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Keynote address:
Comparatively speaking: Notes on decolonizing research

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Il ne s'agit plus de connaître le monde, mais de le transformer
(What matters is not to know the world but to change it)

These words first appeared in a doctoral dissertation written by a medical student in the mid-twentieth century. The thesis was failed when it went to examination and, understandably, the young man was unhappy with this result, but he decided to go ahead anyway and publish his ideas in a book. It came out in 1952 under the title, *Peau Noir, Masques Blanc* (*Black Skin, White Masks*). The author was Frantz Fanon, a descendant of slaves who was born in the French colony of Martinique in the shadow of a brutal colonization and he was later to become a key figure in modern decolonization studies. Fanon died at the age of 36, less than ten years after the publication of this book, but he left a considerable legacy. The aspect of his work that I will address here relates to decolonial transformation and change (Fanon, 1952); and, what I particularly want to ask, in the context of comparative and international education, is how might we understand decolonial thinking today?

This question is important not least because a number of comparative education scholars have been doing some deep soul-searching lately. Earlier this year, for example, comparative education scholar, Maria Manzon (2018), turned the spotlight on academic complicity. She was especially interested in academic collusion with the doctrine of fascism in the field of comparative education during the 1930s. Erwin Epstein (2018) calls this "the darker side of comparative education" (p. 50). The story they each tell about the history of comparative and international education is troubling.

From their respective papers, we learn that the first internationally recognized journal in the field, *The International Education Review,* was founded in Germany in 1930 during the rise of Hitler where it was co-opted as a vehicle for fascist educational thinking. Between 1931 and 1938, Paul Monroe, from New York's Columbia University, acted as the American co-editor. Monroe was a well-respected scholar and he was not a regime sympathizer but his professional relationship with the journal gave it a degree of apparent credibility. Comparative education was not by any means the only field where academics engaged with the German professoriate of that era, but it is my focus here. I will also suggest that it is at times like this that the choices we make as comparative and international education scholars come to matter in important ways.

After the War, the comparative education community acted quickly to refashion the journal. It was renamed *International Review of Education,* an international editorial

advisory board was appointed, and the Nazi "interlude" was forgotten. So, why should we remember this "episode"? Why rake it all up now it is over and done with?

Part of the answer comes from Erwin Epstein (2018) who wrote about this history. He notes that "[j]ust as a house cannot stand without a foundation, so an academic field cannot rightfully contemplate the future without grasping the fullness of its past" (p. 58). This material is only coming to light now, so these discussions are timely. We *do* need to be thinking about how our field of research operates. We need to be asking who the key players are; and, we need to consider which voices aren't being heard. In order to fathom these matters, we need to understand how our fields of inquiry have been shaped over time.

In other recent research, we also discover that most of the papers published in comparative and international education journals are written by academics in the global North (Batra, 2018). This confirms what many of us already know, or have long suspected, and it is a matter for concern. As indigenous people of Oceania, our schools and our communities are more often the focus of comparative studies. As such, we are more often "the studied"; those unnamed, barely visible participants who appear fleetingly in research papers rather than the principal investigators. Perspectives from the global South are often fairly silent in these publications and indigenous voices or Pacific voices are rarely heard.

These are the largely hidden transcripts of comparative education. It is a field that relies heavily on accounts of Oceanic lives and classrooms written by scholars who are not always, themselves, rooted in or accountable to the communities that they study. All too often, comparative education researchers are travellers in those worlds and, in some cases, they are simply passing through on their way to their next study or research grant. I have no doubt that most of these scholar-travellers care a great deal about the schools and the classrooms and the people they meet along the way. But the problem is that the benefits of those encounters that take place in indigenous or Pacific or marginalized educational space tend to flow more directly towards them in terms of promotions, professional recognition and academia's other "glittering prizes". The benefits are frequently much less evident for the people living in those communities. So, if we are committed to transformation and to decolonizing the field of inquiry then these are the questions that we need to ask. And, in the end, this is also the kind of soul-searching that we all need to do from time to time. This kind of reflection offers us a range of choices in comparative and international education.

