DECOLONIZING THE CURRICULUM FOR GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract. In this article Binaya Subedi explores the multiple ways the idea of “global” is theorized within the school curriculum and suggests the utility of approaching the idea of global perspectives through decolonizing frameworks. In particular, she explores the deficit, accommodation, and decolonization approaches as offering three ways that the notion of global has been or can be infused within the school curriculum. Subedi traces the politics each of these approaches may advocate and the kinds of knowledge that may be included or silenced when proposing the utility of learning about global formations. The article proposes that scholars utilize decolonizing lenses to scrutinize how the idea of global perspectives has been articulated within writings on globalizing and internationalizing the curriculum.

Critical, controversial, and complex aspects of global knowledge quite often are absent in the school curriculum. This absence is a reflection of factors such as the institutionalization of a narrow nationalistic curriculum, the lack of adequate teacher training about global issues, and the overall school culture that deemphasizes global dimensions of citizenship. Unfortunately, through formal and informal educational processes, school cultures frame global events, especially those that have taken place in the Third World, as being of lesser intellectual value. According to Cameron McCarthy, the belief that some societies are of less intellectual significance results in a situation in which the school curriculum portrays Third World societies as having inferior histories and cultural systems. Within mainstream knowledge, the Third World continues to be represented as a source of problems for Western democracies. It is often assumed that problems in, for example, Asia, Africa, and South and Central America lead to social problems concerning immigration, terrorism, unemployment, spread of disease, and the like in industrialized societies. For this reason, as Margaret Crocco has suggested, any effort to introduce critical “global material always means confronting some measure of students’ ethnocentrism — the view that one’s ways of doing things are ‘natural’ whereas others’ practices are ‘strange.’”

1. I realize the problems of using the term “Third World.” I use the term as a political category that interrupts how the Third World has been produced in the Western imagination. See Chandra T. Mohanty, Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003), 255.


Clearly, students are socialized within various informal global curricula developed through influences of the media and social or religious institutions. Undoubtedly, teachers face a difficult challenge when students bring to school a knowledge that reinforces the belief that the global Other is culturally inferior and dangerous. To avoid parental and public scrutiny, teachers are often resistant to incorporating a controversial curriculum in classrooms, particularly around topics that may put the U.S. nation-state’s economic, political, and military practices around the world under scrutiny. Because schools (and society) often structure questions of community and belonging within the framework of the nation-state, local/global issues are silenced in the school curriculum. Teachers may fear the unnecessary attention to their classroom practices that a potentially controversial curriculum may invite. In a classroom, the safest option is to avoid contentious local/global issues that may critique narratives on how the United States is portrayed as the savior of world.

Critical theorists argue that schools indeed reflect what takes place in the larger social context. The social construction of commonsense knowledge that students learn is not innocent and the mainstream curriculum knowledge serves to reinforce dominant conceptions of citizenship. Thus, schools privilege certain cultural discourses while discounting others. As Fazal Rizvi has observed, “favored ways of speaking and acting, as well as favored conceptions of knowledge of the Other, are the constitutive elements of such discourse structures, which govern not only student life chances but also such matters as who can speak, about what, and to whom.” The absence of a school-wide global curriculum

4. My use of the term “curriculum” is meant to speak of the formal curriculum (texts, and so on), pedagogy, and everyday practices within schools. I also consider it necessary to critique the mainstream aspect of the curriculum since it is produced through dominant epistemologies.


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with a critical dimension often leads students to develop stereotypes or one-dimensional interpretations of world events. The selective and biased knowledge to which students are exposed often hinders their development of the kind of global perspective that can critique ethnocentric and stereotypical ways of reading the world.

Clearly, the absence of complex and critical knowledge about global societies reinforces stereotypes and biased knowledge about cultures. For example, Özlem Sensoy maintains that students are not exposed to complex experiences of women or girls in the media and often learn to believe that women in the Middle East are oppressed by their culture. As Sensoy rightly puts it, “the contemporary discourses about oppressions in the Middle East, backwardness of Islam, and general cultural decay of the region are part of a historically rooted, institutionally sanctioned, expert-authenticated way of looking and knowing.” As a result of biased learning, students are socialized into believing that events or cultures in the Third World are more irrational, aberrant, and violent. This leads to the perception that perhaps somehow the events “over there” must have something to do with their cultural or religious irrationalities or abnormalities. In this discussion, I explore deficit, accommodation, and decolonization as three ways the global aspect of the curriculum is (and can be) conceptualized in the broader school curriculum. In particular, I examine why each framework might be advocated and the kinds of perspectives or politics it may serve. This article is a contribution toward theorizing critical approaches to the curriculum that can engender transformative thinking and social change in relation to global discourses. My use of the term “global” does not suggest a split between the local and the global (local “here” and the global “there”), but rather advocates the need to examine how multiple local(s) and global(s) are complexly interconnected within the axis of power and politics.

