



# **Grounding the global: A call for more situated practices of pedagogical and political engagement**

**Gulzar R. Charania<sup>1</sup>**

Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education & Graduate Collaborative Program in Women and Gender Studies, University of Toronto  
gulzar.charania@utoronto.ca

---

## **Abstract**

This article examines the complexities and limitations of conceptualizing global education as requiring the intervention or movement of people, in various capacities, from the global North to the global South. I rely on feminist, anti-racist and postcolonial scholarship to foreground questions of race, colonialism and history in relation to “the global.” To begin, I critically analyze how the global is deployed as a theoretical and political concept by locating it within specific material and historical relations. Secondly, I consider the multiple vectors of race, class, gender and Northern status along which global subjects are imagined and constituted. Thirdly, I consider more specifically the prevalence of white women in different kinds of global interventions. I then explore how racialized Northern women fit into the picture of the global. I conclude with an invitation to ground the global and reconceptualize our social justice efforts by attending to our own historical locations and ongoing complicities in North-South relations.

---

<sup>1</sup>  Creative Commons licence: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works

*I was a teaching assistant in an undergraduate university course where the focus was on encouraging students to engage with social justice and equity issues from the perspectives of anti-racist, feminist and social justice scholars, theorists, writers and activists.*

*After a number of weeks of focusing on colonialism and imperialism and looking specifically at the effects of structural adjustment in the South and privatization in the North, a white female student approached me with a great deal of outrage and enthusiasm. Having learned more about the state of the world, she was clearly distressed and wanted to know where in the global South she could go to do something. I asked her why she wanted to go anywhere. She replied that she wanted to do something to help.*

This article examines the complexities and limitations of conceptualizing global education and engagement as requiring the intervention or movement of people, in various capacities, from the global North to the global South<sup>2</sup>. This paper emerged from a constellation of interactions and research interests which have spanned over a decade. It was, however, recurring interactions with undergraduate university students, such as the one described at the outset of the paper, which crystallized the need for me to think through notions of the South as a site where learning about the global or working for social justice take place.<sup>3</sup> I see this paper as an invitation for those of us who are Westerners to collectively, critically and historically think through notions of what it means to be responsible to and for each other in the context of the global. I also see it as an ongoing conversation with the students whom I have had the pleasure of teaching and learning so much from over the past few years.<sup>4</sup>

The incident with which I opened the paper was not isolated to one student. These repeated incidents with multiple students, primarily white women students, preoccupied me a great deal in terms of how responses to global injustice are increasingly framed, interpreted or understood to encourage a specific type of response on the part of Northern people, particularly young people, concerned with

---

<sup>2</sup> I use the terms North and South not to reference “geographical categories but rather socio-economic ones, referring to the line which divides the strong world market sectors from the competitively weak, economically superfluous sectors in society” (Sachs, 1997, 291). While I insist on the political relevance of the categories North and South to reference much longer histories and continued geopolitical relations, I also appreciate the differentiated and complex networks of power within and across contexts. Such issues are often elided if North and South are presented as homogenous and undifferentiated spaces. The focus of this paper rests on exploring the North-South divide and the location of Northerners in this context. I also use Westerner and Northerner interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> Versions of this paper have been presented as a lecture in the course where I was a teaching assistant and instructor for several years. The feedback from students has encouraged me to pursue this paper for publication.

<sup>4</sup> My point is not to single this student out for criticism, nor do I see myself as removed from this student as I elaborate later in this paper. I use these exchanges as an opportunity to raise some productive questions about our activist desires and responses.

the state of the world. Even where the course materials had not at all centred such types of engagement, this student seemed quite fixed on going to the South as a primary outcome of the structural analysis in which we had engaged. On the one hand, as an educator, I am absolutely committed to encouraging outrage and action that emerges from an analysis of global structural inequities. Ethical questions and responses compelled by oppression and suffering occupy a central place in my teaching and scholarship. However, I remain concerned with the kinds of questions and analysis often elided in proposals that frame global injustice as requiring direct interventions of Northern people in Southern places or how this becomes the primary way in which concerns with the world are heard and interpreted. My argument is not a rehearsal of the binary of whether we should engage or not nor am I suggesting a retreat from engagement. Rather, the questions I foreground are: What are the conditions of our individual and collective engagement and what might be better, more effective forms of engagement? What are the various political responses that our rage might lead us to and how is the prevailing response of going “there” to do something encouraged and rewarded?<sup>5</sup>

This paper is divided into four sections. To begin, I consider the deployment of the global as a theoretical and political concept and insist on its emplacement in specific material and historical relations. As a second and related argument, I consider the multiple vectors of race, class, gender and Northern status along which global subjects are imagined and constituted. In the third section, I consider more specifically the prevalence of white women in various kinds of global interventions. I then explore how racialized Northern women fit into the picture of the global. I conclude the paper with an invitation to ground the global and reconceptualize our social justice efforts while attending to our own historical locations and ongoing complicities in North-South relations. Throughout the paper I rely primarily on feminist, anti-racist and postcolonial scholars to foreground questions of race, colonialism and history in relation to the global.

### ***Emplacing the Global***

In this section, I consider the need to emplace the global in a historical context. Despite its apparent commitment to social justice, how might we read history and race into the global self and what might such a reading illuminate? To

---

<sup>5</sup> At the outset, I want to clarify what this paper will not be providing. I acknowledge that there are very rich and nuanced scholarly traditions of international development, global education, cosmopolitanism and globalization studies. I also appreciate that global activism is often organized under paradigms of community development, environmental concerns, gender issues, empowerment of women, sustainable development, human rights and many more. These frameworks share conceptual terrain as well as deep contestations and nuances both within and across various approaches. I do not provide a specific reading of these traditions or practices but focus on various forms of global engagement broadly that require going to the global South. I will also not be looking at the individual intentions of those engaged in global activism in the South. I do not dispute that for many of us, such action is compelled by deep concern with suffering and injustice. However, such appeals to good will or good intentions should not prevent us from interrogating our own political projects, investments and forms of learning and activism and their effects.

