Youth Studies, Comparative Inquiry, and the Local/Global Problematic

Julie McLeod

The field of youth studies appears to have increasingly taken on a self-consciously “international” orientation, characterized by grappling with how to represent local youth identities and social practices within international, transnational, or global contexts. This challenge is repeated across many different types of study and worked through in a variety of ways. A common thread, however, is that young people’s identities and lives today must or should be understood with reference to global phenomena and frameworks, and in terms of how they negotiate and are formed in the intersection of local and global contexts. One starting point for this essay is an attempt to understand the “systems of reason” (Popkewitz 2001) and lines of thinking that underpin how young people are researched, reported, and represented. The local/global global binary has quite strikingly become one of the main lenses for exploring questions about “youth identities” today and one of the key problematics constituting contemporary youth studies scholarship. A more specific starting point, then, is to reflect on what the growing and widespread interest in the local/global relation offers youth researchers—what are the features, the gains, and the losses associated with this construct? And what are the implications of this binary in terms of the intellectual history and truth claims of youth studies? A third and related starting point is the important, yet not always analytically addressed, role of comparative inquiry in youth studies scholarship, particularly in relation to the ascendency of the local/global comparison.
Bourdieu’s arguments about reflexive sociology and the scholastic point of view are instructive here (Bourdieu 2000; Kenway and McLeod 2004). The scholastic point of view refers to an intellectual bias, a set of dispositions and perspectives that are produced within an academic field (Schirato and Webb 2003, 545). Bourdieu argues that this point of view is characterized by its relative indifference to the “logic of practice” and its masquerade as a “natural” point of view, a perspective without a history. For Bourdieu, the viewpoint of the intellectual is a particular perspective, not simply the expression of an individual viewpoint, but an analytic disposition that is part of, formed in and by, the “collective unconscious” of an academic field (Bourdieu 2000; McLeod 2005). Academic fields include the accumulating practices and habits of thought of individual academics (in his examples often sociologists) but are not reducible to such individuals; the terms of argument and perspectives are thus structured into the disciplinary fields, appearing as natural and timeless orientations. The role of the (Bourdieu-ian) reflexive sociologist is to subject that presumption to historical scrutiny, to expose the production and illusion of impartiality, timelessness, and singularity, and to examine its sociological and practical effects (Bourdieu 2000, 21–22, 121).

In a similar move, this article begins a critical mapping of the dominant modes of thought that characterize the field of contemporary youth studies in education. Clearly, such an ambition cannot be fully realized here, but an initial attempt to delineate some key features is offered. The essay first notes debates regarding limitations as well as new directions in comparative inquiry, with particular attention to educational research—a field centrally concerned with youth and young people. It then reviews recent youth research that examines the impact of globalization on youth experience and identity and in various ways engages with the local/global dualism as both empirical context and conceptual framework. The discussion draws out some of the strengths of this framework and the interesting and important lines of analysis it has generated; it also, however, attends to some of the challenges this dualism presents, especially with regard to the category and level of the nation. Third, drawing on a longitudinal study I conducted of Australian secondary school students, I raise some issues regarding the salience of national differences and specificities and the analytic challenge and value of attempting to keep local, national, and global levels in focus when researching youth identities. Overall, the article
proposes that an important and fruitful direction for youth studies is to cultivate more historically enriched approaches, both to researching “young people today” and to analyzing its own intellectual history, including the lineage and effects of its truth claims and structuring dualisms.

A COMPARATIVE LENS?

The prevalence of comparative thinking in youth studies research is evident across a number of concerns today, including, for example, generational comparisons (features of young people today compared to a generation ago); comparisons between different social or ethnic groups and how they may or may not be alike; or comparisons between different national youth cultures or different local practices or, most commonly, between local manifestations of global phenomena. Yet, in many characterizations of young people today, comparison tends to be implicit—the almost silent “driver” of the argument rather than a foregrounded aspect of the discussion. A consequence of this is that one side of a comparison often threatens to be submerged. In studies where the focus is so much on young people in the present, for instance, the figure of the “past” or “earlier generations” is frequently invoked in general or even vague terms, usually to signal temporal distance and to underline how things are different now. Similarly, the local/global comparison can be mobilized in ways that either privilege the global—with the local either a miniature of the global or acted upon by global forces—or sideline the global and elevate the specificity of the local frame. Of course, it is not necessarily easy or straightforward or even practical to give equal weight to both sides of any comparison, and these issues, particularly in terms of the global/local relation, have been debated extensively.

Contemporary youth research is conducted in an era of cultural and economic globalization, and this has meant that the task and promise of comparative study has been simultaneously brought into focus and troubled—what exactly is being compared and what is the unit of analysis (Dale 2006)? If comparison involves analysis of similarity and difference, how can we proceed in a way that properly acknowledges specificity and differences in historical and contemporary contexts? In a blunt but familiar binary, commonality is often aligned with the knowledge, discourses,
people, and material flows of globalization, while difference is located in local contexts, upon which global discourses are imprinted.

