Higher Education and the Im/possibility of Transformative Justice

Article · October 2018

DOI: 10.5749/jcritethnstud.4.1.0130

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89 PUBLICATIONS **2,314** CITATIONS

Stein, S. (2018). Higher education and the im/possibility of transformative justice. *Critical Ethnic Studies, 4*(1), 130-153. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/jcritethnstud.4.1.0130

Higher education and the im/possibility of transformative justice

Abstract: *Critical accounts of contemporary higher education are often emplotted by a demand that the state make good on its post-War promises of distributed affluence, inclusion, and social mobility. Oriented by the critical interventions of Sylvia Wynter and Denise Ferreira da Silva, in this article I suggest that despite significant differences between the post-War (liberal) model of students as engaged citizens and the current (neoliberal) model of students as customers and entrepreneurs, both are rooted in the same template of humanity. That is, they are different iterations of the same modern subject that requires the violent racial and colonial architectures of the nation-state and global capital to enable their reproduction and legitimate their claims to progress, autonomy, and universal reason. However, most efforts to address the contemporary problems of higher education fail to identify this constitutive violence, because these efforts are rooted within liberal frames of justice that self-preservingly cannot challenge their own conditions of possibility. I suggest that the orienting framework of transformative justice offers possibilities for dismantling the modern subject and reimagining and remaking higher education in ways that affirm the ethical and political obligations that are rooted in our entanglement with each other and the world. However, these possibilities are not without complication and must be engaged in their full complexity in our efforts to imagine and practice justice otherwise in the context of higher education.*

It has become commonplace to lament that many U.S. scholars and students work and study in neoliberal universities. Other terms have also been employed to characterize the shifts in U.S. higher education over the past forty years—privatization, commercialization, financialization, corporatization, marketization. These descriptors have important differences, and some may be more precise than others, but in general they are all intended to account for declining public funds, growing use of corporate management techniques, and the intensification of institutional practices that directly support capital accumulation. In this moment, there is a strong sense of dissatisfaction about where we are (the present) and where we appear to be headed (the future), particularly in relation to where we have been (the past). The connections we construct among past, present, and future affect how we understand the problems at hand and, therefore, our horizon of imagined possible responses.[1] Thus, it is necessary to trace the narrative emplotments that undergird our critiques of the contemporary university.

Many critical accounts of the neoliberalization of higher education in the United States are organized by a demand that the state make good on its post- World War II liberal promises of distributed affluence, inclusion, and social mobility. Even as some admit that access to higher education alone is not enough to address growing inequality and diminishing employment prospects, most remain deeply invested in ensuring that higher education can fulfill earlier commitments to the public good by balancing civic, humanistic, and economic development.[2] Such narratives tend to elide at least four important considerations that would challenge their internal logics. The first is that neoliberalism did not emerge out of nowhere but is rather the latest iteration of capitalism's *longue durée*.[3] The second is that capitalism is, at its core, a racialized and colonial process and set of social relations. That is, "capitalism has lived off—always backed by the colonial and national state's means of death—of colonial/racial expropriation"; this includes the capital- ism of the liberal welfare state.[4] The third consideration is that

the state has always been imbricated with both the accumulation and securitization of capital and, thus, has always been implicated in the violence of racialization and colonization.[5] The fourth and final consideration is that although many ultimately think of the university as a benevolent and autonomous institution, in the U.S. context its ethical-political possibilities are consistently (re) shaped by its structural entanglements with state power, the imperatives of capital accumulation, and their ordering logics of racialized de/valuation.[6] As such, the institution has adjusted over time to remain aligned with, and to help manage, shifting priorities of the state-capital articulation—as indeed it has done with the most recent shifts.

These four elements point to the possibility that current crises of the U.S. university are not entirely the result of novel transformations or the betrayal of its underlying values, but rather their fulfillment. In other words, and following the analyses of prison abolitionists and others working against state violence, the university is not broken—it was built this way.[7] This also means that without diminishing the importance of what happens within the institution itself, any radical transformation of the university is unlikely to happen without the accompanying radical transformation (dismantling) of the state and capital that serve as its material base. However, few of the most commonly used analytical tools and practical strategies for contesting the contemporary configuration of the university have the conceptual capacity to situate the present within this larger context of racial and colonial violence.[8] Why this violence remains largely unthought in critical higher education scholarship, and how we might reorient critical conversations to attend to it both ethically and politically, are the orienting concerns of this essay.