explore this question, I turn to an article by Frederick Cooper, “What is the Concept of Globalization Good For? An African Historian’s Perspective (2001). As the title suggests, Frederick Cooper explores how the concept of global and globalization is employed and what it gives us analytically. Cooper asks us to consider interconnectedness not as a novel approach but rather, demands historicizing of this concept. For example, drawing on C.L.R. James, Cooper highlights the organizational forms of slavery as the basis of industrial capitalism and elaborates that these forms were “pioneered on Caribbean sugar estates as much as in English factories. The slaves were African; the capital came from France; the land was in the Caribbean” (Cooper, 2001, 197). Contemporizing his example to the “diamonds- arms nexus” today, Cooper argues that much like the production of sugar during the slave trade, diamonds are a “product to be enjoyed by people in distant lands, who do not necessarily ask where the diamonds came from any more than the consumers of sugar in nineteenth-century England wanted to know about the blood in which their sugar was soaked” (2001, 207-208). That people and societies are connected and have been is undeniable but how useful is such an analytic or claim? Cooper’s point is that references to the global or processes of globalization do not actually tell us very much about the networks, relationships, histories, conditions and mechanisms of specific connections. Critiquing the use of globalization, Cooper argues that this tells us “little more than that history happens within the boundaries of the planet and therefore all history is global history” (2001, 211). In the end, Cooper calls for more discerning and useful concepts and a more precise theoretical apparatus (2001, 211-212). He argues that the conceptual frameworks we use illuminate, and I would add conceal, different kinds of questions and processes, making it not only an academic pursuit but also an important political consideration.

I find Cooper’s reading of globalization useful in interrogating the ways in which the global is mobilized and global engagement framed. Adapting Cooper’s title, I ask what the concept of the global is good for and a related question, for whom does the concept work? I apply Cooper’s critique of globalization and argue that the common place assertions that we live in a global world/village and are ourselves in relation to such processes, global selves or citizens, does not yield very useful political insights or analyses. It does not get us closer to the questions Cooper raises about the nature and specificity of these connections and our various locations and implications in these relationships. In fact, I argue that claims of the global are seductive precisely because they are disembodied, ahistorical and denationalized. The global is everywhere and nowhere all at once. As a number of feminist anti-racist scholars suggest, the global or world citizen, in its various versions and modifications, is simply a “mystified national subject” (Grewal and Kaplan 2001, 669) or as others argue more forcefully, an imperial subject (Kaplan 1996, 127). Rosi Braidotti references the move to the global or world subject/citizen as a tactic of evasion in order to obscure the very material, national contexts in which we are embedded and the relations of privilege and oppression that shape connections within and between various contexts (1992, 8). This “god

trick of seeing everything from nowhere” (Haraway, 1988, 581) or claiming everywhere and nowhere from which to stand is premised on denying place and situatedness.

I propose that we think about what might be gained by pursuing a situated analysis while still remaining committed to political engagement. The desire to support people in their struggles or work towards responsibility does not require a move to the global. Claiming the global must be read as an identity making practice as well as a political project, as a way of understanding self and a particular relationship with the world. At best, it is a naïve move and at most, a denial or obfuscation of relations of power.<sup>6</sup> Rather, I argue that a politics of location and situatedness are much more promising grounds on which to build political projects and to be with people in struggle. This situatedness can provide an opening into how relations of power are structured and organized and our locations within these networks.

### ***Who is the Global Subject?***

Returning to the question I asked earlier about what the concept of the global is good for and for whom the concept works, I now focus on the latter part of the question as a means of excavating the bodies in question, in order to situate them within specific histories and contexts. Who is claiming the global as an identity and a political practice? As Grewal and Kaplan argue, one of the enduring legacies of racially based hierarchies is that “the Western body stands as the normative body in scholarly discourse and public policy” (2001, 666). I extend Grewal and Kaplan’s analysis to suggest that the Western body is also presupposed in Northern based social justice interventions in the South. Despite the fact that the global citizen is advanced as a way to encourage connectedness outside or beyond borders, the global is often constituted through movement across national borders. The materiality of borders, passports and access to means and travel that give rise

---

<sup>6</sup> I am not making the case that all global involvement is the same nor do I deny that some forms of global intervention may attempt to address historical injustices and their ongoing legacies. However, the argument I am making is that despite such negotiations or instances, the majority of global interventions are not organized along such critical or historical lines. As Heron (2007) insightfully argues, in order to preserve their innocence and goodness as development workers, the white women in her study were adept at articulating “critiques of the development enterprise as a whole. We speak of wasted money, of ineffective projects that are imposed on local people, and of a proliferation of highly paid Northern professionals who have no real commitment to development. Interestingly though...most of us see our work as representing in at least some respects an alternative to what is going on around us...with these perceptions we distance ourselves from the development enterprise as a whole, so that our critiques of it have the effect of enshrining us in virtue” (103). My interest is in pre-empting such claims to exceptionalism and pursuing a line of inquiry that insists on the political importance of sitting and working with discomfort and implication. For arguments along this line and also some important interventions in reimagining the global, see Cook, 2008 for a discussion on colonial continuities in development work and on the possibilities of imagining global citizenship in more reflexive and critical ways; Heron, 2007 for an historical and critical race reading on the participation of white women in international development; Jefferess, 2008 for a reworking of global ethics from feminist and postcolonial approaches in relation to the University of British Columbia’s efforts to foster global citizenship; Zermach-Bersin, 2007 for a critique on the ways in which U.S. study abroad programs repackage imperialism as international education and global citizenship.

to claims of a global are specific relations of power, embedded in national frameworks that can not be denied or elided. What are the conditions of movement for primarily white Northerners who claim globality compared to migrant and domestic workers, primarily racialized, also in circuits of travel but living under very different conditions that give rise to movement? As Sara Ahmed argues, the Western subject assumed in theory, is the subject who has choice, freedom and the privilege of movement without fear of being rendered without home or place. She rhetorically asks if this is precisely because for this subject, “*the world is already constituted as its home*” (2000, 83, original emphasis). For many from the global South, movement is not about the world as home or being a citizen everywhere but dis-placement from home and community, as well as limited and differential access to terms of citizenship elsewhere. Recalling Cooper, a vague and undifferentiated concept of the global citizen does not help us to understand these distinct but connected experiences of the global and their relationships with and to each other. As Ella Shohat argues, we are all “living the same historical moment but under diverse modalities of subordination” (2002, 77) and, I would add, under differing conditions of affluence and privilege, not unconnected to this subordination. Ahmed warns that we must watch for this move from the Western “I” to the “global” (2000, 173) as it conceals and masks the privileges and entitlements afforded by the Western “I.” These entitlements are not only material relations between North and South but I argue that they are also deeply informed by racial hierarchies, elided in the move to the global.

