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### **What Can Decolonial and Abolitionist Critiques Teach the Field of Higher Education?**

**Abstract:** In this article, I offer a critical reading of the higher education field-imaginary and its orienting assumptions, inspired by decolonial and abolitionist critiques. These critiques identify the constitutive and ongoing violence that underwrites modern institutions of higher education, and thus, the higher education field itself. In so doing, they challenge scholars and practitioners to reckon with the implication of higher education in systemic harm and unsustainability, and to reimagine higher education as we know it. However, this reimagining should move beyond the common tendency to aspire to transcend the existing imaginary without disinvesting from the harmful promises it offers.

Because US higher education institutions are often framed as primary sites in which systemic, historical, and ongoing violence can be interrupted and redressed, there is a concern amongst many scholars and practitioners of higher education to protect and ensure the continuity of these institutions in the face of contemporary instability and uncertainty. However, increasingly decolonial and abolitionist scholars and activists have brought attention to the ways that colleges and universities have themselves been complicit in historical and ongoing social and ecological harm (e.g. Boggs et al., 2019; Boggs & Mitchell, 2018; Daigle, 2019; Grande, 2018; Hunt, 2016; Rodriguez, 2012). Central to these critiques is the diagnosis that the fundamental problem with mainstream higher education institutions is not that they exclude certain populations from their promises, but rather that racial, colonial, and ecological violence are the ongoing foundations and conditions of possibility for these institutions to exist, and for the promises they offer to be fulfilled. From this perspective, higher education is both rooted in and contributes to the reproduction of a fundamentally harmful and unsustainable system.

In this article, I offer a synthesis of decolonial and abolitionist critiques and apply them to the field of higher education studies itself. By engaging these critiques to offer an analysis of the mainstream higher education field, I denaturalize the implicit horizons of justice, hope, futurity, and change that presently orient the field and its organizing imaginary. This, in turn, prompts the consideration of other horizons of possibility for forms of higher education that would not be premised

on the ongoing reproduction of harm and that instead open up healthier possibilities for shared existence that are unfathomable from within the imaginary that currently shapes the field.

Decolonial and abolitionist critiques have thus far been underutilized in higher education scholarship, but there is growing interest in both frameworks. Indigenous scholars have long critiqued colonialism in higher education (e.g. Minthorn & Shotton, 2018; Waterman, 2019), and although decolonial critiques are still new to many in the field, they are gaining traction, as evidenced by ACPA's (2018) *Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization*. Engagements with abolitionist critiques are even rarer, but they have gained more visibility in the wake of recent uprisings against anti-Black violence and in support of Black lives. Yet with growing interest also comes a risk that these critiques will be decontextualized and turned into slogans or buzzwords, as has been observed in relation to intersectionality (Harris & Patton, 2018), trans\* studies (Nicolazzo, 2017), and decolonization itself (Tuck & Yang, 2012). In other words, even when we set out to listen, it can be difficult for those embedded within the higher education field to actually hear what is being articulated and challenged by decolonial and abolitionist critiques.<sup>1</sup> In particular, it may be difficult to sit with what is perhaps the primary question raised by these critiques regarding higher education: "whether the university is capable or worthy of being 'transformed' from its dominant historical purposes, or if it ought to be completely abolished" (Rodriguez, 2012, p. 812). There are at least two reasons for this potential difficulty.

The first reason has to do with the higher education "field-imaginary." According to Pease (1990), a field-imaginary is constituted by a field's "norms, working assumptions, and self-understandings" (p. 3). It is through this imaginary that members of a field make sense of their shared

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<sup>1</sup> When I use "we"/"our"/"us" throughout this article, I am referring to scholars and practitioners of higher education. However, this encompasses a diverse group of people with different degrees of complicity in the systemic violences I describe, including many who may be both subjugated by this system as well as complicit in the subjugation of others. While on the one hand "people are not equally responsible or capable, and are not equally called to respond" (Shotwell, 2016, p. 6), on the other hand, "There is nothing about our position in the academy, however marginal, that is innocent of power" (Mitchell, 2015, p. 91).

objects of concern and methods of study. In short, a field-imaginary is what keeps things in place. Although no imaginary is totalizing, the dominant higher education field-imaginary generally sets the terms of the conversations higher education scholars and practitioners are able to have, the questions we are able to ask, and thus, the futures we are able to desire and imagine. Nearly all of the mainstream theories, frames, and vocabularies in the field of higher education for thinking about or enacting justice and change fail or falter when confronted with analyses that diagnose violence as the systemic, historical and ongoing condition of possibility for our institutions, our field, and our imaginations. Thus, many higher education scholars and practitioners lack a frame of reference for substantively engaging decolonial and abolitionist critiques. Further, even if these critiques are engaged, they may be decontextualized, extracted, and grafted back into mainstream frames and practices, whether intentionally or not (Ahenakew, 2016; Spivak, 1988; Tuck & Yang, 2012). This happens, for instance, when “decolonization” is reduced to adding a few non-white, non-western authors to a syllabus. This presents an intellectual challenge, which requires translational work to bring different knowledge communities into conversation, attending to convergences, tensions, and incommensurabilities. Building on my previous work in this area, this article offers a small contribution to that bridging work by offering a reading of the higher education field-imaginary inspired by decolonial and abolitionist critiques.

The second reason behind the potential difficulty of substantive engagements with decolonial and abolitionist critiques has to do with the common reluctance to engage deeply with invitations to face the depth, complexity, and magnitude of problems that lack immediate, feel-good solutions. This difficulty is further amplified when these invitations ask us to question our desire for the futurity of the institutions that helped to create these problems, and further, to take responsibility for our own role in creating them as well (Shotwell, 2016). This presents affective and relational challenges that require us to develop stamina for the difficult, uncomfortable, self-implicating work of confronting the racial, colonial, and ecological violence that underwrites modern institutions of higher education, the field of

higher education itself, and thus, our livelihoods as scholars and practitioners of the field. This is beyond what can be accomplished in this or any article; however, I gesture toward some possibilities throughout the text.

