

# Interrogating and Innovating Comparative and International Education Research

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## International education, comparative education, nationhood and ongoing coloniality

Leigh Patel, University of California, Riverside.

In these opening comments, I'd like to address three broad topics: first, how colonization is an active societal structure, second, how we contend with colonization as a cultural practice of knowledge building in the academy, and third, how positionality must contend with relative sociopolitical power to shift sociogeny.

A few weeks ago, the journal entitled *Third World Quarterly* published an article entitled, "The case for colonialism" by Bruce Gilley. In essence, the article argued that colonialism really shouldn't have such a bad name, because look at all the development and good things that have taken place because of, more specifically, Western colonization. Outrage ensued, the internet responded, retractions were demanded. In response to the reaction more than the article itself, Eve Tuck tweeted the following remarks: "I know that there is much deserved outrage about that article, but much of social science is a tacit endorsement of colonialism. This is not 'new' it is the past and the future of many disciplinary fields. Those which do work on people and not with them. Those which make the external research and not the person or community the expert. Research that is obsessed with "development," closing gaps, catching up, even sometimes reconciliation. All of this can naturalize the (ongoing) violence as a starting point of colonization and thereby posit that good things can come from colonialism." Eve's comments are crucial for helping us to contend with the fact that colonialism is a ubiquitous, as are its referents, figurations, and justifications. Outrage is appropriate to such a poorly researched article, but where is our outrage for research articles published by outsiders to communities who then enjoy wide celebration in part because of their subject positions and credential gained rather easily through admissions, matriculation, and degree conferment by historically and still male and Eurocentric institutions of higher education. Put another way, colonialism is ongoing, and its primary products of stratification and exploitation are justified and refreshed on a daily basis for the benefit of a few and the dispossession of many.

To contend with the roots, logics, and material realities of stratification and exploitation, I have drawn heavily and turn consistently back to the work of Sylvia Wynter. Wynter studied, wrote, and theorized deeply about coloniality, the quest to stratify knowledge and wellness for some by naming others as less than, more specifically less than human. In various publications, I have written that educational research has labeled Indigenous populations as savage to treat them savagely, diagnosed Black peoples as criminal to treat them criminally, labeled brown populations as remedial to treat them liminally, and obsessed about the good intentions of white women to expand and justify their right to code others as savage, criminal, remedial, or even more softly put 'diverse.' This research has used both quantitative and qualitative approaches – the number and the words are more deeply linked as common heuristics for the coding of who can know and who must only be coded. Wynter's work has proven crucial

to me because she is thorough in historicizing of knowledge-for domination projects that are imbued through the science, soft and hard, let alone qualitative and quantitative. Her work is also vital for contending with the way that narrative impossibility is created through colonial practices of knowledge production.

Wynter's 1994 essay: *No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to my Colleagues*, details the classificatory logic of delineating black men as not human to direct a lower level of energy and speed that the LAPD should use in responding to an emergency call. This logic and material practice of classification is one that is imbued throughout all of education and educational research. When we ask where someone is from, when we term research as international, research as community-based, or big data, we are invoking a classification. Classification is a fact of our reality. Our duty, I contend is to rigorously question and address what are the assumptions of the classificatory system, what are the tacit referents, and how do those foment coloniality and the elevation of some by the lowering of others. Put another way, how can we rigorously strip research of its colonial roots and cultural shape? Research, international, comparative, in many iterations, has been shaped by a colonized framework of knowledge in which it has become sensical to treat words and numbers as radically different approaches to knowing, even though both are, at their core, heuristics. What and how we frame what numbers and words can tell us, why they should tell us that, and who gets to hear the responses, those are, from my perspective, far more urgent than a false divide between qualitative and quantitative. Our questions must attend to Wynter's framing of knowledge-for what purpose? Categories for what purpose? Who can know? With the question of who can know, we must be rigorous about hundreds of years of colonization that has rendered the subaltern, to invoke Spivak here, unhearable. I would argue that Spivak's point isn't that the subaltern need to be given language. They have language, but it is unhearable through western social science's knowledge for creations of objectivity and so-called rigor.

As a newcomer to this association but as someone who has taught research theory and methods for a long time, I am interested in how the terms comparative and international interact purposefully with the creation, maintenance, and policy of borders, poverty, voracious wealth, and quests for property. The bulk of the questions that have been posed for this opening plenary are, in essence, how we can alter the sociogeny, the social relations which have all too long constituted who can know with domination, with others who can only be known.

So, I'd like to close with this idea of answerability that I've been thinking about for a few years. To engage with the questions the conveners have posed to us, I have to consider who and what we are answerable to (Patel, 2015). Who we belong to, and who belongs to us, what kind of world we imagine we want to have in 50, 80, or 100 years (Marshall, personal communication). As an educational researchers, I am convinced that those are the questions that led to the creation of HBCU's by the formerly enslaved peoples and their children after the codified abolition of slavery in this nation. I am convinced that it is those questions, who and what are we answerable to, who do we belong to and who belongs to us, and what is our collective future to be that leads to pedagogy and knowledge creation being constants with resistance.

#### References

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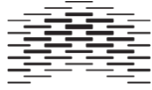
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