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## Burn it Down: The Incommensurability of the University and Decolonization

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**Burn it Down:  
The Incommensurability of the University and Decolonization**

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*As former students and a professor in, but not of, a U.S. liberal arts college, we ask whether our current institutions of higher education are compatible with a project of decolonization. Grounded in our own testimonios and drawing on a genealogy of Western knowledge, we argue that U.S. higher education authorizes and perpetrates settler colonial violence. As such, we find that higher education is not only incompatible, but irredeemably incommensurable with decolonization. Furthermore, based on our experiences surviving this violence, we conclude that the university adapts to inhibit and neutralize institutional reform that might challenge its coloniality. Based on this conclusion, we ask ourselves whether we should attempt to transform higher education or burn it down and start anew. We argue that we do need to burn it down, and we look to how individuals within the institution already work towards the development of a new social structure, one that will outlast and supplant higher education. We identify three constructive and transformative techniques currently used for this purpose: survival, empowerment, and (theft by) conversion. These techniques are a combination of stances towards, relationships to, and practices within, the institution that build collective futurities no longer dependent upon higher education.*

**Keywords:** Decolonization | University | Higher Education | Sovereignty | Violence

We three collaborators, who met while ensnared in a small liberal arts college, draw upon our lived and felt experiences of that place to argue that the institution of higher education is an integral site for the reproduction of settler colonial violence. Weaving together historical analysis, the ideas of other “criminal” (Moten & Harney 2004) scholars, and our own testimonios (Acevedo 2001), we highlight ways in which the university sustains itself in, through, and for coloniality. We contend that the university, as such, can never be unsnarled from its colonial origin and operation, and must be destroyed in order to build educational spaces that support thriving indigenous communities. To these ends, we present three “stances” that may be adopted from within the university and move towards this alternative vision of education.

Of the authors of this piece, one is the child of Southern rednecks and Natives, and two of us are from communities of color who settled on indigenous North American lands. While we have different relationships to settler colonialism, we were brought together by shared struggles within the university, which led to a shared desire to see something else grow in its place. That desire birthed this collaboration of study and writing, interrogating our responsibilities to both end the

settler colonial state, and all its mechanisms, and to simultaneously secure the wellbeing and futures of our communities. This work summarizes our thinking and learning about ways that we can get there together.

The three of us met at Swarthmore College, a small liberal arts college just outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the United States. Lekey and Daniel had come as undergraduate students. From the beginning, they lived at the school struggling to keep their heads above water, navigating the trauma of feeling themselves unknowingly uprooted from the homes they left behind. Eventually they learned to make their way through that place, and both, although by separate paths, found refuge in the Educational Studies Department. In the fall of 2014, Edwin joined that department as a faculty member.

It was Lekey who first reached out to Edwin, looking for guidance in her remaining time at the college. As a student and teacher, and now as a non/member of the academy, Edwin had relied on the work of Gerald Vizenor to navigate the violence of higher education. And so he shared with Lekey Vizenor's (1999) teachings on survivance. Not long after, Daniel also came to Edwin, needing help to complete his major and stay enrolled. Edwin became his academic mentor and greatest support. In the time we spent together we sought to live beyond a survivable name (Vizenor, 1999).

Now, since Lekey and Daniel have left Swarthmore, and as Edwin continues to work at the college, we are all trying to recover ourselves from the violence of that place. We write this article to understand our own experiences there and to study together in ways that are "separate from the thinking that the institution had required" of us (Halberstam, 2013, p. 11). To study in this manner is to engage in a process of inquiring and *platicando* (speaking) "with people, rather than teaching them, in service of a project," (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 148). This paper is therefore, in the tradition of Grande (2015), a joining of lived experience and theory as subversive practice; the creation of a theory which is personally, and intimately felt (Million, 2014).

The derelict and devastative image of the university that manifested in our *pláticas* led us to ask whether our current institutions of higher education are compatible with a project of decolonization. In what follows, we construct a genealogy of Western knowledge and the university, and put that into conversation with our own testimonios (Acevedo, 2001; Flores & Garcia, 2009) to argue that U.S. higher education both authorizes and perpetrates settler colonial violence. As such, we find that higher education is not only incompatible with decolonization, but irredeemably incommensurable with it, and must be eliminated so that we may start anew. Thus, we reject the desire for "inclusion" within that institution; rather, we strive for its deflagration.

Those of us who are *in* the university but not *of* the university (Harney & Moten, 2013), with intimate access to the institution and its resources, are especially responsible for stoking and managing the fire. However, our peoples and communities are entangled in the university. Enkindling it, therefore, requires that we determine how to nullify this entanglement, while also mobilizing techniques to steal from, survive, and build space for life outside of the institution. For that purpose, we conclude by discussing three constructive and transformative techniques which work towards the development of a new social structure, one that will outlast and supplant higher education; we name them stances of *survival*, *empowerment*, and *(theft by) conversion*.

To us this writing is itself a decolonial act of studying, planning, and actualizing what we do want. By speaking the truth of our experiences, without compromise, and without regard for the settler or their institutions, the oppressed confront hegemonic attempts to confine and foreclose

upon decolonization. This is no handbook to destroying the neoliberal colonial structure of higher education. It is, however, an affirmation of the necessity of its deflagration within the larger project of decolonization, and an opportunity to imagine life after the burning.

### **A Definition of Settler Colonialism**

We speak of settler colonialism as that particular imperial violence practiced by settler populations on colonized lands. As settlers, these populations must secure their own futurity, belonging, and dominion within the homelands of indigenous peoples. For that reason, settler colonialism is primarily concerned with territoriality (Wolfe, 2006), exercising both internal and external modes of imperialism in order to secure the *permanent* occupation of indigenous territory, with the “express purpose of building an ethnically distinct national community” (Bonds & Inwood, 2016, p. 716). The *maintenance* of that national community, i.e. the settler state, is defined by and depends upon eliminating indigenous peoples, seizing and privatizing indigenous lands, exploiting and containing marginalized peoples in a system of racial capitalism (Bonds & Inwood, 2016; Gilmore, 2007). These operations, of what we henceforth describe as settler colonial violence, are carried out by the various formal institutions and informal social systems of the settler state; the murder of indigenous women, industry-driven environmental genocide (Whyte, 2018), racist border expansion, urban restructuring, mass incarceration, and the exploitation and killing of Black people (to name a few examples), are its evidence. What must be understood then, is that settler colonialism is not an isolated historical event, nor a regrettable vestige of times passed. It is, rather, an enduring reality, re/structured by the settler insecurities of living on stolen land, and reckoning with the violence of their own existence.