Before I proceed, I want to clarify this article is not an effort to convince higher education scholars and practitioners to embrace decolonial and abolitionist critiques. Instead, it is an invitation for us to “pause” (Patel, 2014) for long enough to open ourselves up to being surprised and unsettled by what these critiques might teach us. This will require interrupting the temptation to selectively “consume” critiques in ways that affirm our existing colonial assumptions, investments, and desires, in particular desires for virtue, purity, and futurity (Shotwell, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Although these critiques can offer no universal prescription for what people “should” do, they make it more difficult to avoid what many of us would rather not see and would prefer to turn our backs to. Thus, whether or not they ultimately agree with these critiques, those who accept this invitation to pause might find that it may enable them to ask previously unthinkable questions about higher education, the higher education field, and our responsibilities as scholars and practitioners – without immediately demanding answers.

I begin the article by introducing the conceptual framework, inspired by decolonial and abolitionist critiques, that orients my analysis of the US higher education field-imaginary. Then, I identify and analyze five orienting assumptions of the field using this framework, including the assumptions that: 1) higher education is reducible to the modern university; 2) higher education is a story of linear progress; 3) higher education should enable socio-economic mobility; 4) higher education requires the nation-state, capital, and universal knowledge; and 5) higher education scholars and practitioners are “good” people.<sup>2</sup> To conclude, I argue that before we can truly imagine and practice higher education otherwise, we need to confront the unsettling implications of these critiques.

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<sup>2</sup> My focus is on the field of higher education in the US. While this presents a problem of US-centrism, the field was arguably birthed here and has influenced programs around the world. Yet the analyses offered here cannot be

## Conceptual Framework

Resistance to racial and colonial violence has existed since Europe initiated the colonization of Indigenous lands and lives, and the enslavement of Black people in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, in what is currently known as the United States and elsewhere, this violence has continued to affect the ongoing dispossession (exploitation and expropriation), destitution, and premature death of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities both “at home” and abroad. This violence extends to violence against other-than-human beings and the earth itself through the objectification of nature and extraction of what are often called ‘natural resources.’ Decolonial and abolitionist theories and practices are efforts to resist this violence, and to foster and sustain other modes of existence. Engagements with these theories and practices should be careful not to erase the intellectual, political, and other labour of those communities engaged in high-intensity struggle that developed these critiques, in many cases as a matter of survival. And apart from merely thanking and crediting these communities for their intellectual labour, we need to ask what our ongoing responsibilities to them are.

The conceptual framework that I employ in this article is inspired by decolonial and abolitionist critiques. I say “inspired by” because: 1) There are many different traditions of intellectual and embodied resistance that inform these critiques, including Indigenous Studies, Black Studies, postcolonial studies, queer studies, among others, each of which has their own internal heterogeneities and complexities; 2) Partly because of this diversity of genealogies, it is not possible to articulate a definitive version of decolonial or abolitionist critique. Conversations across these genealogies are also complex and contested, which attests to the indispensability of engaging each tradition in more depth, the importance of attending to dynamic tensions within and between them, and the false promise of a devising a single, universal theory of racial/colonial violence; and 3) I engage in my own synthesis of

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universally applied to all higher education scholarship, even in the US itself; indeed, provincializing the study of higher education is a necessary part of pluralizing the possible futures of higher education.

these genealogies, and do not want to present this synthesis as if it “represents” any particular decolonial or abolitionist perspective. This latter point is particularly important given my positionality as a white/settler author, and the risk that my account will be privileged over Indigenous and Black peoples’ because of colonial structures that naturalize white epistemic authority. Thus, although I seek to honour the spirit of decolonial and abolitionist theories and practices, like any other reading, mine is situated and partial. I only scratch the surface of the depth and complexities of these traditions of struggle and their possible implications for the study and practice of higher education.

Below I briefly review the genealogies of critique that inform decolonial and abolitionist theories and practices before outlining my conceptual framework for this article.

### **Decolonial Critiques**

My approach to decolonial critique is deeply informed by Indigenous Studies scholarship, which is rooted in a concern for the defense and thriving of Indigenous peoples’ lives, lands, and political and intellectual sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). The field incorporates knowledges, critiques, and social movements that pre-date and continue to exceed its institutionalization as a field in the university. Critical Indigenous Studies scholars in particular argue that Indigenous ways of knowing and being challenge and expose the limits of Western political and social norms, while also generating possibilities for “an after to empire” that is not premised on dispossession (Byrd, 2011, p. 229).

“Settler colonialism” is a primary animating concept within Indigenous Studies. If exploitation or metropole colonialism is characterized by the extraction of wealth and resources by a foreign power, settler colonialism is premised on the ongoing displacement of Indigenous peoples from their lands so as to enable permanent European (and later, non-European) settlement. Indeed, “the disruption of Indigenous relationships to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5). The settler nation-state – in both its conservative *and* progressive iterations – is a primary object of critique, given that it is premised on ongoing Indigenous dispossession. As Trask

(2004) notes, “Born in conquest, the United States continues in conquest” (p. 11). Because the continued presence of Indigenous peoples threatens settler countries’ claims to legitimacy (TallBear, 2019), settler colonialism is organized by a logic of elimination. In this logic, elimination of Indigenous peoples is sought through state-sanctioned physical violence, policies of hyperdescent, and assimilation – including by way of education (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013). These efforts seek to separate Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands and thus rupture their kinship relations. Indigenous feminists also draw particular attention to the state’s role in violently imposing Western gender norms and sanctioning sexual violence against Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit people (Hunt, 2016). Alongside the nation-state, scholars identify the central role of capitalism in colonization, as it requires ongoing access to land and unlimited ‘natural resources’ for perpetual accumulation and economic growth. Thus, according to Coulthard (2014), “For Indigenous nations to live, capitalism must die” (p. 173).

Indigenous studies scholars challenge mainstream horizons of hope and change that define social justice as inclusion into the benefits of the nation-state or capitalism (Byrd, 2011). This does not mean that the immediate pursuit of expanded civil rights and economic security is deemed unimportant, but rather that there is a need to imagine futures that do not presume the inevitable continuity of the colonial nation-state and the capitalist economic system (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013; Donald, 2019; TallBear, 2019).

