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Decolonizing children's geographies: Challenging knowledge production about childhoods in Baltimore, MD

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Abstract

In this viewpoint, I argue for greater engagement between children's geographies and decolonial scholarship. I suggest that decolonial scholarship, by emphasizing the role that knowledge plays in justifying and perpetuating inequalities, offers a way to bring analyses of childhoods in the global north into conversation with analyses of childhoods in the global south. Instead of positioning southern childhoods as the 'other' in relation to global childhoods, decolonial approaches reveal how colonial legacies continue to shape the governance of children in a diverse range of spaces. Further, decolonial scholarship's focus on praxis offers possible avenues forward in ongoing debates about children's agency and research approaches. I conclude by considering how my own work with children in Baltimore could benefit from decolonial scholarship.

Keywords: decolonization, Baltimore, knowledge production, childhood

In this viewpoint, I argue for greater engagement between children's geographies and decolonial scholarship. I have been working directly with children for over 20 years. Until recently my formal scholarship focused predominantly on young people in Latin America, and to a lesser extent, from a historical perspective in the United States. I started to volunteer with elementary and middle-school children in Baltimore, Maryland, a city where nearly 2/3 of the population are Black and about 1/5 live below the federal poverty line. As I expanded my work, I thought about how knowledge about childhood circulates between places, and the ways in which normative representations of childhood combine with structural processes to maintain and justify inequalities. It was clear that colonial legacies continued to shape the governance of children, and the ways in which some childhoods were privileged while others were devalued. I found myself questioning the consequences of imposing ideas about what children should be doing (and where). I asked, 'how are the very categories about childhood themselves part of the problem?'

When I worked with children in Peru, I had benefited from a robust body of literature that examined how particular notions of childhood were deployed in ways that actually made children's lives more difficult (Swanson, 2010; Abebe, 2007; Katz, 2004). Such scholarship critiqued international, governmental and civil organizations' claims that childhood is an exclusive time of school and play, and instead argued that children frequently combine work, political activism and care in their daily experiences. When policies criminalize or stigmatize such activities, children face additional vulnerabilities, including being pushed into less visible but more exploitative work or internalizing negative discourses about their lives (see Aufseeser, 2014; Swanson, 2010). Many of these critiques focused on the inapplicability of 'global' childhoods in the south; yet, the practice of questioning the consequences of particular ways of categorizing children also seemed relevant to analyses of childhood in Baltimore.

In this viewpoint, I argue that theorizing childhood from a decolonial lens can extend work in children's geographies in three main ways. First, in its focus on the relationship between power, hierarchical constructions of knowledge, and material inequality, it provides a way to bring scholarship about children in the global north into more direct conversation with scholarship focused on children in the global south. It challenges ideas that examine southern childhoods in relation to supposedly global childhoods to instead show how the power of coloniality continues to shape the governance of children in a range of spaces (see Balagopalan, 2019). Second, it necessitates embedded analyses of young people's agency that recognize children as intertwined with relationships to place, community and other people. Third, it requires a commitment to move beyond critique into scholar-activism. In what follows, I briefly explain decolonial scholarship before arguing why such a theoretical and methodological approach enhances children's geographies generally and my work specifically.

Decolonizing knowledge production

As a broad category, decolonial scholarship encompasses multiple perspectives, rooted in the specific places and traditions from which authors write (Mignolo and Escobar, 2013). Yet, decolonial scholar-activists are united in highlighting consequences of particular ways of representing the world to reveal how what counts as 'knowledge' is then used to justify and maintain social inequalities (Tuck and Yang, 2012). The power of coloniality lies in utilizing a quest for modernity to obscure the violence and exploitation begun with colonialism (Quijano,

2000). Coloniality is rooted in racial categorization (Solis, 2017) and depends on the maintenance of accepting white Eurocentric knowledge structures as universal. Escobar (2013) argues that this has resulted in hierarchical linear constructions of development that problematically depict places in the south as further behind those in the north and invalidates other ways of knowing and being. The north is then framed as more advanced, existing in a state of development and civilization that other countries should try to emulate.