So, what are those choices?

Obviously, one of them is that we can elect not to acknowledge the awkward silences and difficult histories in the field of education studies. We can choose not to recognize the anglocentric nature of its scholarly practices. Or, in other words, we can keep on doing what others are already doing. We can take the view that there is nothing to see here, folks. Everything is just—peachy.

Although, if I may say, there are obvious risks involved with willfully researching while blindfolded. It is not always the best thing to do.

Fortunately, we have other choices. For example, in response to hearing about the "darker side of comparative education" (Epstein, 2018) we can say, quite firmly: "All that's in

the past. It's over now. All those Nazis are dead. Let's just move on" (p. 50). And that is certainly another possibility. We can look forward and set the past aside. To an extent, of course, this is precisely what has happened in comparative and international education over the years. But the problem is that when something enters the DNA of a disciplinary field; when there have been intellectual transgressions and a history of silence and denial that surrounds those transgressions, then traces of the past invariably linger in the present and that can trip us up. It can also cast a halo around an intellectual domain that is not necessarily well-deserved.

Another choice, then, is to own the difficult past and acknowledge the history of our scholarly fields. As uncomfortable and awkward as that might make us feel and as flawed as those scholarly practices are that silence or exclude indigenous voices, we can choose to recognize this. We can refuse to condone what has happened in comparative and international education and what is happening still in terms of who has power in these fields, and who does not. In other words, we can choose to be vigilant. In that scenario, we can make it our business to educate ourselves about past transgressions in the scholarly domain and understand how they linger in the present often in very subtle ways. That is certainly an option too and it is one that I choose myself from time to time.

But, in the end, just simply knowing that something is happening is not the same as working towards changing it. So, it is not wildly helpful if nothing very much is different as a result of our knowing. All that happens is that we have a better understanding of the status quo but essentially it is left it to others to begin the process of decolonization.

So, I think that there are other choices that we can make as scholars and one of them is to act in ways that actually change the field. Or, to paraphrase Fanon (1952, p. 33): What matters is not merely to know the world *as scholars*, but as scholars to change it.

I think we need to change the field of comparative and international education. It's time.

But how do we do that? How do we usher in this brave new scholarship?

My answer is that I simply don't know.

I don't think there is a one size fits all programme for revolutionary scholarship or scholar activism. And, I don't think that when the revolution comes, we'll all be at the same barricades together. But I do think that this change will happen because it has already started. The old paradigms that have served this field for a very long time are crumbling. Many comparative and international education scholars are asking difficult questions about who is doing the speaking and who is not being heard.

So, perhaps it won't be televised but the uprising *has* begun.

There is a rustling and a murmuring in the dry bones of the academy and a whispering of new voices in its still, quiet places.

So, listen carefully. Listen, and you will hear it.

It is the sound of indigenous scholars and scholars of colour.

It is the sound of Oceania.

It is the sound of the global South clearing its throat—and standing up.

It is the sound of those scholars who live in the marginalized spaces of the institution—saying "no"—and breaking the silence.

It is the sound of smashing plates and broken crockery.

I do not know the answer to how we transform this field but in the end, it doesn't really matter because it's already coming our way. Your choice now is to decide where you stand and what you do next.

I want to speak directly to the indigenous people of Oceania and to scholars of colour who are here today. Later on, I will speak to or Pākehā (settler heritage) allies in the field. But first, I will speak to Oceania.

Friends, one of the things that I want to say is that as indigenous scholars we need to be mindful of the environments that we are working in. In 25 years as an academic working in the field of education and comparative higher education, I have learnt that academic disciplines are riven with power relations.

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There are those who accumulate power within the fields of scholarship and good on them, but it is not, and it has never been, an equal playing field for us. Not ever. And that is the pathological dysfunction of academic life in the neoliberal university for indigenous scholars of Oceania.