In place of history and racism, a central preoccupation in global engagement is cross-cultural understanding, adaptation and appreciation. On the website for Global Citizens for Change, in the frequently asked questions section, the *Canadian Guide to Living and Working Overseas* by Jean-Marc Hachey is cited in order to emphasize the key qualities that Northerners should possess. Northerners are encouraged to be open-minded, patient, flexible, adaptable, culturally aware, resourceful, and possess good communication skills and a sense of humour ([www.citizens4change.org/faq.htm#4](http://www.citizens4change.org/faq.htm#4)). It is these qualities that will enable Northerners to meet the new situations, contexts and challenges they will experience in the South successfully. Hachey’s book and these qualities are cited over and over again on multiple websites and by the majority of organizations involved in global activities of various kinds. In this paradigm, a shared human identity and moral duty to alleviate poverty and suffering are emphasized. Also stressed by Northerners reflecting on their experiences in the South, are emotional growth and connections with people in the South ([www.citizens4change.org/personal\\_stories.htm](http://www.citizens4change.org/personal_stories.htm)).

Not surprisingly, this cross-cultural framework displaces pressing questions of power, history and racism, obscuring how whiteness operates as a system of domination. As George Dei insists, there are “enormous social, political and economic benefits that historically have accrued, and continue to accrue, to certain individuals in society due to the dominance of White (male) power” (1996, 28).

Interestingly, discussions of global engagement are usually absent on questions of how white Northerners are not only implicated in structures of underdevelopment, but also how their curiosity in global efforts often yields enormous material returns, in the form of travel and career opportunities, research and knowledge production as well as the good, altruistic global subjects that they get to be in the process<sup>7</sup>. Writing in the mid 1960s, Albert Memmi observes that the colony is “a place where one earns more and spends less. You go to a colony because jobs are guaranteed, wages high, careers more rapid and business more profitable” (1965, 4). Reminiscent of Memmi’s analysis, Arundhati Roy insightfully observes:

A whole industry of development experts, academics, and consultants have built an industry on the back of global social movements in which they are not direct participants. Many of these “experts” who earn their livings studying the struggles of the world’s poor, are funded by groups like the Ford Foundation, the World Bank, and wealthy universities...from a safe distance, they offer us their insightful critiques (2004, 32-33)

While the global engagement efforts of Northerners are often encouraged and applauded, symbolically and materially, similar acknowledgement and payoffs are rarely granted to community workers and professionals from the South, particularly when they emigrate to the global North. Furthermore, with few exceptions, Southern subjects appear as passive victims in need of aid and rescue or as “partners” without power rather than as scholars, activists and community members whose insights and analysis should direct and drive efforts for “development” and social justice, in which they have the most at stake.

### **Why so many White Women?**

Much of the work of global intervention is directed towards learning about and alleviating the suffering of people in the global South, quite often through the direct intervention of Northern people in Southern contexts. However, what is rarely acknowledged or explicitly discussed is the prevalence of white Northern people, a large number of them women, leading and engaged in global efforts, particularly in the South. How are prior histories instructive for thinking about these more contemporary practices? Why are such histories either peripherized or even when they are discussed, devoid of race and racism?

In order to consider a more textured feminist reading and some of the historical antecedents of current global practices, I draw on Antoinette Burton’s article, “Woman in the Nation: Feminism, Race, and Empire in the ‘National’ Culture.” Of particular interest is Burton’s focus on the relationship of British women to the nation and empire through their relationships with non-Western

---

<sup>7</sup> See Muchunguzi and Milne (1995) for an excellent report that discusses these issues and also looks at the ways in which “partnership” is deployed on the part of Northern donor agencies to mean greater interference in and control over the development process.

women. Burton argues that because British “women were considered the inferior sex in the superior race” (1994, 35), they attempted to escape or at least mitigate this status of partial inferiority by transferring their moral roles from the domestic to the public sphere. Drawing on religious scripture and Christian principles, British women were able to authorize a redemptive space for themselves in the public sphere through their public works. Their inclusion in the nation and empire was on the grounds of their maternal and feminine qualities, indispensable to the moral development and uplift of the nation. As Burton elucidates, feminists were able to use the “sacredness of motherhood” and elevate it to a “national and racial duty” (1994, 49) of reproducing the nation and ensuring its moral character. Their involvement in reform activities, now referred to as “rescue work,” further relied on the notion that “woman’s mission was to protect the weak” (Burton, 1994, 45). As Burton is clear to point out, the admittance of Victorian women to the public sphere was premised on very specific terms that were gendered, classed and racialized. This took on quite distinctive qualities in imperial contexts where the moral responsibility of Victorian women extended to colonial peoples, particularly colonized women who were in “need of improvement and ‘civilizing’” (Burton, 1994, 61).

What is important for our current purposes is the attention Burton draws to Western women’s implications in disturbing and deeply racist practices in their bids for equality. Their brand of feminism and inclusion was predicated on hierarchical relations with colonized women and other oppressed groups.<sup>8</sup> Of interest here is what would be missed by reading this as a feminist victory without paying attention to the exploitive and racialized conditions on which Victorian feminists were admitted to the nation. Burton is careful not to do this and among other methodological insights, what can be gleaned from her analysis is the need for a nuanced consideration of the consolidation of the nation and empire, on terrain that was gendered, racialized and classed. To ignore this is to miss the constitution of nation and empire along multiple vectors simultaneously, not additively or successively.