**The Deficit Approach to the Global Curriculum**

The deficit approach emphasizes narrow ways of formulating the global curriculum and embraces Eurocentric ideology to frame what constitutes “global.” A recurring theme within the monocultural interpretation of the global curriculum is its foregrounding of deficit ways of formulating global events and issues. Because of its investment in whiteness or Eurocentrism, the framework of deficit represents certain societies as lacking “better” cultural values. In other words, deficit interpretation is invested in reinforcing colonial, white racial ideology. The deficit curriculum places emphasis on “problems” in the world and often relies on dichotomous narratives to explain how certain societies are culturally superior while some other societies are inferior. Problem stories often paint a picture of bleak or hopeless conditions in Third World societies, while describing Western industrialized societies as (always) being progressive and democratic and having a geography that is largely free of social problems. The dichotomous framework

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perpetuates the logic that there are only two oppositional ways or either/or approaches for interpreting social issues, and such readings do not leave space for un/learning the complexities that inform a social or cultural narrative. Instead, this framework makes a distinction between good and bad culture(s) and civilized and uncivilized cultural practice(s).\textsuperscript{10} In essence, “problem narratives place emphasis on exotic issues [seemingly strange cultural practices, etc.] or conflicts [wars, stories on violence, etc.] which are often described as having cultural roots or being deeply ingrained within the cultural practices of a community.”\textsuperscript{11}

Within the deficit approach to the global curriculum, knowledge incorporated into the school curriculum privileges the experiences, beliefs, and histories of (white) people who have historically been in power in Western societies. The deficit framework actively silences questions about how privilege and power are accumulated over time. Instead, it focuses on the validity of a certain “truth” and “reality” that have shaped (Western) history and the present world conditions. This narrative also claims Western history and experiences as having universal applicability and as being value-neutral. In other words, the deficit scheme often conflates Eurocentrism with universalism and approaches questions of humanity and culture through Western epistemologies. Edward Said has noted that many U.S. intellectuals approach Third World history by making uninformed statements such as “Show me the Zulu Tolstoy” to illustrate the apparent dearth of “great” writers from non-Western societies.\textsuperscript{12} Considering this sort of willful academic ignorance, educators should not be surprised that world history textbooks continue to conflate world history with European or European American history. Within dominant conceptions of time, people in the Third World, including indigenous communities, are often represented as being marginal to the formation of world history since “history is told from the perspectives of the colonizer.”\textsuperscript{13} This approach often operates through the belief system that Third World societies are too insignificant to be included in the narratives of world history since they are viewed as being, “ontologically speaking, lost to begin with, irredeemably, irrecusably inferior.”\textsuperscript{14} Similarly, the deficit approach to interpreting space/geography serves the interest of dominant society and reinforces ethnocentrism and racial superiority through “the notion that the world as a whole has one permanent center from which culture-changing ideas tend to originate.”\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{10} Mohanty, \textit{Feminism Without Borders}, 31.


\textsuperscript{14} Said, \textit{Culture and Imperialism}, 25.

According to Susan Schulten, school geography has historically functioned to racialize (global) nonwhite subjects as being less civilized beings in order to “demonstrate the need for the wisdom, benevolence and efficiency of American foreign intervention.” Within dominant approaches of “universal” geography, the complex relationship between space and people is omitted, and teaching about space is often reduced to the memorization of certain “truths” about geographical knowledge. The ways in which society views space cannot be understood outside of power relationships and discourses on privilege since “endowing a place with value is inherently a political act.” The dominant narrative of “universal” omits the everyday experiences within geographies considered “different” and fails to examine the relationship between space, power, and the ways in which people negotiate space in difficult conditions.

A feature of the dominant global curriculum is that it essentializes cultural narratives articulated by marginalized communities. Essentialism reduces cultural communities to specific traits, or “boxes,” and frames cultures as being “natural givens, entities that existed neatly distinct and separate in the world.” Essentialist perspectives do not engage critically with differences and do not attempt to ethically recognize or engage with what the Other may know. Too often, the reference to culture becomes a method of describing how Third World geographies are deficient and rife with oppressive elements. Uma Narayan maintains that within Western feminist discussions of culture, Third World women are often represented as having suffered from what she terms “death by culture.” According to Narayan, cultural explanations are deployed to suggest that Third World women are “victims of their culture,” an approach that is “different from the ways in which victimization of mainstream Western women is understood.”