### **A Definition of Decolonization**

As Tuck and Yang (2012) have urged us to see, decolonization is not a metaphor for social change. It is a likewise necessarily violent disruption and expulsion of colonial order from indigenous lives and lands (Smith, 2012). Decolonization is not an attempt to seize imperial wealth or recreate the *progress* it affords, but to end the systems of exploitation that produce them both. Decolonization is concerned with the reclamation of indigenous modes of life (Coulthard, 2014), centering relationships between people and the land, and envisioning our own futurities without regard for the settler.

### **The University, the State, and Modernity**

In order to demonstrate the ways in which higher education performs settler colonial violence, we draw on secondary historical sources and critical analyses of the university to chart its evolution and union with state imperialism. We begin in the early Medieval period, when the university institution emerged out of the sociopolitical relations of Western and Southern Europe and established itself as an intellectual authority. The Reformation and rise of centralized states, however, provided for its domestication to local political interests, pushing knowledge production outside of the university. Lay figures consequently assumed epistemic responsibility and, in the process, articulated a new, modern knowledge paradigm, which would eventually be standardized throughout academia.

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century, the classical education system essentially vanished; academic learning was reduced to a privilege of Church monks, who devoted themselves to preserving classical civilization in private seclusion. In subsequent years this monastic education system concentrated into distinct schools specializing in medicine, rhetoric, and law, but which still lacked central authority as well as any scholarly associations that might have united them (Baldwin & Goldthwaite, 1972). It was the High Middle Ages, of the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries, that created the conditions for the evolution of these schools into the formal university institution and for the advent of scholastic intellectualism.

Both developments can be traced, in large part, to the plunder and trade returned to Europe by the Crusades to the Holy Land. This influx of wealth and increased commercial activity afforded for a renewed urbanism that undermined prevailing feudal relations. As wealthy urban populations ballooned, schools began hosting a larger number of masters and students, both clerical and layperson alike (Baldwin & Goldthwaite, 1972). Masters, for their part, were increasingly unable to rely upon the Church for a salary, and students, more often than not foreigners in their place of study, lacked many political rights and protections under local government. Therefore, in order to protect these common interests, students and masters organized themselves into the first universities during the twelfth century, modeling their associations after both trade guilds and nascent municipal authorities like the Bolognese commune (Hyde, 1972).

In addition to material wealth, however, Crusaders also brought back with them scholarly texts, some original works produced in Islamic centers of learning, others classical Greek and Roman writings lost in the West, but preserved among the Byzantines and other Eastern kingdoms. The “discovery” of these texts, which covered topics in mathematics, astronomy, the natural sciences, ethics, and metaphysics, disrupted centuries of isolated intellectual development in Europe, which had extrapolated from and refined a singular body of knowledge. Attempting to rectify the incongruities between old and new knowledges consequently revitalized European thought, and university scholars helmed the elaboration of critical analytic methods, reasoning, and argumentation which define the high period of scholastic learning and became the basis of the Western intellectual tradition.

Importantly, this new scholasticism also provided the ideological means by which universities would expand their own intellectual authority. Growing out of the monastic education system, early universities considered themselves to be primarily social institutions, dedicated to the maintenance of Christian knowledge and faith among the people (Verger, in Baldwin & Goldthwaite, 1972). Their intellectual authority was, therefore, restricted to exclusively religious concerns, namely theology and canon law. Scholasticism, however, broadened academic studies beyond the religious, allowing university scholars to direct their investigations towards, and claim expertise over, secular topics.

The university secured legitimacy for this extended authority by cultivating relations with the state, leveraging their liminal position between local authorities, regional kingdoms, the Holy Roman Empire, and ecclesia to establish a degree of autonomy (Baldwin & Goldthwaite, 1972). Local territorial rulers especially turned to universities for advice in juridical and political matters, with universities in turn securing legal, economic, and intellectual privileges and exercising a growing influence over medieval society<sup>1</sup>. But, as universities came to depend upon

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<sup>1</sup> The University of Paris, for example, was highly influential in determining the outcome of the 14<sup>th</sup> century Western Schism, a largely political rather than theological conflict, through its advisory role to the Kingdom of France (Verger, 1972).

territorial governments in order to maintain this position of privilege, relations with the state began to domesticate rather than empower. Lay rulers exercised newfound control over the institution, replacing traditional school structure with appointed heads of colleges and even establishing their own universities (Verger, 1972), such that by the fifteenth century, the university was thoroughly defined by local territorial politics (Kaminsky, 1972).

University domestication reached its zenith in the Early Modern period, as a result of both ecclesiastical reform and state centralization. Although intimately tied to the state, universities were still church institutions, and, therefore, equally impacted by Protestantism. Reforms, initiated by both Protestant critics and the church itself, reduced clerical duties to almost exclusively preaching, investing university masters with the responsibility to disseminate a civic and moral code, and divesting them of the authority to elucidate divine knowledge (Hill, 1972). At the same time, the political upheaval of the religious wars catalyzed a process of centralization, allowing state infrastructure to more closely manage the social and religious life of their population. Indeed, following the Reformation, states throughout Europe adopted, or invented, national churches, exercising unprecedented control over clergy and, by extension, university masters.

Thus, by the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the university had effectively been remade as an instrument of the state, adopting a vehemently conservative intellectual and social platform. Universities were expected to endorse and legitimize the policies of their sponsoring state (Kaminsky, 1972), and the study of new knowledges was suppressed to such an extent that contemporary scholars considered them backward in most mathematics and sciences<sup>2</sup> (Hill, 1972). Understandably, enrollment waned and few students stayed long enough to obtain higher degrees as the institution undermined its own reputation as a place of learning.