Burton’s work also opens up a whole series of questions about the contemporary resonances of rescue work in which Northern women are implicated and from which they benefit. In their work with Northern women development workers, both Nancy Cook (2008) and Barbara Heron (2007) argue that through their participation in international development projects, women enjoy access to self-development, authority, empowerment, prestige and a claim to subjectivity not as readily available to them at home. In the words of some of the women participants in Heron’s study, they achieve the status of “honorary men” (2007, 112). In addition to such opportunities and payoffs, I suggest that the idea of the global continues to be particularly seductive to Northern women as it elides

---

<sup>8</sup> Of course Burton is not alone in making this claim. See also Grewal 1996; Lewis 1996; Mani 1998; McClintock 1995 and Yegenoglu 1998.



oppressive relations between women as well as Northern domination. In this space of the global, there is a sameness implied, desired or hoped for and where difference is acknowledged, it is usually outside power or transcended by appealing to a human solidarity or more specifically, a feminist solidarity. Exploring the affinity that white Northern women have to development work, Heron further argues that Southern women continue to be constructed as requiring saving as victims of an ahistorical and perpetual gender persecution (1999, 79)<sup>9</sup>. Reading Southern women exclusively through an analysis of gender or patriarchy and outside an analysis of history, race and class leads us to miss important aspects of how structural violence in their lives is constituted. Identifying the inadequacy of focusing exclusively on patriarchy, Linda Tuhiwai Smith addresses the interlocking effects of oppression. She observes, “moves to discuss patriarchy without addressing imperialism and racism are always reframed by indigenous women, and of course other minority women, as inadequate analyses...in the end indigenous men and women have to live together in a world in which both genders are under attack” (L. T. Smith, 1999, 154). The focus on patriarchy through which women are victims and oppressed primarily in relation to Southern men also distorts the interlocking impact of racism and patriarchy and their intensification through capitalism. It obscures economic and political connections and histories that focus circuits of power between North and South. Sherene Razack elaborates these circuits of power in the following way, arguing that a focus on:

‘barbaric’ customs of non-Western cultures, for example, female genital mutilation...takes away attention from other forms of violence against women, and it masks how the North creates and sustains the conditions in the Third World that increase domestic violence against women, and inhibit women’s means of defending themselves. I am thinking here of the North’s role in devastating the economies of the South (2000, 47).

The perspective of saving their Southern sisters always gives Northern women the upper hand, not to mention the fact that it reproduces the fiction that women in the North are free and liberated compared to women in the South who are oppressed and backwards. It also serves to overlook the resistance and activism of Southern women themselves as well as their own critiques and articulations of their realities and experiences in much more nuanced, multilayered and complex ways than suggested by the trope of oppressed Southern woman.

---

<sup>9</sup> For a sustained analysis of whiteness and gender in the context of international development, see Heron (2007). My point about drawing attention to whiteness is not to recentre it but rather, to displace whiteness as a form of privilege, authority and entitlement. For the challenges and risks of whiteness studies, see Ahmed 2004; Dyer 1997 and Thompson 2003.

## Northern Women of Colour

Reflecting on Du Bois' often quoted statement that the problem of the twentieth century will be the problem of the colour line, John H. Stanfield II adds that the "problem of the next century will be the deepening complexities and contradictions of that color line" (1993, 35). While it is true that the majority of Northerners involved in global interventions are white women, this is not always or only the case. How can we start to think about the complexity of the colour line in relation to the participation of racialized Northern women in global efforts?

I call on my own experience and thinking at various stages in order to explore some of the issues related to the participation of racialized Northerners in global activism. As a child, I grew up with a deeply instilled sense of service to others and commitment to volunteerism. This led me to consider the ways that my own learning and formal education might continue to build on this tradition of service. As an undergraduate student, I studied international development and actively sought out opportunities to go somewhere and do something, much like the student with which I opened this paper. Much of my effort was directed to trying to get back to my birthplace in the South as I had not been able to return. This preoccupation stayed with me during my years as a graduate student and when initially thinking of a project for my M.A. thesis, my colleague, Tabish Surani and I, who jointly researched our theses, thought about the ways in which we could participate in development work in the South. As we wrote in our M.A. theses (Charania, 2001; Surani, 2001), initially we imagined travelling to various parts of South Asia and working with feminist organizations and educational institutions committed to social justice. Because of our own origins in the subcontinent, we felt there was a legitimacy with which we could intervene to do this research. Given the many and varied feminist organizations and movements throughout South Asia, it was our intent to bring these stories to a Northern context in order to disrupt the "production of the 'third world woman'" (Mohanty, 1991, 51). We felt more entitled than white Northern researchers engaged in projects claiming to empower Southern women without a larger analysis of systems of disempowerment from which they, as dominant researchers benefited.

Thinking through our sense of entitlement involved a process of identifying places of privilege and penalty in our lives to understand how we are also implicated in the very systems of domination that we claimed to be challenging. We were not above or outside the critique we were levelling against white Northern researchers, though our locations were not the same. It was in coming to this realization that we began to think seriously about questions of our own complicities and the politics of location in more than statements of self-declaration at the outset of a research project. Throughout this process, the saliency of our Northern status became particularly difficult to ignore or deny. Through a recognition of our own relative positions of privilege as racialized women in the elite world in the academy, living in the North and with our origins in the South, we chose to interrogate our own complicities in order to resist performing ourselves as

dominant through a “politics of saving” (Razack, 1998, 6) people from the South. We had to seriously interrogate our assumed affinity with South Asian feminists working in the subcontinent to “*recognize* our own habits of dominance and our complicity in systems of domination” (Razack, 1998, 160). This interrogation meant a refocusing of our research to political projects in the North that have devastating impacts on the lives of people in the South.