I begin by noting the colonial elisions in accounts of the neoliberal present that rest on nostalgia for a prior commitment to higher education as a state-sponsored means of educating enlightened citizens and ensuring social mobility. Next, I review the critiques of the modern subject offered by Sylvia Wynter and Denise Ferreira da Silva. I then contrast this subject's violently enforced separability, and denial of relationality, to our actual collective condition of entanglement and consider the ethical and political obligations that follow from this entanglement. I argue that the protagonist of mainstream critical accounts of the neoliberal university is this very modern subject, and ask what is overlooked when we overrepresent this subject and take for granted the cruel conditions of his existence.[9] I suggest the need to look outside of liberal notions of justice in the university toward transformative praxis, drawing on Wynter and Silva as well as the work of those who have sought to create and regenerate justice outside of the state's racial and colonial frames. Finally, after considering how transformative justice might inform our approaches to the study and practice of higher education, I briefly address some of the potential circularities that result from romanticizing our own efforts to disassemble the violence of the modern subject and the architectures that hold him up.

Colonial elisions in critiques of the neoliberal university

The contemporary neoliberal university is often compared to the liberal welfare state model that was hegemonic from after World War II until the 1970s. According to Jeffrey J. Williams, "the welfare state university held a substantial role in redistribution; the post-welfare state university holds a lesser role in redistribution and a more substantial role in private accumulation."[10] In many critical accounts of the contemporary university, the state is no longer adequately committed to funding education as a means of preparing individuals for the practice of citizenship and freedom—as it is perceived to have done in the postwar social contract. For instance, Henry Giroux argues, "the obligations of citizenship have been replaced by the demands of consumerism, education has been reduced to another market-driven sphere, pedagogy has been instrumentalized, and public values have been transformed into private

interests."[11] Christopher Newfield laments the lost opportunity for a more inclusive and racially diverse formation of national citizen- ship, a would-be multiracial mass middle class.[12] Wendy Brown also suggests that the extension of access to liberal arts education during this era was a means for non-elites to "become potentially eligible for the life of freedom long reserved for the few," and argues that today universities overemphasize human capital accumulation at the expense of "producing a public readied for participation in popular sovereignty."[13] The idea of education for citizenship was not novel after World War II; however, it took on a new significance, and higher education specifically was believed to be important for guaranteeing a free and democratic society, ensuring the opportunity for class mobility, and fending off perceived threats like that of recently defeated fascisms and ongoing specters of communism.[14]

Few contemporary accounts of the postwar era are entirely romanticized, however. Brown qualifies her analysis: "This is not to say that higher education in this period realized perfection or was absent the usual cruel exclusions from Western humanism, only that its values and practices were vastly superior to those preceding and succeeding it,"[15] while Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades attest, "Ironically, the 'social contract' between university science and society, of which research was the cornerstone, was built on military funding that flowed from the cold war."[16] It is not clear where the irony lies, however, as indeed the U.S. was effectively a "welfare-warfare" state during this era.[17] In fact, since at least the 1862 Morrill Act, which funded public land-grant universities with the scrip of stolen Indigenous lands that had been accumulated through war and other violent means, the U.S. state has often funded "public goods" by way of acquisitive militarism. This suggests that racial and colonial violence are not primarily an effect of "cruel exclusions from Western humanism," but rather precisely what creates the conditions for such a humanism to exist. Furthermore, although human capital development has increasingly been perceived as the responsibility of the individual rather than the state, the notion of preparing skilled and productive workers in the service of capital accumulation was also central to postwar higher education policy. In fact, some have argued that conditional racial inclusion during this era was in part a calculated move to shield U.S. global hegemony and racial capitalism from critique.[18] Thus, rather than afterthoughts, I treat these qualifiers as the starting point for formulating the questions that guide this essay. Namely, what does it mean for universities to educate for "citizenship" within an anti-Black, settler colonial, and imperial capitalist nation-state? And who is the imagined "public" of a nation-state ordered by the racial, heteropatriarchical, and ecocidal logics of personhood and property?

I suggest that, despite significant differences between the postwar (liberal) model of *students as engaged and productive citizens* and the current (neoliberal) model of *students as customers and entrepreneurs*, both models are rooted in the same template, or what Sylvia Wynter calls "genre," of the human.[19] That is, they are different versions of the same base modern subject, who is educated to rationally pursue affluence, maximize utility, and enact seamless progress and development through the supposedly universal governing architectures of the nation-state and global capital.[20] This, in turn, is thought to prepare students to efficiently manage so-called resources (both natural and human), foresee and forestall risks, and engineer consensual societies and solutions to social problems. Though generally elided, racial capitalism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy underlie this framing of education: the imperatives of rational planning, risk assessment, and asset protection are all mobilized to justify the sacrifice of some peoples' well-being (up to and including their lives) for the benefit of others.