Indigenous peoples challenge colonialism and assert their continued presence through various means. Resurgence efforts seek to strengthen Indigenous modes of existence and relationality beyond the dictates and drives of the state, capital, and heteropatriarchy (Aikau, 2015). There are multiple different ways of enacting resurgence, some of them complementary and others conflicting, but for Simpson (2016), “resurgence creates profoundly different ways of thinking, organizing, and being because the Indigenous processes that give birth to our collective resurgence are fundamentally nonhierarchical, nonexploitative, nonextractivist, and nonauthoritarian” (pp. 22-23). This includes

language revitalization efforts (Galla & Goodwill, 2017), practices of reclaiming Indigenous food sovereignty (Kamal et al., 2015), and various efforts to strengthen land-based, community-centered, and intergenerational educational opportunities for Indigenous peoples (Simpson, 2014). Many Indigenous scholars also emphasize the imperative of decolonization, and while as with resurgence there is no single vision of what decolonization entails (Andreotti et al., 2015), there is a general sense that it requires an end to the settler colonial occupation and ownership of land – including both a return of Indigenous governing authority, and a break with the very idea that land is a possession/property, rather than a living entity with whom humans have reciprocal responsibilities.

I also place postcolonial traditions and modernity/coloniality studies under the broad umbrella of decolonial critiques, although I cannot do justice to either of them here. However, one of the primary critiques of postcolonial studies is that of Western universalism and “grand narratives,” as well as a concern for how the non-West figures within these narratives as a deviant, less “developed”, and less deserving other. In turn, this narrative of Western superiority serves as a justification for continued Western economic and political hegemony. This view is strongly associated with Said’s (1978) critique of the colonial mobilization of knowledge to secure and wield power, while Spivak (1988) challenges the tendency of both Western and non-Western intellectuals to romanticize, homogenize, extract and instrumentalize the perspectives and experiences of colonized peoples. Meanwhile, modernity/coloniality studies emphasizes coloniality as the constitutive underside of modernity. Coloniality “refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). Mignolo (2011) argues that modernity and coloniality are two sides of the same coin: “one [modernity] constantly named and celebrated (progress, development, growth) and the other [coloniality] silenced or named as problems to be solved by the former (poverty, misery, inequities, injustices, corruption, commodification, and dispensability of

human life)” (p. xviii). Thus, the violence of coloniality subsidizes the shiny promises of modernity, even as this relationship is constantly disavowed through what Spivak calls sanctioned ignorance.

### **Abolitionist Critiques**

Black Studies, which may also be called African(-)American or Africana Studies, was institutionalized as a field half a century ago, but as is the case with Indigenous studies, Black intellectual life predates and exceeds what was institutionalized as “Black Studies” (Moten, 2013). According to Sexton (2010), “African American Studies renders practitioners inevitable partisans in a series of overlapping debates and contests...There are radicals and liberals, moderates and conservatives...employing a range of analytic approaches” (p. 213). The particular literature I emphasize here is rooted in Black feminism (Silva, 2014) and the Black radical tradition (Robinson, 2000).

Black Studies denaturalizes whiteness as the pinnacle of humanity that measures all others against itself (Wynter, 2003). According to King (2019), “the ‘human’ as an exclusive category demands an outside and requires the death of Indigenous and Black people” (p. 20). In the era of chattel slavery, this “conquistador humanist” logic translated into treating Black people as fungible: interchangeable, accumulable, and objectifiable for white peoples’ profit, pleasure, and self-actualization (Hartman, 1997; King, 2019; Spillers, 1987). In addition to the study of Black peoples’ experiences and resistance under enslavement, Black Studies scholars address what Hartman (2008) calls the “afterlife of slavery,” wherein “black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racist calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago” (p. 6). Black Studies identifies the formulation of Blackness as a foundational element of modernity, including the economic value that was produced through slavery (which is the foundation of the global capitalist present), and the modern Western nation-state, including the US (which is always already a racial state, specifically, an anti-Black state that frames white citizens as the only legitimate political, and thereby fully human, subjects) (Rodríguez, 2018; Silva, 2014).

Black Studies addresses what Silva (2014) describes as the “two faces of Blackness” (p. 85): while Blackness is “a reference of commodity, an object, and the other” (p. 81) within modern categories and modes of social life, it also hosts expansive possibilities for existence that exceed these confines. Mustaffa (2017) emphasizes the equal importance of attending to both anti-Black violence and Black life-making in higher education – the latter referring to modes of thinking, being, and relating otherwise than modern/colonial modes of existence (see also Alexander, 2005; King, 2019; Moten, 2013). Abolitionism in particular is a theory and practice that seeks to both dismantle systemic violence, especially anti-Black violence, and imagine, practice, and sustain alternative modes of (co)existence.

Sexton (2016) calls abolition “the political dream of Black Studies” (p. 593), given that the abolition of slavery is understood to be an incomplete project. Black radical and Black feminist genealogies of abolitionism see the police and prisons as inherently violent, anti-Black structures that enable the continuation of “slavery by another name” (Boggs et al., 2019, p. 2). However, abolitionism does not focus narrowly on eradicating the specific institutions of prisons and police (Gilmore, 2018). Rather, abolitionism seeks an end to *all* “hegemonic paradigms, including but not limited to forms of power constituted by the logic of carcerality, patriarchy, coloniality, racial chattel, racial capitalism, and heteronormativity” (Rodríguez, 2018, p. 1612). Therefore, for Moten and Harney (2004), abolitionist movements seek “not so much the abolition of prisons, but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage” (p. 114).

### **Synthesis of Critiques**

While it is important not to conflate abolition and decolonization, when viewed alongside each other these intellectual and activist traditions point to the fact that racial, colonial, and ecological violence is constitutive of modernity in general and to the US more specifically, rather than an aberration within it. My conceptual framework is inspired by decolonial and abolitionist critiques, as well as by my work with the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures collective and our ongoing

collaborations with Indigenous communities in Canada, Peru, and Brazil (Stein et al., 2020). This framework emphasizes that modern existence is defined, first and foremost, by the denial of relationality and responsibility through the attempted separation of humans from the rest of nature, and from one another, and through the subsequent creation of categories and hierarchies that rank these ‘separate’ beings according to their perceived economic and social value (Alexander, 2005; King, 2019; Silva, 2014; Wynter, 2003). Specifically, these hierarchies naturalize both human exceptionalism, and white men as the apex of humanity. These “deadly hierarchies of life” (TallBear, 2019, p. 26) treat Black and Indigenous peoples, as well as “nature” itself, as possessable, exploitable, and expendable for the sake of “progress” and the fulfillment of modern promises for those deemed worthy. Further, this violence saturates every dominant system – economic, political, intellectual, ecological, and relational. In Table 1, I summarize the promises made by each system, and the colonial process that makes those promises possible for those who are structurally favored by the system.

