

Kwon, H. (2024) *Language Brokers: Children of Immigrants Translating Inequality and Belonging for Their Families*. Stanford University Press.

Review by **Jeffrey Arellano Cabusao**

What does it mean to be young, working class, and a person of color in a society that marginalizes all three social categories? In *Language Brokers: Children of Immigrants Translating Inequality and Belonging for Their Families*, Hyeyoung Kwon examines how working-class Mexican and Korean American children of immigrant parents become active social agents within the realm of language. Through their bilingual skills, they function as “language brokers” on behalf of their immigrant parents (for whom English is a second language) as they navigate racially hostile, classist, monolingual institutions. In her preface, Kwon offers a poignant reflection as a point of departure: “... the anger and confusion I felt as [a] working-class daughter of immigrants left me with an intense curiosity to understand how multiple forms of inequality shape the lives of working-class children of immigrants” (ix). As a Korean American sociologist of working-class origins, Kwon provides a finely detailed examination of the internal/social lives of Mexican and Korean American language brokers as they work through the contradictions of race, class, age, and citizenship.

Language Brokers reflects upon new articulations of the “American experience.” A 2024 report from the Pew Research Center highlights how the largest number of immigrants currently arrive from Asian and Latin American countries—specifically, India and Mexico in 2022 (“How the Origins of America’s Immigrants Have Changed Since 1850”). Kwon’s study is set in Los Angeles, California “where 49 percent of the population is Latinx and 15 percent is Asian American” (p. 23). In addition to conducting “eighty in-depth interviews with working-class Mexican and Korean American language brokers who grew up translating for their immigrant parents,” Kwon interviewed twenty health care workers and engaged in “six months of ethnographic research at a police department” (p. 191-192). Through her interviews, Kwon discovered that the following two sites were the most challenging for young language brokers: health care facilities and police stations.

Kwon’s interviews with working-class Mexican and Korean American youth yielded rich information that challenges mainstream anti-immigrant discourses that devalue the translation work of working-class children as a consequence of immigrant parents unable to assimilate into American culture and society (p. 6-7). Instead of depriving working-class youth of “normal” childhoods (based on white, middle-class values) and causing conflict within the family, language brokering was viewed as a site of empowerment, survival, resilience, and resistance by working-class youth. This counternarrative is conveyed through the organization of *Language Brokers*, which is divided into seven chapters and accompanied by an appendix that inventories methods of

active listening used for the project. While chapters one and seven function as the introduction and conclusion, chapters two through six provide close readings of the interviews and ethnographic research conducted.

Three key concepts are woven throughout the study: W.E.B. DuBois's double consciousness, Patricia Hill Collins's intersectionality, and bell hooks's notion of marginality as "more than a site of deprivation" (p. 17). Kwon builds upon these concepts in her close reading of the voices of young working-class language brokers. In chapter three, Kwon reveals how language brokers (by way of double consciousness) become aware of intersecting forms of oppression that are invisible to mainstream white America such as racialized nativism and lack of access to resources that are necessary for social citizenship or "full inclusion in society"—such as health care, a living wage, housing, and education (p. 11). In chapter five, working-class youth (positioned as "outsiders within" as coined by Patricia Hill Collins) use the following strategies in their translation work to challenge racist stereotypes (ranging from the "passive immigrant" to the "angry person of color") and to gain access to resources necessary for social citizenship: "passing as 'American' adults" (p. 111-119), "shielding parents from racialized nativism" (p. 120-126), and "posing as middle-class adults" (p. 126-131). Kwon also pays close attention to the ways in which working-class youth narrate their lives and the lives of their parents. The realm of culture (specifically storytelling) provides working-class youth an opportunity to construct counternarratives to dominant anti-immigrant discourses. Chapter six provides an inventory of these strategies of "inclusion work": "Americanizing parents' migration journeys" (p. 139-145), "constructing immigrant families as collective and hardworking" (p. 145-156), and "emphasizing intergenerational mobility" (p. 156-162).

While Kwon illuminates how the margins are used as site of empowerment, she also acknowledges the challenges of waging resistance from the margins. It can collude with the center. In chapter six, Kwon highlights the contradictory nature of the "inclusion work" of language brokers. It challenges anti-immigrant racism, yet it simultaneously deflects attention from "systemic and pervasive patterns of inequality" and "reinforce[s]... the moral boundary between 'good' and 'bad' immigrants" (p. 164). Language brokering itself is a contradictory site, as explored in chapter four. It is a site of empowerment and survival. At the same time, it is a site where working-class youth experience the "double bind"—the challenge of juggling responsibilities to one's parents as a language broker and to one's school as a working-class young person aspiring to attain intergenerational mobility.

Language Brokers is necessary reading. First, its focus on working-class youth from two different communities of color rearticulates Ronald Takaki's comparative multicultural approach (*A Different Mirror*, 1993). Second, it builds upon an approach to blending cultural studies and sociology within Asian American/ethnic studies which Yen Le Espiritu developed in works such as *Filipino American Lives* (1995) and *Homebound* (2003). Third, it can open a space for critical reflection. As we anticipate a new presidential administration in the United States that promises mass deportation, we will need to return to a word mentioned throughout Kwon's study: resistance.

Reading *Language Brokers* at this historical moment compels us to reflect upon the concept of resistance. Are everyday acts of survival the same as resistance? If individual acts of counternarrative storytelling and subversive performance from the margins (à la Bhabha's

mimicry) run the risk of reinforcing systems of domination due to their reliance on the “master’s tools,” then what kind of resistance could ultimately dismantle the “master’s house” (to borrow language from Audre Lorde)? The work of Ruth Milkman reveals how young people (Millennials and Gen Z) have become politicized by involvement in various social justice movements over the years—Occupy movement, environmental justice, immigrant rights, racial justice, LGBTQ rights, reproductive rights. In our search to imagine/organize collective resistance (to engage in “transformative work”) in the face of possible mass deportations and other draconian measures of Project 2025, we could creatively utilize Kwon’s thoughtful method for active listening to develop solidarity with working-class youth from immigrant families involved in social movements for change—movements that offer hope as they continue to develop all around us.

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