Racial and colonial violence are therefore not products of ignorance, as many would have it, but rather of an apparatus of racial knowledge that naturalizes Indigenous disappearance, Black death, and imperial occupation. In other words, this violence is a product of what Christina Sharpe describes as a

"death-dealing episteme" and its accompanying material apparatus.[21] Thus, until more people are willing to ask, as Wynter does, "What is wrong with our education?," efforts to reimagine the university will fail to identify, let alone disrupt, the patterns of violence that run deeper than the neoliberal present—that is, they will fail "to imagine possibilities for the politics of opposition against both neoliberalism and postcolonial empire."[22]

In this essay, I reframe and refocus Wynter's question slightly (although still in the spirit of her critique), to ask, and begin to answer: What is wrong with the modern subject (who is also the presumed subject of U.S. higher education)? This is a necessary reversal of the damage-centered research that often takes Black and Indigenous communities as its object.[23] Ultimately, however, the task is to undo the modern categories that determine the subject, object, and their violent relation, rather than to have the racial other/ object occupy the position of the subject.

The modern subject

In this section I review accounts of the modern subject that trace the concepts, categories, desires, and frames of reference that reproduce his onto- epistemological assemblage and therefore, necessarily, also reproduce the racial and colonial matrix of our "modern/colonial world system."[24] Through extended engagements with the work of Wynter and Silva, I trace how the material architectures and conceptual grammar of colonial expropriation and racial subjugation naturalize a particular figure of humanity and violently refuse other possibilities for knowing, being, and relating.[25]

The overrepresentation of man

By offering a genealogy of "our present ethnoclass (i.e.,white, Western, bourgeois) conception of the human, Man," Wynter traces how "Man" overrepresents himself as the only legitimate embodiment of humanity.[26] The effect is that all others—Indigenous, Black, other racialized peoples, as well as the unemployed, the incarcerated, the homeless, the poor, and those otherwise deemed "underdeveloped" —are measured against him and deemed to be less human than he, which is to say, less than human.[27] Katherine McKittrick argues that today, "the human [is] understood as a purely biological mechanism that is subordinated to a teleological economic script . . . whose macro-origin story calcifies the *hero figure* of *homo oeconomicus*, who practices, indeed normalizes, accumulation in the name of (economic) freedom."[28] While this narrow script of existence is clearly evident in the ideology and manifestations of neoliberalism, beyond these more recent and immediate effects the violence of nearly six centuries of Man's dominance threatens to destroy, through ecological catastrophe, countless more human and other-than-human lives than those that have already been taken (including Man's own).

In order to understand what enabled Man to reach his current claim to represent the pinnacle of humanity, Wynter carefully traces the transformations that led from a shift in the dominance of the "True Christian Self ' before the Renaissance to the dominance of the "[Secular] Rational Self " by the end of the Enlightenment.[29] This transformation came about in large part through the attempted conquest of Indigenous peoples of the Americas and enslavement of peoples of Africa starting in the fifteenth century, which provided the economic and epistemological conditions of possibility for Europe's ontological emergence. It was through these violent processes that Man constructed an "irrational/subrational Human Other to [his] civic-humanist, rational self-conception" and established the global architectures of capital and of nation-states to represent and serve his interests, thereby externalizing the costs of his own reproduction.[30]

Today, this onto-epistemological assemblage not only "governs our global well-being/ill-being," but Man's genre of being human has also been "projected onto, and incorporates" not just those who are deemed to legitimately embody this subject position (that is, middle-/upper-class white males), but the entirety of the globe.[31] Though never fully admissible to his ranks, those who Man deems to be his others are nonetheless judged and held to account according to his norms and scripts, and some have adopted for themselves his asserted hierarchy of humanity and narrative of human progress. For instance, Wynter notes the push in the mid-twentieth century by newly decolonized nations to "modernize" following in the path of the West. This push was and continues to be contested with alternative visions and demands, just as alternatives were and are still envisioned and demanded within the West itself. Yet even those who contest Man's dominance and create and keep alive other possibilities for existence are often compelled to at least partially adhere to his scripts in order to ensure immediate survival.[32]

In addition to the power and resources under Man's control, Wynter notes that built into Man's self-conception of universality is the repression of his actual particularity as only one "genre" of humanity among many. What Wynter therefore puts forth is "the possibility of undoing and unsettling—*not replacing or occupying*—Western conceptions of what it means to be human."[33] Further, because the coherence of our currently dominant episteme is dependent on Man's specious claim to universalism, Wynter argues that escaping his dominance would require that we "collectively undertake a rewriting of knowledge as we know it . . . without falling into the traps laid down by our present system of knowledge."[34] For Silva, the role of knowledge is also central. As such, the "ethico-political question becomes whether or not justice can be imagined from within the available modalities of knowledge."[35] In the following section, I explore her insights about what and how these modalities of knowledge produce modern existence, and what makes them so violent, and so difficult to dismantle. Although Silva and Wynter differ in their understanding of the possibilities and conditions for enacting existence otherwise, their critiques of Man, or what Silva calls the modern subject, can be complementary.[36]

The modern subject and his affectable other

Silva's work is largely driven by the argument that racial and colonial violence is not ancillary to modern society and its subjects, but rather productive of them in all spheres of modern life: economic, juridical, and ethical.[37] The modern subject understands himself as transparently operating according to universal reason and, therefore, rightfully enacting his self-determined will on the world through the instrumental application of knowledge, mediated by commodities, concepts, and categories determined by linear causality.[38] Following Descartes and Kant, the modern subject's existence is defined by interior thought, and, following Hegel, his European origins assure him that he is the height of a linear, teleological history of human progress. In order to claim this self-determinedness, interiority, and transparency, however, modern man must deny that his existence was actually only made possible in exteriority, that is, through the relations of violence enacted through slavery and colonialism and the still ongoing racial and colonial difference they instituted.[39] In turn, racial and Indigenous subjects are imagined to be outer-determined, as both their minds and bodies are thought to be shaped by their inferior geographic origins and a lower evolutionary location along the purportedly linear development of humanity (often as signified and read through the tools of scientific racism).

Thus, Silva argues that the rational, self-determined, universal character of the modern subject is necessarily produced not only in contrast to but through the construction of the irrational, outer-determined character of the racial and colonial other (or object). According to Silva, this relation of raciality is built into the grammar of the founding discourses of Western knowledge and, thus, into the

"modern conditions of existence."[40] Both symbolically and materially there would be no modern subject without racial and colonial violence. Accordingly, modern reason both requires and is threatened by the very racial and colonial difference it produces: universality and interiority can only be assured in comparison to particularity and exteriority, which in turn always threatens to reveal the fact that the modern subject, too, is determined in exteriority—by his racial and colonial others.[41] Because of this threat, the spatial/geographic and temporal separation of the modern subject (as the always here and now) and those he deems his others (as the always there and then) is continually asserted and policed. This separation and its effects are then justified and explained by the argument that "the causes of the subordination of the others of Europe reside in their physical and mental (moral and intellectual) characteristics."[42] In other words: they are to blame for their own subjugation.

The co-constitutive modern categories of the universal and the particular create a double bind for resistance to racial and colonial subjugation. To be legible and legitimized within modern horizons of political possibility, those not deemed to be modern subjects must assert themselves as self-determining masters of universal reason. If they do not, they are understood not as proper political subjects but rather as improper embodiments of difference.[43] The available choices are stark: be engulfed into "universal reason" or have one's difference rewritten yet again as an object of that universal reason, which justifies continued racial and colonial violence.[44] Yet the former choice (that is, inclusion into universal humanity as defined by Man) is also illusory, because critiques that frame racism or colonialism as a matter of exclusion from universality (rather than productive of it) fail to recognize that the modern subject's claim to universality is itself already premised on and requires racial and colonial difference.[45] Thus, even strict adherence to Man's norms do not guarantee the nonviolability of racialized and Indigenous persons, whose irreducible difference is ascribed within Man's governing biopolitical logics of coloniality and raciality.[46] Efforts to interrupt these logics that are oriented by the imperative to "include" racial and Indigenous others within existing frames and institutions are therefore inadequate/impossible to the task of disassembling the modern subject and the conceptual and material regimes that guarantee his existence.

Rather than rearrange the borders of modern social categories, Silva therefore considers the possibility of "dismantling the existing strategies for knowing and opening the way for another figuring of existence without the grips of the tools of scientific reason."[47] Silva prefigures possibilities for existence that attend to "affectability (relationality, contingency, immediacy)" and that refuse to rely on "the separation and determination of efficient causality and its categories/forms."[48] It is the process of an "unknowing and undoing of the World that reaches its core"—or, "the End of the World as we know it"—that might offer a means to dismantle the modern subject, his institutions, and the set of relationships they instantiate, and to establish "juridico-economic architectures of redress" for racial and colonial violence.[49]

The modern subject of higher education

As U.S. higher education remains a significant site in which people invest their desires, some have referred to this investment as an example of the "cruel optimism" described by Lauren Berlant. For Berlant, "a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing . . . when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially."[50] Described here is the cruelty of the fact that the object of one's desire—in this case, higher education—fails to deliver on its promised outcomes. Berlant asks: "Why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies . . . when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds?"[51] Yet, when Berlant describes the "cost" of conventional good-life fantasies, she emphasizes the price of unfulfilled promises to the fantasy-haver.[52] If we emphasize only this dimension of cruelty,

we lose sight of the kinds of questions that drive this essay: who is the presumed subject of that "good-life" fantasy, who defines what is "good," and at what and whose expense is this fantasy fulfilled? Derived from the critical insights of Wynter, Silva, and many others, the answers are most commonly: the "good-life" is for the modern subject, as defined by the modern subject, at the expense of those he deems his racial and colonial others. Of course, the latter includes many who labor and study in the university—as students, service workers, and faculty—and many who do not, but regardless, they are rarely the addressees of the analytic of the cruel university.

As David Lloyd and Patrick Wolfe suggest, the "public patrimonies of the modern liberal state that emerged from an earlier moment of enclosure and dispossession represent vast storehouses of capital, resources, services and infrastructure."[53] If neoliberalism has largely been an effort to redirect those public resources into private (wealthy, mostly white) hands, it must be remembered that, in the U.S. context, these resources were in the first instance largely accumulated through early processes of racial-colonial capitalism—namely, slavery and colonization. Thus, not only do public goods remain under perpetual threat of privatization under the imperatives of capital accumulation, but regimes of both public *and* private property are premised on the continued occupation of Indigenous lands and subjugation of Black lives. As the public goods disproportionately enjoyed by the white U.S. middle class (modern subjects) increasingly become the target of privatization, this population is subject to some of the methods and rationales of accumulation that were previously reserved for Black, Indigenous, and other racialized populations. Yet, even as the impacts of dispossession are more widely felt, they still most acutely affect those populations who were subject to the initial round of dispossessions. That is, each new regime of capital accumulation does not replace but rather adds new dimensions to the historical and ongoing violence that has yet to be redressed.

Thus, what appear to be novel cruelties of the contemporary configurations of higher education, the nation-state, and global capital often have precedents that are invisibilized because they have affected and continue to most significantly affect populations who were/are deemed to fall outside of the realm of Man's ethical obligation and political rights. As higher education increasingly becomes itself a target of accumulation, there is both an ethical imperative and a political opportunity to imagine futures that do not depend on dispossession. But this remains unthinkable for those who continue to center the modern subject as their primary concern.

Although I argue that the U.S. university has been held up by the same conceptual, material, and affective architectures that reproduce the modern subject, it is not my intention to suggest that these formations have remained unchanged, either in the transition between the postwar and the present, or for the country's four hundred years of higher education history. Though racial subjugation and colonial expropriation repeat the same basic grammar on loop, the vocabularies through which they are expressed are contingent, often shifting with new formations of the nation-state and global capital, as well as the dynamics that arise in efforts to resist their violence, and efforts in turn to co-opt and contain a full account of the colonial history of higher education nor a fully developed alternative account of neoliberalization to the mainstream (liberal) account reviewed above, anticolonial, race-centered histories of the political present remain important and are thankfully being undertaken by various radical historians and critical ethnic studies scholars.[54]

"Difference without separability"

How might we not only decenter the modern subject from critical analyses of the university, but also ultimately dismantle him and the material and epistemological architectures that uphold his existence?

If the production of modern subjects is premised on what M. Jacqui Alexander describes as the collective but unevenly distributed condition of "fragmentation and dismemberment at both the material and psychic levels," what kinds of ethical and political practice would not presume his reproduction?[55] In Silva's speculative insights, derived from what she calls the practice of Black Feminist Poethics, she suggests that any effort to examine the limits of what it is possible to know through the modern subject's supposedly universal knowledge must denaturalize "all the effects and implications as well as the presuppositions informing our accounts of existing with/in one another."[56] Having done so, it might be possible to engage and encounter a radically different kind of knowing, and possibilities for existence in excess of that which can be neatly measured or mediated by modern ways of knowing.

Fred Moten engages with Silva in conjunction with his work on "black study."[57] In particular he suggests that the modern subject's desire for self-determination is connected to claims of self-possession, both of which are more fantasies than facts. They are fantasies because, Moten suggests, we exist in a condition of "difference without separability." We are, he argues, "entangled, vulnerable, open, non-full, more than and less than [ourselves]."[58] Entanglement signals a condition of enmeshment and an accompanying ethical and political responsibility before/beyond will, which could not be further from the liberal notion of ethical/legal relationships between separate, individuated beings that are instituted by free will through the rational calculation of utility maximization and shared self-interest. In a condition of difference without separability, entanglement is impervious to common or divergent values or interests; it is not premised on universalism, transparency, consensus, or harmony, but rather includes the full range of possibilities, including violence, pain, joy, conflict, creativity, and community.

Also in contrast to the liberal humanist impulse is the fact that entanglement refers not anthropocentrically to the condition of all humans in relation to other humans, but rather to the entanglement of *everything with everything else*. This seriously challenges the notion of the supposedly self-determined and autonomous modern subject of interior reason by suggesting that he is in fact just as outer-determined and affectable as supposedly inferior racialized and Indigenous others.[59] The condition of entanglement is ours whether or not we agree to it, and persists even when we disavow it. Why does this matter? Because denial of affectability and assertion of independence (and thus, separation) is what allows for the violence of capitalism and racism to continue without generating an ethico-political crisis.[60] The imperative is thus to grapple with and unmake/reverse the ongoing effects of the violent colonial architectures and patterns of relation that presume separation and autonomy, and deny obligation.[61]

The possibilities signaled by recognition of entangled existence also shift dominant ideas of solidarity. The condition of entanglement suggests that the modern architecture of existence is violent for everyone (because there is no separation), even as its psychic, material, and symbolic harms are distributed in highly uneven ways (because there is difference). This being the case, speaking about the possibility of building coalition with those who con- sider themselves privileged, Moten suggests, "I don't need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?"[62] Because difference shapes individuals' particular positioning within collective political interventions, we each must take account of (and be accountable for) our specific locations within modern matrices of power and, at the same time, be answerable to the fact of our entanglement. While indeed "decolonization is a project for *all*," as is abolition, it demands very different things of us.[63]

The above authors are only a handful of the many scholars and activists who have engaged in a critique and refusal of the modern subject, and specifically his production through racial and colonial violence.

This includes others writing as part of the Black diaspora, particularly in the traditions of Black feminist and Black radical thought, as well as Indigenous scholars who have long critiqued the modern subject's epistemological, ontological, and metaphysical violence as central to settler colonization, emphasizing the denial of entanglement with and obligation to the earth itself as a precondition for its objectification, commodification, and extraction. These scholars not only offer distinct, and at times incommensurable though often complementary, analyses of modernity's constitutive violences but also gesture elsewhere, to possibilities that offer something other than merely a revised and expanded regime of Man.

Thus, if on the one hand these critiques point to and denaturalize the persistent dominance of the modern subject and the violence that is required for his self-realization, they also remind us that other possibilities have always existed and continue to exist. The question then becomes, "what cultural and aesthetic resources are available to us that would make it more possible to claim, rather than to disavow, this condition [of entanglement and affectability] which is already ours, irreducibly, in a way that we cannot avoid?"[64] If indeed we are concerned to affirm this condition, to remember our boundless responsibility to everyone and everything (before will), to un-numb suppressed senses, to unlearn our investments in presumed supremacies and entitlements, and to practice other modes of sociality, then this question is only one of the many that must be asked. In the case of the neoliberal university, we are pushed to ask about the pasts, presents, and futures that have been imagined and built for higher education, and the desires and material forms that (falsely) foreclose the possibility of collectively imagining and enacting something different. As Alexander suggests, "our task is to reexamine and transform inherited practices that stand in the way of justice."[65] That is, to study, unmake, and reconfigure the relations of power and knowledge that produce the university "as we know it."

Toward transformative justice

Within the predominant imaginary of higher education that is premised on liberal ideas of justice that presume *in*justice is rooted in a betrayal of, and/or denial of inclusion into, the economic, juridical, and ethical regimes of Man, critiques and visions for change will tend to reproduce the racial and colonial violence that underwrites these regimes. Liberal frames of justice—whether premised on representation, recognition, redistribution, or otherwise—have no mechanism by which to substantively redress the population-level epistemological and material violences that are instituted by the supposedly universal architectures of modern existence (i.e., nation-state, capital, Enlightenment knowledge) that are its own conditions of possibility.[66] Self-preservingly, liberal justice can only address violence that is legible within its frame, which means it cannot comprehend, let alone redress, the violence that is instituted by that very frame. We therefore need another kind of justice, one that targets the frame itself.[67]

A transformative justice praxis that both confronts and cracks open the bounds of liberal justice would necessarily entail denaturalizing the violence that is required to reproduce the (material and epistemological) forms of the modern subject and his institutions, dismantling those forms, and experimenting with what else is possible at/with/beyond the determinations and separations they impose.[68] While it is impossible to know in advance "the aftermath of decolonization or what the world will have become after it has been known anew," transformative justice movements that seek to create or regenerate alternative systems of justice against and beyond the liberal justice administered by the state might be instructive for those committed to undertaking this task in the context of higher education.[69]

generationFiVE, which seeks "to end the sexual abuse of children within five generations," is one such group.[70] For generationFiVE, transformative justice requires frameworks and subsequent actions that bring together "social analysis and critique of 'power-over' dynamics and relationships; community education regarding dynamics of violence; understandings of trauma and healing; community-based interventions; community organizing to change social and political institutions, norms, and access to resources."[71] The ultimate goals of these analyses and actions are "survivor safety, healing and agency; accountability and transformation of those who abuse; community response and accountability; and transformation of the community and social conditions that create and perpetuate violence."[72]

