Decolonising ‘Context’ in Comparative Education: The Potential of Oceanian Theories of Relationality

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Abstract

This article addresses long standing and inter-connected tensions within Comparative and International Education (CIE) as a field of research: those of an inadequate theorising of ‘context’ and of a continued and deeply ‘entangled’ colonial legacy. While supporting many of the arguments outlined in recent theorisations of context as ‘assemblage’ we propose a more explicitly relational CIE approach, drawing on both Southern Theory’s inter-epistemic project and our learnings from Indigenous scholars of Oceania.

Keywords

Oceania – Indigenous – Southern Theory – culture history – context – assemblage – relationality

1 Introduction

Today the region of Oceania, which geographically covers a significant proportion of the world’s largest ocean, the Pacific, is defined by United Nations agencies and many other international and regional bodies, including the World Council of Comparative and International Education Societies (WCCES), as

comprising the 'developed' Northern states of Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand, the relatively large 'developing' state of Papua New Guinea (PNG), and 22 small Pacific island countries (PICS) representing the majority of the world's small island developing states. The populations of the Southern states of PNG and the PICS are predominantly Indigenous.¹ Within Oceania, wealth and power differentials patterned by the North/South relationships established during colonial times, have ensured the maintenance of socio-economic inequalities across the region and have long been an issue of concern among social scientists, including comparative educationists, in the region (Johansson-Fua, Jesson, Spratt & Coxon, 2020, p. 5).

In responding to the call for this special issue, therefore, we were mindful of the extent to which the CIE tensions we identify – those arising from perceived inadequacies in how CIE theorises 'context', and in the continued and deeply 'entangled' colonial legacy within CIE as a field of knowledge production – have shaped CIE theory and practice in the region to which we belong (McCormick & Johansson-Fua, 2019). In recent years our regional CIE society, the Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (OCIES), has undergone a continuing process of revitalization with the explicit aim of developing a more diverse and inclusive CIE space, one more representative of the context for which it is named (Coxon & McLaughlin, 2017). Thus, OCIES members have engaged explicitly with such tensions and worked productively to decolonise the processes of knowledge production in a manner which upholds the notion of "the context behind the context" – the sociocultural structures, ways of knowing, values and practices in which education and research is embedded (Airini, Anae, Mila-Schaaf, Coxon, Sanga & Mara, 2010, p. 11).

In choosing to explore how these tensions have served as challenging yet productive aspects of our engagement as non-Indigenous² OCIES members

1 We capitalise Indigenous to demonstrate respect and recognition, in line with the editorial guidelines established by Indigenous writers and organisations, and adopted by many publishing houses. Indigenous peoples are those whose ancestral links to specific places predate European contact. When using the term Indigenous we ascribe to the working definition used within the United Nations systems, which incorporates self-identification (Asia Pacific Foundation and Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, 2013). The populations of both Aotearoa-New Zealand and Australia include Indigenous peoples who, as the result of British colonisation and ensuing settlement by 'outsiders', are minority groups in their own countries. Although all PICS came under colonial administration (from Britain, France, Germany or the U.S.), settlement from outside was limited. The Indigenous peoples of the PICS therefore have retained their majority status and most PICS attained political independence through the decolonisation processes of the 1960s-1980s. The Oceanic scholars drawn on in this article are Indigenous to the independent Pacific states of Tonga, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Fiji and Papua New Guinea.

2 We are both Pākehā New Zealanders, i.e. descendants of Europeans settlers, therefore not Indigenous to Aotearoa. Although at opposite ends of our careers as CIE academics (a

we hope to have indicated a potentially rich trend within CIE, in Oceania and beyond. We maintain that re-theorising 'context' through a combined lens of assemblage and Oceanian theories of relationality has the potential for moving beyond the colonial logics embedded in CIE.

