# Philosophy *of* Education Society *of* Australasia

## Works in Progress

### Table of Contents

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# PESA CONFERENCE 2014

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**Title: Border traffic: crossing academic boundaries**

**Abstract:**
This conference panel will be an opportunity to explore *Other Thoughts* and *Renegade Knowledges* in postgraduate research supervision. The first, namely the thoughts of non-traditional researchers in newly emerging disciplines,[1] were explored by 28 authors in *Of Other Thoughts: Non-traditional ways to the doctorate* (Engels-Schwarzpaul & Peters, 2013). As I was editing this book, though, reflecting on recent developments in the New Zealand tertiary sector, I began to feel uneasy about the educational system's remarkable ability to assimilate difference. In a neo-liberal knowledge economy, any form of knowing presents as an exploitable resource. The ascent of different kinds of intelligence into the preserves of academic knowledge production (for example, in the areas of postgraduate research inspired by creative practice-led and Māori and Pacific approaches) is therefore always about to be institutionalised. This presents chances and challenges at the same time.

Conceptually countering the inward movement of new arrivals carrying *Other Thoughts* into the academy, *Renegade Knowledges* are produced by those who, dissatisfied by established academic contents, practices and procedures, turn away, towards an outside that is, not unlike Michel Foucault's *heterotopia*, still linked to the institution.[2]

**Academic border traffic**

In this dynamic situation, non-traditional candidates, whose knowledge has traditionally been marginalised, have new opportunities to confront the mainstream with un-subjugated knowledges and counter-memories. Through critical engagements with established bodies of knowledge, literatures and methods, they can change the academic landscape. The challenge then, though, is to resist co-optation and subjugation; to refrain from partaking in exclusionary practices by becoming part of, and taking part in, what Jacques Rancière calls the *count*, where only some are counted in and "the unaccounted-for … have no part" (2001, thesis 6).

This count is not fixed: more and more previously unaccounted-for postgraduate researchers negotiate academic boundaries, neither completely from inside the institution, nor completely from outside. They transform the (meanwhile widely recognised) periodic paradigm shifts in knowledge production into a permanent condition. Many have already mastered Western concepts at undergraduate or even postgraduate levels before gaining access to New Zealand universities. They also bring with them *Other Thoughts* to inform their research. At the same time, *Renegade Knowledges* issue challenges to the system from within. Often educated within established canons, indigenous, feminist, postcolonial, environmental and sexual minorities scholars are amongst the renegades, gate crashers, arrivés, fence sitters and crossers implicated in the border work. I suggest that the inverse directions of local border traffic (centripetally seeking closeness to a real or imagined centre and centrifugally straining away from the institutional core) can be complementary and mutually beneficial. Jointly, they undoubtedly bring new knowledges to the institution and simultaneously contest and unsettle existing knowledge. No less than major, clearly visible events, their small acts of resistance and compliance, rebellion and co-optation account for the continual border traffic of *Other Thoughts* and *Renegade Knowledges*. As Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln observe, the generative oscillations in the academic margins are crucial for an understanding of how knowledge is produced. Preventing any form of knowledge from becoming too settled and obedient, "paradigmatic controversies are often taking place at the edges ... the places that show the most promise for projecting" the trajectory of present and future research (2011, p. 121).

**Politics, Assimilation and Containment**

When those who have no part in a prevailing order confront it, they change what Rancière calls the "distribution of the sensible", which defines what is intelligible, visible and audible (2004b, p.1) and apportions ways of doing, being, and saying (1999, p. 29).[3] In Eurocentric regimes based on "self-universalising philosophies", for instance, other ways of seeing and naming the world remain largely invisible. Those without part are denied "the capacity to think critically or creatively by way of enabling, authorising, and empowering themselves to think for the world" (Dabashi, 2011). Their intelligibility is diminished, along with their visibility, until they present as a 'problem'.[4] This condition can be challenged through a politics, or dissensus, that seeks to transform the prevailing regimes of discounting and miscounting, and to make visible all agents and operations involved. By showing the "presence of two worlds in one" (Rancière, 2010, p. 37) and the "equality between any and every speaking being" (1999, p. 30), dissensus makes place for heterogeneous processes.

At their moment of success, then, newcomers can visibly change the educational system: its orientations and goals, policies, curricula, roles and responsibilities, supplies, technologies and physical spaces. Once their heterogeneous agendas become absorbed into the system, however, the very administrative and governance forces that previously discounted the value of their thoughts will likely assimilate their energies to their own purposes. In competitive, profit driven markets, for example, many UK, Australian and New Zealand universities seek to expand their product range by offering creative practice-led research degrees. These have long been regarded with suspicion and made to conform to established criteria. This is, therefore, an exciting time for practice-led

postgraduate research, and candidates can to an extent participate in determining the criteria by which they are judged. However, a formalisation and standardisation seems already under way, as academic management is taking back control of processes and standards.[5] Or, to use a specifically New Zealand example, the fact that research degree completions by Māori and Pacific students attract twice the standard Government funding has created a new interest in these theses. This could, of course, be seen as a positive development and an opening to cultural difference – were it not that research conditions for those candidates do not automatically improve. The usual quality standards and rigour concerning supervision are not necessarily applied, either. Thus, rather than securing Māori and Pacific researchers (or at least experts in Māori and Pacific research approaches) as supervisors, institutions stand by as these theses are supervised by staff who may hitherto have considered Māori and other indigenous epistemologies trite and irrelevant. Sometimes, those supervisors even actively recruit Māori and Pacific candidates, presumably in the expectation of institutional recognition, while much better qualified Māori and Pacific scholars may not find employment.[6]

In such constellations, the original intent of assimilation, "a unidimensional, oneway process by which outsiders [relinquish] their own culture in favour of that of the dominant society" (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2006, p. 20) is likely to dissipate critical forces and to demand unreserved integration into the dominant order from newcomers. In any event, new kinds of intelligence that threaten to disrupt the prevailing institutional order are inevitably met with co-optation by that very order (Chambers, 2010, p. 68). As politics is arrested, the modus operandi then returns to "statist practices" (Rancière, 2010, p. 37) that degrade, convert, and possibly eliminate the unsettling and creative potential of dissensus (Chambers, 2012, p. 73).[7]

**Re-configuring borders**

Clearly, then, challenges from non-traditional and renegade candidates and supervisors concerning the validity and value of established institutional goals and norms can help prevent insincere assimilation of difference. Without them, inclusion tends to take place "from the inside out", emanating from those who already have a part, and can set the terms, while "those who wish to be included [have] to meet those terms" (Bingham, Biesta, & Rancière, 2010, p. 81). Border crossers can lever out these terms when they act "as if intellectual equality were indeed real and effectual" (Rancière, 2004a, p. 219; see also 2010, pp. 1, 15), providing, in a climate of institutional harmonisation, a transgressive will and a dissonance that can throw different epistemologies into focus, thereby revealing the contingent nature of any academic configuration.[8]

Whether institutions can respond adequately to these border struggles depends on their self-understanding: as establishments, they tend to be aloof and beyond the influence of students. In most established institutions, there is a strong impulse to close spaces of resistance, to produce continuity and consensus, and to consolidate and arrest movements that threaten to get out of control. If this impulse produces inflexible and unbending attitudes and policies, renegades or holdouts have little choice but to seek their own spaces. Thus, in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Māori students and postgraduate researchers have voted with their feet by enrolling in Wānanga (tertiary institutions which provide education in a Māori context). Mainstream universities are all the poorer for it. Within my own institution, I have be told by three PhD candidates that they left our School of Art and Design to enrol at Te Ara Poutama, AUT's Faculty of Māori Development, to work in an environment that wholeheartedly and competently supported their Māori and Pacific research orientations – despite the fact Te Ara Poutama cannot offer expert supervision in art and design. Again, our School is all the poorer for it – particularly since all candidates, understandably, left without instigating an open debate of the problem. Jean-Paul Sartre foresaw such disengagements

already in 1961, when he wrote in his prologue to Frantz Fanon's *The wretched of the earth* (for a French audience): "listen, pay attention, Fanon is no longer talking to us" (quoted in Mignolo, 2013).

If they do not wish to perpetuate a form of apartheid in tertiary education, universities will have to remember the "processes, creative phenomena, meaning-making activities or supports" that are more amenable to change and collaboration, and that are already part of their constitution (Pesce, 2011). A greater willingness to engage in genuine politics could reconfigure institutional boundaries. It would grant space to a dissensus about "the disparate logics of equality and domination", the prevailing distribution of the sensible, and about "who has a part or who counts" (Chambers, 2010, p. 199, 200). As a set of practices, *Other Thoughts* and *Renegade Knowledges* can both contribute to this process. Taking place inside *and* outside, they are both linked to *and* contradict the epistemologies and methodologies prevailing in Western institutions. The tensions and struggles they engage not only reconfigure the borders of the academy, they also spread into the entire institution (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013, p. 13), thereby redefining the territory of postgraduate research.

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**Notes**

[1] Taylor and Besley describe *traditional* students as "disproportionately male, from high-status social-economic backgrounds, members of majority ethnic and/or racial groups, and without disability" (2005, p. 141; for a detailed discussion, see Engels-Schwarzpaul, 2013).

[2] Heterotopia are sites which "have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect". They "are linked with" yet "contradict all the other sites" (Foucault, 1984).

[3] See Rancière's definition of *police* as "a partition of the sensible … characterized by the absence of void and of supplement: society here is made up of groups tied to specific modes of doing, to places in which these occupations are exercised, and to modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places. In this matching of functions, places and ways of being, there is no place for any void. It is this exclusion of what 'is not' that constitutes the police-principle at the core of statist practices" (2010, p. 37).

[4] If these problems present as academic 'underperformance', they are conceptually still addressed within a 'deficit model' that is blind to the contributions such students can make (Cunningham, 2011; Slee, 2010).

[5] As the creative disciplines claim their (also economic) share in the academy, Foucauldian questions of Power/Knowledge are crucial. If unacknowledged, they can play havoc even on the most well intended debates concerning pedagogy, curriculum and standards in creative practice-led theses.

[6] This situation sometimes applies also, more generally, to other research based on non-Western knowledges. E.g., the higher fees paid by international students have made them attractive targets for recruitment – without, usually, prompting a consideration of their particular interests, strengths and needs.

[7] In the Pacific, "[s]trategies of transforming genres and of producing work in multiple genres are associated much more closely with indigenous Pacific Islanders than with settlers and non-Natives" (Wood, 2003, p. 357). This is linked to a lesser identification of Pacific Islanders with Western style disciplines, research frameworks, methods and media. Inclusion and assimilation thus raise interesting questions of identity, aspects I will explore further in the full paper.

[8] This will be developed in the full paper.