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Who controls the narrative? The (re)productions of power and coloniality in the higher education in emergencies community

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we critically examine the coloniality of knowledge production processes within the education in emergencies community and explore how and why such actions continue despite mounting critique. We do so by reflecting on our joint involvement in a consultancy for a large donor which sought to map range of threats facing higher education systems under political or ideological coercion. As the work progressed, it became clear that our own academic freedom was being diminished by the funder's own political and diplomatic interests, limiting the contexts we could include or not in our analysis. Reflecting on this experience, we map out the various drivers that implicate many higher education scholars, ourselves included, in projects that perpetuate epistemic erasure, ignorance and/or violence. We explore how collectively, we become implicated in the very systems of imperialism, capitalism and racism we critique – largely through our continued relationship with and dependence on a small group of funders. This is shaped by enterprises of academic capitalism coupled with the rise of the neoliberal university. Rather than accept these dynamics as a given, however, we argue for the importance of finding small spaces of resistance within our everyday scholarly work to unsettle such forces.

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Introduction

We begin with an anecdote – one which might feel familiar to those who have been contracted for their expertise to government, international non-government organisations, or multilateral agencies. Just over a year ago, our team was commissioned by a large donor in the Global North to conduct a study into the impact that ideological and political threats have on academic freedom in the Global South. Academic freedom was defined as the right of higher education staff, students and personnel to access and engage in teaching, research and knowledge dissemination activities without undue political or ideological interference or discrimination because of one's viewpoints, identity, background, or beliefs (CESCR 2020). The fact that the terms of reference excluded contexts in the Global North was of concern to us, given that in contexts like the United States of America (USA), for instance, academic freedom is being impinged on by neoconservative political ideology, particularly in areas such as gender identity, critical race theory and even history.

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Similarly, in other contexts throughout the Global North, particularly the United Kingdom (UK), parts of Europe and Australia, the autonomy and academic freedom enjoyed by higher education institutions has come under increasing scrutiny by the confluence of ideological and political forces aiming to redress the rise of 'wokeness' in the academy. Notably, this was the case before the events of October 7, and since that time, and in the wake of protests against the war in Gaza, we have witnessed the active and often violent repression of academic freedom on campuses across the Global North, including our own institutions.

At the outset of our engagement with the donor, we emphasised the need for a systematic approach to identifying, including, and discussing where and how threats to higher education were occurring. At first, the donor appeared to accept our stance. Our initial literature review went on to detail clear examples of how the threats facing higher education today from political and ideological forces are a global concern, rather than just one confined to regimes in the Global South perceived by the donor country as illiberal/authoritarian, corrupt, or violent. Yet, when it came time to publish the study, it became evident that the donor's diplomatic and geopolitical interests would overshadow and distort this reality, allowing only a selective portrayal of the extent, scale and transnational dimension of such threats.

For many of us, it was not the first time our work had been censored, redacted or not published by the commissioners of our research. But, in light of the focus of our study – about the growing encroachment and erosion of academic freedom by such threats – we could not help but see the irony of producing a report where our own academic freedom was undermined by the donor's interest. In a twist of fate, in writing about the growing threats to academic freedom in higher education around the world, we as individuals working in Global North research institutions had our own freedoms curtailed by political ideologies.

As a team, we decided it was important to collectively and critically reflect on the specific contours of this work, and why for each of us, it left us feeling deeply unsettled. We apply Unterhalter's (2020) reflexive comparative education methodology to ask:

(a) Why and how issues of risks and threats to higher education in the Global North and South are presented as different, despite increasingly common factors impinging on academic freedom and institutional autonomy across the world today? How might this be shaped by the historical and current contours of both the education in emergencies (EiE) community and higher education institutions?
(b) What are the consequences of this differential representation?
(c) And what types of processes and actions might we need to take to achieve epistemic justice in terms of a more accurate representation of the situation today?

In exploring these questions, we draw on Novelli and Kutan's (2024) application of Michael Rothberg's concept of the *implicated subject* to illuminate the complex dynamics that led to the scenario described above. The concept of implication differs from complicity, allowing us to capture 'the complexities of identities, relationships, and degrees of responsibility for both past and present atrocities' (Novelli and Kutan 2024, 407). The specific complexity we speak to in this article is what Bose and Gordon (2019) label as the politics of representation, or the 'contested space between the subject, the representation of the subject and self-representation' (para. 3). Given our focus on ideological and political threats to academic freedom in higher education settings – a context which we are also members of – these politics were even more nuanced and layered. In particular, we sought to avoid committing epistemic violence, which, we interpret in this context to be the production of knowledge which reproduces coloniality and white supremacy (Bunch 2015; Galván-Álvarez 2010; Spivak 1988). This type of violence continues to manifest by situating the Global North as the standard by which all other contexts are judged – a deeply entrenched and long-standing practice of comparative and international education research (Shields and Paulson 2024).