Adding to these issues, comparative research in many disciplinary fields has been the target of sustained critique, in large part because it is seen as irrevocably reinscribing the level of nation as the privileged site of inquiry. A challenge posed here is how to proceed with comparative scholarship when a conventional unit of analysis—the nation state—is under erasure, challenged theoretically and politically, and where new conceptions of the national and transnational circulate (Tyrrell 1991; Sassen 2001). While much of the following discussion explores these matters in relation to educational research, the arguments have a wider reach and resonate with debates regarding comparative inquiry in the humanities and social sciences more broadly. In reference to comparative history, for example, Ian Tyrrell (1991) argued nearly two decades ago that “there had been a failure of comparative history to transcend the boundaries of nationalist historiography” (1033). The limitations of this included reifying national characteristics, masking diversity, failing to historicize the form and idea of the nation or nationalism or the state, and failing to recognize how the national framework alone is not adequate for understanding either the historical or present circumstances of nations. In addition, he argued, the dominant mode of comparative history has tended to make the particular case study, for example, urban history, a microcosm of national histories, so that local histories became “national histories writ small” (1036). Tyrrell claims this simply replicates the blind spots that have bedeviled histories confined to a national frame, and, he continues, this evades the challenge of elaborating local and regional variation within the nation (1042). He proposed that historians needed to develop new approaches “of a global kind, especially those that give proper place to local and regional peculiarities” (1042). The way forward, as he saw it, is to revive regional approaches within a global focus, and to be attentive to historical specificity and variety. Transnational histories, he suggests, would look across the levels of nation, region, and locality, examining the detail of the specific, without seeing the local as an inevitable miniature of the national. Such methodological cautions regarding how to interpret the relationship among the local, the national, and the transnational are extremely pertinent to contemporary youth studies scholarship.
Documenting contrasts and similarities between nations—school systems, youth transitions, educational outcomes, cultural practices—has long been a standard focus of comparative youth and educational studies. Indeed as education systems are organized nationally, educational research has had a strong tradition of comparative scholarship. But the national basis of much comparative research has come under suspicion in the wake of both the phenomenon of globalization and the rise of globalization studies. Processes of globalization, both historically and in the present, have disrupted national boundaries, challenged ideas of the nation state and national communities as fixed, bounded, and insulated, and consequently challenged the conventional basis of international comparative study (Appadurai 1996; Kraidy 2005; Dale 2006). However, in other ways, some forms of national comparison are ascendant, evident in a raft of international measures that privilege the nation, such as rankings of school achievement and testing (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD] 2006) or the development of national school curricula. Simultaneously, then, we have a vast and growing literature on globalization and the precarious and invented character of the nation, and a powerful focus on international comparisons and measurements that reinscribe the national frame. In educational policy research at least, the national level is not readily dislodged.

Within the field of comparative education itself, there are ongoing methodological and philosophical discussions regarding its agenda and purpose (e.g., special issues of the Journal of Comparative Education; Alexander, Broadfoot, and Phillip 1999; Phillips 1999; Broadfoot 2001; Sweeting 2005). Patricia Broadfoot (2001), for example, argues that comparative education has interdisciplinary elements yet is much vexed by sorting out its own status, purpose, and distinctive intellectual and methodological contribution. She notes a declining interest in the social and cultural context of education and calls for a reinvigorated comparative education, which she calls “comparology,” that (re)positions context as a central part of its agenda.

“Methodologically, comparative education finds it very difficult to shake off both its nationalist and statist assumptions,” Roger Dale (2006, 185) has recently argued. Even so, he identifies some positive aspects or potentials of comparative education. Mobilizing the concept of “translation” (rather than comparison) and, following the work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2005), Dale makes
a case for attending to “translation among knowledges” (188) as a
task for comparative inquiry. Quoting from Santos, Dale argues that
such work “start[s] from the idea that all cultures are incomplete
and can, therefore, be enriched by dialogue and confrontation with
other cultures’ [Santos 2005, 19]” (188). The practice of translation is
not to make all things commensurable, but in a sense to look at
what does not immediately translate, to ask how might “concepts
rooted in different epistemological and ontological traditions”
speak to each other (189)?