And yet, it was in this period of stagnation that Europe experienced another major epistemic disruption. Colonial expansion of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries returned knowledges of indigenous peoples and lands which contradicted, surpassed or were otherwise illegible within Medieval understandings. The novelty and controversy of these knowledges made them extremely valuable commodities, trafficked in the “first truly global commercial enterprise: *trading the Other*” (Smith, 2012, p. 93). But, whereas the knowledge looted by Crusaders had revitalized European thought and prompted the scholastic tradition, the prevailing anti-intellectualism of the universities prohibited engagement with colonial knowledges.

Driven from the university by its conservatism, laymen instead assumed the responsibility for intellectual development, organizing themselves into scientific communities, or societies, where they could collaborate free from university oversight (Smith, 2012). Engrossed in a growing body of heretical knowledge, and guided by nascent principles of rationalism, positivism, skepticism, and objectivity, these independent men of wealth began the radical reformulation of European thought that culminated in modern philosophy. In the process, scientific societies also refined and standardized research methodologies and categorized knowledge into the system of disciplines which constitute modern scientific practice (Simpson, 2014).

Mirroring the university’s own rise to prominence, scientific societies gained legitimacy for their endeavors through state relations. Having assumed the work of knowledge production, territorial governments began to rely upon these secular organizations, especially in implementing colonial agendas, with society members receiving teaching positions at colonial universities as well as funding for knowledge extraction and experimentation on colonized lands

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<sup>2</sup> At Oxford and Cambridge, algebra was seen as a “superstitious” discipline, and geometry a “black art” (Hill, 1972, p. 107).

and peoples (Smith, 2012). This legitimization of the scientific society established secular intellectualism and its modern philosophy as the dominant epistemic authority in the West. The secularization of the state in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries then freed the way for its acquisition of the university, reinvigorating the moribund institution and realigning its structure in accordance with modern scientific principles, ideologies, and methods.

Throughout this history, and in every stage of its maturation, the university has been inextricably tied to state imperialism. Its authority has depended entirely upon state legitimacy; its intellectual practice evolved through the extraction and commodification of non-Western knowledges; its structure and methods fashioned to facilitate state agendas, such that all levels of the institution, including its disciplines, methodologies, administration, and funding conform to the imperial project (Atalay, 2006; Smith, 2012; Simpson, 2014). But, we are primarily concerned with that recent institutionalization of modern philosophy—analyzed in the following pages—because its adoption transfigured the essential function of the university into a colonization of knowledge.

### **The Epistemic Violence of the University**

Birthered through and for the colonial state, modern philosophy does not coincidentally bear colonialist ideology, although we would not attempt a full accounting of that here. Rather, because knowledge production and regulation are the defining functions of the university, we analyze the epistemology of modern philosophy. In doing so, we find that modern epistemology not only justifies and authorizes colonial violence, but, in itself, demands epistemic violence. Operating upon these principles, the essential function of the modern university has become a colonization of knowledge: knowledge is processed to conform to colonial ideology and agendas, and, in turn, disseminated in order to assimilate the populace. To conceal the inherent violence of that mission today, the university employs a strategic negligence that reaffirms its own indispensability.

Two epistemological assumptions narrate modern philosophy: (1) there are certain aspects of reality which are ubiquitously and invariably true, (2) observation and logical reasoning are the only means of accessing that absolute truth. From these two basic assumptions however, issue a number of derivative beliefs linking knowledge production to power. The first of these corollaries is the privileging of objectivity, assessing knowledge against the perceived contamination of subjective experience, by which modern scholars limit the scope of legitimate knowledges to those consistent with their own principles and tradition. In so doing, Western thinkers not only affirm the superiority of their knowledge systems but also claim for themselves the exclusive authority to define knowledge (Smith, 2012). Moreover, the assumption that absolute truth is ascertainable practically and ethically implies a responsibility to do so, creating an obligation for humanity to thoroughly investigate their reality. Given the exclusive authority of modern Western scholars to lead that investigation, instrumental reasoning insinuates, and hubris abets, that all reality need come under Western dominion.

On the one hand, this epistemology leaves no room for enchantment, sacrificing the private and sacred for the pursuit of knowledge<sup>3</sup> (Grande, 2015). On the other hand, it justifies imperialist ideation and, in fact, makes scientific investigation dependent upon the subjugation of non-Western peoples and lands. In order to understand reality, modern philosophy thus

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<sup>3</sup> For a recent example, see the conflict over the Thirty Meter Telescope on Mauna Kea (Overbye, 2016).

engenders material and symbolic violences against reality. But, more immediately, modern scientific investigation and knowledge production, in themselves, constitute epistemic violence.

Modern philosophy is confronted by the same conflict as is any intellectual paradigm: incorporating and rectifying new knowledges with the old. In its pursuit of absolute truth, however, modern philosophy cannot engage in dialogic relations, but is confined to the dialectic, and, operating upon the presumed objective superiority of its own knowledge traditions, must contort new knowledge so that it takes on a form comprehensible within its own ideological framework.

That framework, of course, extends far beyond modern philosophy itself, to a larger knowledge system metaphorically described as the Western cultural archive (Smith, 2012): cosmologies, ontologies, ethical systems, histories, symbols and their associations, which predate Christian civilization (Deloria, 2003), and from which the Western sociological imagination derives. In the wake of global colonization, this archive has also been overwhelmingly saturated by the imagery and ideology of colonial cultures (Nandy, 1983), including what Grande (2015) names the “deep structures of the colonialist consciousness” (p. 99): the conflation of progress with change, the separateness of faith and reason, the impersonal nature of reality, individualism, and anthropocentrism.

Knowledge that has been extracted by the university must be sieved through this heterogeneous composition before it becomes legitimate within the modern paradigm. Of course, the only knowledge able to emerge from this processing is that which upholds the values, doctrines, and political necessities of the West (Smith, 2012). In particular, that which defines the violence of colonization as natural and/or necessary, and affirms the colonial state as the only entity able to exercise legitimate forms of violence (Rifkin, 2009). By mutilating and eradicating contradictory knowledges in this manner, the essential functions of the university, extracting, processing, producing, and regulating knowledge, become an epistemic colonization, enriching, evolving, and safeguarding the settler state.

