Beyond Deconstruction and Towards Decoloniality: Pedagogy and Curriculum Design in SWANA and South Asia Studies in US Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the teaching and study of the Middle East (or henceforth Southwest Asia and North Africa-SWANA)[1] and South Asia has been the subject of much reflection in US-based institutions of higher education. More specifically, a key tension is how a decolonial approach to the teaching of area studies can be reconciled with the longstanding push

[1] Naming practices for the Middle East are notoriously tricky, with differences in cardinal terms (e.g. Near East versus Middle East) indexing different political and

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by universities to orient programs towards professional skills and applied knowledge in various fields of practice. While scholars of area studies themselves research themes that centre the unique political and cultural formations of the region through a diverse array of topics such as women's literary voices and the cultural expression of minority communities, their pedagogical labour is often pulled into the service of teaching students how to develop knowledge that can be used to 'improve' the region, which reflects a distinctly colonial approach to knowledge production. In this chapter, we explore the challenges of implementing a decolonial approach to the study of SWANA and South Asia in higher education programs in global development. More specifically, we consider peda-gogical and curricular practices that could contribute to a decolonial approach within such university programs. We suggest that pedagogical practices in the classroom can be enhanced by carefully attending to the content included in syllabi. Additionally, we argue that a decolo-nial approach to introductory area studies courses can begin by more carefully focusing on the multiple layers of marginalisation and unequal power relations that were exploited by European colonialism. In recog-nising the many layers of subaltern subjectivity that exist in the region, we subsequently posit that a decolonial approach must acknowledge Euro-pean colonialism as one of many starting points for understanding the history of marginalisation and subsequently the contemporary movements for self-determination that emerged in the region.

In considering these pedagogical and curricular practices, we contribute to ongoing conversations on decolonising area studies of South Asia and SWANA (Deeb & Winegar, 2016; Ranganathan, 2017). It is clear that the work of decolonisation cannot be limited to one univer-sally portable set of curricular or pedagogical reforms. Indeed, decolo-niality is both an intellectual and political project that must be rooted in structural changes that support the self-determination of Indigenous communities globally (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Thus, when it comes to area studies, decolonisation cannot simply be an extension of what Amy Gutmann has called 'multiculturalism's moral politics of recognition'

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(Gutmann, 1994). To avoid becoming an academic or activist catch-phrase, decolonisation must move beyond a project that seeks to diversify which people, communities, and histories make it into curricula (Jivraj et al., 2020, p. 453). Instead, decoloniality in the classroom seeks to challenge systems that inhibit the aspirations of marginalised communities for self-determination and community well-being. We view the teaching of a diverse array of subaltern voices—specifically the voices of those from non-elite backgrounds and with training not recognized in the Euro-American academy—in introductory course curricula as necessary to build solidarities with existing movements around self-determination in the region (Pérez-Bustos, 2017). Scholars of SWANA and South Asia studies have called on area studies programs to more intentionally introduce students to the social movements being undertaken in the region around autonomy (Deeb & Winegar, 2016; El Shakry, 2021). We explore the challenges and constraints in teaching a decolonial orientation in area studies curriculum while also recognising the diverse needs, desires, and interests of the students we teach. In so doing, we take decoloniality seriously as an ongoing pedagogical praxis that begins in the classroom but must extend beyond it, through individual and collective work, rather than a teleological project marked by one definable moment of arrival. As Catherine Walsh and Walter Mignolo have written:

> Decoloniality, without a doubt, is also (…) practice-based, and lived. In addition, it is intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and existentially entangled and interwoven. The concern (…) is with the ongoing processes and practices, pedagogies and paths, projects and propositions that build, cultivate, enable, and engender decoloniality, this understood as a praxis—as a walking, asking, reflecting, analysing, theorising, and actioning—in continuous movement, contention, relation, and formation. (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 19)

Scholars of the SWANA and South Asia regions have long struggled with the contradictions of teaching regional studies, recognising that some students might ultimately pursue careers that further neo-colonial agendas. While these run the gamut from military to development agendas, here we focus on the latter set of aspirations given the particularities of our positions teaching at the intersection of global studies (with a development focus) and area studies. Introductory area studies courses often provide the first opportunity for students who seek to

pursue careers in global development to learn about these regions and to unsettle Eurocentric imaginaries of their histories and cultures. In that sense, area studies courses can provide ideal spaces in which to enact a decolonial approach to teaching and curricula. Several questions emerge for educators in this space. How can introductory area studies courses take the goals of career-oriented students seriously while also challenging their assumptions about the region and offering alternative forms of engagement with it? How can educators introduce a deeper understanding of the multiple layers of marginalisation that exist in the region?

To address these questions, Paulo Freire's theories of pedagogy are particularly useful. Freire wrote that the classroom is a space where deep self-reflection can help build a collective consciousness of how power works in the contemporary world (Freire, 1968). Thus, the classroom, when viewed as a space of consciousness raising, can be a productive one within which to enact decoloniality as an ongoing praxis. Additionally, as Sanz and Prado (2021, p. 3) argue, implementing a decolonial undergraduate course on the Middle East requires that we 'drop the ideal of 'objectivity' if objectivity means constructing a space from which students imagine themselves to be 'gazing from nowhere' (ibid., p. 12). In other words, decolonial approaches begin by helping students to identify and acknowledge how the questions they ask about the region and what topics they find interesting in relation to it, are already shaped by their social environments, the kinds of ideas that have currency in those environments, and the desires for professional mobility that such ideas generate. Thus, it is impossible to approach a given research topic with a view from nowhere, since the questions we ask, the topics we choose, and the things we find interesting always emerge out of the position from which we view a given set of social dynamics (Foucault, 2005).

Decolonising the teaching of area studies requires recognising the multiplicity of vantage points from which history and the contemporary moment can be narrated. This often runs counter to what many universities and students see as the primary functions of an area studies degree. Some frame the goals of an area studies degree purely in terms of career potential, while others see the goal as training well-informed citizens and culturally competent professionals in public service in federal and local government institutions. For example, at the University of Virginia, where Farmer currently teaches and Zeweri previously taught, students who pursue regional majors in SWANA and South Asia are often double majoring in topics such as Public Policy and Global Development Studies.

Such practice-based majors often require students to demonstrate competency within a particular region. In such configurations, area studies knowledge is being applied to broader fields of practice. US university students are increasingly selecting classes and majors based on 'career potential' (see Schmidt, 2018). Therefore, as departments are expected to continually increase the number of students they enrol, it is difficult to resist the pressure to make curricular decisions that prioritise servicing this desire for professionalisation and career preparedness. In sum, while decolonial praxis seeks to interrupt the dissemination of neo-colonial knowledge, universities are narrowing the spaces in which less 'applied' topics can be explored.

Before continuing, it is important to take stock of how area studies in the US has historically been shaped by policymakers, war strategists, and nationalist imaginaries of the US as a leader in exporting liberal democracy abroad. In the US, area studies programs were initially designed in the wake of World War II to deepen knowledge of the culture, politics, and history of the 'Other' in order to institute colonial and imperial regimes of governance. At the start of the Cold War more funding was made available for area studies programs (Culcasi, 2010). Scholarships such as the Foreign Language Area Studies Scholarship were designed to train university students in regional languages and cultures for the purposes of pursuing a career that benefits US state and cultural objectives in the region. Subsequently, the study of SWANA and South Asia gained newfound importance following the events of 9/11. International and US-based think tanks developed research agendas aligned with US political and security logics that saw these regions as inherently violent, misogynist, and threatening. It was perceived that these 'social ills' could be transformed through military intervention and infrastructural and humanitarian development. This was exemplified by the US military intervention in Afghanistan which was framed as a humanitarian and later nation-building operation that sought to "save" Afghan women from the Taliban and their repressive cultures, and to develop Afghanistan's infrastructure, economy, and civil society (Abu-Lughod, 2002, Hirschkind & Mahmood, 2002). Hundreds of NGOs formed in the wake of the Global War on Terror and the professional opportunities generated therein were abundant. Thus, the events of 9/11 in the US created an intensified demand for regional experts whose necessity was justified through an emerging war economy.

The reverberations of these political projects were felt in the way that area studies of the SWANA and South Asia regions was organised, both topically and conceptually. For example, the region could now be understood through the tropes of terrorism, violence, and gender oppression that were seen as contrary to life in the global North. Many scholars of the region have been committed to debunking these Orientalist tropes in course curricula. Moreover, many introductory courses are dedicated to making visible a genealogy of how the South Asia and SWANA regions have been constructed as a site of the West's own, moral anxieties about its identity and how to govern its populace. While teaching students how to identify the Eurocentric assumptions that underlie the study of these regions is key, this deconstructive approach by itself is insufficient. Many of our students have expressed the desire to move beyond analysing Western stereotypes about the region in favor of understanding locally narrated cultural and political histories. For them, focusing solely on debunking assumptions, while recognized as important, did not do enough to centre Indigenous and subaltern epistemologies and worldviews, including people's aspirations for self-determination. In that vein, the sole focus on deconstruction often, while shedding light on the colonial discourses used to dehumanise people, falls short of rehumanising them and reinserting them back into historical narratives of resistance in meaningful ways. As Maldonado-Torres argues, decoloniality 'refers to efforts at rehumanizing the world, to breaking hierarchies of difference that dehumanize subjects and communities, and which open up multiple forms of being in the world' (Maldonado-Torres, 2016, see also Freire, 1968). In the following section, we illustrate attempts we have made to facilitate such efforts in the classroom.

As educators and scholars, our perspectives on decolonising SWANA and South Asia studies are rooted in the multiplicity of disciplinary and institutional settings in which we teach, write, research, and advise students. Zeweri is a cultural anthropologist who also has graduate training in Near Eastern Studies and has taught an introductory course on the Middle East and South Asia in an interdisciplinary Global Studies program at the University of Virginia (UVA). She has worked for policy and advocacy non-profit organisations in the US that focused on Middle East-Western Europe-North America relations. Farmer is also a cultural anthropologist who directs a program and teaches several courses in Middle East and South Asia studies within the same Global Studies program at UVA. Our positionalities as cultural anthropologists, area

studies scholars, and teachers in a highly interdisciplinary program that attracts students from Anthropology, Middle East and South Asia Studies, and Global Studies, afford us a unique lens to examine the relationship between knowledge and practice in pedagogical settings. The University of Virginia (UVA) is an institution that is known globally for its commitment to training students for careers in the field of global development. It has invested significant resources for students to gain 'international experiences' and become culturally competent practitioners. UVA, like many globally recognized universities in the United States, might be categorised as what Chatterjee and Maira (2014, p. 7) refer to as an 'imperial university', one that 'legitimizes American exceptionalism and US expansionism' through prioritising certain forms of academic knowledge, including 'liberal ideologies of gender, sexuality, religion, pluralism, and democracy' that constitute the premise of development projects in the contemporary world.

The Global Studies program is composed of six tracks that cover environmental issues (Global Studies-Environment and Sustainability-GSVS) and public health (GPH), and investigations into the relationships between commerce and culture (GCCS). The three other tracks are of particular interest here: Global Development Studies (GDS), Global Studies-Security and Justice (GSSJ), and Global Studies-Middle East and South Asia (GSMS). Global Development Studies defines its project as studying the theory and process of development from an interdisciplinary perspective. It encourages students to think about development as not only about the provision of aid but about structural inequalities and state-sanctioned violence. However, while this approach is incorporated at the pedagogical and curricular level, institutionally, GDS benefits from resources and funding that actively place students on the track to becoming development practitioners. While development is a vastly heterogeneous field, the development industry into which many graduates enter relies on premises about the global South that continue to reproduce colonial binaries and hierarchies. Likewise, GSSJ attracts a diversity of students to study issues around peace and conflict. However, while students learn about, for example, the refugee crisis and the racialised logic of borders in North America and Europe, what gets missed is an understanding of how coloniality endures at multiple scales that go beyond the West-Other binary. For example, when looking at the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, while courses may consider the role of the US in producing the crisis, an understanding of US relations with Saudi

Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE as part of a broader set of foreign interventions is largely ignored (Dogan-Akkas, 2021). These courses aim to balance attention to structural logics of coloniality in the contemporary world, with the demands that students gain the analytical skills necessary to address problems one might find in an NGO focused on peace making or a national security agency or consulting firm. We use the term 'developmentalist' to describe the desired career trajectories of many of the students in these programs, as the careers tend to be more oriented towards changing the world according to dominant narratives of progress rather than in critiquing or interrupting Euro-American cultural forms, economic systems, and political interests. The GSMS track was intended to shift away from Eurocentric studies of the 'global', but has struggled to meaningfully centre regional knowledge and to attract students to a program that is explicitly designed to challenge them intellectually without a clear career trajectory. Introductory courses in SWANA and South Asia studies sometimes miss the opportunity to delve into local histories and to stimulate student curiosity about the multiple layers of power, politics, and culture in the region. Our experiences of teaching these three tracks lead us to identify two key entry points into the decolonisation of the teaching of area studies: opening up what kinds of subaltern voices get incorporated into syllabi and avoiding the notion that local narratives are always situated in response to Western narratives and stereotypes of the region.

In the fall of 2020, I (Helena Zeweri) embarked on teaching an introductory course on the study of the Middle East and South Asia in the Global Studies-Middle East and South Asia (GSMS) track. I was excited to participate in shaping a more critical perspective for students. Part of my goal was to illuminate the constructed nature of categories such as the 'Middle East' and 'South Asia' as well as to detail how such categories have real effects on the lives of people in these regions. While postcolonial theory points to the necessity of understanding the work these categories performed for colonial projects (as well as their neo-colonial iterations) (Bhabha, 1994; Mehta, 1990; Mitchell, 1991), these categories, as problematic as they are, have had material effects on the lived experiences and subjectivities of people in the region in complicated ways. It was this tension—the one between colonial categories as constructions yet real, as imported by colonial powers yet locally adapted, reworked, resisted or reappropriated—that I was keen for students to better understand.

I began by introducing students to the content of such categories, including the traditions, practices, and systems of knowledge that they connote for different communities. My thinking was that a decolonial approach requires unpacking the political projects and nationalist imaginaries that undergird the creation of such categories that are often taken for granted. In other words, tracing these categories' historical conditions of possibility (to demonstrate the relationship between knowledge and power) could reveal the assumptions, cultural erasures, and political desires sewn into them. For example, a decolonial approach would entail asking who benefits from a category like "South Asia," and which cultural practices and histories have come to count as part of this category, and which have been excluded. While acknowledging the colonial history of the term and its exclusionary effects, it is also important to explore how the category has gained global salience and been instrumentalised by people with different levels of privilege. Students came to see that despite the origins of 'South Asia' as a top-down construction, local and diasporic mobilisations of the term can be used to achieve political recognition and legitimacy in the face of state marginalization. For example, minoritized groups use the term to connote pan-ethnic and pan-caste identities among diasporic minorities who seek to constitute significant voting blocs in, for example, the US.

While students appreciated the many layers of meaning that have been attached to colonial identity, some students were concerned that to recognize local reinterpretations of the term 'South Asia,' might result in the forgetting of its colonial origins and its over-romanticization. Historically and today, the category has been exclusionary and oppressive, and has not always properly captured the social and racial hierarchies that predated, and were exacerbated by, British colonialism in the region. Through examining scholarship that traced the genealogy of the category, we discussed how the term was weaponised to exclude communities from rights, resources, and recognitions, such as for example the marginalised Dalit community. A student pointed out, for example, that Dalit scholarship had already highlighted how certain cultural and political forms that are readily categorised as South Asian are in fact rooted in a Brahman-centric worldview, but that this scholarship has hardly gained any traction in the Euro-American academy. It became clear that the kind of literature that we privilege in the classroom does not adequately feature subaltern perspectives and historical narratives from non-elite backgrounds. Rather, through focusing on literature written primarily by elite diasporic people

who had more ready access to the Euro-American academy, I began to see how introductory area studies courses could end up perpetuating the assumption that such categories were uncontested and apolitical, fitting neatly within supposedly shared cultural expressions. Through collective discussion about these gaps, we returned to the initial starting point of the course, which was the idea that history could be told from multiple vantage points, and that these influenced the kinds of historical events, cultural forms, and political movements that circulate in European and North American academies.