Since deficit approaches essentialize cultural narratives, they resist theorizing difference in constructive ways. Thus, deficit rationales silence constructive dialogue on differences that may actually exist within a particular culture or community and instead represent nation-states or cultures as being homogeneous, traditional, and unchanging. Because deficit logic is interested in formulating simplistic interpretations of culture, it avoids speaking about the heterogeneous


20. Ibid., 100.

21. Ibid., 84–85.
ways people may live their lives and the internal differences of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and so on that may exist within a given society. The deficit global curriculum is invested in defining societies in one-dimensional, monocultural, and hierarchical ways so that it can fit within dominant narratives on culture.

The deficit global curriculum promotes the belief that it is acceptable to detach learners from critical global issues since it suggests that national events and national citizenship must supersede global concerns. The dominant conception of citizenship emphasizes nation-state-centered approaches to the curriculum in which national events are seen as being distinct from global formations. The dominant production of “good” citizenship is often racialized since whiteness is conflated with authentic national citizenship. Thus, concepts such as responsibility, loyalty, commitment, or care are explored as being significant in the national context only. In such a framework, as Peggy McIntosh has argued, non-national entities are viewed as “competitors, threats, or unknowns,” and the idea of “good” citizenship is produced through the vocabulary of “obligations, docility, obedience, and good behavior.”

Students often become detached from critical aspects of citizenship because the mainstream school curriculum socializes students into systems of knowledge that foster complacency. In the schooling context, this may include privileging neoliberal models of citizenship that promote market- or consumer-oriented citizenship. Such an outlook may emphasize a curriculum that does not explore the material realities and everyday subaltern experiences in the world. Not surprisingly, the result is that students “develop an indifference to citizen engagement and participation in democratic public life.”

Because of the disjunction between the material realities of the world and those to which students are exposed, the nature of knowledge students learn rarely becomes relevant in critically analyzing global events and experiences. Thus, students often fail to learn to critique their place in the world as well as the intersection of power and privilege that creates inequities and oppression in local and global contexts. For this reason, students who are socialized into the dominant curriculum become unaware, reluctant, or opposed to learning about global issues that raise questions about racism, oppression, and inequities.

The centering of national citizenship also promotes the discourse of exceptionalism. Exceptionalist logic asserts the need to educate students about the exceptional or unimpeachable history and origins of the U.S. nation-state. It codifies the question of citizenship only within the national context and avoids addressing the complicated relationship between local and global events.


Amy Kaplan argues that exceptional narratives avoid “discussions of the United States as an imperial power.”\(^\text{24}\) James Loewen maintains that school textbooks reinforce the view of the United States as exceptional in the sense that the nation-state has always been democratic and has been “different from — and better than — all other nations on the planet.”\(^\text{25}\) For example, in an attempt to produce a “pure” or sanitized image of the nation-state, exceptionalist logic proposes that educators examine the U.S. nation-state’s history as a story of “expansion” more than one of colonization. Not surprisingly, because of the credence given to narrow nationalistic and exceptionalist narratives, the global sphere is often treated with apathy, suspicion, and fear in schools. Thus, the conception of global citizenship can be a liability within the deficit framework since it has the potential to expose the complex relationship between local and global interrelationships. Alternatively, it has the potential to complicate the meaning of national citizenship and can open spaces for exploring how the domain of the global has always been part of the U.S. national identity.

The problem with a curriculum that privileges exceptional propositions is that it fosters a hyperpatriotic disposition and creates a sense of detachment from global events. A curriculum that socializes students into a jingoistic patriotic narrative often demands that national loyalty should always come before global responsibility. Michael Apple argues that narrow interpretations of what constitutes patriotism have “made it much more difficult for schools at all levels to engage in social criticism or even meaningful dialogue about U.S. policies and economic power.”\(^\text{26}\) The exceptionalist construct proposes that national and global responsibilities are contradictory and incompatible. Consider the case of the United States’ ongoing involvement in various wars and how the social construction of war influences the way in which notions of democracy, freedom, and citizenship are learned or produced in schools.\(^\text{27}\) Not surprisingly, schools often become sites to memorialize and normalize war, and the school curriculum socializes students into believing that wars are necessary in order to promote and sustain democracy. Such a narrative claims that “defending” freedom and citizenship at home means being militarily engaged in international geographies. For this reason, students often learn to view the world in dichotomous frameworks: they learn that there is a good (peaceful) and a bad (dangerous) world and the United States is engaged in preserving the cause of (liberal) democracy and (Western) civilization.