Yet, processes of knowledge production, when driven by donors' agendas and interests, and within the contexts of the neoliberal academic institutions, meant our own academic freedoms to contest these dynamics were limited. Dale (2015) identifies, for instance, how the field of comparative and international education's (CIE) location within the governance structures of elite institutions across the Global North, alongside its very dependence on a small group of donors working at the global and national scale, shapes and polices processes of knowledge production. As academics working in this space, we are invited to offer 'objective' (i.e. apolitical) analysis of global education phenomena, but through an ontology and epistemology which is often shaped by the political agendas of these funders. Hence if we are to interrogate our experiences of working on this project – and how this implicates us in acts of violence and oppression – we must also chart the 'economic, political and social context within which we research, and the actors that fund us, shape what we ask and what we do' (Novelli and Kutan 2024, 402).

We begin by charting out the histories of academic knowledge production in education and international development scholarship, specifically how the act of comparison serves to structure power and expertise in specific ways, and how this has been used within the EiE community to advance specific projects. We then move to situate this within the wider higher education landscapes we work within today, and the shifting dynamics of the education project within contexts of crisis and conflict. Through this process of reflexive comparison, we reflect on how all of this shaped our experiences of the project we worked on together on higher education under political or ideological threat. Beyond this, we assess our own implications in a specific politics of representation, which continues to permeate EiE research. We end by suggesting how we might find small spaces of resistance – what Grant (2019) labels 'a thousand tiny universities' – where in our everyday scholarly work, we find opportunities to disquiet and unsettle such dynamics.

Our own stance

To explore the questions above and examine our own implications within this, we begin with an ethnography of ourselves and a critical examination of the structures we are part of, in terms of its 'assumptions, practices, methods, epistemologies and silences' (Unterhalter and Kadiwal 2022, 11). As Strumm (2020, 179) notes, such critical reflection processes within the wider international development community are both needed and necessary to reveal and expose the underlying power and dominance of structures, which shape our work and our positions in this. However, the explicit intent of us writing this paper together is to move from building awareness of these structures and how they keep problems in place to identifying how we might find agency and resistance within them to imagine more socially just futures.

This begins with a critical reflection on the professional identity and historical location of each of us. Briefly, Ritesh has been involved in the EiE community for over a decade. He has frequently been involved in conducting research and evaluation work for a range of UN agencies, INGOs and other civil society organisations. While initially, his ambition was to be a 'pracademic' – a practitioner with a more scholarly take on the context – increasingly he has come to realise the tensions and challenges of doing so (Shah, McCormick, and Thomas 2017). At the same time, he recognises his academic capital has been built upon this work. Working in an institution which has witnessed multiple academic staffing redundancies in the last decade, this work has protected him, through demonstrable financial 'value' to his institution. Despite this, Ritesh has often been critical of the neoliberal university and his own identity within it (Shah 2019; Shah et al. 2025).

Jay has worked as a forced migration scholar predominantly in the area of refugee settlement and transnationalism for more than 15 years. Prior to this time, he worked with displaced groups as a social worker in community development contexts. Throughout his time as an academic, he has worked closely with government agencies and civil society in New Zealand to address some of the challenges and issues around refugee resettlement. This work has generated significant revenue

and opportunities for his own career advancement, enabling him to build substantial academic capital within his institution, and arguably greater opportunities for academic freedom.

Daniel is an early-ish career academic. The son of aid workers, he grew up in a range of contexts deemed conflict-affected, or fragile, by organisations such as the World Bank. His work on a few consultancy projects has contributed to Daniel's success in securing academic positions as they signal to his institutions, among other things, a potential to attract external funding and an emerging track record of working with highly regarded international organisations.