Our exploration of the identified tensions begins by problematising the concept of context as it has been positioned within CIE. We then explore the insightful theorising of context offered by drawing on the concept of assemblage as articulated in the work of Sobe and Kowalczyk (2013, 2018), and Bartlett and Vavrus (2019). We find this theorising of context as assemblage and the treatment of contextualisation as an ongoing "matter of concern" in which we as researchers are "entangled", to be generative and exciting (Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2018, p. 197).

However, by reflecting on what is 'in and out of context' in the way these arguments are made, we see the value in further expanding the 'matter of concern' to connect more explicitly with Southern Theory arguments for the critical importance of the "interepistemic" agenda within CIE (Takayama, Sriprakash & Connell, 2017, p. 17). We agree with Takayama, Heimans, Amazan, and Vegneskumar (2016, p. 2) that, because it "is essentially a pedagogic project", Southern Theory work is central to debates in educational scholarship.

We then aim to demonstrate the value of Southern Theory as a "critical epistemic resource" (Takayama et al., 2016, p. 6) for advancing CIE by presenting our learning from Oceanian theories of context and knowledge production, their epistemological underpinnings in relationality, and of research as a relational space. Consistent with the Southern Theory approach, we do not attempt to reinterpret what the theorists say or to draw explicit comparisons with 'Western' theorising. Our aim is to transmit Indigenous ways of knowing as they have been presented, not to re-present them from a non-Indigenous perspective. We give particular attention to the extent to which they have stimulated us to (re)think context and research relationally.

In reflecting on recent developments in OCIES, the final section of the article highlights the implications of the interepistemic project for CIE in and beyond Oceania, especially with regards to the crucial place of education for transformational and sustainable development (Johansson-Fua, 2016). Our

PhD candidate and retired professor respectively) we share an interdisciplinary (education, development studies, Pacific studies, anthropology) approach to our research-practice. With regard to our regional CIE society (OCIES), we each have occupied executive positions and taken leadership roles in its revitalisation and strengthening as a 'relational space'. We also have extensive shared experience as researchers and development aid workers in many of the Pacific island countries in Oceania, and collegial relationships with the Oceanian theorists we cite in this article.

hope is that the discussion will contribute to shifting the traditional starting point of CIE research towards the global South in general.

2 The Problem of Context in Comparative and International Education

The notion that ‘context matters’ in comparative education research arguably occupies the status of a truism. There is a notable and growing body of literature advocating a greater focus on, and the development of more sophisticated methodologies for, taking context into account (Crossley & Watson, 2009; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006). However, less attention has been given to interrogating the onto-epistemic assumptions behind the conceptual framings of context that dominate in CIE, and how our efforts as CIE researchers to ‘contextualise’ are acts of power (Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2013; Bartlett & Vavrus, 2019). Although over the last decade or so, there have been several ‘state of the field’ pieces, in which this unresolved ‘problem of context’ for CIE has been raised (for example, Cowen, 2006; Lee, Napier and Manzon, 2014), as Sobe and Kowalczyk argue, “the field of comparative education still remains hobbled by unsophisticated and inadequately theorised notions of context.” (2013, p. 6).

So, what is this ‘problem of context’, and how does it relate to discussions of the colonial legacy within CIE? As we and others have argued, the problem resides with the conventional theorisation of context, which is rooted in colonial, essentialist understandings of place and culture (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2019; Johansson-Fua et al., 2020; Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2013). This theorisation posits context as comprised of features of a ‘local’ setting, which can be understood in terms of *a priori* categories (i.e. political, cultural, social features) and can be identified, described and accounted for at the outset of the research process (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2019; Stephens, 2007). As argued by Bartlett and Vavrus (2019, p. 190), this conceptualisation of context is also tied to “outdated” notions of culture as a static set of social norms, values and meanings that are associated with a bounded social group and are to be uncovered by the researcher.