As with any colonialism however, those knowledge functions also entail a civilizational mission (Nandy, 1983), exporting assimilatory knowledge products in order to reproduce the colonialist consciousness. Assimilation was the explicit mission of colonial universities, Indian agents, and church missionaries (Grande, 2015), but, because the university is integrated within the state, its knowledges are also implicitly reified throughout state infrastructure. For example, such knowledge enters public education alongside official instructional content as a *hidden curriculum* (Anyon, 1980), latent norms, values, and beliefs which socialize students into colonialist worldviews and ways of knowing (Grande, 2015). This circulation and naturalization of assimilatory knowledges works to both colonize the mind of the indigenous (Fanon, 2005) and *decivilize* that of the colonizer (Césaire, 1955), inhibiting decolonial action and enabling further material, symbolic, and epistemic violences.

While in earlier periods the university openly embraced this colonialist purpose, democratic social movements and anticolonial struggle of the twentieth century made doing so antithetical to its self-professed role of social institution. And yet, since the university first allied itself with the state, it has suppressed the social, in order to protect the state and thereby itself. The key, in this context, to concealing university violence while still maintaining a facade of social consciousness, is institutional negligence (Moten & Harney, 2004).

All three authors, throughout their time in higher education, have witnessed and experienced this negligence firsthand. We have seen a university negligently undertake public discussion of genocide, while intentionally and explicitly defining their topic so as to exclude settler colonial



violence. Negligently, a university has excused its failure to recruit and support indigenous students, as well as its responsibility to disrupt and remunerate colonial oppression, claiming that they won't admit students who are incapable of thriving at the school. Negligently, following a Title IX investigation for the mishandling of sexual assault cases, a university centralized student services and activities, but remains reticent to punish rapists. Negligently, a university publicizes its benevolent charity and community-building projects in the Third World, while withholding the profits of that billion-dollar industry from the underdeveloped, Black community down the road.

The epistemic manifestation of negligence is an immobilizing skepticism within the university: scholars - and administrators - must always be uncertain of their own claims (Moten & Harney, 2004). To be perpetually skeptical allows one to investigate all of reality, even one's own coloniality, while discouraging the impetuous impulse to make conclusions and act upon them, sustaining a cycle of uninterrupted knowledge production and delaying decolonization indefinitely. Negligently, the university does not dismiss its coloniality, but closes off our vision of possibility to include nothing except itself.

In summation, colonialism is not vestigial or superficial to the university; the university's essential functions, producing and regulating knowledge, embody a colonization of knowledge, complete with its own civilizational mission. Nor does this framing of knowledge and knowing, the subjugation of knowledge to the capacities of coloniality, take place in ivory-tower isolation. The epistemic violence of the university mission exists in order to sustain and validate the colonial state, to make it inviolable in the minds of all, performing the intellectual labor behind indigenous elimination.

### **Incommensurable Agendas**

We are led to believe that the university could be decolonized. In these appeals, the university is imagined as a force for the decolonial project, even becoming its primary vehicle. But the goals of the two are fundamentally incompatible, making it impossible to incorporate one into the other. Decolonization dislocates the colonial, divests its power from indigenous life. The university on the other hand, birthed by colonialism, is an essential agent of extant colonial violence, both materially, in extracting, accumulating, and withholding resources from marginalized communities, and epistemically, in monopolizing legitimate knowledges. It is dedicated to global colonization, to salvaging and defining settler futurity, through the construction of knowledge itself. Indigenous self-determination is not a possibility in either its political project or its conception of reality. To decolonize the university would, therefore, contradict its ideological purpose and impede its essential practice.

Thus, we know that these decolonial appeals are hollow. Our own experiences and studies, as well as the histories and struggles of our communities, make it clear that the university could never be an agent of decolonization as long as this essential colonialist purpose remains intact. In fact, survivance will always be inhibited as long as an institution like the university has the authority to control and define our existence. As such, indigenous futurity depends upon eliminating these colonial agendas, so that we might imagine ways to look, live, and strive beyond them.

And yet, it is both fashionable and tactful within these institutions to adopt the language of decolonization (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Just as *multiculturalism* and other agendas have been co-opted by the university, these are specious attempts to salvage the settler project through

*reconciliation* (Coulthard, 2014); including and thereby enclosing the colonized as subjects of the settler state (Grande, 2015). Whatever eloquence shrouds these policies however, it cannot hide the brazen negligence which allows one to speak of *inclusivity*, within an institution sustained by exclusion and exploitation; to offer *global citizenship* as consolation for the forcible domestication of indigenous sovereignty (Simpson, 2014); to grant *mobility* to the private individual, while criminalizing the communities one dislocates; and to boast of *diversity* within a project of cultural, political, and ideological homogenization.

### **The University Cannot be Salvaged**

Because the university is a fundamentally colonial institution, decolonization would require more than these self-serving half measures and instead, transforming its essential nature. As with all institutions, such transformation targets the university's material dependency upon colonial exploitation, as well as its integration within and service to the settler state. For the university in particular however, we must attend to the colonialist ideology animating its knowledge functions. But without this, what remains of the university? Its research methods and methodologies, as well as knowledge packaging, sale, and institutionalization would have to be redirected from their current exploitative and repressive formulas (Smith, 2012; Simpson, 2014). Moreover, if we divest the university of its assumed authority over knowledge, what purpose does it serve? And upon whose authority does it act? In short, decolonization requires the university to become a totally new entity, vested with a new mission, organization, practices, and responsibilities.

However, we realize that such comprehensive reform is not practically viable. The university is skilled in inhibiting structural reform. It does so not by simply dismissing or ignoring criticism, but by becoming 'vigilant in its negligence' (Moten & Harney, 2004, p. 106), incorporating critique nominally and adopting the appearance of sympathy, thereby circumventing a decolonial confrontation.

In its vigilance, the university performs what Tuck and Yang (2012) term *settler moves to innocence* (p. 9), stratagems which, in the pretense of critical self-reflection, divert decolonial transformation into salvaging settler futurity and conscience. Swarthmore, for example, regularly employs "collections," convening the campus body, especially in response to an incident, inviting all attendees to speak. These gatherings demonstrate to a larger audience that the school is sensitive to campus concerns, that they are willing to give students and community members the space to express themselves, but without creating any responsibility to act upon those sentiments. In fact, the equal privilege afforded to all speakers, regardless of relations of power and personal benefit, makes the supposedly democratic space of the collection a venue for university representatives to discredit student and faculty concerns.