Likewise, Wendy has also profited from the relationships the university she as part of had with major donors, both during and after completion of her PhD. university she as part of had with major donors, both during and after completion of her PhD. She has been part of various research teams with Ritesh on a range of research and evaluation projects in the EiE sector, firstly as a poorly paid research assistant, and more recently as a better-paid contractor. She took on this work to enhance her professional credibility in the sector and provide the necessary income. This work, alongside her PhD research on Myanmar, helped her to be employed firstly as a lecturer at a prestigious American university and more recently, at an international development agency in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

We share this about ourselves to acknowledge our privileges as Global North researchers involved in EiE research, and the various ways that we have benefited materially and career-wise from preexisting histories of violence and structures of inequality. Rothberg's concept of the implicated subject provides us with a useful vocabulary to describe how we are 'folded into' (Rothberg 2019, 1) events by virtue of our participation in 'histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator' (Rothberg 2019, 1). As EiE researchers, we were not direct agents of harm, and yet we inhabit and benefit from the regimes of domination that privileged our subject positions as Global North researchers involved in researching the Global South. As implicated subjects, we are the 'transmission belt of domination' (Rothberg 2019, 35). By virtue of our everyday tasks as academics, such as our scholarship and involvement in the knowledge production process, we help perpetuate the legacies of historical violence and support the structures of inequality that shape the present. Indeed, violence is more ordinary than typically imagined. In the following sections, we demonstrate how academia is implicated in systems of domination and historical injustices. In doing so, we confront our implication to hold ourselves accountable for our relations to histories of violence and current hierarchies of power.

Coloniality of knowledge production in education in emergencies

Although colonialisation as a political order has ended, patterns of suppression, expropriation, domination and imposition that characterise the relationship between Western culture and others continue to persist in knowledge and meaning production (Quijano 2007). This coloniality of knowledge is driven by the continuance of a logic of 'norm and deviance', in which the Global North is positioned as superior to the South. Such hierarchies are specified through discourses of distinction such as primitive/civilised, irrational/rational and traditional/modern (Ziai, Bendix, and Müller 2020). They assume Europe as 'the mirror of the future of all other societies and cultures' (Quijano 2007, 76). The enterprise of 'development' as a historically produced discourse has colonised reality to the extent that 'the fact of development itself, and the need for it, could not be doubted' (Escobar 2007, 5). This has occurred through representations of the Global South in science and expert discourses as 'underdeveloped', and been as effective and pervasive as the colonial counterparts in producing powerful truths and ways of creating and intervening in the world (Escobar 2007). It has created a regime of order and truth for producing knowledge about, and exercising power over the Global South. Objectivist and empiricist in character, this wider project of modernity presents Global South subjects as knowable and homogenous and thus, to be intervened upon (Escobar 2007).

Within the education and international development community, this phenomenon remains acutely true. The enterprise of comparison has been key to the field, but the politics of difference and assumptions that sit behind these comparisons, especially how the experiences of the global metropole drive the logic of norm and deviance, are often neglected (Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell 2017). For example, earlier work by Manzon (2011, 45) highlights the 'hierarchical structure in the field of knowledge production, wherein some countries occupy a central "paradigmatic" position for other countries located at the periphery'. What is also missing from these acts of comparison is a recognition of education and research's explicit roles in the project of colonisation itself, and the particular ways in which the formerly colonial and now imperialist powers use education and research as a political/ideological tool for shaping hearts and minds and justifying interventions (see for instance Barakat, Bellino, and Paulson 2024; Couch 2020; Walker et al. 2023).

Academia has long been implicated in supporting and justifying projects of epistemological superiority, conquest and interventionism (Sriprakash, Tikly, and Walker 2020; Unterhalter and Kadiwal 2022). CIE scholars in elite institutions throughout the Global North have been contracted for decades to provide an empirical, 'objective' and neutral evidence base which can justify specific technologies of governance which funders and multilateral bodies then promote (Dale 2015). Researchers who feed into such processes often neglect the fact that their 'right to research' (Appadurai 2006) is entangled with the continuance of a coloniality of knowledge production, including in the analytical categories used and the ontological elements deemed as constitutive of the world and relevant to academic research (Ziai, Bendix, and Müller 2020). All representations are constructed images informed by various power relations and ideological agendas (Anand 2007; Emelobe 2009), but the façade of objectivity hides the inequalities and forms of domination sitting behind these representations and converts representations into truth (Anand 2007).