As an educator, I sought to craft an introductory course that examined both the emergence of colonial knowledge regimes and the power relations that exist between the elite intelligentsia and minoritised and Indigenous subjects within the region. Doing so revealed to students that colonial categories of knowledge both produce and rework existing hierarchies that benefit some and intensify the oppression of many others. A decolonial approach to the curriculum meant being attentive to how such power relations are shaped both by European colonialism and the inherited histories of subjugation that predate European colonialism and worsen because of it and endure after its formal end. This means moving beyond a world systems theory perspective which tends to reproduce the West-Other binary (Connell, 2007). As Barbara Abou El-Haj (1991, p. 143) has argued, the way that world systems theories frame European colonialism as simply a relationship of 'importation' or 'Euro-centrism' focuses too squarely on the binary between the local and the global, thus ignoring the economic and cultural cleavages that exist in a given region. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (1994) have used the concept of 'scattered hegemonies' to refer to the many lines that cut across local–global binaries, thus unsettling the idea that there is a 'pure' local and a 'pure' global.

I began to consider more intentionally and critically how we teach subaltern cultural forms in the curricula. Turning back to the aforementioned example, while we can acknowledge that South Asia is an inherited colonial category and that it is used variously by those living in and outside of the region, students could sense that acknowledging this tension only began to scratch the surface of recentring marginalised voices and their struggles. In other words, a decolonial approach would need to centre the writing, scholarship, and analytical voice of those who are either wilfully excluded or bypassed. However, it became increasingly difficult to articulate how this knowledge could be directly useful for students, many

of whom were about to embark on summer internships with development organisations in the region. While the question of utility remained unresolved by the end of the semester, it was clear that one part of the work of decoloniality was to defetishise the idea of local voices and cultural knowledge and to widen student perspectives on whose voices come to narrate postcolonial histories.

I (Tessa Farmer) recognised Zeweri's concerns, having felt similar dissatisfaction with the awkward gaps and the seemingly insurmountable (and possibly contradictory) task of introducing a critical area studies perspective on vast swaths of the globe in a single semester to a US university audience. I was concerned about the possibility of reifying North–South relationships as central to every story. Even when critiquing imperial histories or including subaltern voices, it is all too easy to reproduce Eurocentrism by assuming that Euro-America is always the reference point to which people in the region react, orientate themselves, and resist. As Zeweri's experience highlighted, this marks a failure to meaningfully account for local dynamics and hierarchies (Spivak, 1988). While much scholarship in SWANA and South Asia studies does take this up as a field of study, a cursory glance at university syllabi suggests that subaltern voices can also reflect the social, cultural, and economic capital acquired through their access to North American and European academies. I began to contemplate the extent to which we are attentive to the key questions animating debate within these contexts (Moll, 2018) inside US university classrooms. More specifically, when students take a SWANA or South Asia studies course for developing cultural competence in the hopes of working in and on these regions, it becomes clear that a decolonial project to move beyond Eurocentrism requires a re-examination of pedagogical and curricular practices and possibilities.

Curricular Issues

The imagined East–West binary largely privileges the European imperial period (early eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century) as the moment of interaction. This interrupts understandings of global flows of knowledge, technology, and people prior to that moment that were fundamental to shaping what we understand as the metropole. These historiographic acts of erasure (Abu-Lughod, 1989) can result in a failure to take seriously how local people resisted imperial powers (Connell, 2007; Loomba, 2015). Making visible these erasures entails attending

to the long histories of interactions between world regions as well as to the possibilities that the effects of colonialism are heterogeneous, multiple, and not easily captured by models that view the metropole as the locus of power and colony as the locus of subjugation (Pérez-Bustos, 2017). Instead, it is necessary to excavate the multiplicity of interactions between these regions forward and backwards in time, as well as show the many South–South engagements that go beyond these binary East–West relations.