Even when a school does sincerely critique its own coloniality, this "dialogue" is still undertaken for the purposes of absolvment and self-preservation rather than the restoration of indigenous sovereignty (Byrd, 2011). And as this nominal call for reform has become professional academic practice, the university reaffirms the necessity of its own existence through those who would question it (Moten & Harney, 2004). Thus the critical academic is made complicit in the institution's negligence, locked into the university's attempts to become amenable to those it oppresses. To be critical of the university traps one within settler futurity.

And so, we, from our different positions, reject the desire for inclusion, for a more critically engaged university. Rather than confront an institution that will not, indeed cannot, recognize

indigenous sovereignty, we seek self-recognition and indigenous modes of life independent of this settler apparatus (Coulthard, 2014). We acknowledge that the only possible relationship to the university is a criminal one (Moten & Harney, 2004), that those of us who survive the institution have a responsibility to betray it and appropriate its resources for our peoples (Fanon, 2005).

Although the university cannot be salvaged—given how thoroughly it is defined by coloniality—it has engorged itself on the material and intellectual resources of indigenous peoples around the world, and these resources are worthy of preservation. Those of us with all the benefits and privileges of a college degree, best able to access those resources, are responsible for moving them back into the communities they came from, in an enriching and sustaining manner. This repatriation is not a “sharing” of university resources, which would engender relationships of dependency. Rather, it is theft, using the university’s own property to enable communities to thrive independent of the institution. While each of us possesses unique skills and capacities, if you are not leveraging your position in some manner to contribute to this theft, you are helping to maintain the settler colonial university. That is why we say loot the bookshelves and burn the school down.

### **A Decolonial Alternative to the University**

If we cannot (and will not) salvage the university, what will we do instead? Right now, we are focused on articulating a vision of education in a decolonial future, creating spaces for survival, story sharing, and resource conversion. This section outlines and deepens that vision.

The current, neoliberal model of education is a system of dislocation: seeking a formal education is a trajectory that requires leaving your home and community, your lands, to exist (continually marginalized) in colonial seats of power, seldom able to return home. There is, however, nothing inherently colonial about people organizing themselves in search of knowledge/ways of knowing, and we agree that education is crucial to thriving individuals and communities. In fact, we know that collectivity transgresses and challenges colonial individualism.

So, what does it look like, this alternative we are calling for? We find it difficult to argue against the notions of *choice* and *freedom* narrating education under neoliberalism. Yet, we also recognize their function in expanding the colonial project. We acknowledge radical/leftist pedagogies which have arisen to combat these neoliberal logics, but they themselves are only conditionally suited to a decolonial education, limited by their foundation in Western ideology<sup>4</sup> (Grande, 2015). We must instead base our aspirations in a new (or perhaps, older) language for notions like freedom, knowledge, sovereignty, and self-determination (Alfred, 2006).

The priorities of indigenous self-determination—land and community—must then, also serve as the foundation of a decolonial education. As opposed to the self-serving, violent individualism of liberal ideology, self-determination is a collective faculty that may only be exercised through the relations which constitute the collective. We therefore, call for an education that does not produce solitary individuals within transnational society, but members of interdependent communities, conscious of their relations and capable of fulfilling the responsibilities within

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<sup>4</sup> e.g. Radical Marxism offers a number of prophetic educational models challenging the social stratification and individualization encultured in contemporary schooling. Marxist theories, however, often consider colonialism a necessary stage in progressing from capitalist to socialist states (Coulthard, 2014); even Paulo Freire reproduces anthropocentric and paternalistic ideologies in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970; 2000).

those relationships. Such an education fosters *intentional communities* of learning (Delpit, 2012, p. 42), where students are socialized into relationships between individuals, families, peoples, and with their lands, with a critical understanding of the colonial histories intruding upon those relations.

Understood not as a tool of personal social mobility but as a pillar that articulates and sustains publics, education cannot remain a “neutral” resource; it must actively maintain the vitality of the community. Therefore, education cannot be available only to those with financial and social capital, but rather, accessible to all, regardless of age, ability, or other limiting factors, for all individuals are deserving of, and indeed, must be prepared to fulfill their roles within the community.

We find inspiration for these endeavors in the alternative educational systems already devised by indigenous peoples: The Rough Rock Demonstration School on the Navajo Reservation (McCarty, 2002); Tribal Colleges around the U.S (Tierney, 1992); The Kula Kaiapuni schools of Hawai’i (Office of Hawaiian Education, 2015); Te Kōhanga Reo in New Zealand (May, 2004); El Sistema Autónomo de Educación Zapatista (Plataforma, 2013); Mní Wíchóni Nakíčiziŋ Owáyawa at Standing Rock (Waterdefenders, 2016). We also acknowledge Sandy Grande (2015) in outlining a pedagogical theory compatible with the indigenous project of sovereignty, as well as the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) and Audra Simpson (2014) in preparing decolonial modes of research.

### **Criminal Practice in the University**

Building educational systems that can resist and supplant the university requires pedagogy which can “disrupt the structures of inequality” (Grande, 2015, p. 6). It at the same time requires navigating the existing institution, its relationship to various forms of power, and stewarding its demise. For that purpose we identify three interconnected *stances*—related attitudes, strategies, and frameworks—which we have observed and which may be used in a decolonial approach to the university. We name these stances *survival*, *empowerment*, and (*theft by*) *conversion*. We see them as what Melamed (2016) describes as “forms of practice, accountability, and collectivity within the university, behind its back, and beyond its reckoning” (p. 982).

We begin each of the following subsections with a testimonio (Acevedo, 2001; Pour-Khorshid, 2016) from one of our authors, in order to elaborate and contextualize these stances within the felt theories that manifest them. Taken together, they represent our conviction that we can not only survive the university, but that we can (and should) be in the process of stealing from and burning it down, and teach about its violence, while building spaces that serve and are governed by indigenous communities. They are how we create decolonial moments within an institution that is intent on maintaining its colonial dominance over peoples, lands, and knowledges.