Although critiques of these understandings of context, culture and locality have been well advanced, particularly through the influence of postcolonial theorists and the more recent “spatial turn” in CIE (Larsen & Beech, 2014), they have had limited impact on mainstream CIE. Such tendencies are by no means exclusive to comparative education and, as noted above, they reflect the broader legacy of essentialist social theory and the colonial logics of ‘otherness’. As Cowen lamented in 2006, “we are nowhere near having sorted out, intellectually, the problem of context” (2006, p. 567); to which we would add

that we are nowhere near having sorted out the coloniality of the concept of context.

3 Retheorising Context Relationally

Reflecting a wider shift to spatial and relational thinking currently occurring across the social sciences, a growing body of scholars within CIE have begun to rethink context in more relational, spatial and processual ways (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2019; Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2018). Employing the concept of assemblage, drawn from Deleuze and Guattari (1987), rather than a fixed and bounded entity, context is reframed as a dynamic “confluence of practices and objects coming together and never permanently stabilising” (Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2013, p. 10).

While there are many and varied interpretations of Deleuze and Guattari's original concept, we find the notion of assemblage a useful heuristic for re-thinking conventional notions of context. Assemblage was described by Deleuze (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987 p. 69 [1977], cited in Müller & Schurr, 2016) as “a symbiosis, a ‘sympathy’. It is never filiations which are important but alliances, alloys”. From this perspective, entities are not unitary wholes constructed according to some coherent logic and with fixed boundaries, but are continually being assembled, disassembled and reassembled as heterogeneous elements come together in emergent ways and are defined relationally (Savage & Lewis, 2018). In this sense, contexts are never pre-existing, rather we are constantly in the process of ‘contextualising’; of establishing relations between objects within time-space, and placing things ‘in and out’ of context. We draw on the particular epistemological resources we have available to us to do so, and thus, as researchers, our attention as researchers must go beyond describing contexts to considering “how contexts are made” and our own role in that as researchers (Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2018, p. 198).

We are persuaded and excited by the potential of this theorising of context drawing on assemblage, which methodologically requires researchers to treat context as an ongoing “matter of concern” within which the researcher is entangled (Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2018, p. 197). The emphasis on emergence and relationality coheres with our own theorising of context as a *relational space* that, as we will discuss below, is based on our engagement with Oceanian theorisations of relationality. Thinking of context in this way adds value in capturing the complexity of education as a socially and historically embedded phenomenon, and of place and culture as made (and continually in the re-making), not found (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). We strongly concur with the

argument that the theorisation of context should be an ongoing matter of concern for our field and that its retheorising represents a generative and potentially rich trend within CIE, worthy of following.

4 Doing Southern Theory

We also argue for a more deliberate turn to Southern Theory as a resource for this (re-) thinking, as an opportunity to enrich theorisations of relationality within the research process. Furthermore, if a retheorising of context and contextualisation is to redress the colonial logics inscribed in CIE – which we believe it must do – our experience is that it must go beyond rethinking. It must be consistently and explicitly accompanied by efforts to shift the material and structural conditions of knowledge production within our academies and CIE spaces. Here we concur with Takayama and colleagues' (2016, p.12) argument that 'doing Southern Theory' is "to challenge the existing structure of knowledge production and dissemination and various institutional mechanisms that sustain it....". Thus, the interepistemic project for CIE is a matter of decolonising "knowledge *and* relationships" (Takayama et al, 2017)p.19). We are not suggesting that the authors referred to as rethinking context have not engaged in such ways of working. Our intention here is to argue for the importance of keeping such action 'in context' when attempting to 're-assemble' ways of researching and thinking in CIE. We will return to this in our discussion below.

As cogently argued by Takayama and colleagues, (2017, p. 18), speaking of the articles in their special issue on Southern Theory, "they show how the "Rest" can be conceptualised as a source of radical difference and a basis for confronting the active legacy of colonialism that constraints our imagination about pedagogy, policy and research".

