

Interrogating and Innovating Comparative and International Education Research

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Symposium statement: Destabilizing power and authority: Taking intersectionality seriously¹

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This plenary is intended to interrogate the legitimization of knowledge in scholarship, funding and evidence-based practices in comparative and international education. One of the central questions panelists are asked to address is, “What ways can research and practice destabilize and transform knowledge hierarchies?” My response to that question starts from an understanding of the university as a colonizing space that is simultaneously (and historically) a site for revolutionary transformation. Much of academic knowledge has been premised upon a distinction between a subject who produces knowledge and the object of that knowledge. The colonial and class-based legacy of academic knowledge production and dissemination has meant that in embodied terms, academic knowledge producers in the social sciences and humanities have historically been wealthy men of European origin, but this embodiment has been unmarked. That is, this positionality imagines itself to be the site of neutral and unbiased knowledge production (Haraway, 1988). Meanwhile, the objects of knowledge and material from which *academic* knowledge was produced have been people from the Global South, people of color, women, and others excluded from the academy (Chakrabarty, 2008; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). This colonizing of knowledge manifests materially in the university, including in the faculty ranks. In the United States, the context for the present intervention, 78% of full-time faculty positions are held by White people, while only 6% are Black, 4% are Hispanic, and 6% are Asian or Pacific Islander. Less than 1% of US faculty are Native American. At the level of full professor (the highest rank for faculty positions within the US context) these discrepancies are far more pronounced, with 58% of positions held by White men and 26% by White women—only 6% of full professorships are held by people from the historically underrepresented populations of African American, Latinx, and Native American scholars. These demographics do not reflect the diversity of the country, where people of color comprise nearly 40% of the population (US Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

The transforming possibilities for decolonizing the academy as it pertains to knowledge are at the levels of teaching, scholarship, and writing. In the last century, feminist and other academic debates substantially altered the epistemological bases of academic institutions (see Davies, 2003). This trend continues as waves of scholarship advance the call to decolonize not only space and place, but also to decolonize the histories and knowledges that shored up that material colonization—a compelling call to ‘write back’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2003). Yet, when students of color, White women, or people from the Global South enter graduate schools and begin the path of writing back and decolonizing knowledge production, that implicit otherness is often reinscribed upon their bodies and used to discount their lived experience, their words, and their research. They are often cast as ‘space invaders,’

¹ This response is drawn from two in press articles, for which I am the lead author, co-authored with Dorothy Holland (Anthropology, UNC-CH), Sara Smith (Geography, UNC-CH), Melvin Jackson (The PRIME Collective, LLC), and Jean Dennison (Anthropology, University of Washington, Seattle). Citations are available upon request.

(Puwar, 2004). As Ahmed (2010) has argued, those that call attention to these inequities become themselves marked as the problem. Problems of climate, hostility, and the difficulty of taking on the colonial legacy of academic settings for students, faculty, and administrators are current and urgent matters on college campuses (Ahmed, 2010; Gutiérrez y Muhs, Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012).

The Graduate Certificate in Participatory Research (Certificate) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is one attempt to interrogate the legitimization of knowledge in scholarship, funding and evidence-based practice. Established in 2013, the Certificate is an interdisciplinary program for graduate students who desire training in the theoretical basis, rationale, methodologies, challenges, and motivations for carrying out research in equitable partnership with, instead of on, communities. The Certificate was developed through a participatory process in which a core group of 15 faculty, 10 graduate students, and 2 community experts created the design of the Certificate and its core courses. From its inception, the Certificate was envisioned as an institutional mechanism for affirming and supporting decolonizing theories, approaches, and commitments, and also as a training ground for students seeking a critical decolonizing praxis.

As one of the founders of the Certificate and its current director, my aim during the plenary will be to outline the critical process that informed the development of the Certificate and the needs and challenges that prompted its initiatives and core course, “Decolonizing Methodologies.” In doing so, I will demonstrate three critical practices that have been vital to our efforts toward decolonizing academic research: (a) disrupting gatekeeping mechanisms that maintain hierarchies of exclusion; (b) creating avenues for privileging a greater range of voices in knowledge production; and (c) providing training for research traditions that engage participants as co-producers of knowledge. I intend to elaborate each of these critical practices through a set of lessons we have learned. I invite conversation about ideas, challenges, and opportunities for creating academic and community spaces that challenge existing power dynamics, enable a larger variety of bodies and positionalities the ability to thrive in the academy, disrupt binary thinking about “the community” and “the academy,” and work to ensure Indigenous futurity (Tuck & Yang, 2012) as well as that of other marginalized groups.

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