Repurposing the University in Times of Social and Ecological Breakdown: From the Ivory Tower to the Nurse Log

Sharon Stein
University of British Columbia

Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti
University of Victoria

Abstract

This article considers how universities might be repurposed to fulfill their responsibilities to future generations in the context of accelerating social and ecological breakdown. To do so, we invite readers into an inquiry about how educators might prepare ourselves and our students to navigate current and coming disruptions in ways that interrupt enduring cycles of violence and unsustainability through processes of redistribution, reparation, restitution, and regeneration. We propose shifting metaphors from universities as elitist ivory towers to humble nurse logs that could support the composting of the current system and nourish emerging possibilities for education and existence. To illustrate this possibility, we consider two experimental efforts to repurpose higher education toward intergenerational and interspecies responsibility.
Keywords: higher education, crisis, reparation, regeneration, responsibility

Résumé

Cet article explore comment les universités pourraient être réorientées pour lutter contre l'accélération de l'effondrement social et écologique et assumer leurs responsabilités envers les générations futures. Pour ce faire, nous invitons les lecteurs à entreprendre une réflexion sur les moyens par lesquels les éducateurs pourraient préparer leurs étudiants et eux-mêmes à naviguer à travers les perturbations actuelles et futures de manière à interrompre les cycles persistants de violence et de non-durabilité grâce à des processus de redistribution, de réparation, de restitution et de régénération. Nous proposons de remplacer la métaphore qui considère les universités comme des tours d'ivoire élitistes par celle d'arbres tombés servant de suc nourricier pour une nouvelle croissance, qui pourraient soutenir le compostage du système actuel et nourrir de nouvelles possibilités en matière d'éducation et d'existence. Pour illustrer cette perspective, nous examinons deux initiatives expérimentales visant à réorienter l'enseignement supérieur vers une responsabilisation intergénérationnelle et interespèces.

Mots clés : enseignement supérieur, crise, restitution, régénération, responsabilités

Introduction

Universities are both impacted by *and* implicated in the accelerating destabilization of social and ecological systems in complex ways. Most universities are also facing their own crises, including growing budget shortfalls and crises of relevance, impact, and legitimacy, particularly among younger generations (Stein, 2024). These converging institutional and systemic crises suggest that existing universities will likely become unrecognizable in the coming decades, if not sooner. Yet there are more questions than answers about what these changes might look like and how faculty, staff, and students might navigate them. In this article, we consider how universities might be repurposed in response to intensifying institutional and systemic crises in ways that are oriented by social and ecological responsibility—in particular, universities' responsibilities to current and future generations of all species.

Many university responses to today's crises seek to restore "business as usual," or business as usual with a few minor improvements (e.g. more sustainable, more inclusive, more efficient). However, many critical, decolonial, and Indigenous analyses suggest the

root causes of today's systemic crises are a product of the inequitable and unsustainable nature of the system itself (e.g., Davis & Todd, 2017; Machado de Oliveira, 2021; Whyte, 2020). For those of us who benefit from this system, these are crises of our own making. In particular, these analyses trace how the modern promises of infinite economic growth, progress, and prosperity have been subsidized through an underside of historical and ongoing extractive and destructive colonial processes that harm both people and the planet through genocide, ecocide, and epistemicide. Yet, while the disavowed costs of these promises have previously been displaced onto systemically marginalized communities and distant landscapes, they are now knocking on the door of the more privileged subset of humanity (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). This poses a significant challenge to university educators, as many of us have been socialized to believe the purpose of higher education is to perpetuate these modern promises for future generations (S. Stein, 2022).

If the continuity of this modern/colonial system is neither feasible nor desirable, and if our universities are embedded within it, the challenge in front of faculty and staff today is to prepare ourselves and our students to navigate current and coming social and ecological disruptions in ways that interrupt and heal intergenerational cycles of violence and unsustainability. With this in mind, but without suggesting it is the only valid or viable way of understanding our current conjuncture, in this article, we propose the time has come for those of us who work in higher education to place a cluster of difficult questions on the table for our collective consideration:

- What would we be doing today if we knew (in our bones, not just in our minds) that social and ecological breakdown is on the horizon, and that sooner or later much of what is currently familiar to us will no longer be viable?
- If future generations were to reflect on our actions 30 years from now, what actions would they be grateful we took in the context of today's accelerating social and ecological crises?
- How might we repurpose our universities through *redistribution*, *reparation*, *restitution*, and *regeneration* to fulfill our responsibilities to current and future generations of all species?

These questions emerge from our ongoing shared inquiry as members of the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures (GTDF) Collective and our long-standing collaborations with the Teia das 5 Curas (T5C) Indigenous Network. This inquiry has also informed our previous work about the shifting nature and purposes of higher education in light of both

emerging challenges and long-standing colonial dynamics (de Oliveira Andreotti, 2021; de Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2015, 2016; Machado de Oliveira, 2021; Stein & de Oliveira Andreotti, 2016, 2017, in press; S. Stein, 2019, 2022; S. Stein et al., 2021, 2022, 2023).