The deficit approach to the global curriculum often frames the Third World within narratives of disorder, exoticism, and violence. In his seminal work *Orientalism*, Said discusses how much nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western literature has represented Arab subjects as being less human than their European counterparts. Within the Western imagination, Said argues, Arab communities often “represent mass rage and misery, or irrational [hence hopelessly eccentric] gestures. Lurking behind all these images is the menace of the *jihad*: a fear that the Muslims (or Arabs) will take over the world.”28 Said maintains that questions of representation cannot be separated from larger operations of power and knowledge production, and he examines how the Other is constructed as the source of deviancy and menace.

Representations do not simply transparently portray societies and cultures, but they are intimately about discourses on securing power and exploiting economic and political resources. The Othering that the deficit framework promotes is closely connected to neoliberal, capitalist practices. The very notion that individuals ought to consume cultures or even take part in what bell hooks calls “eating the other”29 is explicitly or implicitly encouraged in order to maintain the supremacy of [racialized] dominant narratives in the global curriculum. In other words, capitalist practices of consumption and profit facilitate U.S. and Eurocentric knowledge production and legitimization.30 The racialized representation of the Third World as deviant makes it possible to construct such societies as dispensable as well as indispensable, as markets and places to be exploited.

Although the language for describing the Other may have changed over time, McCarthy argues that the racialization or the intent to provide one-dimensional or distorted representations of Third World societies continues to be present in the curriculum.31 And, too often, the narrative on how such societies are exotic or deviant entities to be feared is produced both implicitly and explicitly. The politics of the deficit global curriculum ask that students consume the sphere of the global as something dangerous: a domain to be avoided and not worthy of serious academic inquiry. Within such formulations, students are not asked to develop meaningful connections between their personal identities and the complicated experiences of people in Third World societies. I am not arguing that such connections are always possible; however, meaningful ways of linking local/global formations are absent and are intentionally avoided within deficit approaches to the global curriculum. Next, I explore the politics of the accommodation approach to the global curriculum.

The Accommodation Approach to the Global Curriculum

The accommodation rationale for the global curriculum is a well-intentioned approach to including global knowledge in classrooms. Accommodating logic departs from the deficit approach to the global curriculum in that it seeks to include perspectives that have historically been marginalized. It asks educators to consider non-Western aspects of knowledge inclusion since Third World issues traditionally have been marginalized in the curriculum. To advocate an inclusive curriculum, the accommodation approach may cite the misconceptions and stereotypes that have developed because of the absence of global perspectives. It may similarly ask that educators go beyond the nation-state approach to conceptualizing ideas such as history and culture, and that they include multiple readings or perspectives on global events and issues in teaching world history and world geography.

The accommodating framework seeks inclusion of global knowledge. Although this approach departs from the deficit approach, it does not infuse the global curriculum with the kinds of knowledge that can offer a more nuanced and complex interpretation of global issues. For instance, as a way to compensate for the lack of coverage of global issues, it often emphasizes the value of appreciating the glories or achievements of a particular community but “it fails to be self-reflective about its project of appreciation,” including being “inaattentive to the material, social, and political contexts in which these achievements were embedded.”

Furthermore, educators who follow the accommodation approach may suggest that books that promote global consciousness, and yet are problematically written (for example, using stereotypes, reinforcing whiteness as the norm, and so on), ought to be used in classrooms since schools often marginalize a curriculum that highlights global perspectives. Clearly, texts that reinscribe stereotypes and generalizations can be critically read in classrooms to analyze the kinds of knowledge that are included or omitted from a given narrative. However, the accommodation logic fails to recognize the larger politics of why certain texts are considered more appealing to the Western (white) audience, specifically, the dominant desire to hear or read narratives that reinforce the view of the Other being helpless, naïve, and inferior.

The accommodation stance claims that it is beneficial to include some global viewpoints rather than having very limited or virtually no global content in the school curriculum. In other words, within the accommodating framework, it is quite possible that the attempt to include global content often ends up reinscribing dominant narratives of global knowledge. In essence, the accommodating intention is consciously or unconsciously less attentive to the politics of curriculum knowledge, that is, the ways in which knowledge is politically mobilized to maintain unequal power hit relationships. While well-intentioned, the accommodating framework is less concerned about the politics of how we have come to know the idea of “global”; rather, it operates from the

perspective that new forms of knowledge are important to learn, yet it does not critically analyze the politics that knowledge may advocate.