This brings us to ask what other intellectual traditions of relationality, including processual and spatial thinking, are available and how these might be repositioned as central intellectual resources within CIE. The Oceanian³ theories presented below have been selected because of their pertinence to issues raised above, particularly to theories of context and knowledge production and their epistemological underpinnings in relationality, and the extent to which they have arisen within contexts "where dependence has been challenged" (Connell, 2007) and anti-colonial views asserted. Our aim is to bring to the fore other ways of knowing, thereby contributing to Takayama et al.'s

3 We use the term 'Oceanian' synonymously with Indigenous Oceanic.

interepistemic project (2017). Consistent with the Southern Theory approach, we do not attempt to reinterpret what the theorists say or to draw explicit comparisons with 'Western' theorising. To paraphrase Connell, we present Oceanian scholars theorisations as they are; we consider them as texts to learn *from* not just *about* (Connell, 2007, viii, emphasis in original). Also, consistent with Takayama et al.'s (2016) articulation of Southern Theory, we recognise it as a strategic "heuristic device", employed not to suggest a unified, homogenous (nor static) body of work or approach, but as a "temporary, imaginary point of enunciating" (p. 7). In discussing Oceanian theorising in terms of Southern Theory, we therefore recognise and emphasise that Oceanic thought is not a singular, coherent or static body of thought, and our following discussion is to be treated as suggestive, not definitive. We recognise, as articulated by Sanga and Reynolds (2017, p. 198), "the creative tension between unity and uniqueness across the region" and the generative potential this provides CIE.

5 Oceania as a Relational Space

Over the past 10–15 years, many Oceanic scholars have developed a critique of developments, largely driven by Australia and New Zealand, towards what they term 'hegemonic regionalism'. They identify the challenge of reclaiming Oceanic regionalism and investing it with the building of sustainable societies whose collective relationships are firmly embedded in the diverse histories and cultural traditions of the region (Coxon, 2016). The theoretical-conceptual inspiration for many of them is the work of social-cultural theorist, the late Epeli Hau'ofa.

In his seminal work, *The Sea of Islands* (1993), Hau'ofa challenged the prevalent political and economic structures that, contrary to the promises of decolonisation, had not fulfilled expectations of national sovereignty, political autonomy, and economic self-reliance. Rather, he argued, "the economic and geographic determinist views" (Hau'ofa, 1993, p. 6) constructed by outside 'experts', worked to ensure the maintenance of colonial relations and neo-colonial dependency.

Hau'ofa (1993) explained his portrayal of a new and enlarged Oceania as the means of developing a substantial regional identity "anchored in our common inheritance of the Pacific Ocean", one that would help free Pacific peoples "from the...externally generated definitions of our past, present and future" (392). His counter-hegemonic theorising of Oceania as 'a sea of islands', shifted the focus away from the smallness and remoteness of PICs' land surfaces to "the omnipresent empirical reality" of the Ocean's "everflowing and encircling nature"

(Hau'ofa, 1998, p. 408) as the defining feature of an Oceanic identity that is "openly searching and inventive" (Hau'ofa, 1998, p. 406); as a material fact and a lived reality that all Oceanic peoples share (Hau'ofa, 1993, p. 130).

With reference to the evidence richly conveyed in myths, legends, oral traditions and cosmologies, Hau'ofa (1993, p. 7) asserted that Oceanic peoples had never conceived of their worlds as comprising only land surfaces, but also the surrounding ocean, the heavens and the underworld. He argued that it was not until nineteenth century imperialism, when imaginary lines were drawn across the sea as a way of marking colonial boundaries, that Oceanic peoples were confined to their small island places, no longer able to travel across the vast Pacific as they had done for centuries in pursuit of strengthening kinship connections, trade and exchange networks, and cultural enrichment (Hau'ofa, 1993, p. 10).

The continuing significance of Oceanic 'culture history' he contended was evident in the contemporary process of "world enlargement" carried out by thousands of ordinary people right across the ocean (Hau'ofa, 1993, p. 10) which had revitalised the historical precolonial interconnectedness between people from across the region and had developed new and expansive relationships by way of emergent diasporic Oceanic communities.