The first thing is we learn in our early years in academia is that there are very few of us. Really? You might ask, how few?

Let's do the maths.

Currently in New Zealand's eight universities there are 10,360 full-time academics employed.

10,360 (Ministry of Education, 2018). Remember that number.

Of those 10,360 academics, 495 are Māori, or around 4.8% of the total academic workforce in New Zealand.

How does that look for Pacific scholars in New Zealand?

Of those 10,360 academics, 155 are Pacific scholars, or 1.5% of the total academic workforce in Aotearoa; 1.5% in the land of the long white cloud.

Let's drill down a little further. Let's ask about professors in New Zealand. Who are the senior scholars who shape and mould their disciplines in Aotearoa?

In 2017, there were 1,060 full professors in New Zealand universities of whom 35 were Māori– less than 4% of the New Zealand professoriate.[1]

What about professors who are Pacific people? What of them?

[1] These numbers, drawn from Ministry of Education records, were provided by Dr Tara McAllister, Te Pūnaha Matatini, University of Auckland, New Zealand.

Currently, there are five in New Zealand.

Yes, you did hear me right.

Five Pacific professors out of 1,060 professors in New Zealand universities; or less than half a percent of the academic workforce in this nation in the Oceania region.[2] The Ministry of Education rounds numbers up to five, so there may be even fewer Pacific professors.

So, let me repeat what I said earlier: Academic disciplines are riven with power relations.

I want to ask about the hidden emotional labour buried in those figures.

What is the hidden emotional work that the indigenous scholars of Oceania have to do everyday when we are at work in our disciplines?

And, what are the hidden costs when there are so few of us and when there is so much we have to say?

Inside the universities of Oceania, institutional racism shapes how we build academic careers as indigenous people of this region. These are difficult matters to discuss but I think we do need to talk about them. In a recent comparative study with my colleague, Dr. Cherie Chu, we spoke to Māori and Pacific senior academics about their experiences in New Zealand universities. One senior scholar told us this:

> [I]f you are Pākehā and you do research on Māori—you get a promotion. If you are Māori and you do research on Māori—you get ignored or it's seen as being very threatening. If you are Pākehā and you speak in support of Māori, you are seen as a good person. But if you're Māori and you speak in support of Māori, you get accused of cronyism. The "R" word; "Racism," seems to have a kind of magic power over Pākehā. When the word is used, it's like the flick of a switch and the defences go up. I used to use the word to give what was happening a name... but I've stopped doing that because all it does is make white people go deaf. They literally cannot hear anything that is said after the word "racism" is used in a sentence. (Kidman & Chu, 2015, p. 67).

And there's the rub. Because for many of us working in comparative and international education, "racism" is the word that dare not speak its name. Not even in those public universities where academic freedom and freedom of speech is treasured—where acting as critic and conscience of society is protected under the *New Zealand Education Act*.

The reality for many indigenous scholars of Oceania is that unmasking racism in academia or in our academic disciplines is often a decisively career-limiting or, indeed, a career-ending option. For myself, I'm not immune to this but I'm fortunate because I am part of a generation of indigenous women who had some very good mentors. There were Māori women in the academy who came before us who acted as our guides and protectors. We had Professor Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Associate Professor Leonie Pihama, Dr Ngapare Hopa, Dr Kathie Irwin, and others. There weren't very many of them and they were always overworked but they encouraged us always to

[2] These numbers were also provided by Dr Tara McAllister, University of Auckland, drawn from Ministry of Education records.

speak back to power. Many of these women work in the field of education so it is important to speak their names here.

It is important to speak their names.

These women often put themselves between university managers and some of their more outspoken and more junior Māori colleagues. Sometimes they took the institutional "hits" for us and I am eternally grateful to them and I'm mindful of something that the Black activist scholar, Audre Lorde (2017), once wrote: "When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak" (p. 201).

I believe, in the end, that it is better to speak.