Accommodating narratives on global events often use relativistic rationales to justify incorporating the global curriculum in classrooms — that is, they take the view that all perspectives are equally valuable and that they ought to be somewhat equally represented and discussed classroom discussions. The relativistic mode of inquiry is less attentive or not attentive at all to the politics of how inclusion can reinforce cultural hierarchies. It is similarly reluctant to fully recognize how the critical inclusion of marginalized voices (indigenous knowledge, and so on) can disrupt the dominant narratives of the global. Thus, a limitation of the accommodation approach is that it emphasizes relativistic readings of cultural issues. Proponents of cultural relativism often tend to view social issues in neutral or objective terms and tend to propose that one ought not critique or make judgments about the cultural practices of a community because these practices may be community norms or traditions. Within a relativistic framework, the emphasis is often on the need to understand and not make judgments about social or cultural practices or experiences. Clearly, cultural practices take place in particular sociohistorical contexts. Educators who utilize a curriculum informed by cultural relativism often avoid critical dialogue on contested topics, fearing that students may misread the cultural narratives of marginalized communities or develop further misperceptions about these groups. Relativism may also enter the curriculum through the discourse of multiple perspectives. A curriculum that emphasizes multiple perspectives on global events is useful, yet, as Sonia Nieto argues, an uncritical approach to multiple perspectives can reinforce the dominant discourse if it fails to address questions of power and politics. For this reason, in the classroom context, a well-intentioned accommodating approach to the curriculum can silence controversy and critical dialogue, and it can consciously or unconsciously interrupt the need to take up the praxis of social transformation.

The accommodating curriculum also advocates uncritical readings of what accounts for universal values or knowledge. The question of what is universal and what is not universal is inherently political. How one takes up this question in the classroom poses a challenge given that the framework for theorizing what constitutes universal has historically privileged dominant forms of knowledge. Chinua Achebe once argued that Western academics avoid using the broad term “universalism” to interpret African experiences and histories since the European use of universal appropriated complex African experiences and silenced indigenous epistemologies. Curricular practices that overemphasize universal thinking tend to downplay the value of looking at social difference as a significant analytic category. The discourse of “we are all the same” or “we are all different but the same” reinscribes the Western orientation toward universal values.


From the accommodating point of view, a “common ground” can be achieved through emphasizing universal values since such an approach reconciles opposing viewpoints and creates a context in which dialogue can take place. Yet, this perspective does not delve into questions of how dialogue can or cannot take place and the difficulties of negotiating differences across cultures. It similarly resists recognizing how this focus on the universal can marginalize knowledge that is often not heard in U.S. academia.

Chandra Mohanty argues that educators ought to interrogate the context in which the universal is being framed so that it does not reinforce the codes of dominant ethnocentric universal narratives. For instance, accommodating approaches to teaching about women’s experience in the global context may advocate universal conceptions of gender equality through the framework of “global sisterhood” and may not consider class or cultural differences that influence women’s experiences. Alternatively, it may account for gender differences but may not necessarily recognize racial differences or may consciously or unconsciously advocate the belief that race is irrelevant as a category of analysis in the global context. According to Mohanty, while calling for global gender solidarity, ethnocentric universal discourse positions Western women as being progressive and reduces Third World women to being “average” subjects who are always oppressed and who are incapable of enacting agency. Thus, Mohanty maintains, within Western narratives

this average Third World woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being “Third World” (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions.

Within the dichotomy of average and modern, the “universal” idea that is embedded in the accommodation approach to the global curriculum creates a divide between civilized and uncivilized subjectivities. Rather than proposing that educators critically understand differences (economic, cultural, and so on) across gender identities, the accommodating position reproduces the narrative of the Third World subject as a lesser being.

The accommodation curricular approach is engaged in the well-intentioned politics of including what appears to be absent within the curriculum. This inclusionary move can easily be seen as the “best” practice in teaching about the Other since it seeks to compensate for the missing or silenced narratives. The accommodating intervention is appealing because it is well-intentioned and does not address larger questions of race and capitalism, as these are naturalized “through neo-liberal ideology and corporate culture.”

36. Ibid., 22.
37. Ibid., 9.
practices that do not consider one’s well-meaning approach can reinscribe the status quo and reinforce stereotypical practices. Uncritical notions of empathy and care that are derived from accommodating rationales are problematic since they do not question the broader social context in which knowledge is produced and legitimized. Such a framework often fails to recognize how the very idea of “good” teaching about global issues is fraught with complexities and how questions of (white) privilege are connected to how one may read the world. As a point of comparison, I will next examine the possibilities that a decolonizing interpretation of the global curriculum can enable.

Decolonization and the Global Curriculum

The decolonization approach departs from deficit and accommodation frameworks by foregrounding critical approaches to the global curriculum. I use the term “critical” to suggest the need to formulate a decolonizing curriculum that questions the “reality” regarding what constitutes the global and how local/global interrelationships have been framed in the curriculum. The decolonizing framework embraces three critical curriculum approaches: antiessentialism, contrapuntal readings, and ethical solidarity.

