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Contesting the Politics of Culture, Rewriting the Boundaries of Inclusion: Working for Social Justice with Muslim and Arab Communities

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This article calls on anthropologists of education to assert a more public voice attacking the ideological purposes to which the concept of "culture" has been deployed following the September 11 attacks. We must support schools, communities, and the media to address the power and politics of race and religion in contemporary social and political contexts, rather than focus primarily on multicultural education about Islamic and Arab "culture." Finally, this article urges us to expand our knowledge of the processes of social incorporation for Muslim and Arab immigrant youth to include a deeper understanding of how global politics contribute to young people's sense of emerging identities.

Language is woefully inadequate for representing the enormity of impact wrought by the September 11 attacks, first and foremost on those who lost their lives or loved ones, but also on human consciousness worldwide. I am, however, wary of language that casts September 11 primarily in terms of rupture, for it risks turning attention away from the continuities of vast social, economic, and political injustices that cut across national boundaries. My commitment to working for social justice was born long before September 11, but that day and all that have followed have challenged me to wrestle anew with the nature of how I engage with this work professionally.¹

In these past months perhaps no question has troubled me more than how my work as an educational anthropologist can contribute fruitfully and with some immediacy to a social justice agenda demanded by the changing contemporary political contexts. I have listened across various social spheres—schools, communities, and the media—for how people are struggling to make sense of September 11 and to address the ensuing shifts in local and global political landscapes. In doing so, I have become convinced that by bringing to bear our insights and knowledge about culture, ideology, and global politics, anthropologists of education have a vital role to play in these conversations.

In this article, I take up three issues that educational anthropologists are well suited to address. First, I explore how the concept of culture is currently being employed in dominant discourse about September 11 and its aftermath and suggest that we must have a more public voice attacking the ideological purposes to which "culture" is being put. Secondly, I

argue that most of the current efforts to educate the American public about Muslims and Arabs depend on a banal version of multiculturalism that has eclipsed genuine contention with national and global racial politics. I propose that educational anthropologists can support efforts in schools, communities, and the media to build nuanced understandings of culture that would engage with the power and politics of race and religion. Finally, I suggest that we must expand our knowledge of the processes of social incorporation for immigrant youth, particularly Muslim and Arab youth, to include a deeper understanding of how global politics contribute to young people's sense of emerging identities.

"Culture" Is Alive and Well

Culture may be a contended concept within anthropological circles, but in society at large it is alive and well in what strikes me as its most disturbing form. Everywhere I turn I hear pronouncements that purport to explain entire groups of people in ways that allow us to dismiss their humanity, diversity, and agency. One American scholar of the Afghan region interviewed by National Public Radio (NPR) in the fall of 2001 declared the region to be one "which breeds warrior cultures." I wonder if he has had a look at the U.S. military budget, visited Toys "R" Us to stroll down aisles of toy weapons marketed primarily to boys, or made note of the murder rate in the United States? I ponder, too, how quickly forgotten is the U.S. role in fueling devastating military conflicts in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Myriad articles have sought to explain the cultural roots of suicide bombers. A syndicated NPR host asked her guest, a physician who had traveled for humanitarian purposes to Afghanistan under the Taliban regime, if she had been afraid entering a "culture that is so hostile to women." Thus, with one quick gesture, the language of culture wipes out diversity, conflicting perspectives, structural inequalities, and histories of imperialism and colonialism in the name of "other" people's uniform adherence to a way of life that seems incomprehensible to "us."

Of significance for our particular historical moment is the extra burden that Islam has borne and continues to bear within this discourse of culture, a burden imposed in both popular and academic venues. For it is Islam that is posited as most culturally Other, inimical to "Western" values and traditions in an essential "clash of civilizations" (see Huntington 1996; Lewis 2002; and, for a critique, Said 2001). This discourse of fundamental cultural *difference* also obscures entire webs of relationships of violent political and military intervention, colonization, economic control and globalization—in short, the reality of Western domination.

Of course, this use of the concept of culture is not news to anthropologists. Anthropologists and others have argued that culture, a concept born to counter racist ideologies about inherited differences, soon became a tool of similar ideologies (Benn Michaels 1995; Kuper 1999). We

have cautioned each other against essentializing and reifying culture (Clifford 1988; Turner 1993). We have questioned the usefulness of the concept of culture (Abu-Lughod 1991; Kuper 1999). We have sought to demonstrate the dynamics of cultural production (Levinson and Holland 1996). The notions of the partial, the positional, and hybridity inform our work. Unfortunately, these academic debates have hardly penetrated public discourse. Yet it is precisely these anthropological insights that could interrupt the general ideological uses to which the concept of culture is put these days. Anthropologists concerned with social justice must have a more public voice attacking the truth claims made in the name of culture—especially, at this moment in time, Muslim and Arab cultures. Would we have a seismic impact on the tenacious racist discourse that everywhere abounds? I doubt it. Yet especially in a world in which dissent and alternative perspectives have been virtually silenced in the name of national and global solidarity, our language matters greatly in resisting the out-casting of Other people, resisting that casting-out that justifies indefensible actions.² Toni Morrison reminds us we must think of “language partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency—as an act with consequences” (1998:13).