In a similar vein, there have been calls for comparative education
to more actively reengage with historical and cultural studies and
to take greater cognizance of some of the contemporary theoretical
agendas of these fields (Sweeting 2005). Sweeting suggest that the
“significance of the historical dimension is regaining its earlier
widespread recognition by workers in the field of comparative
education” (26). Since the late 1950s and 1990s, he observes, there
has been a hiatus “in historically oriented comparative education
studies,” explained in part by changing intellectual fashions, and
the academic popularity of both positivist social science and
neo-Marxist approaches. It is time now, Sweeting and others argue,
for a “reclamation” of comparative education’s “disappearing
historical legacy” (Kazamias 2001, 446, quoted in Sweeting
2005, 26). Others have interrogated the formative assumptions of
comparative education, by exposing the history of it as a field of
inquiry or by making explicit its systems of reason and analysis,
and the cultural and political circumstances that have shaped its
development (Popkewitz 2001).

Writing from the perspective of Foucauldian genealogy, Novoa
and Yariv-Mashal (2003) argue that one of the tasks of comparative
education should be to historicize and locate its own questions.
They see contemporary comparativists in a kind of swoon in the
face of globalization discourse. In their view, any change is repre-
sented as a “part of ‘global change,’ one that is not located in
specific contexts, but that is a consequence of ‘global winds.’ These
winds of change seem [like] ‘vapour’ in the sense that they are not
rooted in a concrete reality, that is a well-identified space-time”
(430). Of particular salience for the present discussion is Novoa
and Yariv-Mashal’s argument that it “is impossible to analyze
any educational problem without a clear understanding of its
historical location” (430). Against such unlocated talk of flows
and circulating ideas, they propose a more determined attention
to empirically based, genealogical and localized studies. They see a rejuvenation of comparative education as needing to be accompanied by two related movements. On the one hand, the adoption of methodological perspectives that do not consecrate models of analysis exclusively centred on national geographies, and that are able to understand the multiplicity of levels of affiliation and belonging that characterise communities around the world. On the other hand, the reinforcement of a thinking that lies in the logic of the comparison in time, moving away from a floatation of concepts, lacking roots in location.

In trying to negotiate the methodological challenges of comparison, they advise closer attention to both local and temporal specificity, and to particular places and problems as sites for apprehending the form and effects of change, and for observing the reinscription and reworking of so-called global, abstract notions. Global or transnational changes do not simply happen in global ether, they happen and are manifested in particular places and times. As Kenneth Hultqvist (2003) argues, while there “is nothing global or general per se,” globalizing trends and ideas are made “global by being inserted and translated and put to work on various local (national) contexts” (2–3). What are the implications for youth studies of these arguments regarding comparative inquiry and local/national/transnational/global/translations?

Youth studies can be usefully understood as itself a kind of international discourse, a body of “traveling ideas” and truth claims about young people. The intellectual history of youth sociology warrants investigation alongside study of the subjects (experiences, perspectives) it seeks to know and represent. This involves looking at local translations and reinscriptions not only of global discourses, popular culture, economic processes, and so forth but also at whether or how they impact upon and mediate the experiences and subjectivities of young people. It also requires analysis of the circulating sociological and conceptual discourses that frame and animate the very terms with which we imagine and speak of “youth.” The local/global problematic is now one of the most widespread background discourses in many discussions about contemporary youth—it has become part of the youth studies lexicon and common sense. There is value, however, in pausing and reconsidering what this conceptual orientation offers, what it allows us to
see, and what it might close off from view. In the following section, I briefly document some recent and influential ways in which this dualism has been mobilized in youth studies research, the kind of insights it has generated, as well as some of the risks and dilemmas associated with this increasingly pervasive discourse.

THE LOCAL/GLOBAL CONUNDRUM AND YOUTH STUDIES

Globalization is itself a deeply historical, uneven and even *localizing* process (Appadurai 1996, 17).

A vast array of empirical and theoretical research has grappled with how to articulate the relationship between local and global phenomena. Many overtly reject a simple dualism or opposition between local and global and, as the previous epigraph suggests, stress the interdependence of the two categories, and, in Appadurai’s case, the historicity of the relationship (Appadurai 1996). Ong (1999) argues that for many commentators the global and local relation is unhelpfully “often construed as the opposition between universalising capitalist forces and local cultures,” and further that this simple binary does not ‘quite capture the “horizontal and relational nature of the contemporary economic, social, and cultural processes that stream across spaces (4). Kraidy (2005) similarly questions the utility of the local/global contrast, proposing that “it may be more helpful to think of them as mutually constitutive, a perspective advanced in terms of ‘glocalisation’[...]’interpene-interpenetrated globalization’[...]or ‘distant proximities’” (154). Others, such as Connell (2007), however, have disputed whether such attempts to deconstruct the dualism actually succeed. She argues that “To speak of ‘glocalisation’ is to resolve nothing. It is to assert both terms of a static polarity at once. The local/global opposition has not been conceptually resolved. In various forms—local/global, national/global—it continues to structure both debate and research” (57).