In reclaiming the term 'Oceania' and reconceptualising the embodied life experiences of Oceanic peoples by focusing not just on their small islands (their places) within the vast ocean, but also on the varied relationships maintained over many centuries through the ocean, their shared post-colonial space, Hau'ofa (1998) theorised Oceania as, "a vibrant and much enlarged world of social networks that criss-cross the ocean all the way from Australia and New Zealand in the southwest to the United States and Canada in the northeast" (p. 391).

Hau'ofa's ocean-centric approach attributed the survival and development of the complexity of societies which make up one of the most culturally and ecologically diverse regions in the world to the ocean. His spatial-temporal analysis in which the natural environment and society condition and shape each other over time, presented Oceania as a *relational space*, one that is expanding, inclusive, fluid and continuously in formation (Coxon, 2011), and in which the ontologies and epistemologies indigenous to the region have a crucial role in sustainable and transformational development. In his words, "Whatever we produce must not be a version of our existing reality, which is largely a creation of imperialism; it must be different and of our own making ... human reality is human creation. If we fail to create our own someone else will do it by default." (Hau'ofa, 1993, p. 128–129).

In the years since Hau'ofa's re-imagining of Oceania, the work of many Oceanian scholars has been inspired by his identifying the need "to reclaim indigenous knowledge systems and philosophies" within the region to which they belong (Johansson-Fua, 2016, p.34). Similarly, the notion of Oceania as a relational space has influenced the development of regional CIE and steered our efforts towards decolonising knowledge and relationships within OCIES. For such a re-assembling of our regional CIE space to occur, however, and for OCIES members to begin to re-think context and research relationally, there existed the need for learning *from* the rich epistemic resource offered by Oceanian ways of knowing. The next section conveys how some prominent Oceanian scholars conceptualise relationality. Their writings demonstrate the centrality accorded to philosophies of *vā* (*va*, *va'a*, *vaha*, *wa*) and how these interact with understandings of knowledge and knowledge production.

6 Oceanian Theories of Relationality and Knowledge Production

Central to indigenous Oceanian scholars' theories of knowledge and ways of knowing are themes of understanding knowledge as socially and relationally constructed; of the interconnectedness between human, natural and spiritual worlds; and of more fluid, integrated conceptions of time and space. Their shared understanding of Oceanic peoples as deeply relational, with relatedness elaborated in multiple ways through society, underpins their theorising of 'relationality' as fundamental to how reality is perceived and constructed in culturally and contextually diverse 'places' across Oceania. According to Konai Helu Thaman (2004), because the cultural identity formation of most Oceanic people is relational rather than individualistic the socio-spatial notion of *vā* is central to understanding Oceanian ways of knowing and doing, and "... that the spaces or *vā* between and among persons, or between a person and his/her environment, together with the frameworks that determine such relationships, must be nurtured and protected".

Airini et al., (2010) refer to *va* (or *vā*, *va'a*, *vaha*, *wa*) as a pan-Polynesian concept which "... can be loosely translated as a spatial way of conceiving the secular and spiritual dimensions of relationships and relational order..." (p.11). As elaborated by Samoan writer Albert Wendt (1996, p. 18), "*Va* is the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things. The meanings change as the relationships/the contexts change". The comprehensive and deep-rooted nature of the concept of *va* in every aspect of Samoan life is

further conveyed by educationist the late Fanaafi Aiono Le Tagaloa (2003), “Va governs all things and holds all things together.... Va is relationship, connection, affiliation, boundaries, difference, separation, space, distance, responsibility, obligation, state of being, position, standing, and so much more” (p.9).

