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Growing Up Female in Multi-Ethnic Malaysia. By Cynthia Joseph. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014. 122 pp.

This short book offers an intriguing account of a seven-year, longitudinal, qualitative study of sixteen-year-old schoolgirls in Penang, Malaysia, across eleven chapters. The participants were followed up on at the age of twenty-two on their subsequent life journey. The scope of the study locates the experiences of young Malaysian women in negotiating the socio-political landscape of ethnicity and gender in the domain of education and in their later working lives and careers. The study takes on aspects of an auto-ethnography in that the author is a product of the transcultural dis/locations of educated, middle-class Malaysians who are the subject of her study.

One aspect of the study that could have been usefully fleshed out is its ethnographic methodology, and the inclusion of additional self-reflexive information. I was led to wonder if, in fact, these kinds of fascinating “messy” confessional research revelations, so beloved of most qualitative researchers, perhaps sat uncomfortably in this straightforward social science monograph.

The first four chapters of this book are devoted to setting the context of Malaysia’s national education system. The highly turbulent issue of “race” or ethnicity in Malaysia and the connected and equally controversial issue of political power and its direct association with religio-ethnic identity are covered well. Joseph unsurprisingly introduces a post-colonial analysis to locate the experiences of her participants in the national sociocultural context. While I appreciate the appropriateness of this analysis on the whole, it is used in a somewhat un-nuanced and simplistic fashion in relation to the historical context. In an attempt to trace a direct connection between British colonial, anthropologically inspired interest in ethnic classification and modern-day political manipulation of ethnicity as overt, gratuitous entitlement, the book overlooks the strenuous efforts of the post-war British administration to secure equal rights

for Malaysian citizens of immigrant heritage as part of the terms of the handover to independence — an attempt roundly quashed by Malay nationalists of the day. The implication remains therefore that contemporary racism in Malaysia is a mere off-shoot of historical racism, which I found to be a somewhat lazy and historically inaccurate suggestion in a study one of whose main themes is the marginalized position of the Chinese and the Indian communities in Malaysia.

Joseph pulls no punches in roundly condemning Malaysia's "political corruption, cronyism, ethnic polarization, inefficient bureaucracy" and political interference in judicial affairs (p. 17). The history of affirmative-action policies towards the politically dominant Malay Muslim population is critical to an understanding of contemporary Malaysia, where a raft of privileges are offered to *bumiputras*: Malay Muslims and indigenous peoples. The pre-eminent position of Malays versus the sliding scale of privilege accorded to indigenous peoples in East Malaysia and the fact that the poorest ethnic group in Malaysia are the Peninsular *Orang Asli* peoples are also discussed as a clear socio-political contradiction. These lamentable socio-ethnic-political issues are viewed in the book as part and parcel of the inequities that the participants must negotiate through life.

The findings of the study are covered in Chapters Four, Five and Six, which explore the study site, the participant experiences and the strategies of success and resistance of both high- and low-achieving girls at what the book calls "Parkview Girls High School", a former colonial mission school that became a high-performing state-run school. These chapters make very interesting reading, particularly as the classification of girls into "elite" (science) and "arts" (beta) streams reflects clear ethnic and class divisions (p. 57). In turn, these distinctions are influenced by the ethnic markers that bear huge implications for the educational and life prospects of individuals. Thus we learn that the greatest majority of top-performing girls at Parkview are Chinese science-streamed students, enormously influenced by the cultural concept of *kiasu*, or fear of losing. Indian students tend

to dominate the second-level streams in both the science and arts tracks, and their position is analysed in terms of the marginalized position of the Indian community, for whom statistics demonstrate low levels of tertiary education, professional occupations, political standing or national wealth relative to their share of Malaysia's population. The majority of Malay students are found in the lower streams of the school. Yet their future, thanks to affirmative action, remains more privileged and secure than those of either their Indian or Chinese schoolmates.

I found the book's descriptions of various strategies of success a good but most depressing read. They suggest an exam-obsessed, prosaic "boot-camp" grind of punitive educational attitudes where the love of learning plays little part. Strategies of resistance include adopting the camouflage of traditional gender norms and associated piety. However, the latter chapters of the book, in which the follow-up of participants is reported, make clear that top performers achieve success — primarily by leaving Malaysia, like the author — but that strategies of resistance may be of little use in challenging the status quo. This is particularly true for less-privileged young Indian women.

In summary, this book is a useful and insightful addition to a research canon concerned with analysing the shifting and curious convolution of ethnicity and state politics that characterize contemporary Malaysia. A recommended read.

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Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development. By Daniel Immerwahr. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015. xii+253 pp.

The publication of *Thinking Small* brings Northwestern University historian Daniel Immerwahr's important 2011 Berkeley dissertation to