Tacitus, the ancient Roman historian said that “we created a desert and called it peace” (2005), and two thousand years later another social historian Antonio Negri (2000) said that “while the language of empire is couched in peace, the practice of empire is bathed in blood”. These two quotes frame a cursory review of the scholarly antecedents to diversity education. The scholarship concerning diversity in education is still relatively new, and in many published works the historical given is assumed to be the great diasporas associated with colonisation or slavery and the impact these have had for the growth and development multilingual and multicultural societies. Nowadays the dignity of the person, the need to access human rights as a basic condition for a dignified life, are the hallmarks of a response to the ‘movement of peoples’. Conventionally, standard texts that deal currently with diversity in education typically link it to race, then to gender, very occasionally to sexuality, and almost never to class. For example, Cochrane in “Walking the Road: race, diversity, and social justice education” says that educators “come to understand race, diversity, and multicultural issues” (Cochrane-Smith, 2004, xix). The terminology is sufficiently slippery to elide and even deny important omissions.

There are reasons for this, some of which are obvious, some occluded. If one considers the Western education project to be associated with the 18th Century Enlightenment, then it is not surprising that the education that accompanied colonial expansionism, did so with scant regard for the diversities either of culture or of experience. Scholarship, however, did respond to the historical moment, even if within the limitations associated with the prejudices of the period. For example, strange fields began to develop, from a history of scholarship perspective, such as anthropology, which professed to make a study of peoples and cultures, its chosen focus. As 19th Colonialism morphed into decolonisation, post-colonial scholarship similarly responded to the exigencies of the present internally and externally. Internally, metropolitan culture responded to diversity through the development of a scholarship associated with literary canons and prescribed knowledge associated with a Western sense of race and civilisation superiority. Externally, with the rise of print cultures in colonised territories canonical formations began to be subverted within the first century of colonisation. For example, imperial canons came to be subverted through scholarship focussing on the colonised other (most often black and male in its authoritative voice) even if represented in the language of the coloniser. Similarly, in an area such as Anthropology, there occurred a shift from race inspired perspectives on uncivilised societies, to an understanding that such societies’ complexities were indeed occluded by the very epistemological and ontological perspectives brought to them by white and variably male researchers.

The changing nature of scholarship, articulates as well as silences its others depending of the political and scholarly agendas of the time. Thus while the print literacies spawned a figure like Achebe, for example, the availability of the resources and the legitimising discourses of the time, did not necessarily mean the opportunity for writers addressing gender and sexuality to form the field of diversity education let alone diversity research. This statement does not suggest that such diversities
did not exist, but rather within constellations of power and the academy at the time, it was not possible for these diversities to find expression.

This argument is not without its precedents. Daymond (2003) has shown through a survey of women in African literatures, that colonial regimes colluded with gender hierarchies of the time to favour white men, over white women, black men over black women. Even though there were remarkable female figures such as Miriam Tlali, Noni Jabavu or Mariama Ba (please see Sheldon, 2005), writing in the period of decolonisation, the primary focus of scholarly organisation was always race. Within this race and gender oriented hierarchy, the representation of gender in institutional and other forms, has been limited to the categories palatable to a previously dominant hierarchy associated with race politics and ideology. It is for this reason that male and female have sufficed for the past four decades as representing ‘gender’ by institutional definitions, whilst gay, bi, transgendered and trans-sexualities, remain largely occluded and also oppressed. In the 1980s Zoe Wicomb (1987) said that no South African will be free until women are free, but what was no said was that no women, or men will be free, until gay, bi, transgender and transsexuals are free.

With the collapse of empire and the opening up of scholarship focused on gendered identity (typically associated with feminism), gender as a field of scholarship became complicated by the colonial racist hegemony of the West, the sexist agendas of colonised peoples, often with the explicit collusion of whether animist or mainstream religions.

For the first twenty years following 1940, as decolonisation took effect in the global South, there coincided with this, the rise of feminism in the Western North. While feminism has been taken up by the West and become enshrined in terms of constitutional provisions alongside basic human rights, even within the field of feminist studies there developed contestation between conventional (Western) feminist studies, and scholarship concerning gendered sexualities. When describing these formations of scholarly work, the struggles which have given rise to new areas of study, have two discernible features.

