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Reflections on “Unsettling the University” and Its Call to Responsibility

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Last month, my book *Unsettling the University: Confronting the Colonial Foundations of US Higher Education* was published by Johns Hopkins University Press. The book traces how US universities were built on and continue to reproduce settler colonialism, anti-Blackness, and white supremacy, in material and epistemic ways. The common rituals of a book release tend to center and celebrate the individual author, which is something that makes me extremely uncomfortable in general, but especially so in the case of a book like this. I recognize the tensions of writing about the persistence of racial and colonial violence as a white settler. When I name these things as a white person, I tend to get a very different response than my Black and Indigenous colleagues, who are often silenced, ignored, or punished when they do so. When I receive negative responses, not only are they generally less intense, but my systemic advantages also buffer me from the labour and exhaustion of facing this vitriol on a daily basis. In some cases, I even receive praise for being a “champion” of justice.

As Sara Ahmed (2012) observed, those who name the problem of racism are often treated as if they themselves are the problem – especially when those doing the naming are not white. Thus, as part of our colonial debt, white settlers have a responsibility to take on much more of the labour of identifying and interrupting harmful colonial patterns as they manifest in ourselves and in our institutions. When we don’t do this work, it falls on Black and Indigenous people who are already exhausted from fighting these battles for over 500 years. White people will also need to figure out how to do this work in ways that do not centre ourselves, nor attempt to speak on behalf of Black and Indigenous people, but instead attempt to amplify their concerns, interrupt ongoing harm, and enact repair and restitution for the harm we have already caused.

With *Unsettling the University*, I have tried to write a book that invites white settlers like myself to face and accept responsibility for the fact that, as Nelba Marquez-Greene famously said, “White supremacy is not the elephant in the room, it *is* the room.” Only if we confront our colonial past and present will we have a fighting chance for shifting our course toward futures that are not premised on colonial harm. This is a lot to ask of a book, of course, and I do not mean to overstate its potential impact or suggest that I have succeeded in this intention. In fact, I know that failure is inevitable in this kind of work. Yet we cannot allow fear of failure to immobilize us. Instead, we must learn to see it as an opportunity for further learning and unlearning, following the principles of honesty, humility, and hyper-self-reflexivity. At the same time, we must be aware of and accountable to those who pay the costs of our learning.

Confronting the Colonial Foundations of US Higher Education

What I want to do for the remainder of this piece is clarify the invitation of the book, so that those who are looking for it – like I was as a graduate student – might find it. One book cannot do everything, and this book certainly does not pretend to be a definitive account of US higher education; it is as provincial as any other. What it does do is invite readers to consider that many of the most celebrated moments of higher education history were not only accompanied by but were actually *enabled through* racial, colonial, and ecological violence. Specifically, it focuses on three moments: 1) the founding of the original “colonial colleges,” 2) the Morrill Act of 1862 that founded “land grant” universities, and 3) the so-called “Golden Age” following WWII.

Despite its focus on the past, the book emphasizes that these violences are not just historical or mere “traces” of the past that will inevitably recede with time; they are stubborn and enduring, constantly shapeshifting into new formations in response to changing contexts and resistance to these violences. These violences continue to structure and subsidize everyday life in US higher education institutions. This is true even in an era of growing commitments to “equity, diversity, and inclusion” (EDI), especially given that EDI initiatives often mask the underlying continuity of inequity and oppression, a phenomenon known as “equity-washing.”

It's important to note that while this book is grounded in decolonial critiques, it is not a book about “decolonizing” higher education. I do not know if it is possible to decolonize existing universities, which would require them to paradoxically “right the wrongs that brought them into being” (Belcourt, 2018). In any case, we are a long way away from this. White settlers continue to overestimate our preparedness to address racism and colonialism and underestimate the magnitude and complexity of the work that needs to be done. We still haven't learned to sit with the truth about our individual and institutional complicity in systemic, historical, and ongoing harm. We might listen, we might nod, and we might even take a few steps to address what we have heard. Ultimately, however, for many white people, there is a strong enduring investment in the continuity of colonial business-as-usual – specifically, an investment in the promises that we are entitled to moral and epistemic authority, to unrestricted autonomy, and to serve as arbiters of universal justice and common sense (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). In other words, white settlers maintain an indulgent and harmful fantasy that we can transcend colonialism without giving anything up (Jefferess, 2012).