Looking back on my own learning and thinking about issues of global intervention of various kinds, it is important to recognize that for some of us racialized Northerners, going “home” or returning to our birth places or places of origin might be important factors in wanting to be involved in global efforts. I do not deny the complexity of these desires but at the same time, I want to hold onto the fact that sometimes these desires and longings mean that we do not adequately locate ourselves in relations of power, nor do we always appreciate the very material privileges we accrue from our locations and geographies. Neither does it account for the fact that some of us have very little knowledge of our places of origin, linguistically, culturally and historically, often for very complicated reasons, and we do not always bring a critical reading to histories and relations of power by virtue of who we are. As Donna Haraway cautions, “subjugation is not grounds for an ontology; it might be a visual clue” (1988, 586). I agree with Haraway that we can not assume a particular politics or analysis by virtue of the body while at the same time not denying the importance and potential of our lived experiences as providing insights into social organization and relations of ruling (D. Smith, 1998, 8).

The participation of racialized Northerners in global interventions also raises some interesting concerns about the politics of representation and its limits. An anti-racist analysis might rightly focus on the dominance of white Northern women in global interventions and advocate for increased representation of racialized Northerners. While such a project may be part of an anti-racist strategy, it can also lead us to seek representation rather than question or trouble problematic enterprises and strategies. Referencing Gayatri Spivak, Chetan Bhatt reminds us, that we can not assume a convergence of interests between individuals minoritized in the North and the majority of people in the South. As he elaborates, the “interests of minorities in the West and the subaltern of the Third World are not simply delinked, they may be opposed” (Bhatt, 2004, 17). Nancie Caraway similarly argues that we can not assume individuals oppressed ““are not in fundamental ways damaged by their marginality, and that they themselves are somehow removed from a will to power”” (cited in Fine, 1994, 81). This centres the need to situate an analysis of the global within an interlocking system of oppression that broadens the questions asked to trouble the participation of racialized Northerners alongside white Northerners.<sup>10</sup> Here, questions of Northern

---

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion on theorizing oppressions as interlocking, see Collins 1986; Combahee River Collective 1995/1974; Fellows and Razack 1998; Razack 1998; B. Smith 1995; A. Smith 2005.

status and material relations are also critical. Drawing attention to the limits of the politics of representation should not be used or misused to peripheralize the importance of a focus on race, whiteness and the need for representation. While it is critical to engage these complexities, I do so with the understanding that sustained analysis and discussions of racism and whiteness in the context of the global tend to be absent, marginal or met with a great deal of hostility and defensiveness. I am arguing for a nuanced and rigorous anti-racist politic that enables us to engage these complexities without retreating to a “non-racial” or “post-racial” position. The task, as I see it, is to keep whiteness on the table while also making space for our own complicities as racialized Northerners in North-South relations.

### **What is to be Done?**

When advancing such a critique, the question I am most often met with is, “what should we do?” While this is a pressing question, I am not prescribing one course of action nor can any such prescription anticipate the range of conditions and complexities of current Northern entanglements in Southern contexts and organizations. What I am proposing is a reconsideration of how we view the problem with an eye to opening up a range of avenues for action that are potentially more transformative and less likely to be on the agenda of Northern efforts to engage globally. It is crucial to reflect on how I, and how many of us, are channelled into a particular set of practices in order to respond to oppression. While I had learned to care about suffering and my emotional responses to it had been encouraged, I had few analytical skills to explore the reasons and causes of oppression and poverty, nor were these questions supported. As Zygmunt Bauman argues, we are inundated with images of suffering, death and starvation but short on analysis and underlying causes. As he puts it, “nothing is shown, and no word is spoken, of the causes of famine and chronic illness. No inkling of the steady destruction of livelihoods by trade sans frontieres, of the tearing apart of social safety nets under the pressure of finance sans frontieres” (Bauman, 2002, 212-213). Rather, when explanations are offered, they often point to poor conduct, governance and bad luck or put another way, we are encouraged to “seek biographical solutions to systemic contradictions” (Ulrich Beck cited in Bauman, 2002, 216). Michelle Fine refers to these tendencies where “Others have been yanked out of the contexts of late capitalism, racism, sexism, and economic decline” (1994, 79) as offering decontextualized, ahistorical and pathologizing readings of symptoms and suffering that we are invited to consume.

My earlier responses to oppression were consistent with Fine and Bauman’s analysis as they lacked reference to structures, systems and history. In short, mine was a response organized by charity, rather than justice. It was a comfortable response as it didn’t require me to consider how the conditions of my own life were

made possible through the exploitation of others in very concrete ways.<sup>11</sup> It also didn't require me to give up anything or think about structural violence and oppression and my relationship to it. In fact, I argue that much of our learning about the global, in its various iterations, operates from a position of disguising or absenting our collective violence in the underdevelopment and exploitation of much of the world and as Bauman points out, "almost never does the commitment go far enough to strike at the roots of wrongdoing" (2002, 216). And while global efforts often claim to be about honouring interconnections, what is the nature of these specific links and interconnections between here and there? Drawing on Simon Dalby, Francois Debrix asks us to consider, how the poverty of there is related to the economic affluence of here (Dalby cited in Debrix, 2004, 166)? Put more forcefully, Fanon demands that we consider how "Europe is literally the creation of the Third World. The wealth which smothers her is that which was stolen from the underdeveloped peoples" (1963, 102). Instead, the solutions proposed and that I took up were often of individual morality. As Albert Memmi argues, "indignation is not always accompanied by desire for a policy of action" (1991/1967, 20) and in the case of global interventions, indignation often results in a very narrow policy of action. Compared to this, a justice based response would require a much more sustained engagement with structural violence and it would require systemic and collective interventions.