Selecting key topics and addressing the diversity of religious traditions, cultural identities, and language groups that a semester-long course should cover is a further challenge. For example, issues of race, nationalism, globalisation, economies, gender and sexuality studies, legal regimes, citizenship, and migration are all key issues that require attention. Moreover, making sense of texts and other materials authored by marginalised communities from within these regions requires advancing 'radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis, and thought' (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 17). In order for students to understand that material well and to more fully grasp the significance of regional issues, classes need to offer detailed contextual knowledge.

One way to counter the challenges of achieving breadth and depth across temporal, geographic, topical, and regional scales in a short amount of time is for instructors to curate connections to material and experiences beyond the course itself. They can do this by connecting students to other courses, museums, readings, and resources at their institution and beyond that can provide a deeper understanding of the limited scope that any one course can cover on context-specific issues from migration to gender and sexuality, to racial politics, to struggles for sovereignty.

It is also important to introduce students to organisations that counter Orientalist representations and that feature a diverse array of experiences from the region. Organisations such as the Arab Studies Institute (ASI) and media outlets like the *Middle East Research and Information Project* (MERIP) and *Jadaliyya* (a part of the ASI) are spaces where reporting from the region is more nuanced and rooted in the lived experiences of people from multiple socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Farmer has used the resources that ASI has collated in its news, academic reviews, and pedagogical guidance as a teaching resource on these world regions. Doing so has helped her to build a program connecting students with scholars and activists in the region through

campus residencies, virtual lectures, and research abroad. Zeweri has drawn students' attention to the websites of interdisciplinary collectives throughout the region and its diasporas that merge creative expression and scholarship centred around self-determination, Indigenous rights, and resuscitating marginalised histories. These include movements such as *The Rights Collective* and *Equality Labs* that privilege a multi-caste intersectional perspective. Zeweri has also integrated an analysis of musical and artist groups' social media to introduce students to perspectives that otherwise may go unrecognised if journal articles and monographs constituted the primary source material.

Social media accounts of public intellectuals, creatives, activists, and writers, when used ethically and in conjunction with existing scholarship and news reports coming out of the region, is another potential site where educators could look to help students unpack contemporary public discourses around politics, society, and culture in the region. Access to resources is a key issue when thinking about the kinds of materials to incorporate. Finding sources that are written in English or have been translated into English is itself a challenge, particularly when looking to move beyond texts and media that are in common circulation. With a wider array of sources, curricula might then focus on how local communities themselves have historically been engaging in practices of subversion, resistance, and reappropriation of colonial logics, and in some cases internalising and mobilising them in the service of challenging power and hegemonic political projects. As contributors to the book *Understanding and Teaching the Modern Middle East* have advised, educators can be creative in how they include other sources such as literature and novels (Colla, 2021) and films (Rastegar, 2021).

Highlighting the multiplicity of the local entails centring Indigenous perspectives with the recognition that the idea of 'indigeneity', along with who can claim it and why, varies by context. For example, for some, the claim to land is mobilised towards the creation of an independent nation-state, while for others these claims exceed the idea of a state. Some scholars have noted that decolonisation connotes a formal change in sovereignty from European colonial powers (Duara, 2004), whereas for others it is not a fully realised project, as is the case with displaced Palestinians or stateless Kurdish communities. In other words, decolonising the curricula requires being clear on how decolonisation is being defined and by whom. Additionally, sovereign nation-states continue to experience political subjugation by neo-colonial imperial interventions as in

Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. As Muriam Haleh Davis (2021, p. 87) notes: 'All sovereignties, then, were not created equal. Moreover, they were attained with different degrees of violence and came after discrepant forms of revolt'. Part of addressing this tension, according to Davis, is to help students denaturalise the nation-state as the main unit of political organisation, and to expose them to South–South transnational solidarities that have existed prior to, during, and after formal European colonial projects.

