outlines the primary field site for the study, a particular international school in
Jakarta, which the book refers to as "The International School" (TIS). Comprising over 800 high school
students representing approximately 50 nationalities, and 20 nationalities on its administration and
teaching staff, TIS embodies a (bubble) community that is truly "international". This chapter con-
textualizes the school's efforts in promoting its ideology of "being international" in light of a national
and global trend that pursues the internationalization of education. It discusses how "being inter-
national" is officially constructed at TIS by school administrators through the school's marketing
materials, extracurricular activities and its annual United Nation Day celebration.

Chapter Two critically examines the significance of English – as an international language, a marker of
cosmopolitan cultural capital, and a discursive tool of colonial and capitalist power relations – on the
construction of transnational youth subjectivities. The author argues, "As cultural capital, the language
a person speaks, and the accent with which they speak it, tells a story of where they have come from and
where they can go in a world structured by sociocultural hierarchies" (p. 79). She contends that among
the students in TIS, the marker of "being international" lies not only with the ability to speak fluent
English, but more importantly, speaking it with the "right" accent (p. 57) – i.e., preferably an American
accent (pp. 70–72). In fact, fluency in English, as the book demonstrates, has a direct implication on
a student's social relations at TIS, and can determine the ability for a student to be included or excluded in
the participation of the cosmopolitanism practiced in and promoted by the school.

Chapter Three unmasks the school's version of cosmopolitanism that gives privilege to being "Western" and "White" through a hidden curriculum that pervades social relations on campus. This is illuminated in the "latent cultural hierarchy that placed foreigners at the top and Indonesians at the bottom" (p. 99): administrative and teaching positions are mostly occupied by staff from white-dominant Anglophone countries, while teaching assistants and support staff such as library assistants, clerks, cleaners, and security guards are almost all Indonesians. Such difference in positions, salary and privileges reflect the broader inequality in economic structures and social hierarchies. Consequently, social interactions on campus are inadvertently racialized, gendered and classed, as students internalize such "inequality regimes" (Acker, 2006).

Chapter Four discusses the ways in which parents and students are driven by global capitalist forces to pursue Western cultural capital, which the school packaged as cosmopolitan cultural capital, and promoted in its ideology of "being international". As dominant groups often do not see privilege as a problem (Johnson, 2005), the global-economic forces are able to lend justification to the unearned privilege given to those who are "Western" or "Westernized", and naturalize the social hierarchy that is experienced in the school. Such hierarchy is further reproduced in the practices of hanging out among transnational youth in TIS, as discussed in Chapter Five, as students exercise different forms of capital in order to gain a position within the social hierarchy and decide with whom they prefer to socialize and establish their friendship. While it has been argued that schools play an important role in empowering marginalized identities to regain self-confidence (Weinstock, 2004), this is clearly not the case in TIS. The book informs us that students who do not have sufficient Western cultural capital become marginalized, for their peers perceive them as the "nameless, faceless 'Other'"(p. 134).

Chapter Six explores multiple ways of practicing cosmopolitanism as the transnational youth negotiate their positionality within a transnational space. While "becoming international" is synonymous to "becoming Western" for most students at TIS, for those who are unable to claim belonging within the dominant culture of a Western transnational space, "becoming Asian" becomes their social strategy to "becoming international". The chapter demonstrates how marginalized Asian students practice a form of pan-Asian cultural identification to escape from the deficiency of Western cultural capital. Chapter Seven focuses on the processes of "gendered racialization" in the perception of transnational youth towards beauty, romantic attractions and sexual desirability. The ethnographic data reveal the embeddedness of social hierarchies and pervasiveness of Western capital in determining the attitude of the students towards making friends and having an intimate relationship with people of different ethnicity. Again, the colonial and capitalist discourses that privilege whiteness prevail.

Chapter Eight delves into the annual United Nations Day celebration, which is the "most emblematic ritual for expressing the school's commitment to 'being international'" (p. 43). It highlights how the ambiguous appearance and hybrid identity of mixed descents transnational youth enable them to traverse racial boundaries and disrupt the established social hierarchies when they shift positionalities in different social contexts. Through reconceptualizing cosmopolitanism as a fractal (i.e., a hierarchy within a hierarchy), this chapter highlights the ways students draw upon discourses offered by global and national structures to reinforce their own superior position in the global hierarchy when competing to becoming international.

Growing up in transit provides important insights into the experiences of transnational youth in acquiring and deploying cosmopolitan cultural capital amidst local and global economic hierarchies. Through a thorough and critical examination of the ways in which the TIS promotes its ideology of "being international", the book made a compelling argument on how the international school becomes a key site where reproduction of cultural inequalities occurs. The book is particularly relevant to the Asia Pacific region where the emerging middle class is driving an unprecedented demand for international schools. While previously international schools were mostly populated by children of expatriate parents, the demography of these schools are rapidly transforming to

a majority local student population. "Becoming international" is not only an aspiration but also a lived experience on the campus of international schools.

The author's unique experience growing up as a Third Culture Kid enabled her to breathe life into the ethnographic data, making sophisticated concepts and complicated processes discussed in the book engaging and relevant. The topics addressed in the book can inspire further longitudinal research that traces the effects of the cosmopolitan cultural capital promoted in international schools on the post-school life of the transnational youth, and whether such capital can become a currency for the graduates to land onto certain jobs or social networks where transnational class structures are further reproduced.

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