These are compelling and provocative arguments, pointing to some of the wider and contested conceptual issues at stake. I return to them later, but the immediate focus of my discussion here is how such debates and dilemmas have played out in youth studies scholarship. As with many other fields, much recent youth studies work is concerned both to make sense of and to problematize the
local/global couplet. The examples of this work discussed below approach this by demonstrating the salience of global/local contexts for understanding young people’s lives today and by troubling and interrogating the local/global binary. In doing so, these studies open up important questions regarding the limits and possibilities of this dualism as a lens for researching youth. A repeated theme is thus the challenge of acknowledging the nature and impact of particular “global” processes—for example, media or popular culture, or shifts in gender relations, or movements of capital or people—and of simultaneously giving local specificity to such seemingly globalizing and homogenizing discourses and effects.

Disputing a view that sees globalization as an homogenizing process that “coats each and every place in the thick veneer of its own residue,” Anoop Nayak (2003) argues that globalization not only has uneven and unpredictable effects, but that local “cultures have not been superseded by global change” (4–5). Local cultures themselves shape and mediate global processes; they are not simply spaces overtaken by the inculcation of hegemonic global practices. Nayak suggests that “young people in different places negotiate change in different ways” and that this, in turn, influences “the opportunities, lifestyles and cultural identities of young people” (5). A central argument of Nayak’s study is that “(e)mpirically grounded, place-based analyses of young lives may now offer a challenge to wider perceptions of globalization as an omnipotent, homogenizing force that goes unheeded, in favor of a more textured and contingent portrayal of youth cultures” (5–6). This argument encapsulates a significant trend in youth studies research, where a focus on local formations and practices is seen as a way into understanding both youth in a globalized world and the unevenness and heterogeneity of globalization. The context of young people’s lives is elaborated as one of epochal and historical change—(late) modernity, individualization, risk, compression of time/space—alongside close-up studies of how young people are conducting and managing their lives at the level of the local.

In the introduction to their edited collection Youth Moves: Identities and Education in Global Perspective, Nadine Dolby and Fazal Rizvi (2008) consider the different forms and intensification of youth mobility—physical, imagined, virtual, desired, enforced—across both local and global spaces. “Even those youth,” they argue, “who do not literally move throughout the world or a geographic region are undoubtedly caught up in the continual
circulation of global culture, through the media, movies, fashion, the Internet...[As such,] – their identities are now inextricably linked to the currents of modernity that flow across the world at the speed of a mouse click” (5). The present circumstances that young people inhabit are identified as radically different from those of the immediate past (see too Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004). Central to this contrast is the flow and effects of global culture that infiltrate young people’s lives across myriad local and virtual worlds. Similarly, Pam Nilan and Carles Feixa (2006) in their edited collection, Global Youth? Hybrid Identities, Plural Worlds, characterize the present era as one marked by “rapid social transformation, sometimes described as globalization” (3). While they claim ultimately not to be convinced that the “global eclipses the local” in youth cultures, nevertheless they identify aspects of “cultural and economic globalization emanating from the cultural ‘cores’ that threaten to sweep away distinctive local practices and identity frames in favour of a homogenized set of consumption practices and ways to think about identity” (3). Further, Nilan and Feixa employ the concept of hybridization to signify, on the one hand, “a process of cultural interactions between the local and global,” and on the other “a process of cultural transactions that reflects how global cultures are assimilated in the locality” (2).

This mode of argument—on the one hand, on the other—signals some of the tensions involved in representing the manner and extent to which global processes dominate local youth cultures. Juggling this inevitably presents a number of risks. One is to reinstate a center/periphery divide, to place the authority and universality of the global against the exotic variation of the local; a second is to see the local/global as predominantly or exclusively a spatial relation and to underplay its temporal and historical dimensions. While the global may appear more amenable to historical analysis, the local is more readily positioned as the natural, the preexisting, timeless real to the constructedness of global phenomena; yet the local itself is “a historical product and...the histories through which localities emerge are eventually subject to the dynamics of the global” (Appadurai 1996, 18).

While there are cautious and pessimistic assessments of the effects or potential impacts of globalized practices on local youth cultures, there are also optimistic accounts, emphasizing the opening up of new possibilities. This is especially so in relation to gender. Nayak and Kehily (2008) argue, for instance, that “global
culture can produce new spaces and incite ‘different youthful subjectivities’ … giving rise to new femininities and masculinities’” (24). Moreover, in both pessimistic and optimistic accounts, young people can become symbolically and practically represented as the bearers of modernity; they carry with them, both on and in their bodies, the marks of globalized or hybridized cultural change. How young people are affected by and negotiate the local/global dynamic is represented as now part of how they become (modern) subjects. In other words, not only is the local/global dynamic understood as a major social, political, and material context that shapes and saturates young people’s daily lives and that can be analyzed sociologically or historically, or politically, but the negotiation of this context is also represented as part of the process of subjectivity, of becoming someone, and of becoming an embodied symbol of generational and historical change.