Education about Culture as the Path toward Cohering the Liberal Polity

If culture is used to dehumanize other people—to draw stark lines between “us” and “them”—it is also promoted as that which can bind the fractured liberal polity. In the months since September 11, schools and communities across the nation have sought to foster a deeper understanding of “true” Islam as well as Arab and Muslim cultures, to address the climate of ignorance, blame, and hatred that followed the September 11 attacks. Thus, education was positioned as the primary vehicle for forging inclusion into this multicultural society at the precise moment that the nation’s fault lines were made visible by attacks across the country on Muslim, Arab, and South Asian communities. Within the American racializing project, these groups, among others, are positioned as perpetual foreigners. The problem of discrimination, persecution, and hate crimes has been largely defined—by many educators, politicians, media personnel, and community activists alike—as an educational problem. Ignorance and fear breed discrimination and knowledge can be the antidote.

In the battle to mend the ruptured nation-state, it is culture again that is brought into play, in this case for the purpose of reparation. Arabs and Muslims across the nation are called on to seek opportunities to educate others about shared values, beliefs, and customs. This is one of those historical moments when the cultural processes through which diversity is constructed within the American national myth are made visible (Varenne 1998). In a world that has been ideologically dichotomized into those who embrace civilization and those who do not, those who love

freedom and pluralism and those who hate it, educating about Arabs and Muslims reflects the most banal and benign sense of multiculturalism. The script is a familiar one: We may do culture differently, but underneath it all we are all essentially the same (Erickson 1997; McCarthy 1993). Even as I have felt my anthropologist-self cringe, I have engaged in this multicultural educational project. In response to my seven-year-old daughter's fears about what people might say about her being Palestinian, I visited her classroom during Ramadan. Together, she and I shared "our culture" with her friends. Perhaps, I tell myself, the children's delight at learning to write their names in Arabic and eating special sweets will seed a different script that can be called on when dehumanizing and racist images abound. More likely, the children will go home and watch Disney's *Aladdin* (1992) without interruption from the adults in their lives.

The absurdity of this use of culture—as the multihued threads that weave our nation together—is particularly evident within the current political climate in which a majority of Americans support racial profiling, civil rights are restricted and only afforded fully to U.S. citizens, Arabs and Arab Americans are secretly detained, and dissent is curtailed in a world rhetorically divided such that, as President George W. Bush threatened in his September 20, 2001, speech to a joint session of Congress, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." Even as the borders of racist practices are made glaringly visible in schools and other educational forums, the discourse of multiculturalism and the language of tolerance silences a confrontation with the powerful political forces in play.

Recently, I attended a meeting at which the incongruity of engaging multicultural discourse in the face of racist politics bordered on the bizarre. At the behest of a leader in the Arab American community, the administrative team of a local high school had invited Arab parents to attend an evening meeting.³ One administrator began the meeting emphasizing that the purpose of the meeting was to address "safety concerns" *only*. Through their tone and the constant repetition of this parameter, the school administrators—all of whom were white—set a clear boundary around what could and could not be discussed. Genuinely concerned about the well-being of Arab students in the aftermath of September 11, the various school personnel stressed repeatedly that the climate they tried to cultivate was one in which students treated each other with "respect" and "accepted differences" through a "zero tolerance for intolerance" policy. However, this language of respect and tolerance elided questions of racism, ideology, and conflict. Within this interpretive frame, incidents such as students ripping off Muslim girls' head scarves and an off-duty police officer putting a gun to the head of a local Pakistani store clerk were explained away, respectively, as teenagers doing "silly things" and cops acting "unreasonably." All talk about Middle East politics and several verbal and physical conflicts between teachers

and Arab students—conflicts that had ensued from incompatible perspectives—was swiftly silenced by fearful school practitioners and Arab parents. As engagement with politics, conflict, race, and power was banished, only tolerance of, and respect for, cultural differences were left to discuss. At this historical moment when the boundaries of race and inclusion are being reconfigured, multicultural discourse in a variety of public educational spheres offers up cultural understanding as the glue that might bind together those who remain insiders. This multicultural discourse perniciously obscures the banishment of alternative perspectives that could challenge oppressive, discriminatory and exclusionary practices.

Critiques of multiculturalism, and of the hegemonic purposes that it continues to serve, have been plentiful and insightful (see, esp., Carby 1992; Mohanty 1989–90). Unfortunately, these critiques too rarely penetrate educational spaces, where for the most part multicultural discourse perpetuates a vision of separate but equal bounded cultural spheres that together constitute the nation. As anthropologists of education we have a vital role to play *in* schools and communities, disrupting this type of multicultural discourse and joining with students, practitioners, and parents in expositions of race, power, and the politics of culture. If social justice is the agenda, then it is crucial also that we collaborate with practitioners, students, and parents to move beyond a politics of identity and create educational projects and curricula that actively engage conflict and dissenting perspectives across different groups (Fine et al. 1997; Schultz et al. 2000).