Essentialist readings of global issues often generalize cultural practices, reinscribe stereotypes, and generate racist representations. Narayan writes about how essentialist representations provide totalizing views of a culture since they tend to generalize what may be common practice within a community to the whole. According to Narayan, differences across cultures need to be theorized in antiessentialist ways by “critically interrogating scripts of ‘cultural difference’ that set up sharp binaries between ‘Western’ and various ‘non-Western’ cultures.”38 In addition, antiessentialist curricular practice advocates the need to examine “the internal plurality, dissension and contestation over values, and ongoing changes in practices in virtually all communities that comprise modern nation-states.”39 This approach critiques the monolithic portrayal, for instance, of a particular nation-state or a cultural community, and it simultaneously emphasizes the value of recognizing “the existence of differences and differential relationships within a bounded category.”40 It argues for the need to take into account the multiple experiences of people, which are re/shaped by questions of histories and experiences, when theorizing differences. For example, within antiessentialist readings, women’s experiences in nation-states such as Nigeria or Nepal would not be homogenized since women in various communities within these nation-states have different experiences, cultural practices, and histories. This means recognizing that “speaking of and about women also runs the danger of presuming a set of common meanings and connections when such meanings are precisely

39. Ibid., 96.
what need to be explored. The danger grows when women become the subject of analysis in a universalizing way." Antiessentialist readings recognize that women's experiences are shaped by discourses of power and politics as well as through the influences of patriarchy, poverty, and oppression. The focus on heterogeneity does not mean that one should discount the complex ways commonalities across gender experiences are produced or have existed over time within a particular culture or a nation-state. A key feature of antiessentialism is its emphasis on the need to learn about difference in critical ways. Beyond valuing the need to learn as well to be critical about differences, antiessentialist politics stresses that differences ought not to be constructed to create hierarchies across cultures and communities.

The antiessentialist curriculum critiques dichotomous perspectives on global issues. Writing about the narrow ways in which Muslim women are represented in the world, Amani Hamdan argues that global educators need to critique either/or propositions that construct Muslim women as either being victims of their religion or culture, or as being pawns of Western ideology. According to Hamdan, within North American and European academic or mainstream scholarship, Muslim women are portrayed as women who are not only oppressed by their cultures or religions but also as uneducated and naïve subjects who hide behind their veils. Hamdan also suggests the need to critique the view often held by Islamic extremists that claims democracy and equal rights are Western concepts and that Muslim women ought to be “native” and not engage with questions of human rights and democratic ideals. By analyzing both ideological positions, Hamdan urges educators to reexamine the diverse and complex lives of Muslim women and not to embrace the two narrow ideological positions that attempt to reinforce the view that Muslim women cannot possibly speak for themselves or be agents of social change.

The decolonizing curriculum values contrapuntal readings. The contrapuntal approach departs from traditional ways of framing comparative analysis, as it explicitly focuses on questions of colonization and imperialism. According to Said, contrapuntal perspectives allow the reading of dominant writings “with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented.” Said writes that works of colonial literature, which were often written for a Western audience, utilized non-Western settings or contexts, yet they remained silent about the relationships between empire and European/American modernity. He proposes the need to examine how the exploitation of Third World capital and labor allowed Europeans to maintain a privileged lifestyle. The exploitation was justified through a belief system that held


43. Said, Culture and Imperialism, 66.
that white subjects were destined to exploit and rule over locales in Asia and the Pacific, the Americas, and Africa. Ngugi wa Thiong’o maintains that the structures of the European Enlightenment were built by colonizing non-Western geographies, and the notion of embodying the enlightened or Renaissance spirit meant implicitly or explicitly personifying the imperial identity. Clearly, the period and events of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment had effects beyond the geography of Europe and often negatively influenced events outside of Europe. By being attentive to the power and politics of colonial formations, contrapuntal readings make explicit the relationship within or between societies considered “center” and “periphery,” and reveal the value of rereading, reformulating, and readdressing events from the perspective of marginalized subjects. This approach puts the historical context of global knowledge production under scrutiny and addresses the relationship between local/global power formations.

The contrapuntal curriculum examines the relationships and interconnections regarding questions of power and knowledge, and thus politically it is invested in addressing questions of voice and authority. It asks educators to consider in what ways the curriculum is attentive to how one is speaking and with whom one might be speaking. Analyzing the representation of indigenous Hawaiian history and culture in the school curriculum, Julia Kaomea argues for the need to explore the interrelationship between the presence of dominant European narratives and the absence of indigenous experiences that are often not spoken. For Kaomea, questions of decolonization cannot ignore those things that remain unsaid or unspoken, or those stories that are too horrifying to include, because these forms of knowledge are in many cases too painful to be spoken. Kaomea contends that educators need to complicate how the question of inclusion is framed within the curriculum so that the visibility given to marginalized people does not reinforce colonial stereotypes. It is by examining both the politics of dominant knowledge and knowledge that is “too painful to be spoken” that educators can begin to formulate decolonizing practices.