Of course attention to new forms of subjectivity, hybridized identities, and mobile flows can overlook the more sober practicalities of life for many young people who are stuck, fixed in place by economic, personal, familial, and cultural circumstances. Discourses of mobility, translocality, and hybridity can create a utopian sense of open possibilities, generating new kinds of romantic constructions of youth and neglecting the materiality of lives. Yet, as Dolby and Rizvi (2008) caution, we cannot understand the everyday experiences of young people without also looking at how global conditions of mobility are both affected by, and are instrumental in producing and reproducing, class formations (3).

Further, power, class differences and inequality are not only located in or generated by global processes. Kraidy (2005) has in fact taken issue with accounts of globalization that represent the local as acted upon, as powerless in the face of global forces. In contrast, he argues, power is not confined to the global. “The local itself is often the scene of power struggles between local actors, who are themselves embedded in larger external networks. In other words,” he continues, “the local is at once a site of empowerment and marginalization. This point is overshadowed by the recurrence of romantic views of the local, alternately defined as a ‘residual category overtaken by development’ … [or] a haven of resistance against globalization”’ (154–155).

These conceptual and methodological complications of the local are perhaps most strongly felt in ethnographic studies, and other traditions of qualitative youth studies that gain significance precisely
from their capacity to illuminate the specificity of local and particular practices (Buroway 2000; Nayak and Kehily 2008; McLeod and Thomson 2009). According to Appadurai (1996), the challenge for ethnographers, and by extension other researchers working within the frame of the local, is to unravel the question: “what is the nature of locality as lived experience in a globalized deterritorialized world?” (52; see also Kenway, Kraack, and Hickey-Moody 2006, 44–45). Pursuing this call, Kenway, Kraack, and Hickey-Moody (2006), in their study of youthful masculinity in rural Australia, argue that researchers must reconceive of place and reflexively pay attention to both embodied and local habits and cultures and also to global flows (46). Drawing from Buroway et al.’s (2000) account of global ethnography, Kenway, Kraack, and Hickey-Moody (2006) propose that in an era of globalization the notion of a single bounded field site needs to be rethought, and that new “understandings of field site” might include “global flows, networks or scapes,” and involve exploration of “the multiple global forces, connections and imaginations that are associated with and cut across that site” (46). Kenway, Kraack, and Hickey-Moody adopt a multisited approach that is intended to capture the impact of global flows in and across different social spaces while remaining attentive to local inflections. In their words, it is a means “of tracing the diffusion of global forces, connections and imaginations locally, and of tracing the manner in which these spiral outwards from the local to other scales” (48). Their focus is on the practices of different—new, familiar, contested—forms of masculinity, categorized by them as sacrosanct, subversive, or scorned masculinities. Here the argument turns on the pervasiveness of global flows and their local inflections, once more positioning that difficult relationship as a central problematic for contemporary youth identity.

So far, I have been attempting to characterize some emergent and dominant themes in youth studies scholarship, focusing on how the prominent local/global dualism is “put to work” in discussions of youth cultures and identities. I have indicated some of the main lines of debate in regard to representing the local—a miniature of the global; a hybrid, mobile space that “talks back” to the global; an ahistorical, natural realm that is victim to global forces; a site of new possibilities and flows; and a nexus of instabilities alongside sedimented inequalities; and so forth. While there are persuasive arguments about the need to understand the local/global relation as interdependent and dynamic, the actual specifics of what this
means can seem elusive. In other words, the local/global binary continues to function as a powerful opposition.

Of course the local/global framework has clearly been important and reflects shifts in world politics as well as in academic fields. Yet its emerging popularity as a theoretical framework in contemporary youth studies also brings some risks, including its potential to overshadow the impact of other equally significant factors. Moreover, while the level of the nation may be challenged and deconstructed as the primary unit of comparative analysis, or as inadequate for representing the flows and upheavals of contemporary life, it does not follow that this level has no conceptual utility or practical effects. Acknowledging the effects of national location is integral to building a robust analysis of the politics of place as well as historically enriched and situated accounts of both local/global relations and contemporary youth cultures.