If we are committed to decolonizing the fields of comparative and international education then there are many places where we can begin, but speaking up, I think, is one of those starting points. Importantly, what I also learnt from my mentors—those Māori women who came before me in the academy—is this: One of the greatest acts of resistance in the neoliberal settler-colonial university happens when indigenous scholars act decisively to care for each other, as scholars.

I am not talking here about some kind of cheesy, schmaltzy greeting card kind of call to "lurve" one another because maybe it is an agreeable and companionable thing to do. Because the thing is—we do not necessarily love each other; and, sometimes, the truth is that we do not always necessarily even like each other that much. And that's okay, because we don't live in Disneyland. We don't have to tie our anger up in a pretty pink bow. But to rise above the differences between us that are real, and which *do* matter, is to fight back. It is a powerful way of reclaiming our dignity in the neoliberal university. To use our anger to heal ourselves and the wounds that we inflict on each other after generations of living in white colonial space—this is an expression of hope—and hope is important.

But let me be clear; I'm really not "doing Disney" here because, as we know, hope has many faces and not all of them are good ones. Hope can be naïve. Paulo Freire (1992) tells us that it can keep people locked inside an oppressive situation, longing for our situation to improve. In the neoliberal academy, naïve hope can be a kind of "cruel optimism" (Berlant, 2011). Cruel optimism is the belief that if we keep cooperating with neoliberal university administrations; that if we keep on being nice to them; if we keep on doing what they ask; work those 15 hour days; turn up to every pōwhiri (Māori welcoming ceremony); smile at them and give them compliments, sooner or later surely they'll give us a promotion or they'll employ more of Māori or Pacific academics or people of colour, surely? Or, they'll cite us more often. Or they'll listen to our concerns and act on them. Or, they'll behave like active Treaty[3] partners. *Surely!*

[3] "Treaty" refers to the *Treaty of Waitangi*, signed in 1840. This pact between Māori people and the Crown which promised an equitable, honorable and fair relationship. Since its inception, the *Treaty* has been largely dishonoured by the Crown.

Cruel optimism is the kind of hope that leads us nowhere and which chains us to the status quo. Cruel optimism ties us irrevocably to life as it already is under settler-colonialism—and that is not the kind of hope that I mean.

Because some kinds of hope can be powerful.

Let me call on the work of the Marxist philosopher, Ernst Bloch, the Jewish political scholar who fled the Nazi regime during the rise of Hitler. For a while, he lived in New Hampshire in the United States and during his time there, Bloch wrote his treatise, *The Principle of Hope* (1995).

And in the *Principle of Hope*, this man who fled the horrors of his native land and who lived at a time when his people were being vilified and slaughtered by the massive military machinery of fascism, wrote of a powerful form of hope—a life-giving hope—which he called the *docta spes*.

Docta spes is a form of educated hope, or informed hope. It understands the horror of hatred. It knows, intimately, that not all endings are happy ones, but it educates itself about change. *Docta spes* is the informed and educated hope that the world can be transformed.

So, in the end, the *docta spes* provides us with a concrete "methodology" for people to act collectively in the interests of their own becoming (Kidman, Ormond, & MacDonald, 2018). And that is all I am saying here.

A transgressive *docta spes* for those of us working in comparative and international education gives us all, including our Pākehā colleagues, informed responses to the imperial legacy of the university which has divided us. It gives us informed responses to the colonial basis of fields of inquiry, like comparative and international education, and opens up ethical possibilities for a kind of indigenous everyday hope. It can also provide us with counter-responses to settler-colonial educational aims that constrain us, silence us and exclude us. Everyday hope is not a grand or sweeping gesture. It is quieter and much more mundane. It speaks to the small, quotidian moments that happen in the passage of a day or a month or a year and which are the building blocks of our daily lives. That is often where real change begins. It can happen while we're doing the ironing.