**Table 1.** *Modern Promises and the Colonial Processes that Subsidize Them*

	<b>Modern promise</b>	<b>Colonial process</b>
<b>Capitalism (economic system)</b>	Continuous economic growth and wealth accumulation	Racialized expropriation and exploitation of humans and other-than-human beings
<b>Nation-state (political system)</b>	Security and order; protection of people and property; cohesion through shared identity	State-sanctioned violence, including policing, prisons, borders, and global militarism
<b>Universal reason (intellectual system)</b>	A single, universally-relevant knowledge system that offers certainty, predictability, consensus	Suppression and attempted obliteration of other knowledges (epistemicide); knowledge used to index and control the world
<b>Extractivism (ecological system)</b>	Infinite consumption of ‘natural resources’ for human use	Climate change; biodiversity loss; denial of the intrinsic worth of other-than-human beings
<b>Separability (relational system)</b>	Independence, individualism, and unrestricted autonomy	Refusal of interdependence and its related responsibilities

As Gilmore (2018) notes, “Abolition is a theory of change”; decolonization is also a theory of change. Perhaps more precisely, both abolition and decolonization are a set of theories of change, rather than a single theory. Central to these theories is the diagnosis that the fundamental problem with mainstream institutions (including higher education) is not that they exclude certain populations from their universal promises, but rather that racial, colonial, and ecological violence are the ongoing conditions of possibility for these institutions to exist, and for the promises they offer to be fulfilled (Rodríguez, 2012). In this analysis, “the hinge of inclusion/exclusion both misnames that violence and narrows any sense of possibility for how it can be redressed” (Leroy, 2016). Thus, including more Black, Indigenous, and racialized people will not alter these systems’ and institutions’ violent nature – it simply displaces that violence elsewhere, onto the backs of other people and the earth itself. This is why Byrd (2011) describes “impossible choices,” wherein people feel compelled “to articulate freedom at the expense of another” (p. xxiv). For instance, Al-Kassim (2002) identifies the double-bind of efforts that seek to address racialized oppression “at home” but end up having harmful impacts abroad: “an advance in civil rights here may mean, in the transnational scheme of things, that the cost is paid ‘there’” (p. 174; see also Alexander, 2005). Thus, it is not possible to escape complicity, for as King (2019) asserts, “‘innocence’ does not exist within the lifeways of this hemisphere or the modern world” (p. xi).

From this perspective, nothing less than “the end of the world as we know it” will end enduring systemic violence (Silva, 2014). For instance, Trask (2004) contends, “Only the dismantling of the United States as we know it could begin the process of ending racism” (p. 13). Thus, rather than repair existing institutions in order to improve, preserve, or restore them, we will ultimately need to disinvest from their harmful promises so that other possible futures might emerge. Yet this will not happen through a singular event, but rather through long-term, complex, contradictory, and contested practices and processes of unlearning and undoing violent ideologies, desires, and infrastructures, and (re)learning how

to be together in the world differently. While this transformation will not happen overnight, decolonial and abolitionist analyses point to the continued necessity to imagine otherwise. However, I suggest that before we can truly imagine higher education otherwise, we need to pause for long enough to identify the limits of what is fathomable within the inherited higher education field-imaginary, so that we can also sense the absence of other imaginaries that have been silenced and erased (Ahenakew, 2016).

### **The Higher Education Field-Imaginary**

To understand the field-imaginary of higher education requires considering the history of the field. The birth of the field is often dated to the first ever higher education course in 1893. However, it was in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, during the so-called “golden age” of higher education, that the field expanded and developed the foundations that remain in place today (Altbach, 2014). In the post-World War II context of both the massification of higher education and the increased rationalization and bureaucratization of universities, more higher education programs were established to train college and university staff and administrators (Bowen & Tobin, 2015). As Kimball and Friedensen (2019) note, “disciplines cohere around a shared set of assumptions about how the world works, what problems matter therein, and how those problems might best be approached” (p. 1569). Arguably, the assumptions, problems, and solutions that make up the currently dominant field-imaginary of US higher education were installed during this time. While many things have shifted since then, this temporality is important for making sense of (some of) the guiding assumptions of the field-imaginary, and for asking how these assumptions foster particular responses to the challenges of the present, and preclude other possible responses. In order to more thoroughly examine how these assumptions orient and circumscribe the higher education field, it is important to briefly consider the nature of a field-imaginary.

Pease (2009) describes a field-imaginary as a “disciplinary unconscious,” suggesting it contains desires or assumptions that are not always consciously articulated. Wiegman (2012) argues that as part of their field-imaginary, all academic fields not only have knowledge that its practitioners *must know*,

but also a subset of knowledge that they *cannot know*, or knowledge that is foreclosed in order to maintain their conceptual, moral, and political integrity. In other words, fields are structured as much by shared knowledge as sanctioned ignorances. For instance, a shared ignorance of the field of anthropology is the fact that its disciplinary roots lie in colonial efforts to ‘catalogue’ the cultures of non-European people, who were presumed to be less evolutionarily developed. While many anthropologists now know this history, they nonetheless disavow its implications, which leads to the reproduction of racist hierarchies of humanity in much anthropological scholarship (Smith, 2012).

In other words, a field-imaginary is not the same as the foundational texts or canonical knowledge of a field; it is rather premised on implicit investments, assumptions, as well as disavowals that are rarely stated or acknowledged, and as a consequence, rarely questioned. It can be difficult to find ‘proof’ of these assumptions, since they are often so taken for granted as to go unspoken. All this being said, elements of the dominant higher education field-imaginary have been challenged from many different angles. For instance, Patton (2016) pointed to the overwhelming failure of the field to call “attention to the lineage of racism in the academy” (p. 334), while Stewart (2019) critiqued “perpetual systems of anti-Blackness operating unnamed and unchecked in the field of student affairs” (p. 18). Higher education, like all fields, invites internal dissent, including outliers in various political directions. Indeed, Wiegman (2012) suggests fields expect their practitioners “to engage, revise, and extend a field’s critical and political significance by compulsively debating it” (p. 16). However, if an idea or analysis strays too far from the imaginary, it may prompt boundary-policing (Kimball & Friedensen, 2019). It might be dismissed or deemed unintelligible and thus ignored; or, it might be incorporated into the imaginary in a way that dulls or neutralizes its disruptive potential. This may be particularly the case when an analysis identifies patterns that implicates the field in systemic harm.

In an effort to bypass these circular patterns of response to critiques of the field, I want to acknowledge that the questions, complexities, uncertainties, contradictions, and seeming impossibilities

that are raised in the following analysis may prompt a range of embodied, affective responses, including excitement, defensiveness, shame, anxiety, curiosity, and anger, among others. I therefore invite readers to observe and hold space for their own responses in order to self-reflexively consider and contextualize what might be behind those responses. What might these responses teach us, particularly about the higher education field-imaginary and our attachments to it? I also want to emphasize that the examples I cite are not intended to single out individual scholars; rather, they are meant to illustrate larger systemic patterns in the field. I am implicated in these patterns as well. After all, as Wiegman (2012) suggests, “the scholar in pursuit of discerning a field’s imaginary has unconscious disciplinary attachments too” (p. 15). Finally, I want to emphasize that this review of assumptions is *not* intended to be exhaustive or totalizing; it is just one effort to enable different conversations in the field

### **Assumption 1: Higher Education is Reducible to the Modern University**

Within the field, “higher education” is generally understood as reducible to the modern university. Yet, the modern university as we know it only emerged in medieval Europe and was exported throughout the world, largely through processes of settler and exploitation colonialism (Grosfoguel, 2013; Smith, 2012; Wilder, 2013). As Pietsch (2016) notes, “the most significant legacy of empire [in higher education] is the dominance of the university itself as the pre-eminent institution for higher education” (p. 34). Although Western *uni*-versities make claims to *uni*-versal relevance, despite being rooted in the particularities of medieval Christian Europe, and later of European Enlightenment knowledge, other forms of higher education predated them, and have persisted since their inception despite many systemic efforts to invalidate or invisibilize them (Santos, 2007; Stein, 2019).

For instance, Indigenous peoples have always had, and continue to have, their own forms of (higher) education. Before colonization, this included “lifelong pursuit of specialized knowledge in order to become hunters, warriors, political leaders, or herbalists” (Stonechild, 2006, p. 21), and since the onset of colonization, Indigenous people have sustained these practices, resisting violent colonial

practices intended to eradicate them (Simpson, 2014; 2016). Other non-European traditions of higher education include “Confucian schools for the mandarin bureaucracy of imperial China, the Hindu *gurukulas* and Buddhist *vihares* for the priests and monks of medieval India, the *madrasas* for the mullahs and Quranic judges of Islam, the Aztec and Inca temple schools for the priestly astronomers of pre-Columbian America, the Tokugawa *han* schools for Japanese samurai” (Perkin, 2007, p. 159).

Decolonial and abolitionist critiques point to the need to support and regenerate forms of knowledge and education that have been suppressed by the hegemony of the modern university (Grande, 2018; Santos, 2007; Smith, 2012). At the same time, they challenge common, extractive modes of engagement with these other knowledge systems – including: expecting these knowledge systems to hold ‘solutions’ to the problems modern higher education has created; presuming entitlement to access and ‘master’ these knowledges; and arrogantly assuming that outsiders to these knowledge systems are able to understand what is being said within them (Ahenakew, 2016). However, especially given these common colonial patterns through which non-Western knowledges are appropriated and romanticized, there are different perspectives regarding the extent to which these other forms of higher education and knowledge can or should be incorporated into existing universities, and/or whether there should be a focus on supporting and developing other, alternative higher education spaces (Grande, 2018; Teamey & Mandel, 2016). Rarely is this an either/or option, as these two approaches can operate in tandem.

One example of another form of higher education is the Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning, a land-based educational initiative with deep connections to local Indigenous communities in what is currently called northern Canada. Dechinta centers Indigenous knowledges and employs elders and other Indigenous knowledge holders as instructors. While Dechinta 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, Dechinta works with mainstream universities to offer accredited courses and programs, and its funding system seeks to redistribute resources within the constraints of existing economic structures.

### **Assumption 2: Higher Education is a Story of Linear Progress**

Benson and Boyd (2015) offer what is by now a familiar narrative: the development of US higher education was propelled by commitments to “fostering more fulsome democratic engagement, raising the country’s global reputation, cultivating goodwill between states and nations, and expanding opportunities for more Americans” (p. 70). A linear, teleological history shapes most narratives about higher education, including critiques of the present (Stein, 2018). There is an idea that over time, higher education has become progressively more democratic and inclusive, and thus, that unfortunate histories of racism, classism, and sexism are gradually being overcome. For instance, Patton et al. (2019) point to (and problematize) common assumptions about progress in the realm of diversity. This narrative presents an arc of US higher education history that posits progressive movement across time (of growth, democratization, and inclusion), and expansion across space (of growth from east to west and now globally). There is a sense that this progress reached its zenith in the “golden age”, but was interrupted by the rise of neoliberalism over the past several decades (Boggs & Mitchell, 2018). This historical narrative assumes an underlying imperative to redeem institutions and restore the path of progress.

From decolonial and abolitionist perspectives, the notion of progress itself imperialistically presumes a single valid “forward” direction for all, and rationalizes the sacrifice of those people and other-than-human beings perceived to be barriers to that progress (Smith, 2012; Tallbear, 2019). Indeed, the expansion of higher education has always come at the cost of marginalized peoples, including (to different degrees) those who are conditionally ‘included’ in existing institutions, and those who are both excluded from and pay the highest price for systemic expansion. Regarding the former, numerous studies have documented the ways that universities include marginalized peoples on the condition that they affirm the benevolence of the institution, express gratitude for “being included”, and

do not pose a significant disruption to the continuity of “business as usual” (e.g. Ahenakew & Naepi, 2015; Ahmed, 2012; Jimmy, Andreotti, & Stein, 2019). Those who contest these conditions are often punished, and even pushed out. Regarding those who have not only been excluded but whose subjugation also provided the conditions of possibility for the institution itself, as Wilder (2013) documents, “The fate of the American college had been intertwined from its beginning with the social project of dispossessing [American] Indian people” (p. 150). Meanwhile, enslaved Black people were forced to build and serve in these early institutions, which also had many enslavers and slave-traders among their students, faculty, administrators, trustees, and benefactors. Later, with the Morrill Act of 1862, land grant institutions were founded and funded through the sale of violently expropriated Indigenous lands (Lee & Ahtone, 2020; Stein, 2020).

While conversations about universities’ histories of slavery and colonialism are becoming more common, the implications of these histories are generally relegated to the past, thereby ignoring how racialized dispossession and accumulation continue to circulate in the marrow of their institutional bones (Lee & Ahtone, 2020; Stein, 2016, 2020). In this sense, racial and colonial violence are part of an enduring economic and epistemic structure, rather than a single historical event or era. However, because notions of progress tend to “have a teleological bent, presuming that society is meliorative – gradually moving toward perfection – through incremental reforms of social action” (Seamster & Ray, 2018, p. 316), it can be difficult to identify these continuities of violence. The violence of the post-War/Cold War “golden age”, in particular, is largely invisibilized, lost within nostalgic narratives about generous public funding and democratized access (Boggs & Mitchell, 2018; Stein, 2018).

Beyond the enduring inequities of access during this era, to the extent that inclusion was expanded, it was conditional upon the fact that this served the political and economic interests of white people and the US nation-state as a whole (Bell, 1980). Expanding access for racialized, especially Black, people, served the global image of the US as a benevolent democratic power, which in turn was

mobilized as a cover to expand racial/colonial capitalism both at home and abroad (Melamed, 2006). For racialized and Indigenous people, this also meant that their institutional inclusion was conditional upon allegiance to US “interests”; meanwhile, those who sought deeper systemic changes were often punished or even murdered by the state (Ferguson, 2012; Mustaffa, 2017). Further, during this time, the capitalist wealth that was distributed in more democratic but still racialized ways domestically was largely enabled through US global, political, and economic hegemony, which in turn was secured through US militarism. Given that the field of higher education was firmly established during this era, it is significant to ask how the colonial promises of continuous progress that dominated higher education discourse at the time continue to shape how we understand the history of higher education and higher education as a field of study today – as well as how we understand possible responses to contemporary challenges and crises.

### **Assumption 3: Higher Education Should Enable Socio-Economic Mobility**

According to Trow (2000), “Through its role in fostering social mobility and the belief in a society open to talents, American higher education legitimates the social and political system, and thus is a central element in the society as it is nowhere else” (pp. 312-313). Levine (1986) dates the codification of the link between higher education and mobility between 1915 and 1940, but it was during the post-World War II expansion of higher education, especially the 1960s, that higher education came to be widely understood as “the fairest and best means of sorting the continuing competition for social position and success” (Marginson, 2016, p. 17). The presumed fairness of higher education as a pathway to social mobility is premised on meritocracy, i.e. the presumption that “those who are the most talented, the hardest working, and the most virtuous get and should get the most rewards” (McNamee & Miller Jr., 2009, p. 4). The existence of classes is justified through the promise of accessible pathways for mobility between classes that are based on merit, largely assessed through educational sorting.

Many critiques identify the failure of higher education to live up to its promise and potential as a pathway to social mobility. This includes the fact that the rising cost of college bars access for many low-income students, the universities that offer the most mobility tend to be the least accessible (Reber & Sinclair, 2020), and dominant ways of operationalizing merit often serve to rationalize and facilitate the persistence of inequity, rather than interrupt it (Gunier, 2015). Other critiques point to the ways that opportunities for social mobility are often only made available to those who are willing and able to approximate or align with white middle-/upper-class norms and values (Jimmy, Andreotti & Stein, 2019).

Notwithstanding the important concerns raised by these critiques, they are somewhat distinct from a decolonial and abolitionist critique of social mobility that points to the fact that the framework of mobility itself implicitly assumes the continuity of a hierarchical capitalist system in which there is an unequal distribution of resources and power, and thus unequal socioeconomic “positions” (classes) within which one can be mobile, or not (Ahenakew et al., 2014; Paradies, 2020). Beyond its inherently hierarchical nature, this framework implicitly presumes the continuity of continued capitalist accumulation that is structurally dependent on racialized and gendered forms of dispossession (through expropriation and exploitation), and ecological destruction (through extraction of ‘natural resources’). The promise of an ever-expanding middle-class thereby naturalizes the continued exploitation of the classes below it, and the outright expropriation of lands and labour from the most marginalized, both domestically and abroad. Middle- and upper-class lifestyles are also ecologically unsustainable and burden the earth itself. For instance, if everyone in the world consumed resources at the same rate as the average person in the US, then we would need about five earths to sustain us (Global Footprint Network, 2018).

In our current context, in which there is more competition for fewer secure middle-class positions, many nonetheless cling to the idea that higher education is a means through which to distribute social positions fairly (Boggs & Mitchell, 2018). Higher education continues to promise

“infinite opportunity and upward mobility” (Wyly & Dhillon, 2018, p. 135). Furthermore, when the promise of social mobility is unfulfilled, it is framed as a *broken* promise that requires repair (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). The inevitability of the enduring hierarchies within which one is or is not mobile is rarely questioned, and increased access to mobility is treated as a primary horizon of justice. For instance, according to a recent report from the Brookings Institution, “A combination of changes in policies to reduce segregation and inequality of funding across higher education is urgently needed to realize the promise of higher education as an engine for middle-class mobility” (Reber & Sinclair, 2020, p. 23)

As is the case with many underlying assumptions of the field-imaginary, this is a complex one to disentangle. For instance, a decolonial and abolitionist reading of social mobility would never shame low-income students for seeking mobility by pursuing higher education. If the only options are a classed system with no/low mobility, or a classed system with some possibility for mobility, then the latter is clearly preferable. But these critiques invite us to ask how and why we have come to accept these as the only two possible options, as well as to consider what other modes of social organization might be possible, and why is it so difficult for many people to imagine, let alone create, these other possibilities.

#### **Assumption 4: Higher Education Requires the Nation-State, Capital, and Universal Knowledge**

The field of higher education tends to assume the inevitability and perpetuation of the basic categories and institutions of modern social organization: not only the nation-state and global capitalism, but also universal knowledge. People disagree on which formations of each are preferable – for instance, whether liberal capitalism is better than neoliberal capitalism; what is the most appropriate/desirable level of state involvement; and which knowledges should be considered “universal”. Nonetheless, the field generally cannot imagine higher education without these three dimensions, and thus, we tend to implicitly presume their continuity, even if we have a critique or desired reform of their current mode of operation. This dynamic is illustrated through Clark’s (1983) popular “triangle of coordination”, made up of three primary dimensions that influence higher

education: the *nation-state*, the *market*, and the *academic oligarchy*, the latter of which we might reframe as “arbiters/holders of universal knowledge.” In this theory, while these three factors shift their positioning and relative influence across time and space, they maintain their triangular shape.

This tri-partite assumption of the field-imaginary is perhaps the most difficult to pin down, because it is so naturalized as to be beyond question, let alone critique. For instance, the assumption that socio-economic mobility is a primary benefit of higher education presumes the continuity of a capitalist system – without ever having to defend or even articulate this. Meanwhile, Shahjahan and Kezar (2013) point to the persistent methodological nationalism that shapes higher education research, which takes “the nation-state as a presupposition for society” (p. 20). Despite the fact that the US higher education system is highly decentralized, US universities nonetheless serve as “arms of the settler state” (Grande, 2018), for instance, by preparing citizens invested in the futurity of the nation-state, and thus, invested in ongoing Indigenous dispossession. In fact, many critical scholars emphasize the need to reclaim higher education as a means for preparing graduates for engaged citizenship (Suspitsyna, 2012). Yet while framing education as a means of fostering citizenship can be a strategic effort to secure state funding, for the same reason it can significantly limit what constitutes legitimate knowledge. These kinds of paradoxes are difficult to hold within the higher education field, especially if one is seeking certainties or clear solutions that can be translated into universally-relevant best practices.

The notion that access to higher education would prepare educated citizens (of the nation-state) and capable workers (for capitalism) were drivers of the golden age expansion of higher education. But behind both of these notions was the assumption that this preparation was assured because higher education offers universal knowledge (see assumption 1). US higher education is broadly characterized by what Santos (2007) calls “abyssal thinking.” Abyssal thinking institutes a divide between Western knowledge as universal human truth, and all other knowledges on the other side of the divide, in the “abyss.” The effect of the abyssal line is epistemic violence, including epistemicide:

non-Western knowledges are suppressed and even made invisible from within the frames of Western knowledge. The challenge of how to crack the illusion of (Western) universality in higher education is substantive, as it undermines a central promise of the modern university itself (Grosfoguel, 2013; Patton, 2016). Further, efforts to include knowledges from the ‘other’ side of the abyssal line often paradoxically reproduce the line by selectively extracting content from ‘other’ knowledge without recognizing that this knowledge is deeply embedded in its own onto-epistemological frames that are not necessarily legible or accessible to those who have been socialized into other frames (Ahenakew, 2016). Instead of decentering Western knowledge and developing what Santos (2007) calls an “ecology of knowledges” in which all knowledges are valued for their contextual relevance, this approach effectively appropriates non-Western knowledge to shore up Western claims of universality.

From decolonial and abolitionist perspectives, the assumption that higher education should ensure economic mobility is still rooted within a racial/colonial capitalist system; the idea that higher education should prepare graduates for citizenship reproduces investments in a racial/colonial nation-state; and the presumption of universal knowledge is a racial/colonial construct that has been violently mobilized to justify Western supremacy and epistemicide. If nation-states, capitalism, and the promise of universal knowledge are all sustained at a significant cost for both marginalized human communities and other-than-human beings, then abolitionist and decolonial critiques invite us to disinvest from this futurity while identifying opportunities to reduce the harm that these institutions produce for as long as they continue to exist.

#### **Assumption 5: Higher Education Scholars and Practitioners are “Good” People**

The final assumption is the presumption of innocence and benevolence of higher education as a field of study, following desires on the part of scholars and practitioners to look, feel, and be seen as “doing good”. This effectively forecloses conversations about how we do harm. While certainly higher education scholars and practitioners have differing political and theoretical orientations, the field

generally imagines itself as committed to the expansion of justice, and imagines its members to be good people who will make the world a better place. For instance, one can purchase a t-shirt from ACPA that reads “I am boldly transforming higher education.” This shirt, which not only brands the association but also allows individuals to brand themselves as agents of change, presumes that both the intention and outcomes of this transformation are positive. Yet good intentions are insufficient, and may even be weaponized to avoid taking responsibility for individual and institutional complicity in violence.

In another example, a recent piece by three leading higher education scholars and leaders claims that “those who enter the field of higher education study and practice are the ones who want to make a difference in the world” (O’Meara, Renn, & Stewart, 2020). Like the t-shirt, this framing suggests that higher education scholars and practitioners are “good” people who will make positive change, and that the desire to make a difference is benevolent. However, as decolonial and abolitionist critiques point out, many well-meaning efforts to “make a difference” actually lead to the reproduction of harm, or otherwise further obscure the ongoing realities of racial, colonial, and ecological violence that subsidize modern institutions. The fact that these three scholars have all offered innovative and indispensable contributions to deepening critical higher education scholarship and practice only underscores the deep, systemic nature of colonial logics in the higher education field, and the difficulty of interrupting assumptions about our field’s inherent or underlying goodness.

Even when scholars identify problematic patterns in the field, it is generally assumed that these can be addressed with better critiques and increased awareness. This in turn assumes that injustice is primarily a problem of ignorance that can be solved with more information. By contrast, decolonial and abolitionist perspectives suggest that injustice arises from hopes, desires, and presumed entitlements that require violence for their actualization. Thus, it is not that information about the violence that subsidizes higher education is unavailable, but that we often prefer to either deny it, or deny its full implications and assume it can be reformed so that we can continue enjoying its benefits. For instance,

we might critique our institutions for reproducing anti-Blackness and colonialism, but do not necessarily make the connection between the ways the institution profits from anti-Blackness and colonialism and the fact that those profits in turn help pay our salaries, secure our pensions, and fund both our research and student scholarships. Our desire to see ourselves as “good people” makes it very difficult to consider the possibility that our investments in and attachments to modern higher education might be themselves somehow flawed or harmful, or to see ourselves as part of the problems that we seek to address, without immediately positioning ourselves as the solution.

Decolonial and abolitionist theories and practices suggest that instead, we might view ourselves as part of the solution *and* the problem. The point of deconstructing the image of ourselves as “good” people is not to suggest that we are in fact “bad”, but rather that: 1) We are all (unevenly) implicated in systemic harm; and 2) Beyond this systemic complicity, every person contains within them the full spectrum of humanity – the good, the bad, the ugly, and the broken (Todd, 2015). Accepting the existence of this spectrum within each of us does not amount to endorsing harmful behaviors, nor disavowing the need to interrupt and reorient them. In fact, the desire to look, feel, and be seen as doing good may actually be preventing us from being honest about difficult work that needs to be done.