SITUATING THE LOCAL

In the previous discussions, the local is complicated as the site of research, as the place where “participants” are located, and where the research is conducted. But questions of locality also pertain to the location of the researcher, the place from where one theorizes, perceives, and researches. In this, the researcher is positioned in a double sense—situated in a particular time and place but also positioned by powerful conceptions of which theories and frameworks matter. Connell’s (2007) critique of “northern theory” and her case for developing and heeding “southern theory” proposes that some ideas and theories emanate from and/or are identified as belonging to the realm of the international or global, while others are only ever represented as local knowledge, or local manifestations of global ideas always coming from elsewhere. A shared characteristic of most accounts of globalization, Connell (2007) argues, however different they may be in grounding theoretical orientation, is that they “leap straight to the level of the global, where they reify perceived trends as the nature of global society”:

The trends thus reified are based on concepts that have previously been worked out, not for speaking about colonies, empires or world affairs, but for speaking about metropolitan societies – that is, the cluster of modern, industrial, postmodern or postindustrial countries that had been the focus of theoretical debates in sociology for decades before (55).
Two lines of argument are compressed here. One is that accounts of globalization, even if unwittingly, tend to reinstate a center/periphery division, and presume that the theories and knowledge produced in the northern center apply to and speak for those in the south. Second, this results in trampling over vast differences in history and politics and the relegation of ideas and people outside the north to only ever being constituted as local, places of curiosity and empirical inquiry that might illuminate or speak to wider processes, but not sources of ideas or theories. As Appadurai (2001) observes in reference to the status of “area studies” in the United States, “the more marginal regions of the world [can] not [be] simply producers of data for the theory mills of the North” (5).

Connell’s argument further suggests that the prevalence of a local/global dualism can mask the different types and status of local places and knowledge. Some regions are represented as more “properly” local, while others as less parochial or paradoxically as more “universal” localities. Consequently, the nonmetropolitan is more commonly construed as the local, and the north or the west as a unity, even though they are as much made up of localities, regions, and variation as the south. In Connell’s terms, then, globalization and all the associated talk of local/global interdependence does not in itself overcome the metropolitan, northern-centric bias of mainstream sociological theory.

While the geopolitical and historical distinctions between north and south are obviously not clear-cut, the issues of location raised by these debates are vital ones for youth studies researchers. This is equally the case whether one is located in the north or the south, affiliated with the metropolitan and global, or with the local and exotic. As someone who works in Australia, a country physically located in the south yet historically saturated with and shaped by the colonizing practices and traditions of the north, the confusions and complications of this relationship are felt in myriad ordinary ways, not least in how we situate and translate our research and our stories of what matter to audiences outside Australia. A recurring dilemma in the research projects I have been involved with in Australia, for instance, has not only been how to delineate the relationship between local and global cultures, it has also been working out when national differences and national specificities mattered and when it was important or pertinent to make such a case (Calhoun 2007).
In making his case for transnational history, Tyrrell (1991) warned against the dangers of reifying the national and of ignoring local and regional variation—yet there are also risks in dispensing with the national level. Arguing for attention to national specificities in youth research is a call neither to embrace nationalism nor to ignore the significance of local and global influences or to remain only focused on the nation. Rather, as with other nations, the history of Australia is bound up in transnational events and histories—of migration, of empire, of war, of race relations. The point being made here, however, is that the dominance of the local/global dualism in youth studies research risks marginalizing the influence of other levels of place and affiliation.

THE PLACE OF NATIONAL CONTEXT

Young people in Australia, as elsewhere, are not mirrors or receptors of a free-floating global youth culture; they confront, mediate, and experience things in diverse and not predictable ways, shaped by historical and contemporary processes at national, transnational, and global levels. Within the national frame of Australia, state, regional, and local differences also shape their experiences and sense of self. To focus primarily on either local variations or global trends is thus to risk overlooking the effects deriving from the complex interactions among these different levels of connection and place.

With this in mind, when Lyn Yates and I (McLeod and Yates 2006) began our longitudinal study of secondary school students, we wanted to understand what it was like for young people growing up in a particular time (end of the twentieth century) and place (metropolitan and regional Victoria, Australia) while attending different types of schools. Historical and comparative questions framed the study and the kinds of issues we explored. Key questions included: How were girls and boys faring after more than two decades of feminism and gender equity reforms in schools? What were the influences on and modes of identity making over the course of the high school years? A major concern of the longitudinal study was to understand processes of social and biographic change in a particular time and place. Exploring the diverse intersections among local, national, and global changes was a backdrop to this, but they were not the only type of comparative questions that animated the study.
Comparison was a central element of our project design and operated in several directions. There were comparisons across time (how did young people change over the course of the secondary years, how did their views compare at 12, or 13 with those they held at 17 or 18); comparisons across place (what were experiences like for young people attending schools in the county compared to the city); comparisons across school type (what kind of differences or similarities were there in the experiences and pathways of young people attending a government high school or an elite private school); and comparisons across social and identity categories of gender, class, and ethnicity (how did things compare for boys and girls, for students from middle-class or elite or working-class schools). While we did not conduct our own in-depth studies of comparable issues in other countries, we drew on existing reports and research to gauge broad international trends concerning, for example, school participation, gender patterns, or popular culture. We also engaged with a wide range of social theories and debates that circulated in the global arena of educational and sociological research. We were thus situated researchers, taking on questions and theories that were, in Connell’s (2007) terms, part of the northern theory stable, and we were also trying to reflexively engage with and interrogate these theories in reference to a specific empirical study. Thus the theoretical and methodological challenges we explored—for example, accounts of subjectivity, individualization, habitus and cultural change, and post-positivist and feminist debates about methodology—were likely to be familiar to readers in the United States, Scandinavia, the United Kingdom, or New Zealand, though they were unlikely to be universally relevant or significant.