The first feature, using postcolonial studies, for example, is that the nascent scholarship in literary studies or history reacts to the awareness that gender has been marginalised in early scholarship focussing on race, for example. The second feature is that scholarship in new formations also critique the assumptions of knowledge generation normative to the area of scholarship. Thus enlightenment assumptions concerning the measurability of reality, and the presentation of fact, have been contested to suggest that knowledge is situated, constructed, placed, and develop in alliance with each other. Such a perspective might be associated with critical theory, but has been taken up by feminism.

Within education, and simultaneous to the development postcolonial scholarship, there has arisen diversity education most often in reference to the development of civil rights, human rights and the recognition of race and gender as factors critical to the development of an education meant to provide a critical citizenry. The features associated with diversity, as arising from the scholarship, include reference to the fact that curricula ought to take account of the learner’s cultural and experiential differences and that such differences ought to be reflected in a positive and constructive manner; teachers ought to develop and encourage positive attitudes and constructive engagement among learners; the culture and life of the school ought also to reflect and represent the community of learners as microcosm of society; social class, language and gender ought typically to be acknowledged and respected in the teaching-learning strategies.
Pedagogic developments in other areas parallel the above: for example, in linguistics, and associated with decolonisation in the 1970s, there occurred the growth of communicative language teaching. Together with multicultural education the communicative approach has become subsumed within the broad area of diversity education and that, in turn, has contributed to the development of social justice education. However, and as is reflected in the range of papers at this conference this week, there remains a paucity of research which deals with sexual identities and also class identities within diversity and human rights education.

Not only are the gaps intriguing but they also suggest absences in relationship between education and the academy on specific issues. For example, despite the emancipatory alliance between theories such a critical theory, critical pedagogy, socio-linguistics, and learner centred teaching, feminism and post-colonialism, being strong, the commitment to dealing with gendered difference and its impact with regards to access to representation, power, and equity, is variable. Perhaps the development of fields within the academy make it difficult for scholars and scholarship to respond to new areas of work, which because of the epistemological histories, have not had the opportunity to achieve an impact on the mainstream curriculum. If I could illustrate this further, for example, the contribution of Foucault (1976) and Butler (1990) to an understanding of diversity in education, and the contributions more recently of Jeffrey Weekes (1981), or Madeleine Arnot (1999) to the scholarship on gender and education performance, cannot yet be seen, despite our agreement that difference makes a difference to access to power as well as rights, not only in terms of race and gender, but also in terms of curriculum development. If we accept that the silences in the curriculum are not accidental, but constructed, then it seems to me that we can also accept that selected meanings of diversity, remain absent or constrained in relation to a refusal by the academy to question conservative impulses and consequently to collude in a denial that there is a confluence of such impulses with neo-imperial agendas such as neo-liberalism. The question then arises concerning the extent to which the academy is compliant with such agendas, or whether it disrupts them. How diverse is ‘diversity education’ and to what extent does our scholarship extend the possibilities of the field to challenge the mainstream curriculum?

Although I have not been able to describe in detail the historical survey suggested in this address, I would with a fair degree of confidence, assert that the academy reproduces the alliances made possible through social, political and economic transformations, and as much as these alliances are reproduced, they are also subverted at the margins within the academy. Other scholars such as Edward Said (1993) or indeed and much closer to home, those published within the special issue of the SAJHE (2011) on the profile of postgraduate education research in South Africa, show similar trends. Thus the phenomenon is not only associated with cultural studies, but indeed within any area of scholarly work including education. We need to question the extent to which education as a field remains non-responsive and generally compliant in the nexus referred to in the title of this very brief welcome message.

Of course, there is no such thing as a scholarly moment that correlates neatly to populist notions of historical events. Instead the academy responds to history in the form of scholarly movements (such as postmodernism, feminism, constructivism and so on). Nevertheless, the academy legitimises consensus through the constant rearticulation of its discourses (after Foucault), and thus also ‘tames’ what has come to be accepted as ‘cutting edge’ in any field.
My belief is that diversity education, through its very association with those historical movements, and moments associated with the subversion of oppressive systems and mores, is poised at this stage to rearticulate the challenge to the education to be true to its history in South Africa. When the freedom movements chanted that the ‘doors to education shall be opened’, activists might not have considered that the lived experiences of all manner of members of society could, or should be included in the curriculum. This message might not have been intended then, but it is certainly the fullest expression of what we mean today by diversity in education and diversity education, and I hope it finds its expression in the course of this conference.

References: