

Proposal Summary.

Title

Futures Thinking and the Difficulties of Imagining Higher Education Otherwise

Abstract

This paper argues that prevailing approaches to the future in higher education are oriented to reproduce the coloniality and unsustainability of our current systems. It suggests more just and sustainable futures would require recognition, interruption, and repair of the harms caused by higher education in the colonial past and present.

Proposal Text

Objectives of the inquiry

There are many different ways of grappling with possible “higher education futures,” ranging from technocratic efforts to plan and predict more efficient and “economically rational” higher education systems (often led by consulting firms like KPMG or intergovernmental organizations like the OECD), to individual universities’ institutional strategic planning processes, to the visions put forward by student and social movements for climate action, decolonization, and abolition. Each of these approaches to and visions of the future is premised on very different theoretical, political, and onto-epistemological assumptions and investments. Yet the approaches that tend to orient our colleges and universities are those that narrow rather than pluralize possible futures (Facer & Newfield, 2021), particularly favoring those futures that would lead to the reproduction of existing social, political, and economic systems. These are the same systems that, critical scholars and activists argue, have led us to current social inequities, extreme wealth disparities, ecological destruction, and climate destabilization.

As Shahjahan (2018) suggests, “Time remains unexamined and undertheorized when exploring different aspects of higher education” (p. 1). This paper follows Shahjahan’s suggestion that “we need to understand the conceptual practices we engage in by which we make sense of time” (p. 1) by examining different approaches to futures thinking in higher education. I particularly focus on asking how different approaches to the future would either interrupt or extend existing social and ecological injustices, focusing on the possibilities of a reparative approach to the future. I also offer two examples of recent efforts to gesture in this direction. While the paper focuses on how the future is approached in higher education within settler colonial countries, like the US and Canada, there are implications for other contexts as well.

The philosophical argument and sources to support it

Like many of the concepts that orient commonsense/whitestream (Grande, 2004) habits of thinking, being, and relating within Western universities, Western notions of time are positioned as if they were

universal truths, rather than partial, situated representations of reality (Shahjahan, 2018). Below, I briefly review five primary assumptions of Western notions of time,

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focusing on those that significantly shape orientations toward the future:

- 1) linear progress – the assumption that time moves in a straight arrow, in one direction, toward ever-greater improvements in human knowledge and morality (Seamster & Ray, 2018)
- 2) allochronism – the assumption that Western societies are leading linear progress and non-Western societies are thus behind in the supposedly-universal path of progress (Fabian, 2014)
- 3) teleological – the assumption that we should predict and project the future in advance and then plot out how to forward toward it (Andreotti, et al., 2019);
- 4) certainty – the assumption that the future should be predetermined in order to allow for a sense of security that we know what is coming and how to plan for it; and
- 5) universality – the assumption that Western notions of the time are the only “real”, legitimate approach to time, which invalidates and/or invisibilizes other approaches.

This approach to time tends to foreclose possible futures that are not imaginable “from within our contemporary colonial mode of sense-making,” as these other futures are “deemed to be unreasonable and unrealistic or are made invisible” (Andreotti et al., 2019, p. 394).

I outline the impacts of the universalization of a Western approach to time not to entirely dismiss this approach, nor to suggest that it be replaced with a prefabricated alternative. Rather, my intention is to provincialize it as one possible mode of temporality whose hegemony has limited other possibilities for existence and to consider the potential implications of continuing on this path. In particular, continuing on this path will likely lead to the reproduction of white/settler futurities that seek to secure white epistemic and moral authority and the right to enjoy the material benefits derived intergenerationally from centuries of colonialism, slavery, and segregation (Baldwin, 2012; Brousseau, 2021; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013). White/settler futurities seek to disallow the self-determination and flourishing of Black, Indigenous, and communities of color, in both the Global North and South. These white/settler futurities also have significant ecological impacts that threaten the health and well-being of these communities as well as the health and well-being of other-than-human beings, but that may also ultimately threaten the continuity of all human life on the planet as we face climate crises.

A Western approach to time also has significant implications for higher education futures thinking given that it tends to discount how the future is significantly shaped by past and present injustices (Sprirakash, 2022). Recent scholarship has documented the ways that higher education in settler colonial contexts was founded and continues to be organized by colonialism, capitalism, white supremacy, and ecological extraction (e.g., Boggs et al., 2019; Boidin, Cohen, & Grosfoguel, 2012; Chatterjee & Maira, 2014; Daigle, 2019; Hailu & Tachine, 2021; Meyerhoff, 2019; Minthorn & Nelson, 2018; Patel, 2021; Stewart-Ambo & Yang, 2021; Tachine, 2022, Wilder, 2013). This scholarship goes beyond simply naming existing social and educational inequities to also name how these inequities were initially created and have been reproduced over time. Specifically,

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this work points to the ways that, through its complicity in genocide and epistemicide, higher education in settler colonial contexts has been developed and funded not only through the exclusion of Black, Indigenous, and communities of color, but also at the expense of their well-being (lives, livelihoods, and lands). Another body of work also names that while higher education is often looked to as a source of solutions to climate and ecological crises, it has also been an active contributor to those crises by producing knowledge and educating students in ways that foster extractive, utility-maximizing modes of relating to nature (e.g., Green, 2021; La Paperson, 2017; Pradanos, 2020; Stein, 2019).

While some institutions have taken initial steps to redress their complicity in this harm, for instance, through land acknowledgements, institutional apologies, and formal “self-study” reports, in general, these efforts tend to relegate the impacts of racial, colonial, and ecological violence to the past. The assumption of linear progress embedded in Western approaches to time suggests that, with the passage of time, the impacts of these violences have lessened and have become or are gradually becoming irrelevant (Seamster & Ray, 2018). Thus, the past is seen to have little role in shaping the present – or at least, its impacts are selectively remembered. As a result, the past is seen to have little role in shaping the future, as well.

However, a small but widening group of scholars and activists have suggested the need to centre how racial, colonial, and ecological violence have shaped the past and present of higher education, and to consider how these violences might shape the future. Many of these thinkers draw on theories and practices of decolonization and abolition, as well as other frameworks originating from the communities most affected by this violence. While these thinkers do not suggest that the continuity of this violence into the future is inevitable, they do suggest that this violence will likely be reproduced if we do not commit to actively interrupting it in the present. Such an interruption would require a reckoning with the historical injustices of the past as well as the ongoing injustices of the present, including enacting forms of restitution and repair.

For instance, Sprikash (2022) argues for the need for “material, epistemic, pedagogic, and relational modes of reparative redress in education.” Reparations are grounded in the responsibility to redress past injustices and interrupt how they are reproduced in the present, which in turn would contribute to the possibility of more just educational futures. Reparation is not only about paying intergenerational debts (although it is certainly about that), but also about the learning and unlearning that can come from the painful process of facing difficult truths.

Facer (2022) suggests that most engagements with the future in higher education focus on either critiquing the present or imagining idealized futures. She calls for more engagement with “disruptive change that may be emerging at the margins of the present” (p. 203). Two examples stand out as efforts to gesture toward reparative approaches to higher education futures thinking in particular. The first example, the Oshkigin Noojimo'iwe, Naḡi Waḡ Pə tu Uḡ Ihduwa's'ake He Oyate Kiḡ Zaniwica ye Kte

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report (2023), was produced by the Towards Recognition and University-Tribal Health (TRUTH) Project. This Indigenous-led effort “highlights the ongoing struggle for recognition of Indigenous rights and sovereignty, focusing on persistent, systemic mistreatment of Indigenous peoples by the University of Minnesota.” In addition to documenting the university’s complicity in colonial harm, the report makes several recommendations for how the university can move toward repair with Indigenous Nations, including by returning Indigenous lands, paying material reparations, and offering fee waivers to Indigenous students.

The second example is focused on ecological violence. Sterling College in Vermont, which in 2019 revised its mission and vision to focus on ecological thought and action. The new vision commits Sterling to use “education as a force to address critical ecological problems caused by unlimited growth and consumption that is destroying the planet as we have known it, such as: fossil fuel dependence and rapid climate change; destruction of biodiversity and loss of wild places; promotion of harmful agricultural practices that threaten human and natural communities; persistence of structural oppression that impacts human and ecological wellbeing; and deterioration of civil society through estrangement from community, nature, and place.”

These examples offer just a glimpse of what a reparative approach to the future in higher education might look like in practice. Although one is more focused on colonial violence and the other is focused more on ecological violence, in reality, these processes are deeply interconnected. The exact nature of repair in any given context would need to be collectively constructed by those communities involved and affected. Rather than a single event or action that guarantees a different future that can be determined in advance, reparation can be understood as an emergent, relational process. Through the act of repairing harm and building respectful and reciprocal relationships in the present, different futures can become possible. This approach to the future challenges the assumptions of teleology and certainty embedded in Western notions of time, and desires for the continuity of a system that protects white/settler advantages. Thus, we may anticipate that this approach may activate significant resistance to those who propose it.

Emergent conclusions or propositions and implications

This paper suggests that enabling the possibility of substantively different futures of higher education would require: 1) rethinking prevailing approaches to the future that are narrowly premised on Western notions of time, and 2) attending much more closely to how the past shapes the present, and to how what we do in the present may affect the future. Specifically, I suggest that putting forward a predefined vision for an idealized future (Collard & Dempsey, 2022) can deflect the work that needs to be done in the present to confront the harsh reality that higher education has benefitted from and actively participated in naturalizing, normalizing, and reproducing ongoing processes of colonialism, capitalism, white supremacy, and ecological extraction. Until those who work and study in higher education commit to ongoing counter-processes of identifying, interrupting, and repairing the impacts of colonialism, capitalism, white supremacy, and

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ecological extraction on our colleges and universities, then even well-intended efforts to “imagine higher education otherwise” may result in more of the same.

Importance of the argument for higher education

With the proliferation of climate crises and the growth of socio-economic inequalities, many people are asking how higher education can contribute to just and sustainable futures. Yet prevailing approaches to time and enduring investments in the continuity of white/settler futurities risk reproducing precisely the opposite: unsustainable and unjust futures. This paper offers students, staff, and faculty an alternative approach to the future that emphasizes our responsibilities and relationships to one another and to the earth itself in the present in ways that prioritize the well-being of current and future generations of all species.

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