#### **Survival**

**Daniel:** *School had never been a place of joy, or learning. So, I did not expect much from Swarthmore. And yet, because the college offered me so many opportunities as well as a supposedly generous amount of financial aid, it was beyond criticism. The isolation I felt, the meaninglessness of our studies, I attributed to my own failures and flaws. How ungrateful it*

*would have been to blame the college, when my whole family had worked to get me there. In fact, I had never done anything to deserve this “once-in-a-lifetime” opportunity. They deserved it, not me. But they never got the chance, and when I did, I didn’t even appreciate it.*

*I wandered around that campus for four years, feeling completely foreign, finding over and over again that the people and place I had come from did not belong there. At the same time, the longer I stayed, the less I belonged to my own home. What would I return to after graduating, and who would I be by then? Would my family even recognize me, having abandoned them for so long? I had come for a diploma; too late did I realize that its price was everything I had before.*

*It was only after witnessing the stories of others, first in the student protests of the spring of 2013, and later as an archivist for the Intercultural Center, that I came to understand the role of the institution in my experience, and to name that experience as one of violence. And it is only now, looking back at that time through this study, that I find catharsis. Although Swarthmore enacted upon us physical, personal, and epistemic violences, none of them originate with this school. They arise inescapably from Swarthmore’s institutional nature, as a college, as a “non-profit,” as a putative place of learning intermingling the knowledge industry with the settler state.*

The civilizing mission of the university is concentrated in the personal experience of faculty, staff, and students, undermining physical, psychic, emotional, and spiritual health; in order to build a future outside of this reality, we must first survive it. In this regard, we would say that surviving means maintaining a holistic wellbeing, emerging from the institution with an intact sense of self in relation to place and people. Therefore, graduation and tenure are not an indication of having survived. In fact, some of us may need to drop out in order to survive.

Enacted under the duress of colonial violence, *survival* denotes a critical relationship to the university, and resulting strategies, which preserve one’s self, attempting to protect the non-Western ways of knowing and being targeted for elimination. Recognizing the university as both insidious and negligent, survival grows within the subject as a constant vigilance; skepticism and distrust distance one from the institution. The turning away of one’s sympathies and hopes becomes an unwillingness to rely upon the university, an unwillingness to be surprised by its failures, an expectation of incompetence, delinquency, and maliciousness. Survival, therefore, manifests in tenuous and flexible dealings with the university, designed to exploit the institution for all its resources, while attempting to limit the pressure that institution exerts on the subject.

As an active practice, survival draws upon the full range of one’s resistant capital, those oppositional knowledges, behaviors, and skills that challenge structural inequality (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Of these, escape is a primary survival strategy, breaking free from unwelcoming and damaging spaces and retreating to an indigenous one: ditching class, secluding yourself in a private study room, taking a leave of absence, speaking your language, moving off-campus, etc. In addition, when confronted by assimilatory knowledges in the classroom, some survive by not-learning (Kohl, 1993), while others in the same situation may look for ways to take control of their education and teach themselves. Knowing the discrimination one will face, some intentionally build relationships around campus, creating allies for when the balloon goes up. Others choose their relationships cautiously, dedicating themselves only to those individuals who will help them to grow. Critical of the university, some take on the role of a double agent, mastering the norms and language of the institution to pass through undetected, while others engage in creative maladjustment, refusing to make moral or personal compromises, confronting the university in accordance with their own sense of integrity (Kohl, 1993). We base this description and these examples in the accounts of Native students at Swarthmore who

contextualize their own experiences in terms of survival, but by whatever means, we need you to survive.

### **Empowerment**

**Lekey:** *Fulfilling the end goal of the path on which I found myself, however unwillingly, through entering Swarthmore cost me dearly. By our own definition, I have not survived. During and after my time at Swarthmore, my mental health suffered and I experienced a profound sense of alienation. After leaving Swarthmore, I often found myself paralyzed with anxiety and disconnected from others, unable to articulate what I was feeling, or why. I grappled with guilt from having accrued the social (and financial) capital that Swarthmore imparts, intended to differentiate and separate me from the communities I am part of. I struggled along the path of “mobility” out of obligation to my community and family members who had not received the same opportunities afforded to me. Nowhere in Swarthmore’s pedagogy was there room for students to become anything other than agents of the university, who, upon exiting, would perpetuate its colonial practices and knowledges.*

*During my time at Swarthmore, I gradually understood that the institution’s disregard for the mental and spiritual well-being of students (and others) is not a coincidence, but a fundamental feature that exemplifies its coloniality. My conviction grew: The colonial structure must go. I reject the concept of my “inclusion” in the university and understand the rhetoric of “inclusion” as assimilatory, as antithetical to decolonization.*

*For us who seek knowledge based in our experiences and our communities, we become inherently “criminal” in our relationship to the university. We have no choice but to steal. If Swarthmore did educate us, then it did so at the price of who we once were. Upon graduating, many of my friends and I felt torn from our communities and faced the task of learning how to return. In being shaped into “individuals,” we lost the original markers of who we are: beings in community.*

*What did help me get through the alienating and violent experience of the university were the pockets of space—physical, discursive, and otherwise—in which I felt safe, in which not only my ideas, but my feelings and dreams would be honored. I and the other authors fought for this space, in which we could, in community, work towards something that affirmed, nurtured, and liberated all of us.*

If we understand *survival* to be characterized by fugitivity and self-preservation, then *empowerment* is characterized by personal and collective enrichment, cultivation in opposition to and defiance of settler colonial violence. Recognizing that the university cannot provide a decolonial education, empowerment fills its place; one gathers knowledge, skills, resources, and relationships, and re-appropriates them in order to carry out decolonial acts and to prepare for an independent future.