While the young people and the schools we studied were located in Australia, many of the issues that we addressed—to do with subjectivity and self-formation, social difference and inequality, gender, class, race, and ethnicity—were not peculiar to Australia. For example, the experiences of high-achieving middle-class girls in our study resonated with findings reported in numerous British and North American studies on gender and schooling (e.g., Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001). The common thread here was the intense pressure these young women felt to achieve, to always work hard, to never feel “good enough,” and to always feel responsible for making their own (successful) futures. In this we saw, as have others, the playing out of the combined and contradictory effects of feminism
and neoliberalism that laud autonomy and the self-regulating individual. While in many respects these are global movements, their translation in Australia is filtered through a specific cultural history and policy engagement with feminism, one that has seen an extensive network of feminist engagement with the state and with educational policy processes. A “girls can do it” feminism had been a prominent part of educational reform during the 1970s and 1980s, and up until the mid 1990s, when anxieties began to emerge about the education of boys. How young women and men in our study responded to both the feminist and gender equity discourse and the “boys’ education” movement, and consequently worked out their views about gender identity and gender relations, requires us to look beyond a simple local/global binary. To be sure, their responses drew on a range of circulating popular discourses about feminism, about feminism going “too far,” about “things being equal now.” But they also arose in the context of national cultural politics and panics about masculinity. In the country schools, this was particularly the case, evident in the ambitions some of the young men had for a future that replicated that of the previous generation of men—leave school, full-time work in factories or trades, become a “breadwinner,” and support a wife and family. Such ambitions were not uncommon in the country town, and the young men witnessed close by many (older) men’s lives unfolding along such a trajectory. Yet changes in the local and national labor markets, the demand for greater credentials, and shifts in social and gender relations that destabilized notions of the male breadwinner meant that this dream was likely to be unrealizable for many of these boys. Local labor market changes, the loss of jobs in manufacturing, and the increase in hospitality and part-time work, for example, were of course connected to global economic restructuring. But that assessment on its own does not tell us much about what it was like for these young men growing up in a country town community, where the mismatch between their dreams and likely future circumstances was also challenging forms of conventional and normative working-class masculinity and the local organization of community and family life.

In such examples, our challenge was not simply to unpick the global from the local, or not only to see how global processes infiltrated local practices—though this is important. The challenge was also to see when national history and politics and local specificities were making a difference and then to see how these different levels of place intersected and shaped youth cultural politics and
identifications. These are hard goals to fulfill, and the lines and points of distinction between the different levels are often blurred, signifying the complexity and flows of contemporary social relations. Looking back on the longitudinal study from this conceptual vantage point, I can see the value of trying to keep these different levels in view, but also recognize that it is not easy or straightforward or even realizable to do so all the time.

An overall methodological and substantive question for us, however, was when does local specificity matter, and where and when can we take up “findings” as if they have a more general significance. Australian high schools and Australian young people are not the same as schools and youth in North America or Europe, but to a very large degree, they do inhabit a common world—a common media culture, common comparative movements in school systems, some common shifts in work and family patterns. Many of the themes we explored, such as young people’s dreams of the future or gender differences in educational experiences, were likely to strike a chord with people from other national contexts. But other issues seemed to us to be more sharply defined and affected by specific aspects of Australian social and political life and history. This was especially evident in relation to social class and race and ethnicity. The Australian population comprises a small Indigenous population and a large majority composed of successive ways of immigration, from invasion onward. Recurrent and intense debates about immigration and multiculturalism and an historical view of Australia as a “white nation,” mean that questions about national identity, about who rightfully constitutes and belongs to the nation, are central to discussions about race and ethnicity in Australia (Hage 1998).

To take another example from our longitudinal study, I turn to interviews with students on their views about race and racism in Australia (discussed in more detail in McLeod and Yates 2006). These interviews were conducted in the mid 1990s, during a time of intensified focus on the politics of race and national identity in Australia. There was an ongoing national debate about whether there should be a formal apology from white Australians to Indigenous Australians to acknowledge past wrongs, and especially heated responses to the then prime minister’s refusal to apologize for previous acts of state-supported racism, such as the forced removal by governments of aboriginal children from their families. A new political party, One Nation, was receiving much
attention for its rhetoric against migrants and aboriginal people and for its fulsome support for the apparently beleaguered, ordinary (white) Australian. The One Nation political party was in part responding to moves by governments in the 1970s and 1980s to see Australia as a more independent and cosmopolitan country, a country located in Asia, rather than a colony linked to Britain or America (Ang 2000).