As well, an informed and educated everyday hope for indigenous people can potentially open up a strategic framework where we can mobilise indigenous ways of knowing and being in academia and in our fields of research. If we are committed to transformation, this is also one of the places where we might usefully begin because, at its heart, informed everyday hope can give us an ethic of care in our dealings with each other. As indigenous scholars, when we care for ourselves and when we care for each other—even when we are in the grip of terrible anger—that is an act of resistance.

It is an act of defiance.

It is an act of refusal.

It is an act of solidarity.

It allows us to deny the power of the colonizer—that relentless, hectoring voice—passed on through settler-colonial generation after generation.

It allows us to switch off that colonizing script that insistently whispers to us to silence or suppress, or even, injure the Native Other—the indigenous Other—as well as our own indigenous selves. We can use this kind of hope to fight that voice—to banish it, and to heal.

So, in closing, let me turn my attention to my Pākehā colleagues because I know that many of you have spent time—and, in some cases, you've spent many years of your time––figuring out how to be good Treaty partners and how to be effective white allies in the academy.

I know that this is sometimes very painful work. It takes courage.

I applaud you for having that courage.

There are times, when acting in our defence, you have put your own careers and interests on the line. We know this and we do not forget those who have spoken out. Pākehā allies, the *docta spes* is yours as well.

But all fields need new members and I've been delighted to see so many younger Pākehā scholars coming into the field in recent years. I hope that you'll find a home here. The only advice that I have for you as you're starting out is this: As Pākehā scholars, good intentions matter. And, I know there are good intentions.

But understand this, as well: Good intentions can be weaponized in the neoliberal academy.

In a market-driven, highly competitive, deeply and psychotically individualistic settler institution, good intentions can be turned against the very people you might most want to work alongside: the indigenous peoples of Oceania.

In the neoliberal academy, understand that good intentions can turn sour.

Recognize that when you come into our communities and our classrooms and our university offices with good intentions and eager smiles, you're almost certainly the latest in a long line of people who have come before you with the aim of helping us, or saving us, or changing us, in one way or another. We've met you before in the guise of those other scholars, those travellers who preceded you—bristling with good will.

So, understand this: Decolonization won't come for us from the academic promotions and professional recognition that you will get as a result of speaking to our communities and our people.

Decolonization won't come for us from the knowledge that you will take from your conversations and interviews with us and which you will publish in academic journals.

Decolonization won't happen for us when you are speaking about us but not with us.

Decolonization won't happen for us when you try to save us because when you try to save us it means you haven't heard our solutions or recognized that we need to find our own answers first.

But I have hope. So, to our white allies who are here today, in closing, I want to read you a love poem. It was written in 1899 by the Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, in the last year of the Nineteenth Century, which some historians have called "Britain's Imperial

Century". It was a time when the industrial revolution was at its height and the English countryside was disappearing under hundreds of miles of newly built railway tracks; and, when the growth of new cities with their smoke-filled factories, were belching poisonous fumes into the air.

It was a time when the British Empire was reaching its zenith; a time of huge political expansion and a time of encounters with new peoples in distant lands. It was a time when all the old rules were being overturned. And, it was in that time of change, that William Yeats wrote a poem about love.

And so, Pākehā allies, this one is for you. It's called *He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven*, and this is how it goes.

> Had I the heaven's embroidered cloths,
> Enwrought with golden and silver light,
> The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
> Of night and light and the half-light;
> I would spread the cloths under your feet:
> But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
> I have spread my dreams under your feet;
> Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.
> (Yeats, 1984, p. 171.)

These are the words I want to close with: Tread softly, Pākehā allies and comrades.

To those of you who are just getting started in this field; understand that we are not a white man's burden. We are not a white woman's burden. We are not a white scholar's burden. But sometimes you are ours.

So, tread softly because there are only so many love songs that we can sing.

Tread softy, Pākehā allies, and decolonize.

Tread softly. Decolonize. And, repeat.

Tread softly. Decolonize. Repeat.

And, remember: *He waka eke noa*. We're all in this together.

Kia ora.

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