To reiterate, my critique should not be read to mean that action and activism are not required or are too complex and must therefore be abandoned in favour of a focus on more insular or local issues. I rely on Dei's explication of critical to mean a "critique aimed at understanding and transforming existing ways of knowing and doing things" (1996, 10). It is my hope that engaging in critique will lead to a focus on the varied proposals for action that flow from very different analyses and enable us to ask which proposals are more consistent with a vision of transformation and social justice? Learning about global issues or working to redress global inequality and injustice does not require installing ourselves in Southern countries or contexts nor is withdrawal from global entanglements possible. Operating under the pretext that we are not already engaged in the lives, oppressions and experiences of people in the global South is not only false, it is dishonest. Challenging Western feminists, Sara Ahmed argues that we are "already in relationships with 'third world women' given our implication in an international division of labour – we do not *withdraw* from that implication by refusing the

---

<sup>11</sup> To make these connections concrete for students, I have engaged some of the following resources and strategies in my own teaching. We reexamine our perceptions of aid being acts of charity and benevolence to looking more closely at mechanisms to sell goods and services from donor to recipient countries through aid, commonly referred to as tied aid. We also look at the actual monetary flow from the Global South to the North, not the other way around as most students expect (see George, 1989, 235-236) as well as structural adjustment programs and the workings of international institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Historicizing current trade and international financial regimes has also proven to be particularly useful (see Loomba, 1998, 3-7) as well as making conditions of trade concrete by tracing our everyday habits of consumptions (coffee, chocolate, clothing etc.).

privilege of speech” (2000, 167). However, often our speech, research and activism come to stand in place of others, rather than in solidarity with others. Reflecting on the tendency for Northerners to respond to or conceptualize global engagement in particular kinds of ways, Dawn Sutherland isolates our collective self-interest in continuing to secure for ourselves, access to the South:

Today, there are still hordes of Northern ‘experts,’ ‘advisors,’ and ‘researchers’ in the South...I suspect there are still relatively few willing to engage in a rigorous examination of their own major stake in the perpetuation of the colonial relations of power underpinning their ‘knowledge’ production, in spite of a considerable body of critique from ‘Third World’ intellectuals (1994, 45).

While I do not deny that in most cases, people are often motivated by good intentions, compassion and commitment to alleviate the suffering of others, as was I, this should not result in an uncritical embrace of our own activist desires and responses. Nor should a move to the global self come to stand in for emplacing ourselves in very specific national geographies, bodies and material locations. To do so, would simply be to obfuscate our own embeddedness in the injustices we seek to understand and challenge.

It is for these reasons that I propose a *pedagogy of suspicion*, meaning cultivating an ongoing approach to our activism and learning that is sceptical of our investments, desires, practices and social locations. I think we need to learn to get and stay suspicious about what is illuminated and eclipsed in our approaches to global justice and education, the questions we ask and those we evade, the privileges we speak of and those on which we are silent, the suffering that moves us and in what direction and that to which we are impervious. Such a pedagogy is not meant to stand in place of action but rather, to guide and give rise to potentially more transformative and reflective actions. I propose such suspicion as a political imperative. I suggest that through a pedagogy of suspicion, we might be able to get closer to, stay with and work through these questions and issues that we would rather evade, ignore or peripheralize.<sup>12</sup> How, for example, might we engage a

---

<sup>12</sup> In engaging these complex ideas, many take the invitation to ask a set of critical questions in relation to our own activist desires and investments in ways that are productive. For others, this process is deeply unsettling and they are much more reluctant and resistant. While tracing the lines and reasons of student resistance is not the focus of this paper (see Boler 2004; hooks 1994 and Luke and Gore 1992 for discussions on the complexities of social justice pedagogies), I do want to flag some of the more common techniques to evade such critical questions. Some students interpret the need to think critically and historically as being “theoretical” and “academic” in the face of urgent global concerns. Rather, the educational process I am proposing is a call to open up a potentially different set of responses to oppression and suffering, not withdraw from such commitments. Secondly, some students claim that because power is diffuse, shifting and complex, it is impossible to make such grand claims about the operation of power or to know in advance the effects of global interventions. As stated earlier, I am not making the case that all global involvement is the same nor do I deny that some forms of global intervention may attempt to address historical injustices and their ongoing legacies. However, the argument I am making is that despite such negotiations or instances, the majority of global interventions are not organized along such critical or historical lines. Finally, as for the complexity of power, I do agree that various fields of thought ascribed as post-structural and Foucauldian, among others, have

whole body of critical scholarship by Southern activists and scholars to help reformulate or at the very least challenge our notions of global intervention, development and assistance? Why are so few Northerners informed by or even aware of such scholarship and activism? How does an understanding of colonialism help us to better understand current trade practices, regulations and the structural underdevelopment of the global South? Why is there so much hostility and resistance to seriously engaging race and whiteness alongside an analysis of the global? Why are so many Northerners and Northern institutions in a position to “help?” How might we get sceptical about our own desires to feel good and innocent?<sup>13</sup> My focus here is on a move away from guilt or goodness to thinking about responsibility, accountability and scepticism with a corresponding shift in what it means to think or “go global.” As an educator, I see my goal not only as exploring these ideas and questions with students but also working with them to get curious about why we rarely think to ask these very questions or notice the more material workings of our global aspirations. By suggesting that we “ground” the global, I am not arguing that we ignore our commitment to others or give up our outrage but rather that the grounds on which we imagine our responsibility and relationships with others in the South need to be reconsidered from our very specific, embedded contexts.

What are the ethical commitments and obligations that might follow from such a politics of location? What might it mean to account for who and where we are? I am interested in how we, as Northerners who articulate a commitment to global justice, might think of a politics of location not as a declaration of who we are in various predictable lists and identity categories but rather an acknowledgement that requires a corresponding shift in accountability and political

---

opened up important trajectories for thinking about the organization of power and resistance. However, I also argue that “to end specific hierarchies at specific sites” (Razack, 1998, 161), more essentialized approaches to power and political organization are sometimes useful and necessary. I am less interested in a consistent theoretical position on the concentration or diffusion of power and more interested in contextual and politically effective ways to address oppressive power relationships. In a different but relatable context, when asked about her commitment to the instability of categories or critique of binaries, Judith Butler (2011) had the following response: “I don’t have a political standing in favour of the instability of categories as such. Only under regimes in which the stabilizing of categories works to perpetuate subjugation, do I think the destabilization of categories might be a good thing but I also think sometimes destabilizing categories can be an operation of power that we need to resist” (<http://rabble.ca/rabbletv/program-guide/2011/03/features/judith-butler-speaks-about-bds-torontos-israel-apartheid-wee>, segment 4 at 7 minutes and 50 seconds)