Such mindsets often extend to ideas about childhood. Normative ideas of childhood, characterized as a time for school and play, to be spent in the nuclear family, emerged from a specific context and then were exported around the world as a model (Liebel, 2017). Achieving this narrowly defined understanding of childhood, often demonstrated with snap-shot indicators such as an increase in school attendance rates or a decline in children's labor contributions, became a way for countries to show they were advancing (Aufseeser, 2014). Sandoval (2019) argues that the figure of the child, towards which societies must strive, is imagined as white, excluding "racialized children from constructing their own futures" and devaluing their childhoods (see Solis, 2017).

Yet, one aim of decolonial praxis is to reveal the ways in which economic development of the north depended on exploitation of colonized people and places. Rather than seeing shifts from pre-capital to capital forms of labor proceeding in a linear manner, Quijano (2000) argues that different forms of work coexisted and depended on each other. Martinez (2015) shows that a separation of Euro-American childhood as a protected time period, to take place in separate spaces such as the school or the nursery, depended on other children (mostly Brown and Black)'s contributions in servitude and slavery.

The decolonization of knowledge necessitates asking where particular forms of knowledge come from, what this knowledge enables, and how it comes to be known (Nxumalo and Cedillo, 2017). Instead of investigating why a place may be lacking, so as to 'fix' that place (or the people in said place) decolonial scholarship focuses attention on relationships and categories. It aims to recenter alternative interpretative frameworks that have been oppressed and devalued (Mignolo and Escobar, 2013) and to honor and advance refusals to adhere to colonial violence. Daigle and Ramirez (2019) suggest that decolonial geographies are better understood as a constellation of different social movements and visions of the futures, as movements emerge in the context of specific places but also shape each other in interconnected struggles.

McKittrick (2011) argues that analyses of Blackness can themselves reinforce racial-colonial categories that link Blackness with violence and dispossession and whiteness with freedom. Instead, a focus on everyday struggles and acts of place-making, rooted in the praxis of communities and social movements, affirms other ways of being and knowing that strongly reject the devaluation of Black and indigenous lives (Sandoval, 2019).

Further, decolonial geographies are situated within liberation struggles (Daigle and Ramirez, 2019), exposing links between knowledge, actions and material change (Cheney, 2018). Solis (2017) suggests that embracing alternative *saberes* (knowledges) from communities' ancestors and homes can be a form of habitual resistance to the violence of coloniality. Exposing political aims behind knowledge can challenge the ability to stigmatize or blame particular people/places for the material conditions of their lives, and instead expose structural conditions that create disadvantage.

Questioning knowledge about childhood

There have been some recent efforts within childhood studies to specifically engage with decolonial/postcolonial arguments¹. Balagopalan (2019, 20) argues for a need to consider “ways in which the colonial state set in place dichotomies and distinctions whose exclusionary tactics not only attempted to culturally reproduce and preserve a racialized ‘white’ identity but also worked to justify the racism inherent in the civilizing mission and preserve the gains made by colonial capitalism through the use of children’s labor.” The governing of children, and the circulation of knowledge about childhood, are key to maintaining unequal systems (Martinez, 2015). In many places before colonization, society was organized around clans, in which women had significant leadership roles. Under colonialism, however, the clan was replaced by the nuclear family, with lasting repercussions for how society is organized (Lugones, 2007). With the imposition of colonial models of the family, children were relegated to set places and institutions, framed as in a state of becoming, rather than active participants in society. Yet, in some communities, children and adults are not strictly dichotomous. People of all ages occupy the same spaces and have shared responsibility for their communities (see Liebel, 2017), in

¹ Postcolonial scholarship and decolonial efforts share a concern with challenging Eurocentric assumptions about the world and whose knowledge counts. Decolonization pushes beyond postcolonial scholarship to necessitate action and is linked with efforts to reclaim land and resources.

contrast to “the domestic and private area that childhoods are [now] confined to” (Cussianovich, 2020, 147). In Andean culture, for example, young people’s contributions to the community are both accepted and expected (Cussianovich, 2006). They take care of siblings, work with family members in the fields and support each other. In this way, they have more responsibility but also more respect. What would it look like to consider how certain roles of children in community and family in the US may be overlooked?

