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Beyond Higher Education as We Know it: Gesturing Towards Decolonial Horizons of Possibility

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Abstract

This article addresses the conceptual challenges of articulating the ethical-political limits of ‘higher education as we know it’, and the practical challenges of exploring alternative formations of higher education that are unimaginable from within the dominant imaginary of the higher education field. This article responds to the contemporary conjuncture in which possible futures have been significantly narrowed, and yet these possibilities also appear increasingly unsustainable and unethical. It invites scholars of higher education to rethink the epistemological and ontological frames within which most imaginaries and institutions of higher education are embedded. If we fail to denaturalize these frames, then efforts to pluralize possible higher education futures will risk reproducing existing conceptual limitations and enduring colonial harms.

In this article I address the conceptual challenges of articulating the ethical-political limits of ‘higher education as we know it’, and the practical challenges of exploring alternative higher education futures that are unimaginable from within the imaginary that currently dominates the higher education field. In particular, I write in consideration of an emergent paradox. On the one hand, the epistemic and material conditions of the present have narrowed the purposes and possibilities of higher education in ways that make its radical transformation appear nearly impossible. On the other hand, the continuation of our present institutions and fulfillment of their promised benefits is also unlikely as the sustainability of our political, economic, and ecological systems appear increasingly uncertain. This, in turn, results in growing anxiety about the future and an intensified dissatisfaction with the concepts and vocabularies that the field of higher education has made available for making sense of the present and for enacting strategic interventions toward different futures. Within this contemporary conjuncture, I call on scholars of higher education to rethink the dominant epistemological and ontological frames within which our imaginaries and institutions are embedded.

In response to this context, I situate my contribution as a critical engagement with and extension of the relatively small body of literature that falls under the heading of higher education philosophy. As Barnett (2017) notes, “the challenges in developing [a subfield of philosophy of higher education]—seriously to be adequate to the challenges in front of it and the complexity of the university in the 21st century—are formidable” (p. 82). I take up this challenge with ambivalence, conscious of how the canonized discipline of philosophy often produces abstract, disembodied ideas of and about the world in ways that implicitly universalize a single perspective (namely, of white male thinkers) (Silva 2007, 2014; Wynter 2003). Nonetheless, I consider the generative potential of strategic engagements with philosophical questions, particularly when done in ways that historicize and contextualize the bio- and geo-politics of knowledge production (Andreotti 2011; Lugones 2007; Shahjahan 2016), and that consider the implications of

the contingency, complexity, contextuality, and partiality of all knowledges and ways of knowing (Ahenakew 2016; Ahenakew et al. 2014; Hunt 2014).

Western ways of knowing and being have not only crowded out other epistemological and ontological possibilities, they have also naturalized dominant political and economic systems, while masking the colonial conditions that make those systems possible. For instance, in the U.S. context, the benefits of individual freedoms within a liberal democratic nation-state are asserted in ways that invisibilize the racialized state violence of border policing, law enforcement, imperialist interventions, and the ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples; and the benefits of social mobility within a capitalist system are asserted in ways that invisibilize the exploitation and expropriation of labor and lands, along with ecological destruction, that are required in order to accumulate capital. The overall effect of these systems is to naturalize the violences that subsidize modern institutions, while sanctioning popular ignorance about these violences.

In this article I suggest that many contemporary higher education challenges are a product of our dominant systems and frames of reference, and thus, solutions to these challenges that are formulated from within these systems and frames will only address the *symptoms* of today's crises, while the *root causes* remain unaddressed and continue to cause harm. That is, if we simply re-imagine higher education from where we currently stand, we will likely continue to imagine and create more of the same. Thus, my intervention is oriented by an imperative to denaturalize the epistemological and ontological categories and assemblages that enable 'higher education as we know it' to exist and persist. If we fail to identify and unravel these assemblages, then it will be difficult to create and hold space for other possibilities to not only emerge but also thrive.

At the same time as I engage this deconstructive work, I recognize the importance of engaging possibilities that are otherwise and elsewhere (Crawley 2015), that is, which are viable but unimaginable from within higher education 'as we know it' (Silva 2014; Stein, Forthcoming). In particular, I gesture to decolonial horizons of possibility that might exceed what is currently enabled by the organizing pillars of colonial modernity: separation and hierarchy, global capitalism, the nation-state, and universalist Enlightenment knowledge and values (Stein et al. 2017). However, rather than put forward any particular alternative vision of higher education, this paper is organized around the notion that it is important to nurture the "possibility of possibilities" from which different futures and formations might ultimately emerge (Barnett 2014). Otherwise, we risk repeating the same colonizing moves that are driven by the currently dominant ontological investments in universality, supremacy, certainty, and mastery that have made our current institutions both unsustainable and unethical. My understanding of ethics emphasizes the kinds of relationships that are naturalized and "envisage[d] as desirable or possible" (Andreotti and Dowling 2004, p. 606). In describing contemporary social arrangements as *unethical*, my intention is to problematize the dominant patterns of relationship that extinguish other possibilities for collective existence.

I begin by reviewing how the extant higher education "field-imaginary" shapes the kinds of research that scholars are encouraged to pursue, arguing that this work is not responsive to the contemporary conjuncture. I then consider different diagnoses of the present by outlining three different layers of philosophical inquiry that are possible within

higher education. I suggest that our general failure to engage in inquiry within all of these layers is a product of the modern project of colonization that shapes higher education institutions. In order to provincialize this particular conception of higher education and illustrate its coloniality, I consider Leanne Simpson's (2014) work on Nishnaabeg philosophies of education. I conclude by conceptualizing different types of interventions that might enable us to reimagine higher education at each layer of philosophical inquiry.

The Higher Education Field-Imaginary

The realm of philosophy in higher education is, with a few exceptions, sparse in English-language scholarship, particularly within North America (Barnett 2017). There is some work coming out of Europe, and notably, a new journal has recently been launched, *Philosophy and Theory in Higher Education*, the latter of which might be a reflection of growing dissatisfaction with the available conceptual frameworks for higher education. Notwithstanding these developments, in general it remains the convention that, as scholars of higher education, we produce either descriptive or prescriptive research, or some combination of the two. With descriptive work, we are expected to produce empirical data that represent existing *reality* (if you come from a more objectivist position), or *realities* (if you come from a more social constructivist position). In the case of prescription, we are asked to put forth well-defined solutions to identified problems that clearly delineate the ideal means to a predetermined end. Often, the two go hand in hand: when one describes a problem, it is expected that this will be followed by a practical prescription for how to resolve it.

There is relatively little scholarly space for questioning the epistemological and ontological frameworks that orient our work, and that shape the questions we ask and answers we pose. To raise questions without clear answers, or to deconstruct the conceptual grounds on which we stand without immediately reconstructing them, is generally considered unhelpful and indulgent. The notion that all worthwhile knowledge production should be immediately instrumentalizable can be understood, in part, as a by-product not only of the applied orientation of the higher education field, but also of the currently dominant higher education field-imaginary. I argue that most people, and other-than-human beings, are not well served by this imaginary. According to Pease (1990), a field-imaginary is made up of the collective "norms, working assumptions, and self-understandings" that characterize a particular field (p. 3). It is through this imaginary that a field's practitioners make sense of shared objects, theories, and methods of study. Field-imaginaries also place boundaries on fields, shaping not only what is included, but also what is excluded or foreclosed (Wiegman 2012).

Field-imaginaries are not timeless, but rather shift in relation to the larger "problem-space" in which they operate. Scott (2004) describes a problem-space as, an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs. That is to say, what defines this discursive context are not only the particular problems that get posed as problems as such...but the particular questions that seem worth asking and the kinds of answers that seem worth having (p. 4).

The emergence of a new problem-space tends to require different terms of the kinds of conversations it is possible to have. If a scholarly field is to be responsive to these shifts

and thereby facilitate these conversations, then its field-imaginary must also shift. However, once an imaginary becomes normalized and naturalized, it can be difficult to unsettle it, even if the problem-space that gave rise to it has become outdated.

The currently dominant higher education field-imaginary was not only sedimented during the post-World War II era in a different problem-space than our own, it was also oriented around a narrow subset of primary beneficiaries—namely, the white middle class. Even as the list of beneficiaries has become more inclusive, the imaginary remains rooted in a set of presumptively universal categories and aspirations: possessive individualism (within relations premised on claims of hierarchy, mastery, and the separability of beings); continuous economic growth and private property distributed through meritocratic processes (within global capitalism); decision-making through deliberation (within universal Enlightenment knowledge); and equal rights and shared values upheld by democratic political institutions (within the modern nation-state) (Stein et al. 2017). Thus, this imaginary will only include forms of difference that will have no substantive effect on dominant modes of social organization (Povinelli 2002).

The Problem-Space of the Present

Decades after its initial development, both the ethical and practical limitations of the dominant higher education field-imaginary have become harder to deny. Even at the time of its emergence, this post-War higher education imaginary sanctioned and enabled certain possibilities, while invalidating and invisibilizing others. Nonetheless, the promises on which it was premised were at the time feasible for at least the subset of the population that it centred (the white middle class), given the context of U.S. geopolitical and economic hegemony, and the rapid expansion of global capitalism more generally (Robinson 2010). Within this context, state and national governments committed to funding higher education in order to train workers in ways that also bolstered the U.S.'s strategic global positioning as a beacon of egalitarian democracy (Ferguson 2012; McClanahan 2017).

Since then, political and economic contexts have shifted dramatically. States allocate fewer funds for higher education due to declining revenues attributable to slowing economic growth, tax cuts, and decisions to prioritize public spending elsewhere, including on the expansion of incarceration (U.S. Department of Education, Policy and Program Studies Service, 2016). Meanwhile, most workers have lost considerable bargaining power thanks in part to the transnationalization and flexibilization of capitalist production (Robinson 2010; Smith 2017). Yet in the midst of all this change, the higher education field-imaginary has remained relatively static. Public defunding and increased marketization of universities has been problematized to varying degrees by higher education scholars, but generally in ways that remain invested in the old imaginary's promises of shared economic prosperity within capitalism. Because these responses are articulated within a field-imaginary that was developed in response to a problem-space that is detached from the socio-material conditions of the present, they have largely proven inadequate for intervening effectively in the face of privatization and austerity.

Within a sedimented field-imaginary, knowledge is produced through a set of taken-for-granted epistemological norms and conceptual-ideological assemblages. In other words, the general terms of what it is possible to say, do, and think, are set, yet our awareness of the terms themselves (and their impact on the knowledge that we produce) is dulled

as the contextual conditions of its emergence disappear from view. As a result, we do not often think to ask whether the questions that orient our field-imaginary are still the questions that need asking, and whether the terms of our scholarly conversations are adequate to the task of responding to contemporary ethical-political challenges. Scott (2004) thus asks “whether the moment of normalization of a paradigm is not also the moment when it is necessary to reconstruct and reinterrogate the ground of questions themselves through which it was brought into being in the first place” (p. 8).

We are well past the point of normalization when it comes to the currently dominant higher education field-imaginary. If we think for but a moment, several sedimented concepts become evident, as do the arguments around which they orbit. For instance, we debate the extent to which higher education is and should be a public or private good, but rarely question the desirability or inevitability of the liberal capitalist frameworks within which the paired concepts of public/private good are embedded (Marginson 2007). Another well-worn debate is that between positivist and social constructionist approaches to research, but in both cases the research produced still largely responds to the description-prescription imperative. These dynamics are understandable; of course we will use whatever vocabularies are available in order to resist the total privatization of the university. The question we must ask, however, is whether vocabularies from the dominant higher education field-imaginary are adequate.

Simons et al. (2007) suggest that taking the pressing questions of the present “seriously implies that we cannot simply rely on authoritative ideas or principles, which are vaguely reminiscent of our university traditions” (p. 402). Similarly, Barnett (2014) asks, “Doesn’t the present time present us with a set of stock phrases and terms that hardly any longer convey serious meaning?” (p. 12). Barnett is speaking here about phrases and terms associated with the shift toward university marketization and privatization, yet I suggest we need to ask the same question about the whole stock of concepts that populate our field-imaginary. In other words, the issue is not that we don’t have enough critiques of this shift, but rather that many of these critiques have little strategic impact, and insufficient ethical heft, in our current context.

In Scott’s (2004) words, it seems possible that “The old languages of moral-political vision and hope are no longer in sync with the world they were meant to describe and normatively criticize” (p. 2). We continue to describe the problems of the present, and prescribe solutions to them, often in quite articulate ways, but on the whole, the higher education landscape seems unmoved. Thus, some have begun to sense the inadequacy of our interventions. The dominant ‘describe-prescribe’ dynamic of higher education research is operating from within an old frame that has started to lose its grip. This does not mean that knowledge production within this dynamic has lost all value. However, it does suggest that interventions articulated from this space alone will be inadequate to the necessary task of disinvesting from old frames, and facilitating the emergence of new ones. Yet the task of unfolding new frames is hardly simple (and likely cannot be orchestrated by human will alone). Indeed, before we can even begin to consider what else might be possible, it becomes necessary, in Scott’s (1995) words, to open the cognitive space for questions regarding the historicity of our political present. What the concepts are that will have to be produced—that will have to be reappropriated or worked over—in order to give us a critical purchase on alternative futures are perhaps

not self-evident. But these concepts, whatever they are to be, can only emerge out of an interrogation, from within, of our common and uncommon present. (p. 23)

Few higher education scholars have been as persistent and convincing in their efforts to open up this ‘cognitive space’ for higher education as Ronald Barnett. However, in the spirit of attending to the false and damaging traditions of western philosophy in which a particular, situated perspective becomes universalized as if it offered a view from nowhere, we must also consider that there are different diagnoses of the present. These diagnoses in turn prompt different propositions about the future. In particular, I suggest that when today’s primary problems are identified from within dominant frames, they generally describe what are only symptoms of a larger and more deeply rooted set of unethical and unsustainable conditions of possibility for our colonial present.

The Coloniality of Modern Existence and Higher Education

Critical Indigenous, Black, and other de-/anti-/post-colonial theorists have long pointed to the coloniality of modern western ways of knowing and being, and by extension, to the coloniality of modern western educational institutions and their supporting infrastructures (Ahenakew et al. 2014; Andreotti et al. 2015; Grande 2004; Grosfoguel 2013; Hunt 2014; Maldonado-Torres 2007; Mika 2012; Silva 2007, 2014; Tuck and Yang 2012; Wynter 2003). These critiques indicate that if we pursue alternative horizons of higher education from within the inherited onto-epistemological frames that uphold colonial modernity, then we risk reproducing the violences that are at the root of many contemporary problems.¹ The critiques also delineate how the frames and categories of western philosophy produce “modern subjects” who are socialized to invest in their own supremacy, which is premised on the presumed universality of their knowledge, understood primarily as a means to describe the world (and objects within it) in order to then predict and control it. The modern subject’s mastery of knowledge rationalizes their social authority and entitlement to property claims, and effectively defines their existence as equivalent to the knowledge that they create or amass. Conversely, a threat to the universality or certainty of their epistemological claims is understood as a threat to their ontological security, and thus, to their existence (Andreotti et al. 2018; Shahjahan and Wagner 2018; Stein et al. 2017).

Because of its claims to universality and totalizing knowledge, the modern western onto-epistemology has the violent effect of delegitimizing other ways of knowing and being, and of rationalizing the psychic, intellectual, and material subjugation of those who practice and embody that ‘other-ness.’ This subjugation takes many forms, including exploitation and expropriation of lands and labor, outright annihilation, and assimilative absorption into the dominant system, including by way of educational institutions (Silva 2007; Tuck and Yang 2012). Indeed, modern institutions of education, including higher education, are a primary means by which colonial structures of being are reproduced and naturalized. This affects both those deemed to be “modern subjects” and those deemed to be their “others”, albeit in very different ways.

Even as many historians of higher education date the emergence of the modern research university as we know it to the late 19th century, its roots can be traced back to the

¹ I derive my understanding of “onto-epistemological” from decolonial critique, particularly that of Silva (2007, 2014), rather than from new materialist scholarship. This term seeks to capture how epistemology and ontology are intertwined in ways that shape the conditions of knowledge and existence.

early universities of medieval Europe, later iterations of which were exported around the world, often forcibly through processes of colonization (de Wit 2002). From their very beginning, modern universities offered a limited range of educational possibilities, and were premised on the subjugation of difference, including the exclusion of non-western educational philosophies and forms of higher learning (Grande 2004; Grosfoguel 2013; Patton 2016; Simpson 2014; Wilder 2013). ‘Higher education’ itself is therefore irreducible to the institutionalized ‘modern university’, much in the same way that ‘education’ is irreducible to ‘modern schooling’ (Calderon 2014).

The continued hegemony of higher education as we know it in the form of the modern *uni*-versity precludes other educational possibilities, because it posits itself as *uni*-versal. Some have suggested that the contemporary crisis of higher education has to do not only with immediate political economic challenges, but also with the inherent limits of this particular form of higher education (Boidin et al. 2012). Tamdgidi (2012) suggests it is “a crisis of [western higher education’s] own hitherto dominant ‘academic model’ based on the presumption of a Eurocentric epistemic canon that attributes truth only to the western way of knowledge production at the expense of disregarding ‘other’ epistemic traditions” (p. vii). This ‘academic model’ is not only thoroughly Eurocentric in its regimes of sanctioned knowledge and socialization, but also capital- and nation-state-centric; in other words, it is thoroughly colonial.

Despite my concern to offer a critique of the coloniality of modern higher education, I have chosen not to frame this paper as a proposal for decolonizing higher education. First, there is no single approach to decolonization. The term decolonization is itself contested, and has multiple meanings, genealogies, and interpretations, both in general (Tuck and Yang 2012), and in the context of higher education specifically (Andreotti et al. 2015). These, in turn, give rise to different possible ways forward. Rather than adjudicate between these possibilities, I seek to pluralize the potential futures beyond what is available within the organizing pillars of colonial modernity (Stein et al. 2017). Indeed, in response to the limits of the *uni*-versalism of the modern university, some have posed the intriguing idea of the *pluri*-versity as an alternative for higher education (Boidin et al. 2012). Yet in order for ‘pluri-versities’ to truly become possible, we would need to denaturalize, disinvest from, and dismantle the hegemony of the uni-versity. Below I consider how different types of “imaginative thinking about higher education” (Barnett 2014, p. 18) might enable us to do this work.

Different Layers of Intervention

Much research about higher education emphasizes diagnoses and interventions at the level of practice, and therefore often fails to address or interrupt the hegemonic structures of knowing and being (Tight 2012). If we want to go beyond simply addressing the symptoms of contemporary problems to address root causes, and if we want to make alternative formations of higher education possible, then we will need to engage in deeper examinations that address the epistemological frameworks and ontological assemblages within which higher education is situated. Below, I elaborate what I mean by these terms (see also Andreotti et al. 2018).

Diagnoses at the methodological layer of higher education emphasize questions of practice. When we rethink higher education at this layer, we generally do not rethink our orienting questions, or our desired end goals, but rather are concerned with adjusting

the answers that we provide to existing questions, and the means by which we will reach those ends. We can think of efforts to discern and revise ‘best practices’ as operating primarily at this layer, as well as questions about how to make existing policies more ‘effective.’ The general idea is that certain elements of our institutions and larger systems are not performing optimally, but there is little consideration that the institutions or systems themselves might be limited or require deeper transformation. Thus, methodological diagnoses are generally followed by methodological solutions. The bulk of higher education research operates at this layer of intervention.

Orienting questions at the methodological layer might be things like: *How do we increase the persistence and graduation rate of [x, y, or z] population? How can we grow enrolment? What are new possible sources of revenue that will enable institutions to balance budgets given declining public funding? How can student aid systems be more accessible and easy to use? What kinds of data do we need in order to assess and demonstrate the importance of a particular intervention? How can we encourage faculty to submit more grant proposals? How can we discourage students from cheating? What competencies do college graduates need to develop in order to be employable?*

Some higher education scholarship engages the epistemological layer, particularly work in more critical traditions. This work seeks to not simply answer existing questions or pursue the established ends of education, but to address the ethical and political dimensions that shaped how those questions were answered, and how those ends were chosen. Epistemological diagnoses do not simply consider the kinds of knowledge that is produced and transmitted in higher education, although this is a big part of it, but also consider what kinds of knowledge is produced and transmitted *about* higher education. Although the orienting problem-space of the dominant imaginary might not shift at this level, there is a commitment to pluralize possible solutions from a more diverse array of perspectives, questioning the presumed universality of any single answer (or ‘best practice’) and the power dynamics involved in determining whose answers carry weight.

Orienting questions at the epistemological layer might be: *Whose voices are centered in curriculum, and whose are absent? What kinds of knowledge production is validated and valued? How should we balance the public good orientation of the university with economic considerations? How do we not just enhance the numeric representation of a particular population, but ensure that they are getting the resources they need to succeed, and that the university is a welcoming environment for them? How can pluralizing our research methodologies and social theories enable higher education researchers to better capture the experiences of different populations? What might ideas of responsibility and accountability look like outside of definitions imposed by capitalist and/or nationalist imperatives? What kinds of knowledge production are possible in higher education research that are neither primarily descriptive nor prescriptive?*

Very little higher education scholarship engages at the ontological layer (Shahjahan et al. 2017). Any particular ontology is rooted in particular ideas, categories, and experiences of reality and existence as they relate to temporality, spatiality, language, relationality, reality, and agentic capacity. Ontological categories enable certain possibilities for existence to take hold and remain in place, and preclude others from thriving or emerging. In particular, Western ontological categories tend to deny the animacy of

other-than-human beings, reproduce linear narratives of time, and neglect the significance of multi-layered, place-based relationships in knowledge production (Marker 2018). Diagnoses at this layer of intervention identify how (often invisibilized) frames shape what is perceived to be real, valuable, possible, desirable, and intelligible. Rather than pluralize answers to popular questions within the dominant problem-space and higher education field-imaginary, the commitment would be to historicize those questions, and consider what other questions we might ask. However, it might be preemptive to pose those questions in relation to higher education as long as we remain within the same ontology, lest we reproduce the notion that we can learn to be otherwise by simply thinking otherwise (reducing our existence to what we know).

Thus, orienting questions at the ontological layer of intervention might first need to interrupt our satisfaction with existing ontological assemblages in a way that neither entirely dismisses them nor overdetermines possible alternatives. This might enable us to glimpse other possibilities without dismissing existing ones, emphasizing a “both/and more” approach: *How might we practice...ethics with/out the modern subject? Politics with/out the nation-state? Education with/out modern institutions? Sustenance with/out capitalism? Difference with/out separation? Knowledge with/out certainty? Imagination with/out the intellect? Existence with/out individualism? Community with/out consensus? Temporality with/out linearity? Relationships with/out subjects or objects? Critique with/out normativity?* (questions inspired by Silva et al. 2016).

I am not suggesting that we cease to engage in higher education research and practice at the methodological or epistemological layers. Even diagnoses at the ontological level also consider what is happening in the other layers, given that these are nested layers rather than mutually exclusive ones. Further, having an ontological diagnosis does not preclude one from posing short-term methodological or epistemological solutions. Indeed, this is necessary work for addressing the many immediate, acute crises in our existing institutions, in the case of solutions at the methodological layer, and for denaturalizing the reproduction of unequal power relations in terms not only of who is included in higher education institutions, but also whose knowledges are sanctioned and whose voices are heard and carry political weight in the case of solutions at the epistemological layer. However, unless we *also* support and engage interventions at the ontological layer, then we are likely to remain trapped within an imaginary and a problem-space premised on the unethical and unsustainable conceptual and material assemblages that uphold colonial modernity.

In other words, if we pursue alternative horizons of higher education from within the dominant field-imaginary, then we risk reproducing the violences at the root of many contemporary problems. These risks are illustrated in Barnett’s proposed idea of ‘feasible utopias.’ According to Barnett (2014),

Feasible utopias are utopias that just might be realised. They are utopian in that they are nowhere to be found, at least in their fully realised form. They are feasible in that there are good reasons for believing that they *could* be realised. They are not castles-in-the-air but have a degree of feasibility about them, even if—given the weight and power of the contemporary forces besieging the university—they are unlikely to be realised. That they could just be realised imparts hope and energy in the possibly daunting project of bringing them about. (p. 17)

Barnett's work here and elsewhere is driven by an admirable commitment to expand the available frames of reference for thinking about higher education. However, failure to attend to the sanctioned ignorances of western philosophy when engaging with this concept could lead, however unintentionally, to its weaponization towards colonial ends. Any "utopian" vision of higher education already bounds possibilities for what might be desirable. It presents a normative future that will inevitably exclude other futures; one person's utopia is often another's dystopia. We can say then, that even at the epistemological layer, there is a risk of putting forward particular ideas about what constitutes a utopia (and thus, what is universally valuable and relevant) without asking questions about who decides what this is, and at whose expense would it be realized. These concerns are also relevant in relation to "feasibility." Assessments of feasibility often foreclose on possibilities whose realization would challenge the dominant mode of existence. If hegemonic ontological categories circumscribe what is possible for us to imagine, then limiting our engagement to alternatives that can be deemed feasible from *within existing ontological categories* also limits the available possibilities. This is particularly concerning given that these dominant categories sanction the invisibilization of colonial violences that subsidize existing possibilities for existence.

None of these limitations make the idea of feasible utopias entirely unhelpful. This is particularly the case if we frame utopias not as ends to be achieved, but rather as reminders that it is possible for things to be otherwise than they are (Jameson 2007). However, we must also consider the risks of deploying it, and ask about other (non-coercive) ways that we might expand possibilities for higher education.

The Ambivalence of Engaging Difference

I have thus far sought to establish that often when we are invited to engage in more imaginative thinking about higher education, our thinking remains circumscribed not just by a particular dominant field-imaginary, but also by a set of western ontological orientations premised on the modern subject's presumed mastery, certainty, superiority, and universality. As long as these orientations remain in place, they are likely to affect the continuation of the very problems that we seek to address in our 'reimaginings.' This is often the case even when one is made aware of the harms that are affected by these orientations at the epistemological level: once the critique sinks in, the immediate response is to seek absolution. If one remains within a mode of existence that is oriented by mastery, certainty, superiority, and universality, there will be a desire to transcend the coloniality of modern existence without giving anything up (Jefferess 2012).

Certainly, our limits also have to do with material conditions: "giving up" one's presumed entitlements is harder to do when it feels like a choice. As the feasibility of fulfilling promised benefits (for the white middle-class) within our current systems continues to diminish, this *might* open up possibilities for going beyond progressivist critiques that seek, e.g., greater regulation of capitalism and more redistribution within it. In other words, as the mismatch between the promises that orient our currently dominant higher education imaginary and today's political economic realities becomes harder to deny, the imperative for new modes of existence become increasingly evident. But while the material context creates opportunities, if we seek to provincialize the university as we know it, and not only address problems that can be articulated and addressed within the methodological and epistemological layers of our higher education field-imaginary, then

we will need to take steps to avoid the circularities that keep us rooted and invested in a colonial mode of existence. One way of doing so is to engage other educational philosophies as a means to potentially interrupt the illusion of western ontological universality and provincialize its organizing categories. Indeed, any worthwhile reframing of higher education philosophy would necessarily engage non-Euro-, andro-, and anthropo-centric philosophies. Recognizing that there are both recolonizing and decolonizing potentialities in such engagements, I proceed with caution.

As Shotwell (2016) notes, it is precisely because it is so difficult to imagine the world other than it is that “we turn, sometimes in colonial or orientalist ways, toward ‘other’ cultures, which show that things are very different elsewhere than they are here” (p. 186). These ‘colonial/orientalist ways’ can be understood as a result of the fact that, as Hunt (2014) notes, “Indigenous knowledge is rarely seen as legitimate on its own terms, but must be negotiated in relation to pre-established modes of inquiry” (p. 3). In many ways this arises out of a failure to recognize that epistemology is not distinct from the ontology within which it sits, hence my use of the term “onto-epistemology”, even as we can separate the two layers for pedagogical purposes. The process of making non-western knowledge legitimate and intelligible within western institutions often involves two moves: over-simplifying and homogenizing other knowledges (due to a lack of training in their nuances and the colonial desires for mastery and universality, which in turn reduce complexity, dynamism and potentiality into determinate categories and meanings that leave little room for ambiguity, uncertainty, and unknowability); and decontextualizing those knowledges (in ways that fail to consider how grafting ideas from other contexts results in a violence to that knowledge, and also will likely not have the intended transformative effects in our own) (Ahenakew 2016; Hunt 2014). Engaging different onto-epistemological possibilities in these ways enables western subjects and institutions to reassert their universality and supremacy while asserting that they have done otherwise.

How might we engage different educational philosophies without romanticizing them, instrumentalizing them, or presuming that any one of them holds the answers to the complex problems that are a product of our own making? One way of thinking about this is that, for those of us socialized within the western onto-epistemology, other ways of knowing and being cannot become transparent to us—not only because we have not lived with and through them, but also because the very act of seeking to master them is but another reproduction of the colonizing imperative (Shahjahan et al. 2017). Rather than seeking to make what is invisible visible, or to make what is absent present, we might therefore try to foster an approach to engagements with difference that “makes what is invisible noticeably absent so that it can be remembered and missed” (Ahenakew 2016, p. 333). If one approaches encounters in this way, then rather than being enacted out of a desire for mastery of difference, the encounter itself can enact a provincialization of not just western knowledge, but of all knowledges—thereby potentially cracking the western onto-epistemological frames of universality and certainty, instead of incorporating new knowledges into those same old frames. What might this look like in terms of engaging other educational philosophies and knowledge systems in higher education? These engagements could be oriented in such a way that the primary intention is not to *learn from* difference in ways that enable us to ‘authentically know’ the other and/or ourselves (Zembylas 2018). Instead, the intention would be to open oneself up to *being taught by* difference (Bruce 2013). Drawing on

Biesta (2013), Bruce (2013) distinguishes between *learning from* and *being taught by* difference: while learning from implies learning something that is expected and then assimilated into our existing frames of knowledge and sense of self, being taught by entails decentering oneself and suspending one's preconceptions in ways that can result in an unexpected and potentially disruptive rearrangement of knowledge [and desire (Spivak 2004)] (Biesta 2013). To be open to being taught by difference requires that one has at least temporarily bracketed the modern onto-epistemological desire to predetermine and control the directionality and outcomes of engaging with difference.

I suggest that by opening ourselves to being taught by other educational philosophies, we might confront the assumptions and limitations of our higher education system, including the power relations that have naturalized the modern university form. This might then enable us to deuniversalize our own perspectives in ways that accept the radical equality of all knowledge systems, *even those we know nothing about* (Santos 2007). The idea here is not to turn away from universal relevance only to turn toward absolute relativism, but rather to recognize the contextual relevance of all knowledges. That is, not only is there no 'zero point' epistemology or view from nowhere (Castro-Gómez 2007; Grosfoguel 2013; Maldonado-Torres 2007), but all knowledges will enable certain possibilities and interventions into reality, and foreclose others (Santos 2007). This then creates the possibility for making knowledge claims that are not rooted in claims to epistemic privilege (which in turn is premised on presumed universality and neutrality). In this way, we might expand the available horizons of what appears possible or desirable for higher education, without then feeling compelled to plot a single teleological path toward the future in ways that would inevitably coerce and contain difference.

Recognizing that all of this may sound a bit abstract, particularly in the absence of many previous conversations in higher education around these concepts, below I offer one example of the generative possibilities that might arise from engagements with other educational philosophies without seeking to determine in advance what they might teach.

Nishnaabeg Educational Philosophy

Before one even gets to the body of her article "Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation," Simpson (2014) already indicates that Nishnaabeg knowledge production differs from that of the west in which authorship is the domain of individuals by acknowledging authorship as a collective, emergent process: "The thinking within this paper was generated inside a community of intellectuals, artists, Elders and cultural producers to whom I am both influenced by and accountable to. Previous drafts were peer-reviewed outside of the standard academic peer-review process and within a community of practitioners and Nishnaabeg thinkers..." (p. 1).

The article itself begins unlike most western scholarship, with the story of a Nishnaabeg child, Kwezens,² who learns how to get maple syrup in the sugar bush, first by observing a squirrel do it, and then by using her own creativity to create another way that is also respectful to the maple tree. She is grateful to the squirrel, and the tree, and shares this

² ² As Simpson (2014) notes, "Kwezens literally means 'little woman' and is used to mean girl" (p. 2).

knowledge with her family. Simpson's decision to centre the story itself tells us something about Nishnaabeg epistemology—that stories are not simply cultural artefacts or entertainment, but important teachings about the Nishnaabeg worldview. That is, for Simpson, this story is rooted in Nishnaabeg collective intelligence, and Nishnaabeg theory, the latter of which “isn't just an intellectual pursuit—it is woven within kinetics, spiritual presence and emotion, it is contextual and relational”, and “isn't just for academics; it's for everyone” (p. 7). Although Simpson shares this story and talks about what it means in relation to Nishnaabeg intelligence, she also suggests that its meanings, metaphors, and interpretations are not fully available to those who have not lived as Nishnaabeg people; there is also great heterogeneity and dynamism within the larger umbrella category of Nishnaabeg intelligence itself. As Simpson (2017) suggests elsewhere, “there are many different diverse interpretations and philosophical standpoints within Nishnaabewin, and as communities of thinkers” (p. 35). Thus, rather than try to summarize an intelligence that I do not embody and that contains its own internal pluralities, I consider some of what the Nishnaabeg educational philosophy embedded in Kwezens' story might tell us about the dominant higher education field-imaginary.

If one only looked at Kwezens' story at the level of methodology, then it would be easy to consider it simply as a medium through which to deliver a message about practice: how to extract maple syrup from trees for human consumption. Simpson (2014) notes how settlers have developed their own, commercial method for extracting syrup as a means to make capitalist profits. In this way, “they completely miss the wisdom that underlies the entire process because they deterritorialize the mechanics of maple syrup production from Nishnaabeg intelligence and from aki [land]. They appropriate and recast the process within a hyperindividualism that negates relationality” (p. 9). Indeed, Simpson describes how this kind of grafting happened in her own schooling, when a teacher gave the option of the “pioneer method” or the “Indian method” of making syrup, the latter of which was completely separated from the onto-epistemological dimensions of Nishnaabeg intelligence, and clumsily forced into a western educational frame.

The Nishnaabeg educational philosophy in this story illuminates the anthropocentrism of western onto-epistemologies, in which only humans can be thinkers and teachers. In Kwezens' story, other-than-human beings, like the squirrel, are teachers, and the maple tree and its sugar are Kwezens' relations, rather than resources to be extracted—thus, Kwezens offers tobacco as an act of thanks to the tree. And the land itself is not simply the context of learning, but a teacher and a co-learner. Indeed, the story also illustrates an educational philosophy in which knowledge creation happens relationally, amongst a web of beings, rather than as a process of mastery by a single, isolated individual. Knowledge is therefore meant to be shared, rather than hoarded and put toward personal gain (as in ideas of ‘human capital’). Nishnaabeg knowledge is also considered a gift from the spirit realm, “coming to individuals through dreams, visions, ceremony and through the process of gaaizhi-zhaawendaagoziyaang—that which is given lovingly to us by the spirits” (Simpson 2014, p. 10). Thus, knowledge cannot be individuals' alienable property, and is not only transmitted via books within a classroom.

Kwezens' story also provincializes western notions of temporal linearity, as Simpson (2014) notes, “It is critical to avoid the assumption that this story takes place in pre-

colonial times because Nishnaabeg conceptualizations of time and space present an ongoing intervention to linear thinking - this story happens in various incarnations all over our territory every year in March when the Nishnaabeg return to the sugar bush” (p. 8). This concept of temporality contrasts sharply with western ideas of linear, unidirectional time, particularly the Enlightenment idea of perpetual forward movement, which is often linked with ideas of perpetual progress and development, and castigates those (usually non-western people) who are perceived to be ‘lagging’ behind in this path.

Finally, Simpson situates this story amongst a web of other stories. She acknowledges where she learned it, contextualizes her own telling of it, and notes that there are not only other versions of the same story, but also other maple sugar origin stories. This is a different epistemological practice than that which dominates in western educational practice, and is rooted in a different ontological orientation. In indicating that there are other versions of the story, Simpson gestures to the plurality, partiality, and contextuality of Nishnaabeg knowledge. She does not claim that her own version of the story is the universal or authoritative one, nor does she suggest that an authoritative version even exists. In fact, Simpson retells the story in her 2017 book, and notes that she has “told different versions over the years. Nearly every time I tell it, I understand new meanings and make new connections” (p. 145). In the book version, Simpson renarrates the main character as a gender non-conforming child, and notes, “it is crucial we tell stories in a way that draws every member of our community into the stories, and to demonstrate the intelligence we all miss when we continue to uphold the colonial gender binary” (p. 145). As Simpson demonstrates, Nishnaabeg storytelling is not about mastering and transmitting a static canon of facts, but rather embodying shared wisdom and making it meaningful for different contexts while understanding and respecting its links to a larger set of stories, relationships, and responsibilities to other humans, other-than-human beings, as well as to one’s ancestors and other relations in the spirit realm.

There is much else that engaging with Simpson’s (2014) article can teach, not just about Nishnaabeg educational philosophy but also the limits of western educational philosophy. However, it is important to also consider how she contextualizes the story with regard to western education itself. She recognizes that it is not easy to engage in the kind of Nishnaabeg education that takes place in Kwezens’ story in the context of settler colonialism, which poisons the land and designates the sugar bush as the property of the colonial state, corporations, or individual settlers. Western educational philosophy tends to value education as schooling within colonial institutions, and has actively suppressed other educational philosophies and the ways of being in which they are rooted. Simpson notes, “Nishnaabeg intelligence has been violently under attack since the beginning days of colonialism through processes that remove Indigenous peoples from our homelands” (p. 13). Nishnaabeg and other Indigenous peoples have resisted these attacks, and even eventually claimed spaces within western institutions. However, Simpson also suggests, “the academy does not and cannot provide the proper context for Nishnaabeg intelligence without the full recognition of the system that generates this intelligence and the people that have dedicated their lives to growing, nurturing, and living that system” (p. 17). She argues that Nishnaabeg intelligence cannot truly thrive until colonial relations have ended, so that relations to and with the land may be fully restored.

Would Simpson's notion of a decolonized future be deemed 'feasible' in the terms of Barnett's feasible utopia? I suspect that if non-Indigenous educators really understood what decolonization would entail, then many would say no, as this would require a dismantling of the epistemological and ontological frameworks that uphold colonial modernity, and thereby, our existence as modern subjects. Yet to say no also presumes the continuation of not only the hegemony of western educational philosophy, but also of settler colonialism, which is premised on the disappearance of Indigenous peoples (Coulthard 2014; Hunt forthcoming; Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández 2013). As Hunt (2014) notes, "Investigations into western onto- logical possibilities are bounded in ways that limit their ability to fully account for Indigenous worldviews" (p. 27). This limitation, and its ethical and material impacts, are nothing new. However, increasingly, these western ontological possibilities are also limited in their ability to generate solutions to the economic and political problems that the western worldview has itself created. Perhaps the modern subject's protective shell is starting to crack on its own.

Different Interventions

If current conditions are such that the continuation of dominant formations of higher education appear increasingly unlikely, yet truly different formations also appear impossible or unimaginable, how might we proceed with developing a practice of higher education philosophy, specifically one that seeks to imagine and engage higher education otherwise and elsewhere? One way to frame this is to consider that interventions are needed at all three layers (methodological-epistemological-ontological), even if our diagnosis emphasizes the ontological layer.

First, with regard to methodological interventions, we can enact short-term, *harm reduction* practices that primarily address the symptoms (rather than root causes) of today's challenges. Thinking in reference to Simpson's critique, one example of how to immediately address the coloniality of mainstream higher education is to "Indigenize" the existing university, that is, to create space for Indigeneity within structurally colonial institutions. This might include efforts to recruit and retain more Indigenous students and faculty, include more Indigenous content in courses of all kinds, and cultivate deeper understanding of histories of colonization. Within these efforts, Indigenous existence (not just epistemologies, but also ontologies) is still subjugated by colonial constraints (Ahenakew 2016; Hunt 2014). As Ahenakew et al. (2014) note, "if we try to provincialize western thought within the institutions (e.g. nation-states, universities, schooling, etc.) that were created to naturalize it, we will need to remain within its language, epistemology and ontology, even when we claim to be doing the opposite" (p. 217). Nonetheless, these methodological efforts can become the first step toward opening up other, more thoroughly transformative higher education futures.

Next, epistemological interventions can enact alternatives that are possible within the existing ontological conditions in the medium-term—what we might call, after Barnett, *feasible utopias*. Thinking in reference to Simpson again, we can consider the example of not only everyday practices of Nishnaabeg intellectual resurgence despite ongoing colonization, but also Simpson's work as a faculty member with the Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning. Dechinta is a land-based educational initiative with deep connections to local Indigenous communities in what is currently called northern Canada. Dechinta centres Indigenous knowledges and employs elders as instructors, and although it is not entirely disentangled from mainstream institutions or independent from the

economic and political constraints of the present, it engages these in strategic ways that support its commitment to epistemological alternatives. For instance, it works with the University of Alberta to offer accredited courses, and its funding system redistributes resources within an inherently unequal capitalist system (Ballantyne 2014). Places like Dechinta are educational experiments that gesture toward radically different futures. Even if they themselves are constrained by the ontological conditions of the present, they can generate possibilities for existence that exceed currently available possibilities.

Interventions at the level of ontology are perhaps the trickiest to engage, as they are long-term and necessarily open-ended. We can describe this as gesturing towards *decolonial horizons of possibility*, in which hope for a different future rests not in any particular vision or promise but in an orientation that looks beyond the horizons that are currently enabled by colonial modernity (i.e. global capitalism, nation-state, Enlightenment knowledge, and possessive individualism premised on hierarchy and separation) (Stein et al. 2017). For instance, Simpson (2014) describes not only the possibility but also the necessity of a non-capitalist, decolonized future. In order for Nishnaabeg educational philosophy to thrive, western epistemological dominance but also western ontological dominance would need to be disrupted and unraveled. This would require widespread disinvestment from the claims of supremacy, certainty, mastery, and universality that so deeply circumscribe sanctioned possibilities for modern existence, and dismantling of the infrastructures that give these claims material force. Barnett's (2014) idea of keeping open the 'possibility of possibilities' is one way of framing the necessary work of enabling radical different futures without guarantees, and without knowing in advance what higher education might look like from within these other forms of existence.

Conclusion

The scale and scope of contemporary crises demand that we grapple with both the gifts and limitations of a dominant higher education field-imaginary that naturalizes and upholds fundamentally unsustainable and unethical structures of existence. Ironically, it is these crises that *might* deepen the existing cracks within the common sense of the dominant higher education field-imaginary, so that possibilities that were previously invisibilized and unintelligible start to become viable and imaginable. In this paper, I have sought to historicize and contextualize these shifts, while also considering the risks and potential circularities that might result from efforts to reimagine higher education that do not adequately problematize the coloniality of western frames of knowing and being. These frames naturalize: a desire for mastery over knowledge about the world that rationalizes one's position of authority and claims to supremacy; presumed entitlements to determine with certainty the direction of our shared futurity; and a belief that our knowledge defines our existence (Andreotti et al. 2018; Stein et al. 2017). I have also sought to gesture towards different horizons of higher education without romanticizing any particular alternative as the 'solution' to the problems that we have created.

Recognizing that what falls outside of our dominant frames is often unintelligible or otherwise deemed impossible (or unfeasible) (Shahjahan et al. 2017), how might higher education scholars nonetheless gesture toward other horizons of possibility? First, we can commit to holding spaces for multi-voiced, critically-informed conversations in which we problematize the practical and ethical limits of our existing field-imaginary, without throwing away its gifts. This would be, in a sense, commitment to a methodological

practice that works within the epistemological layer and could articulate the limits of higher education within the ontology of colonial modernity. However, if we seek to go beyond deconstruction to also enable the possibility of higher education within entirely different forms of existence, then we cannot predetermine what this might look like from where we stand without circularly reproducing the limits of our own ontology. Thus, long-term, systemic transformation requires more than intellectual conversations.

As Shotwell (2016) argues, “Political transformation is not an intellectual exercise, but instead is a visceral, emotional, commonsensical refiguration—that when we engage with [efforts to enact social change], we are moved on many levels, only some of them rational and conceptual” (p. 186). In other words, intellectual work might enable us to get to the edge of what is possible to imagine within our dominant epistemological and ontological frameworks, and to articulate their internal limits and harmful effects, but it cannot, in itself, bring us somewhere different. As Burman (2012) states, “there is no way we are going to intellectually reason our way out of coloniality, in any conventional academic sense” (p. 117). Although she is speaking specifically about Indigenous resurgence and decolonization, Simpson (2014) similarly asserts:

We cannot just think, write or imagine our way to a decolonized future. Answers on how to re-build and how to resurge are therefore derived from a web of consensual relationships that is infused with movement (kinetic) through lived experience and embodiment. Intellectual knowledge is not enough on its own. Neither is spiritual knowledge or emotional knowledge. All kinds of knowledge are important and necessary in a communal and emergent balance (p. 16).

I suggest that any effort to interrupt the hegemony of higher education as we know it, and to enact radically different futures, will require facing today’s challenges in ways that recognize past mistakes, denaturalize present circumstances, and open ourselves up to being taught by other ways of knowing and being, without instrumentalizing difference as a form of escapism. Nonetheless, many questions remain about how we might unlearn colonial habits of being that we might not even realize we have, and learn to be affected by the world in unexpected ways that could then inform possibilities for higher education that are unimaginable from where we currently stand.

Opening oneself up to being affected by the world in this way is a difficult if not impossible task. If modern subjects are conditioned to imagine something, or know the possible outcomes of something, *before* we do it, then can we will or command ourselves into doing something that we can’t yet imagine? This process is also likely to be uncomfortable, painful, and disorienting, as it requires the conditioning of muscles that have atrophied, as well as the deflation of those that have been over-developed. If the colonial conditions of modern existence create a hard shell to protect modern subjects from the uncertainties and vulnerabilities of the world, and if there are already cracks developing in the shell, then why would they want the cracks to be further opened? It might be that people will be willing to do so only once they have calculated that the cost of maintaining a protective shell is higher than the risk of what might be possible once they have given it up. Or perhaps the shifting conditions of our social and ecological context will make it increasingly difficult for us to remain within the shell.

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