



Book Review: *Can Big Bird Fight Terrorism? Children's Television and Globalized Multicultural Education* by Naomi A. Moland

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BOOK REVIEW

***CAN BIG BIRD FIGHT TERRORISM?
CHILDREN'S TELEVISION AND GLOBALIZED MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION***
BY NAOMI A. MOLAND
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2020. XI + 277 PAGES
\$39.95 (HARDCOVER), \$31.95 (E-BOOK)
ISBN 978-0-19-090395-4

Founded in 1969, Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit behind *Sesame Street*, celebrated its 50th birthday in 2019.¹ The groundbreaking educational television program has given birth to a huge body of research about educational television. As a child in small-town New England, *Sesame Street* was my reference point for city life: the first time I remember seeing an African American person on television and the first time my Deaf sister and I saw an adult who wasn't a teacher or parent of a Deaf child use sign language was on the program. Treating diversity as a given and encouraging curiosity in young children across generations is *Sesame Street's* great strength. Over the decades, that spirit of inclusiveness and progressive values in education has infused Sesame Workshop's international projects in more than 30 countries around the world.

Naomi Moland's addition to the literature on Sesame Workshop, *Can Big Bird Fight Terrorism? Children's Television and Globalized Multicultural Education*, is especially relevant in the shift to remote learning during this moment of COVID-19. Moland provides an in-depth look at *Sesame Square*, a children's television program offered in Nigeria through a partnership of Sesame Workshop and the US Agency for International Development. Nigeria was chosen as the site of this partnership because simmering regional conflict and religious differences were fueling extremist groups, like Boko Haram. Moland uses a combination of interviews, ethnographic observations, and episode analysis to develop a case study focused on two questions about the potential contribution multicultural education can make to peacebuilding. First, she seeks to understand how educators, in this case the writers and producers of *Sesame Square*, in their efforts to localize an externally developed curriculum can inadvertently re-create or reinforce the very stereotypes and divisions they want to break down. Second, she interrogates whether a "public curriculum" of conflict, violence, division, and discrimination renders multicultural education's messages of peace and tolerance ineffective or even offensive.

1 The original name was the Children's Television Workshop.

Moland draws on the work of Cynthia Miller-Idriss to provide a compelling conceptual critique of multicultural education as the basis for peacebuilding, cautioning us to “temper our expectations for what education can do” (p. 190). She explains that the medium of television is especially prone to the pitfalls of multiculturalism. This includes reducing differences to fixed identities using recognizable symbolic images that leave little room for viewer interaction, and little space to capture people’s “messy, shifting identities” (p. 197) with the level of complexity needed to provide a critically inclusive experience. In Nigeria, the reduction of identity was a particular challenge with viewers from the north where, in an effort to ensure that clerics and community leaders would not forbid people to watch, such depictions were reduced to a static picture of the most conservative iteration of identity.

In chapters 2-4, Moland sets up the fundamental challenge of multicultural education implemented through international development. Since the goal of multicultural education programs will always be to catalyze change in attitudes and behaviors, program developers will always face the dilemma of balancing local values with values from elsewhere. In this case, in an environment rife with sharp divisions along religious, regional, and ethnic lines, Sesame Workshop’s Western expression of the values of peace and inclusion struck an uneasy balance with local conceptions of the same values. As educators and development agencies localize projects, they focus on the “needs” of their audience. In this process, they often take over the power to define their audience’s differences, often framed as deficits, and thus tend to echo the discourses of “orientalism they intend to correct” (p. 194). Moland describes the power dynamics of international organizations choosing which locals to privilege as they construct both problem and solution. Ensuring a collaborative and largely equal partnership between the writers and developers from Sesame Workshop in the United States and the *Sesame Square* production team in Nigeria was a large part of the effort to get this balance right. The exploration of this theme is useful beyond the current case study because the producers tried so hard to get the balance right, yet still faced instructive challenges.

Further using the theory of nesting orientalisms—a variation of Said’s work explaining that a group “orientalized” in the North and West can, in turn, “orientalize” another group, resulting in multiple or nested orientalized identities (Bakić-Hayden 1995)—to interrogate the possibility of reinforcing stereotypes through multicultural education, Moland concludes that the target audience in multicultural education and international development projects will always be “othered,” or treated as intrinsically different and alien to their true selves, because, even when they work closely with host governments or communities,

the outside agencies identify both the project goals and the target audience. This is especially true in conflict-affected contexts, where divisions already run deep (p. 191) and outside actors' access to communities is often curtailed. Moland uses the example of *Sesame Square's* portrayal of Nigerians from the north of the country as a compelling example, documenting writing room conversations showing that the Nigerian team included mostly Christian Yoruba writers, with only two relatively elite writers from northern Nigeria. The needs and concerns of the Muslim Hausa target audience were filtered through this group. She cites religious differences as especially difficult to bridge, particularly when people see their religion, in fundamentalist terms, as the only "correct" way of being in the world.

Moland's findings and response to the central question on the inadvertent reproduction of stereotypes provide a well-researched and thoughtful critique that applies to international education projects. However, they might not have the inevitability in terms of children's television that she assumes. Othering is likely to occur when the diversity of the writing room does not reflect the diversity of the audience, so whether the writing team could have taken more risks in their portrayal of religious diversity if its members had been more representative or if they had been able to conduct more pilots and focus groups in communities in northern Nigeria is an important question. Moland suggests that managing multicultural initiatives with respect to the problem of othering the target audience, and its downstream effects, is an area for further research. She also recommends that future efforts focus on hybrid and fluid identities by showing, for example, characters who speak some degree of several languages, as many Nigerians do (p. 204). This recommendation was not taken up by the producers, who were worried about confusing or alienating part of their audience.

In chapters 5-6, Moland finds that Big Bird might be able to fight terrorism, but he cannot do it alone. He will inevitably be undermined when a public curriculum or surrounding narrative of violence coexists with the lasting structural violence of colonialism and a government that is "incompetent and corrupt such that people cannot know whether state institutions exist to provide services or prey on them" (p. 198). The program creators must hope that *Sesame Square's* messages of peace and tolerance can help lay the "foundation for the ongoing battle for hearts and minds" (p. 200). Moland explores this point in relation to violent conflict and the path that young people might follow—from social and religious networks that provide social services and protection to radical terrorist organizations like Boko Haram. Showing an alternative to the existing public curriculum of state corruption could also open a pathway to demanding more accountable

government. In framing her pessimism about multicultural education projects, Moland assumes the typical two- to four-year timeline of a typical international development project. Interrogating the relationship between the timeline, those driving the project, and support for surrounding or ancillary activities is a shortcoming in her analysis.

As Moland rightly points out, the multicultural education project's offering cannot be so utopian that it becomes unrelatable, which returns to the highly contextual question of how to balance the curricula of informal public education programs like *Sesame Square* and formal education. Moland cites the need for remedies beyond this single television program, such as expanding access to academically relevant and inclusive opportunities in local school contexts. Other suggestions, which may be more workable for a program like *Sesame Square* than developing different versions of the program or expanding formal educational opportunities, are to emphasize commonalities, such as the fact that the entire audience is affected by conflict, and to focus on teaching children the skills and processes they need to understand diverse others, to develop fluid, layered identities, and to resolve conflict. Overall, Moland has made a valuable and well-written addition to the literature on children's television, multicultural education, and Sesame Workshop by clearly naming the successes and pitfalls of *Sesame Square* in Nigeria, so that others can learn from this experience. Her research and recommendations for developing multicultural education programs delivered through television take on new relevance in light of the school closures in the era of COVID-19 as we intensify our exploration of the possibilities of remote education beyond basic academic skills.

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