Importantly, a transformative justice approach is not premised on romanticizing those who are most affected by racial and colonial violence, nor does it presume to assess whether they are "deserving" of solidarity, as this would only serve to reproduce liberal forms of justice premised on the impossible task of proving one's "innocence" within a fundamentally unjust system.[73] This approach also does not consider those most affected by violence to be responsible for "saving" the rest of humanity, including their abusers, which would rather absurdly task the most vulnerable populations with the intellectual and affective labor and material risks of educating and transforming those who subjugate them.[74]

Nearly every issue of concern in higher education today could be addressed through a transformative approach. However, translating transformative justice to higher education is not straightforward. For instance, would it seek to abolish the university in the same way that many transformative justice advocates seek to abolish prisons? We cannot in good faith claim that the university is equivalent to the prison, even as they are hardly opposites.[75] On the other hand, if abolition means not simply the abolition of prisons but rather "the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage," then any university in the *after* of such abolition would be radically transformed, if not unrecognizable.[76] Indeed there are many who have "hacked" the colonial structure of the university from within in order to work toward that very end, guided by the idea that it is necessary to work ourselves out of a job, just as there are those who focus their efforts on building something different.[77] Both are important.

Apart from questions of analytical transferability, as with all contexts, the higher education setting presents particular challenges. For instance, con- sider one of the primary goals outlined by generationFiVE: "accountability and transformation of those who abuse." In the case of the university, it is not only individual students and faculty, but also the institution itself that has perpetuated abusive relations. Are institutions that are premised, above all, on ensuring their own preservation open to being held account- able and transformed? Responses to recent antiracist student protests and demands, and indeed the entire history of institutional suppression and/or strategic instrumentalization of such demands, suggest not. Recent university apologies for participation in Black enslavement (such as those offered by Harvard, Brown, the University of Virginia, and Georgetown) and, more rarely, Indigenous genocide (at Northwestern and the University of Denver), signal a tentative openness to accountability. Yet, the almost total absence of subsequent actions taken by these institutions to enact redress by returning lands, resources, or other institutional wealth that was generated through this violence, or by addressing *ongoing* material and epistemological violence against communities of color and Indigenous communities on and around campus, signals a firm limitation to universities' conceptualization of accountability and to the possibility of transforming the institutional conditions and logics that produce(d) that violence in the first place.[78] These institutional responses also signal the difficulty of achieving another transformative goal outlined by generationFiVE: "survivor safety, healing and agency," which in the case of the university would include not just those within its walls, but also the kin (both human and other-than-human) of those whom it has subjugated and exploited throughout

its history and the local com- munities that are deeply affected by its presence. How is healing possible when the abuse remains ongoing, and when critiques are only acknowledged if they can be reduced to a demand for difference that makes no real difference?[79]

Even as we grapple with these difficult questions, we can consider that transformative justice is not only a process of undoing harm but also of making space for regenerating and being taught by systems of justice rooted in different epistemologies and ontologies than those of the racial and colonial state. For instance, Sarah Hunt argues that Indigenous legal systems offer frameworks of justice that uphold Indigenous self-determination and refuse state justice systems that overwhelmingly reproduce rather than interrupt colonial relations.[80] Hunt also prompts us to ask what it might look like if universities were held accountable to the ceremonial and legal practices of the Indigenous peoples whose lands they occupy.[81] She illustrates this imperative of accountability in arguing that deepened understanding of the gendered nature of colonial violence must be central to any transformative effort to address campus sexual violence. Given that bodily dispossession and the dispossession of lands are intimately linked, Hunt suggests, "if we do not apply a decolonial lens to our understanding of sexual violence on the UBC [University of British Columbia] campus, and on campuses all across North America, the roots of rape culture will remain intact."[82]

To continue with this example, what might it look like to apply a transformative, or decolonial, lens to campus sexual violence? Here I offer some general possibilities, while also recognizing that place-based knowledges, practices, and relationships should significantly inform any actual interventions. Applying such a lens would require looking elsewhere than the state to deliver justice for survivors of campus sexual assaults, for instance, by ceasing to presume that justice is delivered within colonial courts, and by discontinuing reliance on campus or local law enforcement to ensure safety on campus, in particular the safety of Indigenous and racialized students, faculty, staff, and guests whom are often targeted by those very same officers. A transformative approach would ask why the assaults reported by racialized and Indigenous peoples are often received through gendered racial and colonial administrative frames that presume the survivor's inherent sexual violability—and thus, that they either wanted or deserved to be assaulted. This approach would also not frame those who commit sexual violence through liberal narratives of exceptional bad actors and instead would consider the larger set of colonial logics, social norms, and material structures into which assaulters were educated. Sexual violence is not only perpetrated and experienced unevenly across populations, but it is also embedded within a system that occupies Indigenous lands without consent, polices the bodies of nonwhite, female, trans*, Two-Spirit, and nonbinary people (i.e., those who do not qualify as "modern subjects"), and systemically produces and transmits knowledge and professional practices that rationalize this violence for (the modern subject's) profit, pleasure, and, yes, education.

