

The Discipline of Hope

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Abstract

To the average person, academia has often felt disconnected from everyday life, with academics simply offering an interpretation of the world. Yet, as Karl Marx has suggested, an interpretation of the world is simply not enough - academia must encourage and generate change. Exploring Mariame Kaba's concept of hope as a discipline, hope can provide the foundation necessary for academics to generate positive societal change. Academic activists like Moana Jackson and Angela Davis exemplify this concept and show what is possible when academics use critique to generate positive change that transcends community boundaries. If academics wish to continue this legacy of change, then their academic work must be transformative rather than merely descriptive and to continuously practice hope as a discipline.

Keywords: academics; academia; activism; hope

To the average person, academia is perceived as a voyeuristic pursuit, one that comments on the nature of society and yet has little relevance to people's daily lives. I was speaking with my dad who has worked in blue-collar jobs since he was 14 and I asked him what it is that he thinks academics do, to which he replied: "They go to the office, muck around on the internet, get paid lots to complain about everything and do nothing about it." His response supports Marx's perspective that an interpretation of the world is simply not enough, and that academia must encourage and generate change. Academics cannot afford to separate themselves from the communities in which they live and remain behind closed doors writing in isolation. Activist and prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba (2021, p. 26) has stated that hope is a discipline, and I believe that thinking of hope in this manner has the potential to make Marx's iconic statement a reality.

When thinking and talking about hope, we often describe it as a feeling, a desire and a wanting for something to happen. However, hope in its emotive state can sometimes struggle in the face of adversity. Hope without action remains nothing more than a nice idea that can easily collapse under the weight of reality. In comparison, discipline requires action, it requires practice, it requires control. Yet these connotations seem sterile, and I fear that thinking of discipline as relating to controlled behaviour encourages separating oneself from community and continuing the isolation so often seen in academia. Without discipline, hope risks simply being an emotion. Without hope, discipline remains an aimless action. Hope can provide the guidance necessary to use discipline to generate change.

I believe that there are many contemporary academics who already practise hope as a discipline, and it is evident in their work. Many of them have inspired me on my academic journey so far. They not only write about the oppressive structures that exist in their communities but are actively working towards constructing a more inclusive and better society. As someone who is tangata whenua, I think of people like Sir Mason Durie (2005), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and the late Moana Jackson whose mahi have contributed to helping the communities which they are part of. Moana Jackson was not only openly critical of the legacies of colonialism in Aotearoa, but he also played a fundamental role in the development of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007), showing that it

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is possible to use critique to generate positive change that can reach beyond the scope of one's respective community. His example shows how when hope is used as a discipline, critique can be used to create something better for the most vulnerable within our society.

I have had the privilege of living in Hawai'i for the past three years, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and during this time I have been exposed to the writings of those who made their home there and on other motutere within te moana nui a kiwa. One academic that has influenced me is Epele Hau'ofa, whose writings are embedded with hope, challenging the limiting ways that many of us from the Pacific often see ourselves, as belonging to these small, isolated islands in a vast ocean and limited in our potential. Hau'ofa (1994)'s famous essay "Our Sea of Islands" helped me to realise that I am not restricted to the boundaries of our islands but am part of the wider moana and that its vastness holds a world of possibilities. Living in Hawai'i, I have witnessed the legacy of Native Hawaiian academic and activist Haunani-Kay Trask (1993), whose work confronts the legacies of settler colonialism, drawing attention to the exploitative nature of tourism, and asserting the necessity of resistance in oppressive circumstances. Her work has helped to inspire many of those outside the academic setting to challenge the legacies of settler colonialism. Her writings empower Native Hawaiians to challenge the continued exploitation of their land and their communities. Trask did not stay isolated, hidden behind university walls—she joined her Native Hawaiian people in protest and often stood on the front lines of demonstrations, delivering rousing, heartfelt speeches of defiance against the settler colonial state that has caused so much harm in Hawai'i. Haunani-Kay Trask's academic work and legacy shows how practising hope, using it as a discipline, can help to inspire ordinary people to challenge oppressive structures and empower communities to generate change.

Although some of the academics I have spoken about so far have passed away in recent years, there are still many academics today who use hope in their work, who actively engage with their communities, and who shine a light on the systemic oppression that exists in those communities. I think of Vivek Shraya (2018), Imani Barbarin (n.d.) and Cornel West (1993), just to name a few. I think of Angela Davis (2016), whose writings have encouraged many to see the interconnected nature of systemic oppression across societal lines. Her academic and activist work encourages us to recognise that freedom for one marginalised community requires us to fight for the freedom for all those who are marginalised by the various systems that benefit from our division and our ignorance of the struggles of our neighbours. Davis (2016) has said that you have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world and you have to do it all the time. This quote is a reminder that it is not enough to just hope to make the world a better place, nor is it enough to just write about the issues that exist in the communities which we are part of. Like Angela Davis, like Haunani-Kay Trask, like Moana Jackson (2020), and like so many others, we have an obligation as academics to radically transform the world and not remain isolated, separated from the communities to which we belong.

Marx's legacy is undeniable—I mean, here we are today still discussing his work 177 years later. I believe that to truly make Marx's statement a reality, we as academics should look to Marx and his contemporaries less and instead focus more on the academics in our recent past and in our present. The numerous academics that I have spoken about so far have shown that it is possible to interpret the world and actively work towards changing it for the better. Their example helps to challenge the common perspective, like the one my dad has, that academics are paid to complain about everything and do nothing about it. Any work that we do as academics should contribute to some sort of positive change—whether it be through legislation, making our work more accessible to those who do not have the luxury to attend university, or encouraging those around us to believe that radical transformation is possible and necessary to ensure that our communities, our society and our world is better for everyone, not just a select few.

This is not to say that Marx has no relevancy in our modern era. On the contrary, Marx feels as important as ever, with younger generations embracing more Marxist thought than previous ones. Rather, it is important to understand that his work is part of the wider whakapapa, or genealogy, of philosophy and

that it is one of the many works we can look at for inspiration in the whakapapa of academia. To understand and interpret the world, we must recognise and remember who has come before us—as academics, we should continue to look to our past to remember the risks of social isolation and see what we can achieve when our work seeks to change and better the world we live in. We must also recognise the continuation of the genealogy of ideas as they pass into new generations, new thinkers and new contexts. This idea of looking at the past and the present reminds me of a whakataukī that my grandfather used to say to me as a kid: “Kia whakatomuri te haere whakamua—I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on the past.” I didn’t think much of it at the time, but now as an adult beginning my academic journey, I see it as incredibly important to look to the past and the present to help guide my future. I believe that we as academics must look to our past, to see the errors and successes and remember the whakapapa of the disciplines in which we belong, to ensure that what we do moving forward ultimately helps our communities. We are links in a continuous chain, in an enduring legacy of love, of speaking truth to power, and of lifting up those around us.

The academics that I have spoken about today, many of whom have inspired me deeply, are examples of what it looks like to practise hope as a discipline, and I believe that we should keep this in the back of our minds with any work that we do. We as academics have an obligation to engage with our communities rather than limit ourselves to words on a page. We as academics have the potential for our work to be transformative rather than just descriptive. It is all too easy to remain isolated in a world where misinformation is rampant and divisions seem too deep to repair; however, we owe it to ourselves and to each other to remember to practise the discipline of hope.

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