Recent years has seen an unearthing of CIE's entanglements with these histories and legacies of colonialism and race (see for instance Shields and Paulson 2024; Sriprakash, Tikly, and Walker 2020; Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell 2017; Unterhalter and Kadiwal 2022). Similarly, in the EiE community, there are an increasingly number of scholars who have explored the implications of academia's entanglements with Western interventionism, neo-imperialism, and racial erasure (see for instance, Brun and Shuayb 2024; Dalrymple 2023; Menashy and Zakharia 2023; Oddy 2024) and demonstrated increased researcher self-reflexivity about ones' own roles and responsibilities within these complex webs of oppression (see for instance, Menashy and Zakharia 2022b; Novelli and Kutan 2024; Shah et al. 2023a; Shah et al. 2025). This work highlights how the national interests and political, economic and military strategies of imperialist powers often shape, if not drive, educational research and policy agendas within the EiE community. And as Novelli and Kutan (2024) note, by virtue of the engagement of all of us – higher education researchers in the Global North included – in this machine, we too are implicated whether we like it or not.

What has, perhaps, been less theorised are the drivers and motivations which influence scholars in the Global North, to remain implicated in these practices. For this, we need to unpack knowledge production enterprises in the Global North, and how this is undermining and threatening academic freedom and our own integrity as independent scholars in more insidious ways.

Higher education landscapes and the complicity it leads to

Neoliberal reforms to higher education systems globally have resulted in 'academic' or 'knowledge' capitalism and the rise of the enterprise university (cf. Marginson and Considine 2000; Olssen and Peters 2005; Slaughter and Leslie 1997). These reforms positioned universities as businesses which were required to generate revenue, rather than solely obtain funding from public sources (Brown 2015). Such requirements coincided with the reduction of state funding to higher education in real terms in many countries (cf. Akinsanmi and Olanrewaju 2020; Bryant 2022; Marginson 2018) and placed increasing demands on academic staff within the higher education sector to secure financial revenue from external sources. Increasingly, this is a leading to higher education

institutions and academics marketing their services and expertise to government agencies, civil society organisations, philanthropic interests and private corporations, who then commission (or purchase) the expertise of researchers to help support their interests and agendas (Bridges 2017).

This notion of research for purchase can lead to a range of issues, including contestations over ownership of the intellectual property produced, alongside how and whether such research should be used. As Bridges (2017) outlines, social science research can have multiple outcomes. Some of these outcomes can be challenging for a funder, as research may:

> … reveal discrepancies between the claims made by government or other sponsors of educational innovation and the evidence of the research, though (less frequently perhaps) it may confirm those claims; it may reveal improprieties in the behaviour of politicians or officers, or confirm their integrity and public-mindedness; it may reveal that the pet schemes upon which politicians have staked a significant part of their credibility are successful or are flawed. In any of these cases, political reputation, authority, and power can be at stake, and in this sense, research can have a political value which is independent of its economic or moral value, though it is indirectly linked to the latter. In these circumstances, *who owns the research and who consequently has the right to publish it or withhold it from publication become themselves important political issues.* (326, italics added)

Non-disclosure agreements and confidentiality clauses can make it potentially difficult to render a critique of specific objectives, policies, approaches, or decisions a funder may be making (Norris 1995). Research for purchase can also lead to epistemic drift (Elzinga 1985, 209) whereby hallmarks of disciplinary rigour are replaced by a concern for relevance and applicability, which 'influences the problems' selection, the standards of performance of research, standards of significance, and territorial definition of the field in question'. It also means that the value and quality of research, rather than being determined through peer review and independent protocols, is shaped by its relevance for politically, administratively or commercially determined goals.

This undermines academic freedom and intellectual autonomy. As O'Neill (2013) highlights in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, a scholarly and independent research culture is being eroded by demands for utility and the economic value of any research endeavour. Significant new ethical burdens are placed upon individual researchers who no longer have the strong collegial, participatory decision-making culture to help them make right choices. These burdens coincide with a significant increase of precarity in academia. As Vatansever (2023, 3) notes, an 'overdependence on external funding and the ensuing rise in project-based work compel a growing majority of academic workers to accept forced mobility between institutions and places … to work on research agendas that are dictated by market incentives'. A combination of conditions attached to external funding and precarious employment holds considerable implications for the freedom of academics to make ethical research decisions without undue external influence (cf. Ferreira 2023; Mason and Megoran 2021; Vatansever 2023).

Additionally, the risks posed to individual academics who step out of line with interests of the research funder, or the university as a whole, has been greatly heightened. For instance, within the EiE community, a decision by a group of academics to publicly write about the unethical exit of a donor led to it threatening these academics and their institutions with lawsuits and refusal of payment (Shah et al. 2023b). In response, some of the institutions which employed these academics sought to distance themselves from the stance taken in their article.[1]

We must, however, acknowledge that the threats to academic freedom occurring in conflict-affected contexts are far more acute, as often peoples' lives and livelihoods are at stake (GCPEA 2022; Scholars at Risk 2022). Equally, as we have seen with recent dissent on university campuses in the Global North in response to the ongoing genocide in Gaza, these protests have been addressed by university leadership violently and/or coercively, drawing on mechanisms of the repressive state apparatus in the process (King and Mead 2024). Individual academics and students have been targeted and blacklisted by both their own institutions and pro-Zionist forces (Borter, Ax, and Hay 2024). It is this dilemma which we wish to speak to: as academics situated in Global North institutions, and writing/researching about higher education systems in the conflict-affected Global South contexts, how do we exercise our academic freedom and ethical responsibilities, avoid playing into a particular politics of representation, and not risk our own careers in the process?

The context of our own implication

A large donor tasked our team to investigate the resilience of higher education systems in contexts that they termed 'authoritarian regimes' and 'non-permissive'. The brief was clear: focus on regions where academic freedom and access to higher education were under significant threat from authoritarian regimes and provide recommendations on bolstering these systems against such challenges. From the outset, our team understood, based on the way the terms of reference were written, that this project was not just a neutral exercise in knowledge production but was deeply embedded in the politics of representation and the coloniality of knowledge that Quijano (2007) describes. The Request for Proposal (RFP) explicitly stated that the work should focus on specific regions of the Global South. In our own proposal, to challenge this, we made explicit that our study needed to be inclusive of any context where academic freedom and institutional autonomy was under threat from political or ideological forces. This meant including countries, irrespective of their geographic, economic or political locations, as long as such threats were documented in the evidence base.

We justified this based on our expertise as academics and through a language of method and rationality, which provided a scientific and politically neutral approach to how we would identify the circumstances and contexts under which these threats had arisen. In doing so, we sought to distance ourselves from the clear political agendas that were driving the donor's interests in the higher education settings of some countries and not others. As Dale (2015, 357) observes, it is this power of comparative education research to provide epistemologically authoritative but politically subservient expertise that can be 'detached from academic roots … national origins … and from accusations of partiality', that we marketed, knowing full well that as researchers for contract, we were treading a line between pleasing a client and our own positionalities.

As we drafted our findings, we wrestled with the internal dilemma of representation that Ziai, Bendix, and Müller (2020) highlight: should we include specific countries that might challenge the prevailing narrative of the Global South as the primary locus of authoritarianism? Could we justify their inclusion based on empirical evidence? Why was it important for us as scholars to be comprehensive and remain critical, even if it risked inflaming geopolitical sensitivities and political fallout? These provocations guided our early drafts and conceptual approach as we sought to avoid the issues surrounding the coloniality of knowledge in our field discussed earlier.

This approach naturally raised questions about the inclusion of countries like Turkey, India and Mexico, as well as instances within the Global North, such as threats to academic freedom in Western Europe, USA, Australia and New Zealand. However, the feedback from the donor quickly shifted the narrative, underscoring the power asymmetries that shape knowledge production. Communication we received indirectly from the managing contractor for this project suggested that our report had raised several flags within different parts of the donor agency. The comments were not technical ones but rather focused on ensuring that the message which the report communicated did not undermine the donor's pre-existing diplomatic and development agendas. Our 'methodological approach was challenged, and highlighted to us how underlying political and ideological agendas could take primacy in the knowledge production enterprise (Anand 2007). We were informed that labelling specific contexts as 'authoritarian' or 'non-permissive' could strain diplomatic relations. Instead, we were encouraged to adopt more positive or neutral language as 'non-negotiables', framing the issues not as 'threats' but as challenges related to 'repression of freedom of association, assembly and expression'. Additionally, we were told to be more selective and cautious with the examples provided to illustrate different threats to academic freedom. While the donor had no qualms about some countries being named and included as examples – particularly those where diplomatic relations were already strained, or where there was a need to justify the donor's continued engagement – other countries where this was not the case were expressly off limits.

It felt like a case of buyer's remorse: we had delivered what was originally agreed upon, only to be told it was not politically palatable. These dynamics led to a critical team discussion. How could we reconcile the demands of the funder with our own ethical, moral and scholarly commitments?

Should we selectively omit specific contexts and countries, or would it be more ethical to remove all country names altogether to avoid the pitfalls of selective representation and the perpetuation of epistemic violence (Shah et al. 2025)? Rather than misrepresent countries adversarial to the donor as being excessively authoritarian and countries allied to the donor as benign, we decided to not name any countries in the text. While this decision somewhat contradicted our emphasis on the importance of understanding and analysing the context when considering strategies in response to specific threats in higher education, at a minimum it allowed us to communicate the research with some degree of integrity. Additionally, we decided that rather than frame the accompanying case studies by geographical regions, we would present threats and responses under thematic groupings instead. This would ensure that we would avoid presenting issues as specific to one context, but not another. It also enabled us to avoid falling into the trap of becoming the mouthpiece for particular political projects and aligned with our key learnings from the consultation sessions anyway. But even there, we described specific contexts in vague, non-descript terms, rather than going into details on the richness of the unique historical, political and social conditions which had led to threats and responses manifesting in specific ways in each location.

We recognise we produced a final report that was significantly diluted and stripped of much meaningful content. By avoiding specific country references and contextual examples that would provide specific grounding, the document presented a flat ontology of the situation, sidestepping the deeper political issues central to the original brief of our work. While this report was diplomatically acceptable, this decision reflected the colonial constellations in academic knowledge production that we had sought to challenge (Ziai, Bendix, and Müller 2020). Instead, it reinforced the Global North's narrative dominance and silenced how today, academic freedom is under threat from a range of socio-political and economic factors that transcend the borders of nation-states.

Reflecting on our own implications and where to go from here

Engaging in politically sensitive research, particularly within EiE, presents a landscape fraught with ethical dilemmas and complexities. Our experience with the commissioned study brought these issues to the forefront, prompting us to reflect on our roles as scholars within these contested spaces. What we have come to realise is that our engagement cannot be easily categorised as either complicit or ethical but rather on a spectrum shaped by the dynamics of power and the concept of Rothberg's (2019) implicated subject. As implicated subjects, we operate within a continuum where ethical considerations and practical realities must be constantly negotiated. Despite its limitations, we are generally proud of the final product submitted to the donor and believe it will contribute to ongoing conversations about academic freedom in a rapidly evolving environment. Yet, this pride is tempered by a recognition of the work that remains to be done – both in terms of contesting the politics of representation that shapes higher education today and in working toward more just and equitable processes of knowledge production. In light of these complexities, it is clear that deep reflexivity is not just a methodological choice but an ethical imperative to respond to the epistemological challenges we face.

As scholars, we are not merely passive observers or neutral producers of knowledge. We are enmeshed in the very systems of imperialism, capitalism and racism we critique. As we have signalled, this is particularly true for those of us within institutions of the Global North, or who engage with institutional donors to support our research platforms. In the neoliberal universities in which many of us work, it is through such engagement that we are able to further our careers and also generate revenue for both us and our institutions. And for fear of biting the hand that feeds us, but also potentially, out of shame, we often remain silent about such dynamics. This not only limits our own academic freedom but contributes to wider acts of epistemic violence.

During this study, we encountered clear examples of the blind spots, silences and unstated truths that pervade the systems of knowledge production in higher education today. These gaps are not merely incidental but are indicative of a larger politics of representation that can warp and

misrepresent the realities of our social world. The harm done by such omissions and distortions is profound, as it perpetuates a narrative that prioritises certain voices and perspectives while marginalising others, often reinforcing existing power structures, inequities and hegemonic forms. And importantly, it ignores some of the common and shared threats which face higher education systems today – founded on neoliberal and capitalist logics – which have instrumentalised research production activities into a marketable process, undermining academic freedom. Our continued relationship with and dependence on such funders, not only limits our own academic freedom but perpetuates various forms of violence (epistemic, structural and material) against those in the Global South through acts of empire. Our role, then, must go beyond merely acknowledging these silences, and instead, involve actively working toward reparations within the academic landscape. Such reparations in the context of education can take many forms – material, epistemic and pedagogic (Sriprakash 2023). Thinking explicitly about epistemic repair, we consider how we might 'interrogat[e] past and present epistemic injustices, refusing to carry forward their erasures, denials and distortions … attending to them through educational systems, institutions and practices', and restore our own integrity in the process (Sriprakash 2023, 789).