Pedagogical Issues

When it comes to implementing decolonial pedagogies in the classroom, students may experience discomfort in unsettling their cultural preconceptions and learning to think outside dichotomies such as global North/ global South, West/non-West. We propose that part of the decolonial pedagogical project entails asking students to become more conscious of the kinds of frameworks that make them uncomfortable and why. Rather than seeing discomfort as a sign of something amiss with the perspective being presented, students can be encouraged to use their reflections to more intentionally engage with the deconstructive dimension of learning. It also requires asking students to learn from each other, including elevating the voices of students who have experience collaborating and advocating with communities from the region. Initiatives such as the Decolonial School[3] hosted by the California College of Arts are useful for thinking about what assignments and learning strategies could count towards decolonial modes of instruction rooted in subaltern, Indigenous, and marginalised epistemologies.

A strategy we have found useful is to explicitly lay out the goals of a semester-long experience in studying the regions, so that students understand that there are layers of the deconstructive and reconstructive projects that are important for each topic covered. While they may not always verbalize this, students might at times be struggling to reconcile ideas that seem contradictory but are in fact part of a larger and

historical moments, and with shifts over time about which countries are considered to be incorporated in those terms. Here we have chosen the Southwest Asia and North Africa, following the SWANA Alliance, who have put this term forward as a decolonial regional designation that doesn't centre Europe. Retrieved on January 31, 2023, from: https:// swanaalliance.com/about.

[3] Retrieved on May 5, 2022, from: https://portal.cca.edu/thriving/decolonial-school/.

layered history of power, domination, and resistance. We identify six key learning objectives that can serve as the basis for an introductory area studies course and ease students into embracing these contradictions with more openness. First, students will learn foundational information about everyday life in communities across multiple socioeconomic classes in the South Asia and the SWANA regions. This goal is often what brings students to the class in the first place. Second, they will gain a basic orientation to local cultural logics, historical trajectories, and contemporary political economy that animate everyday life. Part of the goal here is to counter inherited 'culture talk' (Mamdani, 2002) that explains events and patterns through the trope of 'archaic cultures'. Instead, one might offer explanations for why and how things happen in these regions by contextualizing local moral and social worlds within broader political economies of the regions.

This leads to the third goal wherein instructors have students reflect on their own exposure to 'culture talk' and to narratives that have sanitised imperial histories in textbooks and contemporary media about the region. Students need to be aware of the ideas that they, possibly unconsciously, bring into the classroom. Fourth, students will be introduced to the diversity of ideas and experiences on a topic to shift away from the notion that there is a singular, homogeneous regional culture, pattern of political thought, or form of cultural expression. In this way, students can recognise that the cultural 'Other' is composed of a vastly heterogeneous set of communities and histories and that 'cultural norms' are often shaped by hierarchical power relations in a given context. Fifth, students will have the opportunity to reflect on how they can learn more about their own cultural traditions and experiences through actively reflecting on the production of social and political norms and institutions elsewhere. As Omnia El Shakry (2021) writes, it is important to emphasise comparability rather than exception in the study of the region.

The sixth and final objective involves encouraging students to move beyond cultural chauvinism and culturally relativist positions. Cultural chauvinism, the assumption of the inherent correctness of, for example, Euro-American lifeways and political systems, is often embedded and unconscious until explicitly pointed out. This process of exposure can sometimes lead students to take a 'hands off' or culturally relativist stance in which the inappropriateness of judging another culture by 'our' rules leads to the belief that they should therefore avoid engaging with anyone 'elsewhere'. Helping students to move past these positions requires

demonstrating to students that there is no straightforward distinction between 'here' and 'there' as we are always already embedded in systems and institutions that impact the conditions of possibility elsewhere (Abu-Lughod, 2013; see also epilogue of Ferguson, 1990). Indeed, students' everyday lives are already tied to supposedly culturally distant others through the products they buy, the global circulation of capital and the political representatives they vote for and their policy agendas abroad. By moving beyond culturally chauvinist and relativist positions, students might instead see that there are other opportunities to act in meaningful ways for global well-being and there are other logics that could provide guidance on a different vision of the future, what Arturo Escobar (2017) has called a re/emerging pluriverse. If a course seeks to help students understand the problems with the developmentalist agendas that might have brought them into the classroom to begin with, then turning towards regionally specific decolonial projects can provide students with alternative possibilities for what meaningful action in the region looks like and what their own positionality implies for how they might intersect with those projects.