<sup>13</sup> In engaging such questions and lines of inquiry, it has also been important to pre-empt a reading of those of us who engage in such analysis as the “good activist” or “good anti-racist.” See Thompson (2003) for the ways in which white anti-racists recentre racism through their desire to feel good, unimplicated in and distant from racist structures and privileges. Sara Ahmed (2004) also argues that the term “critical” (in the context of whiteness studies) is often deployed as a marker of transformative politics. She cautions that such a reading is inattentive to the effects of anti-racist declarations, which can be engaged while concealing or leaving in tact racist relations of power. Put another way, the terms critical or anti-racist can be mobilized performatively rather than as transformative political practice. The point is not to abandon an investment in critical politics, teaching or activism but to be mindful of its complexities and refuse its closure.

practice. Vandana Shiva forcefully suggests what such a practice of accountability and political engagement might entail and look like:

*We ask the people in the North to discipline their governments and their corporations. Seattle was a start. We are strong enough to fight violence in our own societies ourselves. What you need to do is stop your companies at home. Have a moment to stop Cargill from taking over our food system. You don't have to come to India and tell us how our farmers should behave. You need to tell Cargill how it should behave. You need to tell your commerce department. They day you resurrect democracy in the US, we resurrect democracy here (2001, 171, emphasis mine).*

While Shiva directs her comments to American activists, they apply equally well to those of us living in Canada and other parts of the Western world. Shiva is advocating a practice of situated solidarity and engagement with issues within and beyond our own borders that requires us to meet and engage our differences and acknowledge our connections without referencing an undefined global space and self from which to act and understand ourselves and our political projects. Her call requires us to reexamine the seductiveness of going “there” to do something and doing the much less glamorous work of long term political mobilizing and lobbying for change in the Northern corridors of power as a way to demonstrate our solidarity with and support for activists in the global South.

## **Conclusion**

While the global has a humanist poetic and seductive appeal, as Fanon (1963), Sartre (preface to Fanon, 1963) and Said (1994) among others have cautioned us, the humanist project has existed well alongside colonialism, genocide and racism. We would do well to recall their insights in our move to the global while at the same time, not giving up on a vision of a world not defined primarily through territories, borders and hierarchies. The differential and connected conditions in which we live will not disappear by assertions to a global world or self but rather through a situated analysis and political engagement. This is not about good or bad people but rather how we, as Northerners, are produced and come to certain forms of action in relation to injustice, oppression and suffering which despite our good intentions, are not outside power. As Puar and Rai argue, in considering our social justice efforts, we “must confront the network of complicities that structure the possibilities of resistance” (2002, 140). We often misdirect our outrage at suffering to a preoccupation with symptoms that make us feel good, benevolent and charitable but that do not get us closer to understanding the causes and more systemic and transformative approaches to oppression that implicate us in difficult and uncomfortable ways.

Throughout this paper, I have explored questions about who the global subject is imagined to be, the longer histories in which such global imaginings must be placed, what whiteness has to do with this whole enterprise and more



ethical and historically responsible ways to conceptualize our efforts for social change. At the same time, the issues raised through the participation of racialized Northerners and the large number of white Northern women in an assortment of global interventions challenge us to think of the simultaneous operation of multiple systems, rather than an additive or successive approach to oppression. Addressing the perils and risks of working with theories that focus on the complexity of power and oppression, such as the social construction of race and related forms of identity, Paul Gilroy argues that efforts to centre race as socially constructed and constituted by other forms of identity and difference have “been insufficiently alive to the lingering power of specifically racialized forms of power and subordination” (2003, 68). Gilroy’s caution is an important one given the pervasiveness of race denial and evasion in many global engagement efforts, variously organized. However, the challenge is to interrogate whiteness and white privilege while simultaneously working with the complexities of racialization and social identities.

Finally, I argue that claims to global selves and a global world are not conducive to exploring the nature of our connections and interconnectedness or the relations and histories of privilege that make it possible for some bodies to be at home or claim home as everywhere. In the preface to *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Albert Memmi poses the following question, “I had to ask myself if I would have condemned colonization so vigorously if I had actually benefited from it myself. I hope so” (1991/1967, xvi). I find Memmi’s question compelling as it requires those of us who benefit from relations of colonialism and imperialism to confront these very material privileges and comforts. We do benefit, the question is, do we object and if so, do we do so in ways that do not reinscribe imperialist impulses and relations?

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the reviewers for their enormously helpful and detailed feedback. Your suggestions, encouragement and scepticism helped me to clarify my ideas and thinking. Thank-you also to Katherine Browne and the editors of ACME and Nancy Cook and Barbara Heron for their persistence and efforts in bringing this collection to publication.

I would also like to thank George Dei and Carmela Murdocca for their feedback on an earlier draft of this paper. The intellectual preoccupations in this paper developed long ago with Tabish Surani and I can trace the genealogy of the ideas here to our collaborative work.

### **References**

Ahmed, Sara. 2004. Declarations of whiteness: The non-performativity of anti-racism. in *Borderlands*, vol. 3(2). Retrieved from [http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2\\_2004/ahmed\\_declarations.htm](http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/ahmed_declarations.htm) on January 23, 2007.

- Ahmed, Sara. 2000. *Strange encounters: Embodied others in post-coloniality*. New York: Routledge.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2002. *Society under seige*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bhatt, Chetan. 2004. Contemporary geopolitics and 'alterity' research. In, M. Bulmer and J. Solomos (eds.), *Researching Race and Racism*. New York: Routledge, pp. 16-36.
- Boler, Megan. 2004. *Democratic dialogue in education*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.
- Braidotti, Rosi. 1992. The exile, the nomad and the migrant: reflections on international feminism. *Women's Studies International Forum* 15(1): 7-10.
- Burton, Antoinette. 1994. *Burdens of history: British feminists, Indian women, and imperial culture*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Charania, Gulzar Raisa. 2001. Encounters with northern development workers: Reflections from the 'field', M.A., Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, Toronto.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 1986. Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of black feminist thought. *Social Problems* 33(6): S14-S32. Retrieved November 23, 2009.
- Combahee River Collective. 1995. A Black feminist statement. In, B. Guy-Sheftall (ed.), *Words of fire: An anthology of African-American feminist thought*. New York: The New Press, pp. 232-240.
- Cook, Nancy. 2008. Shifting the focus of development: turning 'helping' into self-reflexive learning. *Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices* 2(1):16-26.
- Cooper, Frederick. 2001. What is the concept of globalization good for? An African historian's perspective. *African Affairs* 100: 189-213.
- Debrix, Francois. 2004. Tabloid realism and the revival of American security culture. In, S. D. Brunn (ed.), *11 September and its aftermath*. Portland, OR: Frank Cass, pp. 151-190
- Dei, George J. Sefa. 2005. Critical issues in anti-racist research methodologies: an introduction. In, G. J. S. Dei and G. S. Johal (eds), *Critical issues in anti-racist research methodologies*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, pp. 1-27.
- Dei, George J. Sefa, Leeno Luke Karumanchery, and Nisha Karumanchery Luik. 2004. *Playing the race card: exposing white power and privilege*. New York: P. Lang.
- Dei, George J. Sefa. 1996. *Anti-racism education: theory and practice*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.
- Dyer, Richard. 1997. *White*. New York: Routledge.