To recognize that U.S. higher education has always been violent, and that its imagined student has tended to be the modern subject, even as the particulars have shifted over time, does not require that we immediately give up on the university, nor dismiss the possibility of situated, strategic actions within it. Just as making demands on the state does not necessarily signal confidence in its ability or intention to deliver justice, making demands in/of the university does not necessarily signal earnest belief or investment in the possibility of its reform, nor a desire for its restoration to an earlier form.[83] Is it possible to resist the continuing tide of university privatization without employing the foil of a benevolent state, or an innocent public? Benevolent or not, it is difficult to turn away from the state as a preferred source of material support for the foreseeable future, given the available alternatives (onerous student loans or suspect private donors). Even if so, we can nonetheless signal that these are contingent, harm reduction strategies, rather than the ultimate ends of transformation. As Tiffany

Lethabo King argues, "temporarily resuscitating the subject, specifically within the context of the neoliberal university, may be necessary even to those interrogating the very terms and existence of the subject," for instance, to ensure that demands are legible to administrators in the context of organized labor campaigns.[84] Yet, she also suggests, even as this "important strategizing is occurring, having the capacity to move in, between, through, and outside of subject formations is essential."[85]

Coda

Even for those who are agnostic about whether the university can ever be "made just," as long as these institutions are in place there remains a responsibility to make them more accessible and livable for the most marginalized within them and to also mitigate the violence that the institutions affect beyond their walls. Whether that work ultimately leads to transformation, or what the *after* of transformation will look like, cannot be determined in advance, particularly if transformative justice ultimately requires the end of the university/the world as we know it, and the creation and/or regeneration of something different that would not repeat the same mistakes.[86] Whatever happens, it is inevitable that we will make new and different mistakes as part of this process. Even as we remain answerable to those mistakes, humility is crucial, as is an attentiveness to the complexities and contradictions of doing this work. The risks of romanticism are not reserved for those steeped in liberal nostalgia about the past; we must also consider that we are prone to romanticism about our own efforts to enact transformation in the present. Thus, I conclude by attending to some of the circularities that arise in efforts to do this kind of work, which must be addressed alongside efforts to defend the most vulnerable from the violent backlash of a modern subject who will resist his own dismantling.

First, too often stated commitments are equated with actually doing the difficult work of unlearning separability, unraveling material domination, and enacting relationships that affirm our entanglement with and responsibility to one another in everyday practice.[87] For instance, by offering a critique of the neoliberal university, we may position ourselves outside of it, where we and those who join us can "come to know and reaffirm what is right and what is wrong through the conduct of the critique."[88] The fact that we might benefit from some elements of neoliberalism at the same time as we are harmed by it is then suppressed by the dubious conviction that speaking out against something will spell its end.[89] More generally, there is a reluctance to admit that many of us remain (even if reluctantly) invested—and thus, implicated—in the very institutions that we critique, and so we fail to substantively consider how these conflicted investments might have contradictory effects on the work that we do toward transformation.[90] That is, we cannot always be certain whether our desire to transform the university is ultimately rooted in a desire to create something entirely otherwise or to preserve it.

Another common circularity is that in efforts to engage the "cultural and aesthetic resources" that provide glimpses of otherwise ways of knowing and being, these resources are imported, or grafted, back into the same supposedly universal matrix of intelligibility and value that previously denied them legitimacy.[91] Any effort whose end is to simply include difference in the world of the modern subject, rather than to dismantle that world, will always be conditional—for instance, by including only that which is not disruptive, and/ or translating it into colonial categories of meaning and capital in the process of institutionalization. Regardless of intention, selective inclusion of non-Western knowledges can proliferate colonial claims to ownership of non-Western knowledge, thereby re-silencing possibilities and peoples that exceed the bounds of what can be neatly classified and contained by modern frames.[92]

These possible pitfalls point to the difficulty of transformative work, or some might conclude, its impossibility. Yet, instead of a dead end, perhaps exhausting all imaginable possibilities is precisely where the potential for something else becomes viable. While political imagination is important, transformative justice cannot be determined in advance of its doing, as "[a]bove all, we need to learn how to *practice* justice, for it is through practice that we come to envision new modes of living and new modes of being that support these visions."[93]

Notes

This paper was originally presented at the Cultural, Social and Political Thought Graduate Student Conference at the University of Victoria in 2015. It has since been significantly improved through subsequent conversations with Denise Ferreira da Silva and Vanessa Andreotti, as well as thorough the editorial suggestions of Dallas Hunt, and the generous critiques and guidance of the *Critical Ethnic Studies* editors and anonymous reviewers.

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44. Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*.
45. Silva, "Outline of a Global Political Subject."

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48. Ibid., 81, 92.
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