Conclusion

Introductory area studies courses that focus on development issues offer a unique lens through which to explore the work of decoloniality. Often, students take these introductory classes because they have a sense that such knowledge could be useful for the kind of career they want to pursue. At the same time, there is a sense of openness and curiosity that students bring to these spaces that can be harnessed towards broadening their perspectives on what counts as valuable knowledge and whose voices are seen as authoritative. Critical perspectives entail experiencing the cognitive dissonance of realising the limits of our intellectual worlds. As we ask students to be comfortable with the discomfort of knowing that there are other ways of making sense of the categories that we have inherited and reproduced, we as educators can also examine our own scholarly blind spots and the sources and limits of our knowledge. Thus, learning to reflect on curricular and pedagogical practices is one starting point of a decolonial approach.

Here, an anthropological disposition towards how people make sense of what they see and experience every day becomes a useful approach in presenting multiple 'local' perspectives within a given context. For

example, Tanya Jakimow (2015, p. 1) has argued that anthropologists who teach in Development Studies should see their contributions as going beyond simply offering a 'critical' approach to development or equipping students with cultural knowledge to aid development interventions. Rather, an anthropological approach is rooted in a disposition of curiosity about how people create meaning, the broader systems that structure such meaning-making processes, and the forms of sociality that are rendered valuable to people. While we do not teach in Development Studies as such, Jakimow's point is relevant to our context. Part of fostering curiosity among students means showing them how people in the region make sense of their everyday realities. This exposure can prompt students to reflect on their learning process, their own communities, and how they themselves are positioned in relation to different kinds of power. In other words, integrating anthropological questions as a starting point for more diverse content, can help students make the connection between knowledge and power and become interested in how people experience and navigate the world. Doing so runs counter to the goals of development projects, which are rooted in essentializing modes of thinking about human experience. In focusing on facilitating social well-being, development projects are rooted in the idea that culture is a bounded entity that can be marked by arbitrary geographic boundaries and that people in a given community necessarily have shared experiences of, for example, the state or colonialism, and thus are all invested in the same kinds of futures. While unpacking the historical roots of cultural essentialism in the development industry are beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to point out that the professionalization of cultural competence does not reconcile well with an anthropological orientation towards area studies.

While decentring a utilitarian approach to decolonising introductory area studies programs is important, it cannot be seen as an intellectual endeavour that exists outside of the scope of students' own material and economic realities, concerns, and aspirations. In many cases, students are aspiring practitioners who want to act ethically. If ethics 'represents and demarcates the bounds of actions acceptable in the work of bringing these worlds into existence' (Hancock, 2008, p. 173), then it is important to consider how our curricula can support this. For many students, a job with the government and/or a development organisation is a way of achieving socioeconomic mobility and oftentimes it is too late for some to transition career paths even if they believe in the ethos that comes out of a more critically minded and decolonial area studies course. This is certainly

the case for those navigating life in an economy in which access to health-care, a stable income, and other basic resources are becoming increasingly difficult for college graduates entering the workforce. As educators, we might think about what structural reforms need to be undertaken so that being an ethical actor does not mean having to sacrifice basic access to resources and rights. Having said this, we recognise that even this line of thought is not entirely reconcilable with the broader project of decolonisation in the North American context. What does the desire among the labor force to achieve a more ethical and economically stable future mean for the question of Indigenous land, self-determination, and sovereignty? This question, which was also raised by Tuck and Yang (2012) needs to be part of the conversation around decolonising the classroom and university.

Decolonising area studies is an ongoing epistemological, political, and institutional project that requires attending to how people and communities make sense of their conditions of possibility and imagine and enact different futures. In this ongoing endeavour in which we both continue to learn and grow, we take student perspectives and critiques seriously. Many of our students have experienced the enduring effects and ongoing violence of coloniality, experiences they have brought to class discussions in which decoloniality is much more than a theoretical project. For them, decolonizing the classroom must serve a broader project of furthering a more complex and inclusive understanding of the human experience. As such, decolonising introductory area studies goes well beyond representation and is inextricably linked with the ongoing struggles and movements for human dignity and social justice in all its forms.

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