- Fanon, Frantz. 1967. *Black skin, white masks*. Translated by C. L. Markmann. New York: Grove Press.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1963. *The wretched of the earth. Preface by Jean-Paul Sartre*. Translated by C. Farrington. New York: Grove Press.
- Fellows, Mary Louise and Sherene Razack. 1998. The race to innocence: Confronting hierarchical relations among women. *The Journal of Gender, Race and Justice* 1:335-352.
- Fine, Michelle. 1994. Working the hyphens: reinventing self and other in qualitative research. In, N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 70-82.
- George, Susan. 1989. *A fate worse than debt*. Toronto: Penguin Books Canada.
- Gilroy, Paul. 2003. The Black Atlantic as a counterculture of modernity. In, J. E. Braziel and A. Mannur (eds.), *Theorizing diaspora*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., pp. 49-80.
- Grewal, Inderpal and Caren Kaplan. 2001. Global identities: theorizing transnational studies of sexuality. *GLQ Archive* 7(4): 663-679.
- Grewal, Inderpal. 1996. *Home and harem: Nation, gender, empire, and the cultures of travel*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Haraway, Donna. 1988. Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies* 14(3): 575-599.
- Heron, Barbara. 2007. *Desire for development: Whiteness, gender, and the helping imperative*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press.
- Heron, Barbara. 1999. *Desire for development: The education of white women as development workers*, Ph.D., Sociology and Equity Studies in Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, Toronto.
- hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Jefferess, David. 2008. Global citizenship and the cultural politics of benevolence. *Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices* 2(1): 27-36.
- Kaplan, Caren. 1996. *Questions of travel: postmodern discourses of displacement*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Lewis, Reina. 1996. *Gendering orientalism: Race, femininity and representation*. Routledge: Routledge.
- Loomba, Ania. 1998. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. New York: Routledge.
- Luke, Carmen and Jennifer Gore. 1992. *Feminisms and critical pedagogy*. New York: Routledge.

- Mani, Lata. 1998. *Contentious traditions: The debate on sati in colonial India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- McClintock, Anne. 1995. *Imperial leather: Race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest*. New York: Routledge.
- Memmi, Albert. 1991/1967. *The colonizer and the colonized*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1991. Cartographies of struggle: Third world women and the politics of feminism. In, C. T. Mohanty, A. Russo and L. Torres (eds.), *Third world women and the politics of feminism*. Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, pp. 1-47.
- Muchunguzi, Dennis A.K., and Scott D. Milne. 1995. *Perspectives from the South: A study on partnership*. Dar Es Salaam: AFREDA.
- Puar, Jasbir K. and Amit S. Rai. 2002. Monster, terrorist, fag: the war on terrorism and the production of docile patriots. *Social Text* 20(3): 117-148.
- Razack, Sherene. 2000. Your place or mine? Transnational feminist collaboration. In, A. Calliste and G. J. S. Dei (eds.), *Anti-racist feminism: critical race and gender studies*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing Ltd., pp. 39-54.
- Razack, Sherene. 1998. *Looking white people in the eye: gender, race, and culture in courtrooms and classrooms*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Roy, Arundhati. 2004. *Public power in the age of empire*. Toronto: Publishers Group Canada.
- Sachs, Wolfgang. (1997). The Need for the Home Perspective. In M. Rahnema and V. Bawtree (eds.), *The Post-Development Reader*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing Ltd., pp. 290-301.
- Said, Edward W. 1994. *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Shiva, Vandana. 2001. The violence of globalization: India pushes back. In, L. W. Neva Welton (ed.), *Global uprising: confronting the tyrannies of the 21st century*, Gabriola Island: British Columbia: New Society Publishers, pp. 167-171.
- Shohat, Ella. (2002). Area studies, gender studies, and the cartographies of knowledge. *Social Text*, 20(3): 67-78.
- Smith, Andrea. 2005. *Conquest: Sexual violence and American Indian genocide*. Cambridge: South End Press.
- Smith, Barbara. 1995. Some home truths on the contemporary black feminist movement. In, B Guy-Sheftall (ed.), *Words of fire: An anthology of African-American feminist thought*. New York: The New Press, pp. 254-267.
- Smith, Dorothy E. 1998. *The everyday world as problematic: a feminist sociology*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 1999. *Decolonizing methodologies: research and indigenous peoples*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Stanfield II, John H. 1993. Epistemological Considerations. In, J. H. Stanfield II and R. M. Dennis (eds.), *Race and ethnicity in research methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, pp. 16-36.
- Surani, Tabish. 2001. Shaping the North-South encounter: The training of Northern development workers, M.A., Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, Toronto.
- Sutherland, Dawn. 1994. Speaking truth to power: oppositional research practice and colonial power. *Resources for feminist research/Documentation sur la recherche feministe* 23(4): 42-54.
- Thompson, Audrey. 2003. Tiffany, friend of people of color: White investments in antiracism. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16: 7-29.
- Yegenoglu, Meyda. 1998. *Colonial fantasies: Towards a feminist reading of Orientalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zemach-Bersin, Talya. 2007. Global citizenship & study abroad: It's all about U.S. *Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices* 1(2): 16-28.