Writing of her homeland of Tonga, Thaman (2008) notes the “importance of *vā* as the basis for Tongan social interaction” and how it “is reflected in the high regard people place on rules governing different kinds of interpersonal relationships and social interaction”(p. 464). She explains that “*vā* is used to denote interpersonal relationships” and that within these relationships there are behavioural expectations and social norms that are expected to be played out (Helu Thaman, 2008, p. 464.). Consequently, the maintenance of the *vā* is also contextual, depending on the people involved (individuals, families, social groups) and the place (for example, home, village, formal event). Her fellow educationist ‘Ana Taufe’ulungaki (2004), illuminates the dynamic nature of *vā* within Tongan society as follows, “Literally it means ‘space’. But, in Tongan communities, relationships or the space between any two individuals or groups, or between communities and nature, are defined by the context in which the interaction occurs. Thus, when the context changes, the relationship changes also, even in the case of the same two individuals or groups ...” (p. 6).

The centrality of relationality in Melanesian social worlds is asserted by anthropologists Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo (2002) who counter ‘outsider’ views of the huge cultural and linguistic diversity found in Melanesian countries as indicating isolation, fragmentation and exclusivity, of social groups as bounded entities. With reference to Solomon Islands, they deny that most social groups see themselves as exclusive – rather they pursue multi-cultural networks and value their differences as a means of working together to discover their commonality through strengthened relationships. The dynamic nature of relationality in Melanesian societies is further explored by Papua New Guinean educationist Michael Mel who describes the concept of *Mbu* upheld by the cultural group known as the Mogeï. *Mbu*, he maintains is central to the Mogeï’s understanding of being and represents the dynamic and relational process of becoming a knowing, thinking, understanding Mogeï person. For Mogeï, “*Mbu* signifies identity, knowledge and relationships” (Mel, 1995, p. 688). Because *Mbu* is a temporal experience, knowledge is something that is continually being created and recreated, an evolving process rather than something that is fixed (Mel, 1995, pp. 688–689).

Similarly, educationist Unaisi Nabobo-Baba (2006) has researched how knowledge is produced in a specific indigenous Fijian context, Vugalei. Her aim was to “not just decolonize but to dehegemonize Fijian epistemology from an Indigenous Fijian perspective” (Nabobo-Baba, 2006, p. 2).

Her work examines what Vugalei consider to be their important knowledge and ways of knowing and what the implications of that are for contemporary education (Nabobo-Baba, 2006, p. 9). A key line of pursuit was the impact of Indigenous knowledge on the ways in which societies are run, their value systems and relationships. She concludes that 'belongingness' is an important aspect of how Indigenous ways of knowing can impact education and that understanding of *vanua* (land, place) relationships are pivotal to the learner in such contexts.

This brief overview highlights points of synergy between theorisations of context as assemblage, and the relational ontology central to Oceanian theorisations of time-space, identity and knowledge. Oceanian theorising brings particular attention to the spiritual element of relational spaces and the ethical accountabilities that relationality generates, which we suggest as central considerations for CIE research. Our next section draws on writings by Oceanian scholars who elaborate key themes such as indigenous knowledge, context, relationality, in terms of their implications for research.

7 Indigenous Knowledge, Relationality, and Research

Earlier in this article we referenced the notion of the need for educational research to explore the "context behind the context" (Airini et al., 2010, p. 11); the sociocultural structures, values and practices in which education is embedded. Each of the two Oceanian perspectives presented in this section acknowledges the 'context behind the context' as related to issues of epistemology, the nature of knowledge and knowledge production, and highlights the implications of this for education research methodology.

In his discussion of Indigenous Oceanian research, Sanga (2007) refers to its presuppositions about time, space, the self and others, and its assumption "that 'reality' is subjective to the context and people. It expresses the social, spiritual and cultural worlds of a people. It is experienced. It is particularistic to time and space. It is local. 'Reality' in this instance, is what people 'make of it'. It includes other realities. It embraces change, introductions and trends and makes these its own." (p. 44). Furthermore, because "by its nature" indigenous Oceanian research assumes reality to be constructed, "truth and knowledge about it is therefore partial and tentative [and] what gets to be valued differs in time and space" (Sanga, 2007, p. 47). Sanga calls for such research to "be more of itself, first. It needs to know more of what it really is and what it is not" (Sanga, p. 50) rather than ... justifying itself in terms of other research traditions.