We feel this is not a question of individual ethics, but rather, of collective responsibility to a politics of repair within the EiE community. Finding such agency within a landscape where such reparations require not just individual action but deep transformation of the systems and structures that create such injustices can sometimes be challenging. But here, we take solace in Grant's (2019) argument that universities such as ours are made up of thousands of 'tiny universities' comprised of small acts of transgression and resistance to the hegemonic order. This notion encourages us to be alert to the 'daily possibilities of not just resistance in the present, but, better transformation towards an alternative' (10). Such possibilities, as Grant notes, do not come from sweeping change, but rather from alternative modes of acting, being and inhabiting the higher education landscapes we are part of. This is particularly important for those of us privileged, as we are, to exercise our academic freedom, and where legislation in Aotearoa/New Zealand encourages us to act as the critic and conscience of society (Shah 2019).

In this context we work in, some incorporate varieties of abolitionist and anti-racist frameworks in their daily work to unmake the repertoires of racial violence the university reproduces against indigenous peoples (Gillespie and Naidoo 2021). This includes, for instance, an explicit integration of indigenous theories and knowledges into their teaching and research practices. Others take more dramatic actions, such as making decisions to not engage with particular donors. This may be more palpable for senior academics whose careers have already been established from prior work with these organisations, or in a context where public good funding for research remains more plentiful. But, from the geographic and social locations which we write this piece from, exercising such forms of principled boycott may be to the detriment of our careers or survival in an increasingly resource-constrained landscape.

Alternatively, it could be argued that there is an imperative to continue such engagements, but with a critical lens, and within them, to continue to find opportunities to provide counter-narratives and points of resistance to the status quo. In this way, agency is exercised through small acts of transgression from the inside. For us, this paper is itself a small act of transgression, choosing to speak out against a silence about these dynamics of power which many recognise, but few choose to name (Shanks and Paulson 2022). Importantly, we have learned from our engagements in research consultancies, that within contracting agencies, there too are individuals who seek to change the hegemony, but who may lack the autonomy or authority to do so on their own. Recognising where and how our academic authority and 'independence', coupled with their bureaucratic knowledge, can be channelled towards change is an important form of transgression and solidarity in itself. Recently, such partnerships were used to support a public and published discussion between researchers and practitioners, about the types of radical changes necessary within our education in emergencies community to address historical and contemporary injustices (Shah et al. 2025). Hence, even in producing the commissioned research on higher education in authoritarian

regimes, we had support from many allies from within the donor itself, and its contracting agency, who helped us to think about how to navigate the contested terrain described in an ethical way.

Either way, in rejecting opportunities to work with funders, or seeking them out, we remain implicated subjects in the wider systems and structures we are part of. What is useful about this notion of implication is that it doesn't absolve anyone from blame, and rather makes us all responsible for the injustices we note – individual academics, bureaucrats, donors, or higher education institutions themselves. It also highlights the importance of solidarity which requires finding our commonalities in struggle rather than our differences, and in overcoming the hierarchical and competitive structures the sector is marked by (Menashy and Zakharia 2022a). This includes thinking about the wider threats which undermine knowledge production and the wider purposes of higher education in society today.

Higher education is in crisis everywhere, largely influenced by contemporary political and economic forces which are transnational in nature. Thus, this paper is not just a story about higher education in the Global South, where the situated gaze (Haraway 1991; Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler 2002) of the donor into the challenges to academic freedom is represented as more visible and extreme. It is also a story about higher education in the Global North today – one where capitalism, political ideology, the military-industrial complex, geopolitics and emerging technologies like artificial intelligence are also threatening academic freedom and serving to reproduce epistemic injustice. These forces are not only shaping the content and direction of scholarly inquiry but also influencing the conditions under which knowledge is produced, curated and disseminated and insidiously structuring our academic freedoms in specific ways. It also undermines some of the core functions of higher education, such as fostering critical thinking, promoting social equity and contributing to the public good. Collectively, it is our job to protect these important functions and ensure it is not unduly compromised by the political economy of knowledge production within the education in emergencies community. This requires us to continually interrogate our positions, the power dynamics at play and the broader implications of our work. It demands that we remain vigilant about how our knowledge production processes may perpetuate silences, reinforce dominant narratives, or contribute to the marginalisation of others. In this way, we can strive to navigate these contested spaces of complicity and resistance, all within the constant contestations as implicated subjects who are ultimately working toward more ethically engaged and socially responsible and just scholarship.

Note

1. https://access-education.auckland.ac.nz/discountinuation_of_funding/.

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