The contrapuntal curriculum is also committed to analyzing experiences that are complex and discrepant. Discussing the value of analyzing discrepant histories and experiences, Said suggests that a critical analysis of relationships across power cannot ignore questions of ideology since there is a radical need “to think through and interpret together the experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them coexisting and interacting with others.” This focus on discrepant experiences enables educators to tease out relationships in what may at first seem separate or unrelated. This

44. Ania Loomba, Colonialism/Postcolonialism (London: Routledge, 1998), 64.
46. Said, Culture and Imperialism, 32.
approach invites them to analyze complexities in teaching about experiences and differences that are marginalized in the mainstream curriculum. In other words, the contrapuntal approach critiques a global curriculum informed by dichotomous perspectives and advocates that educators consider what might be uncovered when one examines cultural narratives from subaltern perspectives. Kevin Kumashiro argues that educators cannot avoid uncertainty or complexity when developing a curriculum, including the inherent tensions involved in addressing questions that pertain to cultural differences. For instance, such a practice points to the need to complicate discussions about oppression so that educators do not reinforce the view that the colonized were (only) victims and not agents of social change.47

The decolonizing curriculum is attentive to how questions of solidarity have been conceptualized, and it emphasizes the need to mobilize mobilizing collective struggles across differences. It asks, “How can solidarity be crafted across differences so that questions of empathy and cross-cultural affiliations do not recolonize or appropriate the Other?” As the decolonizing framework values the need to critique how questions of community are written within the curriculum, practices of solidarity seek possibilities to develop consciousness that is emancipatory. Yet this framework also views solidarity as an act that needs to be complicated or critiqued, and it values it as a practice that is necessary despite its potential limitations or challenges. In other words, the ethical practice of solidarity counters simplistic formulations of cross-cultural dialogue or community. It attempts to speak with the Other rather than to speak for the Other and recognizes the limitations of engaging in cross-cultural dialogue. Theorizing within feminist conceptions of solidarity, Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty illustrate how feminist solidarity needs to be anticapitalist and can be messy and difficult to formulate, yet it is a practice that is necessary to formulate even if it “means grappling with differences between oppositional and relational consciousness,” and involves “political organizing and mobilization across borders.”48 Such an approach frames solidarity not as a charity or a mandate, but as a responsible and accountable act that serves radical social change.

Addressing the need both to critique solidarity and to formulate responsible practices of solidarity, Lila Abu-Lughod points out the dilemma that well-meaning feminists encountered after the United States’ invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. In her critique, Abu-Lughod argues that many feminists embraced liberal conceptions of feminism by being critical of the ways women were oppressed in Afghanistan, yet the narratives on women’s oppression often framed Afghan women as inferior to Western (white) women. According to Abu-Lughod, the widespread representation of women in Afghanistan as being oppressed and inferior and needing to be “saved” was codified within what constituted Western feminist

ideals of freedom and liberation. The complex relationship between politics and representation raises questions about the problematic ways in which liberal feminists have conceptualized questions of social change, particularly those that do not challenge Western epistemologies.49

Proposing that scholars interrupt liberal conceptions of the global, Abu-Lughod urges readers to question why Western feminists may be more interested in “saving” Muslim women than in opposing everyday global inequities. Why might Western feminists be less interested in fighting global poverty and various forms of structural violence, yet more inclined to be part of a social cause that may allow them to “save” women who are often represented in Western media as being backward or traditional? Abu-Lughod argues, for instance, that women in the West may be willing to join groups that support women’s rights in Afghanistan, yet they may be reluctant to question U.S. support for the Israeli government that oppresses Palestinian women in everyday contexts. A decolonizing perspective asks that we reconsider “what we are supporting [and what we are not] and [prompts us] to think carefully about why.”50 It invites educators to critically examine what it means to think in progressive terms about the world and asks that educators interrogate even well-intentioned production of the global curriculum. In other words, the decolonizing curriculum demands that we scrutinize projects that claim to be committed to social justice and social change in the world.

The decolonizing curriculum is invested in the politics of changing social norms so that it can work toward developing a more equitable global society. When theorizing the question of solidarity, the decolonizing trajectory foregrounds the need to recognize how social structures oppress women, yet it also articulates that marginalized women cannot simply be reduced to victim status and that they enact agency in complex ways. In its critique of hierarchical social structures, it recognizes the value of emphasizing the concrete and the specific struggles of marginalized subjects so that educators may avoid essentialist conceptions of group solidarity. The local/global understanding that is based on the decolonizing principle advocates the need to develop a curriculum that values cross-cultural solidarity, and it also urgently calls for the need to avoid assuming the sameness of struggles, needs, and desires across differences.