Such matters—both historical and contemporary—were an integral part of the context for understanding young people’s responses to us and their views on race/racism and national identity. Across interviews there was a marked anxiety about how to speak about race and of finding the appropriate language and mode for talking about identity and belonging, accompanied with a heightened concern and self-reflexivity regarding how their views might be perceived by others, and particularly by us as researchers. Many responses focused on differentiating among migrants, Indigenous Australians, and white Australians, and the shifting identifications of who was us and who was them.

It is not possible here to elaborate the details of this example (but see McLeod and Yates 2006). I raise it briefly, however, to indicate the value of attending to national differences and histories, a focus that can be subsumed by the local/global optic. The issue of how power in relation to race and ethnicity is constructed through discourse, identity and (national) identification is foregrounded by looking at how these relations are worked out in specific national settings, where the cultural logic, “common senses,” and historical legacies are indeed different from those in many other countries. It thus offers opportunities to reflect on the cultural construction and historically shaped nature of identity categories and race/ethnic relations, to explore issues of “otherness,” difference and whiteness from other perspectives, and to counter essentialist and universalizing views of ethnicity, race, and school inequalities. Moreover, such an orientation works to avoid collapsing the analysis of specific—local and national—phenomena into ready-made categories and theoretical frameworks that derive from other centers and national or transnational histories, yet function as discourses with a wider truth and applicability. Finally, matters of national context and history need to be heeded when making sense of young people’s identity work and cultural practices because the flow of powerful effects and discourses is not confined to the local/global relation. In this sense, and in regard to comparative inquiry, this example
is offered not as an illustration of a detailed and elaborate comparison across different nations but in order to suggest how a comparative orientation to the analysis of youth culture might allow one to mark specificities, alongside commonalities in history and present circumstances.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

I have been examining some dominant tropes and trends in contemporary youth studies research, situating this as part of a larger project concerned with developing a reflexive and historical account of this field of inquiry and its “systems of reason.” One thread has been the status of comparative inquiry in regard particularly but not exclusively to debates and developments in the field of educational and youth research. I have argued that comparative frameworks underpin much youth studies scholarship but that they are not always directly or explicitly acknowledged or analyzed. The discussion here has called for greater attention to the significance of comparative thinking and for forms of comparison that do more than reiterate the local/global as the primary or principal dualism for situating either youth scholarship or young people themselves.

Another thread, then, has been the prevalence of the local/global dualism as a framework for positioning and analyzing youth identities and youth culture. I have shown how trying to render the local in relation to the global has become a striking, if repetitive, feature of much youth studies scholarship. The problem of youth and youth subjectivity now seems to be increasingly mediated through the language and comparative positioning of the local/global relation. This dualism is mobilized as both empirical context and conceptual framework, and this constitutes a significant new paradigm for constructing knowledge about young people.

One aim of this essay has been to elaborate some of the features of this dualism, the types of insights, perspectives, and knowledge it has generated. A further aim has been to indicate some of the potential blind spots and dilemmas arising from the dominance of this dualism. I have suggested that one significant risk is to overlook the salience of the national level, as a site for either comparative analysis and/or for researching youth identities. Yet, attending to questions about when national differences matter—not withstanding the invention and shifting boundaries of
those categories—is an essential part of addressing the historical character of the local. To bypass consideration of national differences is not to resolve the question of the relation among local, national, and global. It is simply to bury it. Equally, to acknowledge the salience of the nation is not to inevitably render it an ahistorical category, rather it is precisely to historicize the local/global connections that structure youth identities and social relations or any research site.

Keeping in play these different lenses to understand the multiple dimensions of young people and the worlds they inhabit is both necessary and in some senses impossibly difficult. In his conception of transnational history, Tyrell (1991) argued that it would look across the levels of nation, region, and locality, attending to variation and specificity and avoiding collapsing the local to a reflection of the national. We could similarly argue that a pressing challenge for youth researchers today is how not to render the local as a miniature or reflection of the global and, further, how to keep in analytic play the shifting intersections between these various levels of place and affiliation.

Finally, this essay has been making a case for looking reflexively and historically at the field of youth studies scholarship. This includes mapping the rise and effects of emerging trends and intellectual interests and examining the discourses and truth claims that have constituted its body of expert knowledge. Such work also calls for greater attention to the situated context of youth studies researchers, and to the places, times, and theories that locate us and shape how and from where we see young people and the project of youth studies.

AUTHOR NOTE

I wish to thank the editors of this special issue for their valuable feedback and patience as the article developed; and for ongoing conversations and insights, I thank David Goodman, Glenn Savage, Lyn Yates, and members of the Education, Equity and Social Identities Reading Group, University of Melbourne.

REFERENCES