Empowerment uses strategies and/or tools for individuals to maintain or deepen their connections to their communities. For example, Lekey and Daniel operated out of this stance by taking control of their education at Swarthmore, redirecting it for their own purposes. Lekey maneuvered university resources to continue learning Tibetan, where she was able to practice spoken and written Tibetan and develop sustaining relationships with her teacher, classmates, and other members of the Tibetan community. Daniel created a special-major in Native Education, allowing him to study indigenous and decolonial scholarship despite their absence at the College. Both examples did fulfill a university requirement imposed upon students, allowing

them to deflect attention or consequences, but the true purpose of these efforts surpassed and could never be recognized as valuable in this settler colonial context.

Beyond personal benefit however, empowerment is primarily directed toward the development of communities. Daniel attempted to co-opt his senior thesis project and use its resources to document the survival stories of Native students of the college. It became an opportunity to pass on the collective knowledge Natives had gained in resisting the institution, a resource for future students and their families. Likewise, Lekey participated in Serenity Soular, an environmental justice partnership with a neighborhood in nearby Philadelphia. Lekey learned and practiced collective accountability and concrete organizing skills while also appropriating institutional resources (grants, donations, etc.) for the collective's work in Philly.

Acts of empowerment may or may not be legible to the university, or perhaps only partially, as something to co-opt. They will, however, always have a purpose which extends beyond the confines of the university's settler colonial mission. In the case of Daniel, his personal studies became the basis of his senior thesis. Daniel strategically chose this pathway to ensure that he would be permitted the academic freedom and resources to fulfill this graduation requirement while working towards a project he had deemed necessary for the wellbeing of future Native students at Swarthmore.

The above strategic approaches and actions activate a person or community's position within the university to enable the building of spaces, relationships, practices, and more that will undermine, outlast, or supplant the university. Empowerment moves the actor within the university from the critical to the criminal, and requires careful and ongoing assessment of the colonial machinations of the university. In the empowerment stance, we can strategically position ourselves to exploit when necessary and to undermine where possible, all with an eye toward securing our communities' decolonial future in which the university, along with all remaining settler colonial structures and institutions, have been dismantled.

### **(Theft by) Conversion**

**Edwin:** *As I began working at the College, I had mixed emotions. "This is my opportunity," I said to myself, "my opportunity to be an educator-scholar-activist who could, potentially, have an impact on something, on someone." I was excited, I was grateful. Still, having navigated U.S. education as an arrivant of Color for over three decades, I had grown increasingly wary of the purposes of higher education. When I began to work with Lekey and Daniel, their experiences echoed this concern. From our positions as students, educators, and survivors, we were asking ourselves how the university functioned as settler colonialism, and what were the effects of being caught up in this project for us and our loved ones?*

*Through this process of more deeply understanding the settler coloniality of the university I have witnessed the manifestations of imperial violence in the lives of students, my colleagues, and myself. We are taught to desire financial/occupational security and shareholdership in the educational enterprise, and to believe that productivity and civility (not of our own design) are the means to attain those desires. What goes unaddressed is that those desires are a fiction that are only necessary to the sustainability of settler coloniality. In attempting to fulfill these fictitious desires, we have had to endure physical, mental, spiritual and economic challenges that have made our lives ever more precarious—increasing our vulnerability to premature death. Survive? Some of us have. Empowered? Some of us have made ourselves. But this must end.*

*While survival and empowerment, in their many forms, are essential, the complexities of existing as an arrivant of Color employed by the settler university requires me to also think about what it means to stay in this place. We can walk out on the system (Andreotti, Stein, Ahenakew, & Hunt, 2015) by graduating or leaving the university (being pushed out/quitting/withdrawing), and developing alternatives separate from the system. What I am beginning to realize though, is that while decolonization is global, its particularities and enactments are local and intimate. Decolonization requires us to attend to both the systemic and the intimate, and walking out is but one approach. I think some must walk out, while others must stay in the intimacies of coloniality to keep the embers burning. My commitment to being an accomplice to decolonization, my desire to teach about imperial violence and practices of survivance, and most importantly the nourishment I feel being in solidarity with students and colleagues, compels me to want to stay. Being moved to stay, I ask myself, what does it mean for me to stay? What are the goals of staying? What are its practices?*

The practice of staying is not a process of salvaging the university, but rather a process of facilitating the slow burning of a violent, unsustainable system. One of the practices we can, and have been engaging in, is conversion, or *(theft by) conversion*. *(Theft by) conversion* is a legal term that describes when a person lawfully obtains possession of another person's property, but then converts that property into funds for their own use, interfering with the rights of the owner (Davis, 2016). If someone, for example, loses their wallet, and you find it and decide to keep it instead of returning it to its rightful owner, you are converting that wallet to your use (Davis, 2016). In the context of the university, whose underlying premise is ownership of knowledge and monetized resources, those of us who stay can 'lawfully' access the exclusive privileges of academia but then convert it into resources for use of the public/our communities, against the wishes, and independent, of the university.

Increasingly, universities have articulated a renewed interest in the notion of *public or engaged scholarship*, an approach that often employs practices similar to what we are calling conversion. Barker (2004), argues that engaged scholarship is a response to the increased specialization of knowledge, the dominance of positivist epistemology, and the corporatization of the university. A common thread is the linking of the university and its resources to external communities in order to focus action to benefit the public (Barker, 2004). While seemingly well intentioned, the history of objectification and exploitation that indigenous, Black, and other communities of Color experience when interfacing with the university (Smith, 2012), signals that ultimately engaged scholarship is an attempt to salvage the university and settler futurity.

Acts of *(theft by) conversion* however, are distinguished by their criminal intent; they are undertaken in order to engage the public in the university's knowledge functions, to teach about its violent ways, to divest the university of exclusive ownership of knowledge (property), and repatriate material resources to dispossessed communities, contributing to the slow and steady obsolescence of the university. Moreover, these collective acts of conversion create potential spaces, or *collectives of sovereignty*, which aim to "not only refuse forms of knowledge and knowledge-making contingent upon settler imperatives but also to conscientiously enact others founded in Indigenous specificity and wellbeing" (Grande, 2015, p. 12). *(Theft by) conversion* is thus not only about the redirection of materials but also about "constructing the conditions for a different kind of encounter," one "that both opposes ongoing colonization and that seeks to heal the social, cultural, and spiritual ravages of colonial history" (Gaztambide-Fernández 2012, p. 42).