Denaturalizing the construct of ‘child’ exposes how knowledge can serve the interests of more powerful groups (see Balagopalan, 2019). For example, Nieuwenhuys (2007) challenges definitions of agency as learning to become entrepreneurial neoliberal subjects. Framing agency in limited ways devalues alternative ways of being and acting. Although not always under the label of decolonial studies, critical scholars emphasize that agency is exercised in the context of specific relationships and socio-political histories (see Punch, 2002; Payne, 2012). This allows space for children’s participation but does not pit children against exploitative parents—a common tendency in popular press that vacillates between criminalizing the children and criminalizing the parents. Sandoval (2019) suggests that when nonwhite children, such as immigrants, are deemed worthy of any rights, it is only by disavowing the relationships they have with parents, who continue to be framed as ‘criminals.’ A focus on interdependency lends itself well to decolonial methodologies by moving away from strict dichotomies and instead embracing ideas of co-protagonism, or co-leadership, which “expresses generational and convivial interdependence” (Cussianovich, 2020, 145). As Klocker (2014) explains, adults are also part of, and can suffer from, unequal power dynamics.

To decolonize childhood studies, Cheney (2018) articulates a need to ‘confront Western civilizing constructions of childhood’ as well as to interrogate the ways in which knowledge is produced. Such efforts align well with participatory action research already occurring within childhood studies (see Cahill, 2010, for example). However, including children does not automatically equate with a decolonial approach. As Cheney (2018) suggests, even those well-versed in participatory action research often fall back on tropes about youth that limit their ability to see them as co-creators of knowledge. Even when children are included as ‘partners,’ there are often expectations that this participation will occur in pre-determined ways (Cussianovich, 2020). Expectations of what knowledge looks like and how one establishes

expertise can limit recognition of alternative knowledge frameworks; de-colonial praxis can expose some of these limitations by situating universities as institutions steeped in coloniality.

While there is now recognition of multiple experiences of childhood, there is still a tendency to base theoretical constructions of childhood on experiences in the north while framing other childhoods as cultural experiences (Balagopalan, 2019). Decolonial scholarship challenges such a tendency by emphasizing “the West’s complicity in (re)producing the ‘stunted choices and deprived conditions’ faced by Majority World residents” (Nieuwenhuys, 2009, 150). Decolonial approaches move beyond comparison to draw attention to the consequences of particular ways of knowing. Their focus on how knowledge systems amount to violence, questioning whose voices are amplified and whose are silenced, and challenging how certain policies become naturalized are relevant to both the south and the north.

Overcoming strict dichotomies

Imoh et al (2019) suggest that much scholarship in childhood studies can be characterized by a binary between the global north and the global south. For example, there is little dialogue between scholarship on children’s care work in the majority world and in the minority world (Evans and Becker, 2019). Further, dichotomous analyses of the north and south may also unintentionally obscure differences within regions. I suggest that framing the conditions of childhood as ‘advancing’ alongside a country’s economic development, as mentioned above, has resulted in a tendency to consider certain topics, such as children’s labor, as a ‘problem of the global South’ that was overcome in the north with increased attention to children’s rights and protections (Bourdillon, 2019, 35). Perhaps because of this mindset, children’s labor in the north has not been the focus of any of the articles in *Children’s Geographies*, with the exception of Bourdillon (2014). Recognition of the ways in which migration, work, and varied living arrangements continue to characterize experiences of some children in places like Baltimore challenges linear frameworks that present the lives of children in the global south as mirroring historic experiences of children in the global north and instead shows how the two simultaneously exist.

To date, there is a lack of discussion on how decolonial analyses could reveal links between the politics of knowledge production and material inequalities in childhood in the United States. I suggest the way children are disciplined and valued serves to naturalize why

certain people (and the neighborhoods they live in) are assigned less monetary value than are others. For example, in the United States, standardized indicators of school failure provide justification for the removal of resources and the closing of public neighborhood-based schools. Yet, the children with whom I work evaluate their schools based on how they *feel*, if they have friends or supportive teachers, their familiarity with, and proximity to, the school, and other resources offered, including free meals or temperature-regulated buildings. Further, children's efforts to acquire more learning sometimes depend on actions that are framed negatively when compared to normative understandings of childhood. For example, some children constantly shift between godparents, cousins and aunts' homes depending on the availability of food, stable adults, proximity to school programs, and emotional connections with family members at any given moment. What would be gained by embracing alternative ideas of mobility, family and home, rather than interpreting their lives in comparison to normative (white) childhoods? Additionally, a decolonial approach would necessitate examining *how* Black communities have been (re)constructed, exploited and dispossessed over time, and would highlight uneven *relationships* that facilitate various experiences of childhood.