With specific reference to a Solomon Islands research study on educational leadership development, Sanga and Reynolds (2018), explore the use of *tok stori*, a cultural form of discursive group communication with a long history as a research methodology in Melanesian societies. Tok stori, they maintain, “inhabits a relational ontology” (Sanga & Reynolds, 2018, p. 22) which acknowledges that relationships exist in time and within the cultural inflections and nuances of the tok stori space” (p.19). Furthermore, that “An ontological lens applied to *tok stori* ... pays attention to understanding the world as dialogic, relational and processual” (Sanga & Reynolds, 2018, p. 13). Sanga and Reynolds (2018) attribute the effectiveness of tok stori as a research tool to its being embedded within cultural knowledge, expertise and pedagogy and the development of the relational trust that “creates safe spaces where deep conversations can take place” (p. 22).

Seu'ula Johansson Fua (2016) proposes a collective and collaborative Oceanic research model in which researchers together develop the research approaches, methodology, and ethical protocols that “contextualise and make sense of the ‘ocean within us’ – our cultures, traditional knowledge systems and trusted traditional processes – and the ocean around us – global agenda for education and development” (p. 39). With reference to the context of educational development in Tonga, she espouses the value of relationality, the significance of *vā*, with particular attention to the processes of *tauhi vā*, and *tauhi vaha'a*, the nurturing and protecting of ‘the spaces between’ in order to strengthen relationships at various levels across and within education research contexts, researcher relationships and the relational spaces of participant schools and school communities (Johansson-Fua et al., 2020, p. 45). She also addresses the interconnectedness of people and the socio-cultural contexts in which they live, arguing that the ‘context behind the context’ is far more complex, ontologically and epistemologically than often perceived, especially regarding the nature of knowledge and knowledge production, and “key questions of What can be known? and How can it be known?” (Johansson-Fua, 2016, p. 53–54) Responding to such questions in contextually and culturally appropriate ways, she argues, requires a re-articulation of the research methodology adopted, with particular attention to the utilization of indigenous knowledge systems and recognition of “relationality as a space for deeper engagement with, and learning *from*, the context” (Johansson-Fua, 2016, pp. 53–54, emphasis in original).

Our experiences as non-Indigenous researchers learning from Oceanian theorisations, have caused us to challenge not only the Northern ways of thinking about the world that dominate, indeed assemble, the academic and development aid spaces we operate in, but ways of thinking about what it means

to be a researcher, and ways of doing research. In the following discussion, we reflect on this further, with specific reference to OCIES

8 Assembling OCIES as a Relational Space

Our reflections about how explicit engagement with the tensions of context and coloniality continue to provide productive ground for the flourishing of Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (OCIES) lead us to suggest it is possible to think of OCIES through a combined lens of assemblage and Oceanian relational theorising; to consider OCIES as an always becoming, unbounded, relational space.

OCIES is one of only a few regional societies within the World Congress of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES), and the only WCCES member society within the Oceania region. OCIES evolved from earlier configurations (or assemblages) of a regional society comprising mainly Australian and New Zealand members, known as ANZCIES. In 2015, in response to the growing desire for a Society that is more representative and inclusive of the diversity of the region, the Society changed its name to OCIES (Coxon & McLaughlin, 2017). This change also signalled a deliberate move towards strengthening OCIES as a relational space, in which engagement with Oceanian theory specifically, and Southern Theory more broadly, is fostered. OCIES leaders have actively adopted a relational platform that situates OCIES not as a club of members, but as an expansive, inclusive space of histories, ideas and relationships that are connected by and through difference, articulated by Sanga (2016), current co-president, as follows:

The Oceania Education aid community must not remain a club, secure in its self-referential notions of credibility. Our education community must be open to the outside. Being so allows us to be more easily drawn to unfamiliar and uncomfortable places. Only in such places will life be experienced in tension; where we are secure and yet are vulnerable. (p. 13).