Two of Edwin's emerging conversion projects, BarrioEdProject and his Critical Racial/Ethnic Studies course, exemplify these practices. The Education in our Barrios, or BarrioEdProject, is a youth participatory action research collaborative with Swarthmore students and Philadelphia high school students that focuses on healing, youth leadership development, critical racial/ethnic studies, and co-designing and conducting a research project to address the living conditions of their communities. Rather than the academic, colonial imperative of making minoritized youth and communities objects of study, we use our curriculum of *conocimiento* [knowing ourselves, knowing our communities] (Mayorga & Rosales, in press) to look upon ourselves, our communities and our histories as the basis of how to be in, and transform, the world. The resources of the university are converted to facilitate work that ultimately decenters and turns away from the university, in order to broaden participants' capacities to enact knowledge-making for resistance and wellbeing (Mayorga & Rosales, in press).

Where BarrioEdProject works primarily outside the university, Edwin's course, *The Undercommons: Critical Racial/Ethnic Studies and Education*, is a primary tool for igniting collectives of sovereignty within and across institutions. Starting with Grande's (2015) *Red Pedagogy* and Harney and Moten's (2013) *The Undercommons*, students trace the history, and teaching, of Racial/Ethnic Studies as a means to decenter coloniality and better understand abolition, while also studying critical pedagogies to imagine alternative relationships between knowledge, history, people, and the land. Indeed, a key aspect of our shared inquiry is an analysis of the coloniality of K-16 education itself. Upon this theoretical basis, students in the course collaborate with local K-12 community educators in working on racial/ethnic studies-focused curricula that will become part of a curricular database, #EthnicStudiesPHL.

More recently, Edwin is in the planning stages of reworking this course so that it compliments the emergence of the CREATE coalition. Critical Racial/Ethnic Studies Action, Transformation & Education (CREATE) (2019), "is a group of Swarthmore students and faculty committed to raising visibility of oppressed voices, perspectives, and histories in our curriculum through Critical Racial and Ethnic Studies" (Who We Are section, para. 6). The goal of CREATE is continually evolving, but the efforts are not to institutionalize critical racial/ethnic studies at the campus, but to create a robust space for collectives of sovereignty. The Undercommons course, it is hoped, will signal to students and faculty a location where this transformative work can be taught, examined and taken in scholarly and political directions. As such, Edwin's intention across these conversion projects is to expand our collective capacity to interrogate colonial education and to begin working toward the deflagration of these institutions as they exist today.

These stances as we have defined them are not discrete or linear, progressing from one to the next; rather, they overlap and are often enacted simultaneously in ongoing resistance. For instance, creating conversion spaces will most likely take on the work of empowering its participants, being in itself both a decolonial act and one which prepares for collective action. And yet, these spaces may also serve as a refuge from otherwise hostile environments, and thereby be an important component of one's survival and our shared capacity to heal. Thus it is that we see the decolonization of education naturally invoking all three of these stances.

## Conclusion

From its inception, the university has been yoked to imperialism. The extraction and commodification of non-Western knowledges and goods provided the material conditions for its

development, while also evolving its intellectual traditions. It was able to claim an exclusive authority over knowledge by lending its support to imperial states, which subsequently began to refine its structure, organization, methods, disciplines, and knowledge paradigm to facilitate their own agendas. The final adoption of modern epistemological principles, reflecting this imperial narration, transformed the university's essential functions - generating and curating knowledge - into a colonization of knowledge, an epistemic violence that justifies and perpetuates the colonial state. Coloniality is not historic or superficial to the university, but a fundamentally defining feature and motivating force.

The university cannot be a vehicle for decolonization as long as it is defined by this coloniality, because the agendas of the two are incommensurable. To attempt to salvage the university would, therefore, require the institution to become an entirely new entity, including even its essential knowledge functions. But, the university conceals its violence through negligence, and employs settler moves to innocence, diverting decolonial transformation towards self-preservation and the reconciliation of the oppressed. Thus, we argue, that the university cannot be decolonized. It cannot be salvaged. It must be incinerated.

In place of the university, we offer a decolonial vision of education, based in the principles of self-determination, as articulated by indigenous educators around the world. To reach that vision, we must both steal from the university while it still stands, and begin building educational communities that can supplant it. We identify three stances that can be employed from within the university for this purpose. Survival is a critical relationship to the university, drawing upon one's resistant capital, in order to protect non-Western ways of knowing and being and emerge from the institution intact. Empowerment strengthens one's connections to place and people, while cultivating the skills and resources necessary for decolonial work. Lastly, (*theft by conversion*) repatriates university property to the communities it was stolen from and fosters spaces of sovereignty that will enable us to live independent of the institution once it is in ashes.

## Epilogue

We have been told the university is our only option now, and that it is truly a good for all. But we are asking for all of us to abandon the university. We see that as our only option now. Because as an inherently colonial institution, it cannot be reformed, and we will not allow ourselves to be reconciled.

It is the exact work of hegemony that narrows our view to exclude all but the university. But we cannot accept recognition from the very system that both (a) denies that anything was ever broken and (b) assumes that we are the broken part; so we refuse to ask to be acknowledged, and instead we want to take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it, and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls (Halberstam, 2013, p. 6). We cannot say what new structures will replace the ones we live with yet, because once we have torn them down, we will inevitably see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming. What we want after "the break" will be different from what we think we want before the break, and both are necessarily different from the desire that issues from being in the break.

But it is possible to live otherwise. Yes, we must survive, and gain power and knowledge and money to make any of our revolutionary imaginings a reality. But that work will only help to evolve the colonial state as long as we continue to operate within and rely upon its institutions. So we ask that everyone become a teacher and a student; that we move education into our own

hands. Because the state depends upon our labor and loyalty, which we can dedicate to other endeavors.

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Lekey Leidecker is a Tibetan living in diaspora. Raised in Kentucky, she now lives on Piscataway lands. She holds a degree in Educational Studies and Sociology/Anthropology, but hopes you will look past that. She makes space for her communities to flourish despite violence.

Daniel Orr de Gutiérrez is a K-12 educator in Northern California. He holds a B.A. in Native Education from Swarthmore College and an M.A. in Teaching from the University of San Francisco.

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