Global Politics and Identity: Some Directions for Anthropologists of Education

I recently participated in a community event at which a film about one Japanese American family's experiences with the U.S. internment camps was followed by a panel discussion about similarities and differences between our historical and contemporary contexts. Although most of the panel participants focused on the national political scene, one speaker insisted that any discussion of U.S. local politics must also be connected with its global dimensions. His comments provoked great controversy among this roomful of political activists, most specifically because of his criticism of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Finally, one audience participant sought to end this controversy by declaring that as activists we should decide to work on those issues on which we could agree (civil liberties and anti-Arab, anti-Muslim discrimination in this country) and simply agree to disagree about the rest (U.S. foreign policy). Yet, if we have any hope at all of living one day in a more peaceful and just world, we must also engage deeply with these global political questions. The September 11 attacks reached well beyond the immediate victims and their loved ones because they penetrated Americans' sense of separation from, and invulnerability to, the problems of the rest

of the world. Even as nation-states remain powers with which to contend (as witnessed by the U.S. and British war in Afghanistan), inhabitants of many nation-states represent global migration trends at ever increasing rates (Suárez-Orozco 2001).

The exponential rate of transnational migration raises new questions for our work. Suárez-Orozco (2001) points to a need for research that examines what happens to immigrant youths' sense of belonging during this era of transmigration. I agree and suggest that we especially need a better understanding of the role that *global politics* plays in the lives of immigrant youth and their families.⁴ As one example, the identities of Palestinian immigrant youth are not only forged in the United States, but also within the context of a nationalist struggle against Israeli occupation. This is not an abstract political struggle for many Palestinian youth living in the United States. Traveling to and from their villages in Palestine, many experience the conflict first-hand. They also experience the United States as a party to that conflict—one that has historically been hostile to Palestinian nationalist commitments and aspirations. Must social incorporation in the United States depend on giving up their sense of connection to Palestine? In addition, many Palestinian youth are Muslims. Being religious in general, and being Muslim in particular, are often viewed as obstacles to full incorporation into a liberal society. Can social incorporation only be achieved if Palestinian youth either become secular or adopt certain kinds of Muslim identities, ones that are seen as compatible with a liberal understanding of citizenship and politics?

The salience of questions about the process of social incorporation into the liberal nation is heightened as the current state of war continues and the vision of Arabs and Muslims as outsiders or even terrorists exacerbates the problem of belonging for these communities. As anthropologists of education, we can contribute to an understanding of the shifting nature of what it means to "become an American" in an increasingly globalized world. We can document Arab and Muslim life histories in collaboration with students and families and support these narratives' inclusion in curricular initiatives. Moreover, this work represents a call to action that challenges schools, and by extension liberal societies, to forge inclusion into the democratic polity by addressing political conflicts and engaging dissenting perspectives.

Resisting Impenetrable Divides

September 11 created an opportunity for the United States and its Western allies to launch new military battlefronts that threaten to expand for years to come. Given these battlefields, the struggles over *culture*—at the level of national ideology, identity, and community—take on new meaning and import. Perhaps now more than ever, our work is critical to resist discourse and practice that build impenetrable divides. We must seek rather to affirm our deep human interconnectedness, confronting

social, political, and economic injustices that cross national and international boundaries. As the proverbial Sisyphean stone grows ever larger, we do this work to make spaces, however small or large, that represent, borrowing a phrase from Myles Horton (1990), "islands of decency" in which justice appears humanly possible.

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Notes

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1. For me, the notion of social justice is closely tied to what feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young (1990) has called an enabling concept of justice. This includes not only a sense that people must be well cared for and free from exploitation, powerlessness, and violence, but also that there be established "the institutional conditions necessary for the development and exercise of individual capacities and collective communication and cooperation" (Young 1990:39). Young defines oppression as structural conditions that "prevent some people from learning and using satisfying and expansive skills in socially recognized settings . . . [and that] inhibit people's ability to play and communicate with others or to express their feelings and perspectives on social life in contexts where others can listen" (1990:38). This definition seems relevant for those of us working in the area of education, broadly defined.

2. As just one example of this, there has been a fairly steady academic and public discourse that argues that Islam is incompatible with democratic values. This discourse both obscures the U.S. and European role in creating and supporting repressive regimes in Muslim countries, even as it justifies this support on the grounds of cultural and religious values.

3. I had been invited to this meeting by a leader of the Arab American community in my role as a concerned educational advocate.

4. Related questions of national conflicts are raised in the United States especially by the experiences of Puerto Ricans (Nieto 1998; Ramos-Zayas 1998) and Native Americans (Deyhle 1995).

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