As Sanga intimates, in concurrence with Takayama et al. (2016), such a project is uncomfortable, unsettling and difficult. But it is in this process of assembling, of bringing together difference, that new "lines of flight" emerge (Deleuze, 1995, p.85). Attentiveness to the past, to the genealogy and relationality of ideas is central here; as Sanga and Reynolds (2017) remind us, development of a research field is aided by careful and respectful critique that is attentive to origins. Thus the shift from ANZCIES to OCIES, rather than resolving or avoiding the tensions of context and coloniality, represents an ongoing commitment to "conversations concerning

the distinctive historical and existing colonial legacies and practices in education, and future directions for the field of comparative and international education in Oceania" (McLaughlin, 2017).

Specific examples of how this is being enacted include physical relocation of the annual conference to venues in Pacific island countries as well as creating new 'spaces' within annual conferences through use of indigenous methodologies for knowledge sharing and production, and now in the time of covid-19, working to do this in online spaces. The Society's journal, *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives* (IEJ:CP) is actively working to enable multi-lingual and artistic forms of expression to be shared through the journal. A New and Emerging Researchers Fono (NERF) has been established, to provide emerging scholars a relational space for ongoing support and learning across what can otherwise be felt as isolating geographic and academic spaces (Cobb, Couch & Fonua, 2019). A noteworthy NERF achievement is the recently published special issue of IEJ:CP that, through both the writing and publication process and its content, responded to the theme of "how Comparative and International Education (CIE) can be repositioned around the notion of relationality to contribute theoretically, practically, and spiritually to education at global, regional, national, and community levels" (Cobb, Couch & Fonua, 2019, pp. 2–3). Deliberate efforts are also being made to foster connections across real and figurative oceans, in terms of collaborations across disciplines, across research and practice, and across Societies.

These efforts do not come without tension or difficulty; in our personal experience such efforts involve – indeed, we would suggest they demand – occupying a space of discomfort, uncertainty, and disruption. In reflecting on these experiences, we have found it useful to think of them in terms of both *teu le va*, the continual work involved in nurturing and protecting relational spaces, and the processes of re/dis/assembling, the continual bringing together and pulling apart of what it means to be CIE researchers and OCIES members. For each of these a manner of continual vigilance, not only to epistemic assumptions, but also to relational accountabilities that extend beyond the conventional bounds of research and academic spaces, is required. As Takayama and colleagues (2016, p. 12) suggest, "Doing Southern Theory is...inherently dangerous". Yet, in our experience, it is from this danger that lines of flight emerge.

9 Final Comment

To conclude, we draw on the concept of *Motutapu*, as developed by Johansson-Fua (2016, 2020). *Motutapu* is a pan-Polynesian term for the small, sacred islands that

are frequently found at the entranceways from the ocean to the inhabited islands of Polynesian communities (Johansson-Fua, 2016). *Motutapu* has served the role of sanctuary from conflict, a resting place, and a meeting place for negotiations; "a place for rejuvenation as well as a place to launch new journeys" (Johansson-Fua, 2016, p. 36). In her keynote address to the 2015 Oceania Comparative and International Education Society conference, Johansson-Fua offered *Motutapu* as "a space of opportunity for Oceanic researchers to ponder, to critique, to build new methods and approaches ... a collective actionable space, an ethical space for Oceanic researchers in the field of comparative and international education" (2016, p. 37). Our intention in this article was to reflect on and share how, in our experiences as CIE researchers, as development practitioners and as OCIES members, we have benefited greatly and learned from our privileged access to *Motutapu*, that is to a space in which Southern theorising and the relational accountabilities it generates are centered. We contend that taking Oceanian theories of relationality as a starting point, from which insights offered by concepts such as assemblage can be considered, offers a generative space for not only retheorising context, but also disentangling the colonial 'entanglements' that contextualising entails for us as CIE researchers. It is this such a space that *Motutapu* offers and in doing so, we believe, represents a new assemblage – a new relational and ever-evolving context – for CIE research.

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