**Why Study the Local/Global?**

The rationales for developing a curriculum that can meaningfully provide global or local/global perspectives are often misleading and misguided. The view that schools need to adopt an international curriculum because of economic imperatives, technological changes, terrorism, and so on does not address the more urgent reasons why educators ought to engage with a critical global curriculum.


50. Ibid., 787.
in schools. Too often, the rationale for studying the global is framed within the vocabulary of global competitiveness and the need to gain skills and knowledge for participation in the global labor marketplace. This logic situates the sphere of the global in economic terms and thus socializes learners into the neoliberal aspect of self-making and citizenship. For this reason, the decolonization approach is “a critique of the operation, discourse, and values of capitalism and of their naturalization through neoliberal ideology and corporate culture.” Clearly, a corporate or neoliberal approach to citizenship is always implicated in racial, cultural, and imperial projects.

How schools become sites for producing and reproducing (inter)national subjects is rarely theorized in U.S. educational research. The very idea that a nation-state has a perfect, ideal, or complete democracy that does not need any modification, or the belief that our “way of life” is [very] superior, impedes how students can engage with historical or contemporary local/global formations. Dominant discourse on the global is invested in promoting the status quo and attempts to disseminate a narrow articulation of what constitutes global citizenship. The [dominant] socially constructed meaning of the local/global relationship misinforms students about the historical and contemporary realities of the world, realities that have been forged within the circuits of power-laden interconnections and overlapping, difficult cross-cultural histories. Too often, the dominant approach to the curriculum demands that students construct their identities in opposition to [nonwhite] subjects who are represented as being the Other in multiple ways [economic competitors, terrorists, culturally deviant, and so on]. Dominant narratives of the global essentialize the Other, representing the Other as “less than.”

As I have shown, a global curriculum that is invested in accommodating logic promotes culturally relativistic positions. Cultural relativism often seeks to silence controversy, aims to take “neutral” positions, and accepts the view that learners need to understand, but not be critical of, complex sociocultural experiences or knowledge. This approach stifles dialogue and critical conversation since it proposes that learners understand cultural practices or global issues by simply “not judging anyone.” Clearly, nonjudgmental narratives that overemphasize the existence of a common global humanity or a universal global value system can easily reinforce ethnocentrism. A curriculum based on such a rationale does not raise questions about the discourse on differences and fails to offer multiple readings of local and global issues. This approach also does not question neoliberal projects that construct local/global relationships within the

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51. The demographic changes within U.S. schools certainly raise questions on how racially diverse students may read or critique the mainstream curriculum. Questions around Islamophobia, racism, and the mobilization of resistant citizenship by South Asian Muslim students is explored in Sunaina Marr Maira, _Missing: Youth, Citizenship, and Empire After 9/11_ (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005).

framework of economic competitiveness and market rationales. Since it projects itself as a well-intentioned global framework, the accommodating curriculum consciously and unconsciously reinforces the idea that the policies of the (U.S.) nation-state are the lens through which one needs to interpret global events. Because of its politics of “neutrality,” it is resistant to raising questions around empire, social justice, and racialized neoliberal projects that may implicate the (U.S.) nation-state regarding issues of injustice, oppression, or structural violence.

I have argued that the decolonizing approach examines world events and global issues through a critical lens and values the significance of examining how social differences and power relationships influence knowledge production. This approach scrutinizes the politics of how narratives on universalism or a common global culture are articulated, and it critiques taking a commonsense approach to theorizing the global curriculum. The decolonization approach is concerned with colonial and neocolonial conditions, and it explores how questions surrounding such issues as race and class cannot be silenced in conversations about the global curriculum. It advocates that educators promote an antiessentialist curriculum that is more nuanced and complex and that provides contrapuntal readings of world events; it asks that a more responsible curriculum be developed to raise critical questions about how local/global approaches to the curriculum have been conceptualized. The decolonizing curriculum is invested in addressing conversations about oppression, racism, and social justice. Yet decolonizing practices also recognize the difficulties of promoting a critical curriculum since schools, and society in general, resist knowledge that may focus on subaltern or marginalized epistemologies. Linda Tuhiwai Smith argued that decolonization is a messy project because educators who promote decolonizing practices are complexly implicated (through their university affiliations, and so on) in the world[ing] — specifically, in the ways of producing and disseminating knowledge that have been influenced by the legacy of colonialism. The decolonizing curriculum has the potential to critique what is absent — what remains silenced — and it works to account for what has yet to be heard or mobilized.

53. Smith, Decolonizing Methodologies, 35–41.