Embracing multiple ways of knowing childhoods opens possibilities about where and how young people should spend their time and limits a tendency to devalue children's lives that do not measure up to global yardsticks of childhood. This means that attending school, working in the informal economy, or taking care of family members are not in and of themselves bad or good. In Baltimore, Black youth work at downtown intersections to clean windshields. Referred to in popular press as 'squeegee kids', their presence has been a topic of intense debate, touching on the right to occupy space but also relying heavily on unarticulated discourses about childhood and assumptions about Black bodies that are then used to justify their regulation (Fryer, 2020). From my work in Peru, I learned that children's work contributions, while often stigmatized as exploitative child labor, were actually experienced more ambiguously by children themselves. There is a global network of child workers' groups that organize to improve the conditions under which they work and to get international organizations to include their views when formulating policy. They say that the assumptions of many international organizations, that a reduction in child labor is inevitably positive, overlook the important role that young people play in contributing to the economic and social well-being of themselves and their families. Instead, they argue for the right to work in conditions of dignity. By organizing and revaluing work, they

improve the quality of their lives, even if they are not able to change the material conditions under which they work (Liebel, 2017). If ‘squeegee kids’ were able to reframe their labor positively, what possibilities might open up? In considering the concept of work in the broadest sense, to include not only paid work, but also domestic work and schoolwork, how could an emphasis on dignity change the conversation? What would it look like to organize collectively around work more broadly? Peer-to-peer and intergenerational co-learning offer alternative ways of theorizing about the world and structuring education, with the potential to change power dynamics and thus material living conditions.

In a critical look at formal schooling, Abebe and Biswas (2021) posit that decolonial critiques may reveal the inadequacy of Western schooling not only for children in the South but also for children in the North. They question assumptions that school, narrowly defined, is the only or best space of education for some children. More specifically, they argue that institutionalized systems of schooling “inflict violence by stigmatizing” (2021, 121). Alternatively, challenging universal narratives and embracing decolonial methodologies opens space to radically question what education could look like and adds to studies within critical education that examine how schools can be both a site of oppression and a site of opportunity. A decolonial approach would question the idea that youth failure or poor performance is ‘exceptional’ and rather reveal its necessity to the whole system. Control of education is a key component of coloniality (Solis, 2017). Knowledge about schooling is not the only framework that marginalizes some young people’s experiences of childhood. Insights from children’s geography scholars, as well as direct work with children themselves, taught me that normative ideas about work contributions, living arrangements, and migration can have negative impacts on the lives of children who fall outside the boundaries of such experiences. Decolonizing knowledge about children in Baltimore challenges models of children in need of ‘rescuing’ without negating the need and responsibility to address inequalities. It makes space for multiple stories and ways of knowing, not simply to argue that childhood manifests itself in multiple ways, but to revalue these experiences and use them to disrupt the power to theorize and represent childhoods.

Praxis is central to decolonial scholarship. Outside academia, cross-national collaborations, such as when Palestinian youth taught Black youth in Ferguson how to make gas masks, are becoming increasingly common. Youth share strategies to address climate change

and engage in global acts of civil disobedience to target global inequities (Abebe and Biswas, 2021). Yet, more progress can be made in connecting academic arguments to praxis (see Punch, 2016). How might dialogue between youth in the United States organizing for social justice in education and Peruvian youth arguing for their right to work in conditions of dignity enhance both scholarship and praxis? I end this viewpoint by suggesting that the often greater mobility that academics have compared with the children with whom they work can facilitate the sharing of knowledge around, and strategies for, alternative possibilities for the present and future. This is more than semantic. Ideas of childhood form the basis for policies and evaluations that have material effects on children's well-being. The categories we construct shape the allocation of resources, narratives about how the world works (and does not work), self-identities and a myriad of other factors. Putting different social movements and knowledge systems in contact with each other offers the possibility to continue to move beyond questions of why some children succeed and others do not and to instead learn from the lived experiences of children in both the South and North. How can scholars understand and analyze differences in childhood in a more relational and connected way? Greater engagement with decolonial scholarship and praxis offers one way to continue to move beyond North-South dichotomies and to challenge the ability to use limited understandings of childhood to assign blame and to justify ongoing inequalities.

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