Although the focus of the book is on higher education “at home,” the implications exceed national borders and have significant relevance for contemporary forms of internationalization. Indeed, white supremacy and coloniality are global phenomena (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022), although they manifest differently depending on the particular context. True to their colonial roots, US universities are increasingly looking abroad for new sites of expansion, extraction, and exploitation.

Recently, I learned that Vanderbilt University is collaborating with American University in Baghdad to create a US-style College of Education on the palace grounds of Saddam Hussein. In a press release, Vanderbilt stated, “Through the partnership with AUIB, Peabody College hopes to contribute to rebuilding the education system in Iraq. Conflicts and severe teacher and school shortages, compounded by the difficulties from COVID-19, have reduced the amount of time that Iraqi children spend in school to just four years by the time they reach age 18. Iraqi educators are in urgent need of training and support to promote student engagement, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and community building.” The layers of coloniality here are many—from the vague and euphemistic description of the US invasion and occupation and their long aftermath as

“conflicts,” to the paternalistic imposition of US-style education in another nation being framed as a form of benevolent aid.

This example illustrates that whiteness and coloniality continue to live and thrive in US higher education not only “at home”, but also in our operations abroad. And these local and global colonialisms are entangled. As Jodi Byrd (2011) has observed, “The continued colonization of American Indian nations, peoples, and lands provides the United States the economic and material resources needed to cast its imperialist gaze globally” (p. 58).

Developing Stamina for the Long Haul

By tracing the origins and endurance of racism, colonialism, and imperialism at US colleges and universities, the book also reminds people that things can always be otherwise. But this is not guaranteed, and it won't be easy or painless to get there. Hence, apart from examining the past, the book also invites fellow white settlers in the university – students, staff, and faculty – to accept our responsibilities in the present, roll up our sleeves, and get to work. This is not the usual work of “fixing” things with simple, feel-good solutions; the layers of coloniality in higher education are entrenched, complex, and multi-layered and therefore, largely immune to these kinds of solutions. Rather, it is the life-long work of learning to identify and interrupt the violence of colonial domination within and around us, especially when this is inconvenient, uncomfortable, and challenges our benevolent self-images, and our investments in progress and the continuity of existing systems and privileges.

For white settlers, just confronting the truth about our institutions and ourselves is difficult, and that is only the first, baby step in a lengthy, complex, non-linear process of repairing harm, including through restitution for stolen lives, lands, and livelihoods. Thus, we will need to develop stamina and endurance for the long-haul, while continuing to ask: What is the next, small, most responsible thing I can do in my own context to reduce harm?

The book also invites US colleges and universities themselves to go beyond the pattern of tokenistic apologies and conditional forms of inclusion toward deeper institutional commitments to material restitution and relational repair, including reparations for the descendants of peoples enslaved by universities (Garibay, Mathis, & West, 2022), the repatriation of the Indigenous lands that universities occupy (Ambo & Beardall, 2022), and appropriate forms of redress for imperial educational entanglements abroad (Chatterjee & Maira, 2014). Indeed, more critically engaged students, as well as social movements, are demanding this. However, because it is such a significant deviation from the habits and infrastructures in which we and our institutions currently operate, we cannot know in advance exactly what the work of reparation, repatriation, and redress might look like, and where it might lead. For this reason, the book cannot offer the certainty and solutions many people crave in this kind of work.

Some people, especially white people, will weaponize this uncertainty as an excuse not to do the work at all. But for those who decide to read the book, I will close with one final invitation. As you read, try to notice your own intellectual and affective responses, in particular any thoughts or feelings of perceived entitlements that emerge, such as entitlements to comfort, certainty, control, security, and self-affirmation. Then consider: Where are these responses coming from? Where are these responses leading to? What possibilities are being foreclosed by these responses (and do I even know what these possibilities are)? What am I learning about myself, and the colonial habits of being I still need to unlearn, by observing these responses?

Given the extent to which colonialism has colonized our imaginations, it may be that more responsible higher education futures are unimaginable from where we currently stand and can only become possible once we have given up the search for universal answers and guaranteed outcomes. There are no guarantees with this approach, either. But I think we owe it to each other to try.

You can read the introduction and Chapter 1 of the book for free [here](#).

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