When decolonial and abolitionist critiques emphasize complicity, they are not asking us to seek purity by finding places free from complicity (Shotwell, 2016). Because this is impossible so long as our lives and livelihoods continue to be rooted in the modern/colonial system, to try and do so would be a “move to innocence” (Mawhinney, 1998) resulting from a desire to relieve “feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 23). Decolonial and abolitionist critiques instead issue a call to responsibility and humility, an invitation to question the benevolence of our desires and our institutions, and a gesture toward a horizon oriented by the possibility of an educational system that would not be premised on violence.

## Implications

The initial decolonial and abolitionist reading of the dominant field-imaginary of higher education offered in this article suggests that the imaginary itself is entangled with violence against both humans and other-than-human beings. If we seek to respond to contemporary challenges and crises in ways that do not reproduce further harm, we will need to learn from the mistakes of this imaginary so as to foster the possibility that something more sustainable and less violent could emerge or regenerate in its place. Existing efforts to reimagine the study and practice of higher education come from diverse political orientations and investments. Although space limitations preclude me from offering a detailed review of these approaches, I invite readers to consider how decolonial and abolitionist theories differ from these other perspectives – including those that they hold most dear. Most of these efforts interpret contemporary challenges as indications that our system is broken, which presumes that it is fixable (Boggs & Mitchell, 2018). One may approach this presumption of fixability from the position that either minor or major reforms are needed, with the latter offering a deeper, more systemic critique (see Andreotti et al. 2015). By contrast, decolonial and abolitionist critiques suggest that many existing systems, institutions, and imaginaries are beyond reform (Starblanket & Hunt, 2020). If violence is the ongoing condition of possibility for those systems, then this violence will not stop as long as everyday life continues to be ordered by modern/colonial separations, hierarchies, and desires.

At the same time, these critiques cast suspicion on efforts to create a ‘better’ imaginary to replace the old, given that this move is often motivated by a desire to be absolved of complicity and transcend violence without giving anything up (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Even when people *intellectually* agree with decolonial and abolitionist critiques, this is not necessarily accompanied by an *affective* shift away from desires for the continuation of the comforts, securities, and enjoyments offered by the modern/colonial system, and a *relational* shift away from separability, individualism, and autonomy, and toward relationality and responsibility. When efforts made in the name of decolonization or abolition

are re-routed back into colonial desires and perceived entitlements, the transformative possibilities that they gesture toward are foreclosed. These critiques can also be weaponized as an alibi for efforts to renovate harmful structures, whether they be institutions or scholarly fields (Boggs & Mitchell, 2018). This article is no exception: while my conscious intention is to invite the higher education field to confront and grapple with its implication in systemic, historical, and ongoing violence, this intention may be at least partially rooted in an unconscious desire to recuperate the field.

Nonetheless, decolonial and abolitionist critiques interrupt common assumptions about the presumed desirability of the continuation of higher education “as we know it” – and thus, the continuation of the field of higher education itself. In the face of this interruption, rather than seek uncomplicated, immediate, feel-good solutions, we would need to develop the stamina and the intellectual, affective, and relational capacities and dispositions that can enable us to stay with the difficult, painful, messy, non-linear, life-long work of individual and collective regeneration. And we will need to learn to hold space for everything that surfaces in our bodies and minds when we address the depth of violence that shapes higher education, and the complexities involved in trying to reimagine it. This work can be unsettling and unpleasant, but we will also need to find sources of joy and vitality if we are going to sustain it over the long-haul. While this long-term horizon might be frustrating for those seeking to “move forward,” if we move too quickly, then we may continue to circularly imagine more of the same while thinking that we are doing something different.

However, pausing to sit with the implications of decolonial and abolitionist theories and practices does not preclude engaging other critical traditions, or taking immediate action to transform policy, practice, and other strategies to reduce harm. For instance, the Critical Resistance Abolitionist Educators (2020) have produced a resource, “How to Grow Abolition on Your Campus”, which emphasizes abolition as both “an immediate strategy and a long-term goal” (p. 1), and offers guidance about things like eliminating campus police. Some abolitionists distinguish between “reformist reforms”,

which allow for the continuity and even expansion of existing violent systems, and “non-reformist reforms”, which contribute to (or at least do not hinder) the long-term horizon of abolition. Another way of thinking about this is to focus on fostering contextually-relevant interventions that enable generative movement. That is, when considering a potential intervention, ask: To what extent will this intervention in this time/place facilitate movement *away* from harm, and *toward* responsibility? When making these interventions, it may be strategically necessary to temporarily bracket certain layers of complexity, and thus it is important to remain attentive to and accountable for what is being left out.

### Conclusion

While it is impossible to know in advance what US higher education might look like in the *after* of decolonization and abolition, we can nonetheless gesture toward other horizons of possibility. The deep injustices of contemporary political, economic, and ecological landscapes might make such horizons appear more distant than ever, yet this moment is also a dubious opportunity. In the context of current crises, growing disillusionment with the dominant system might lead us to reconsider what previously seemed impossible. Not everyone will be called to do this work, but those who seek worlds beyond the one that we have inherited will need to denaturalize and reconstruct dominant notions of knowledge, relationships, time, gender, labor, language, the environment, property, governance – in short, nearly everything about the dominant system, and the place of higher education within it. Decolonial and abolitionist critiques point to an unsettling and disorienting horizon of justice that invites people to mourn illusions about the reformability of our existing system, and recalibrate our collective existence in ways that are unfathomable to most of us from where we currently stand (figuratively, but also literally, on colonized lands). Yet fathomable or not, in the midst of emerging crises, the inherently violent and unsustainable nature of this world is increasingly difficult to deny. It may be that “the end of the world as we know it” is coming, whether we like it or not. In this context, we might eschew the common script of asking how higher education scholars and practitioners can “change the world,” and

instead ask some of the important questions that are raised by decolonial and abolitionist critiques, which have no easy answers, including: How can we denaturalize, disinvest from, and joyfully “compost” the colonial structures of a world that is ending, so as to create fertile soil in which other worlds might (re)grow? What if “the end of the world as we know it” includes the end of higher education as we know it? And how can we grapple with the sprawling gap between the questions raised by decolonial and abolitionist critiques, and the mainstream questions that currently orient the higher education field?

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