Since we first raised these questions over 10 years ago, we have encountered growing interest among faculty and staff in collectively engaging with similar questions about the inequity and unsustainability of existing models of higher education. Still, many remain hesitant and suggest it is irresponsible to pose these kinds of questions out of concern this will create or feed a sense of panic, fear, despair, hopelessness, and even nihilism about higher education and society in general. We recognize that we cannot know what the future holds before it unfolds, and there is considerable disagreement about the likelihood of significant social and ecological breakdown (e.g., Pinker, 2018; Ritchie, 2024). However, even if this represents only one possible future, it warrants thoughtful and responsible collective consideration.

By offering these questions, we are not asking readers to agree with the premise of the questions, nor are we posing definitive answers. This goes against the usual grain of mainstream academic scholarship, which offers a totalizing *description* of a problem and a universalizing *prescription* for addressing it. Instead, we invite readers to participate in a self-reflexive inquiry about what responses emerge within them as they consider these questions. For most people, this will include a range of different responses, some of which may be contradictory, and which can be thought of as coming from different "layers" of the self. Among these responses could be thoughts and feelings of panic, fear, despair, hopelessness, and nihilism, as identified by those who express concern about the impact of these questions. However, there could also be renewed energy and a sense of relief from naming these potential futures instead of repressing them. Rather than identify or disidentify with the responses that surface, we encourage readers to ask what these responses are making visible and what they might be teaching you.

By observing different responses within us, and asking where they come from and where they might lead us, we can begin to identify and address the intellectual, affective, and relational blockages that might be preventing us as educators from showing up to do the difficult work that is being asked of us in these times of social, ecological, and institutional instability. Only if we acknowledge the presence of these roadblocks within ourselves will it be possible to "compost" them and prepare the soil for more intellectually discerning, relationally mature, and intergenerationally accountable responses to social and ecological breakdown.

We begin the article by introducing some basic dimensions of contemporary systemic crises and how they relate to higher education. We then consider what possibilities might arise if universities were to disinvest from business as usual and instead repurpose existing institutions in the service of multi-generational and multi-species well-being. Specifically, we introduce a potential shift in common metaphors: from relating to the university as an elitist and erudite *ivory tower* that intentionally walls itself off from the rest of the world, toward the university as a humble *nurse log* that can both support the composting of a declining (decomposing) modern/colonial system and provide nutrients to other emerging and precarious possibilities for education and existence. We reflect on two experimental efforts to repurpose higher education and conclude by offering a "Pledge of Generations" that could serve as a guiding compass for faculty and staff navigating social, ecological, and educational crises.

We want to emphasize two things before we proceed. The first thing is that when we speak about "the university" we are broadly referencing the form and format of higher education in the West. As Grosfoguel (2013) notes, the structure of modern Westernized higher education has been shaped by four centuries of epistemic racism, colonialism, and sexism, with genocide being the condition for the epistemicide of non-Western knowledges and thus the asserted universality of Western knowledge. However, as Grosfoguel (2013) also indicates in his use of the term "Westernized," rather than simply "Western" institutions, it is not only universities physically located in what has been called the West or the "Global North" that have these characteristics and are guided by Eurocentric approaches to knowing, being, and relating.

The second thing to note is that we work in universities within what is currently known as Canada. Our positionalities as professors of education, and as a white settler (in Sharon's case) and a racialized settler (in Vanessa's case), inevitably inform our understanding of and approach to these matters, as does our ongoing collective inquiry as members of GTDF and our collaborations with T5C. We draw on what we have learned from various pedagogical and artistic experiments that seek to challenge the usual educational patterns, including patterns grounded in the search for simplistic solutions, extractive, paternalistic, and transactional collaborations, and Eurocentric imaginaries of justice, sustainability, and systemic change.

Multi-Layered Crises

The crises we face today are multi-layered, and most responses to these crises are also multi-layered. These layers of crisis include the ecological crises of climate destabilization, biodiversity collapse, and the breaching of planetary boundaries; economic crises of growing inequality, rising prices, and public austerity; social crises of hyper-individualism and hyper-polarization; political crises of compromised democratic institutions, the escalation of violent conflict, and the cancellation of civil, labour, and human rights; and psychological crises of the growing incidence of mental illness, emotional dysregulation, addiction, and self-harm.

Some also point to a crisis of "sensemaking" that results from increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA), the dispersal of epistemic authority (and thus, lack of consensus), the rapid pace of social and technological change, and the increasing distance and dissonance between generations (Bauman, 2001; S. Stein, 2021; Z. Stein, 2022). This crisis of sensemaking underlies and exacerbates the other systemic crises we face and impairs our individual and collective ability to address them generatively. In this way, our lack of capacity to confront or even grasp today's crises can be understood as part of the crisis itself.

While these crises are arguably global, they do not affect all communities equally, nor are all communities equally responsible for creating them. White and wealthy communities in the Global North have outsized responsibility for creating and driving these crises (Hickel, 2020; Táíwò, 2022). Their comforts and securities have been sustained at the expense of the well-being of other people and the living planet, including communities in the Global South, systemically marginalized communities in the Global North, and biodiverse ecosystems around the world. For over five centuries, modern systems and institutions have been subsidized by crises elsewhere. At the same time, on our highly interconnected, living planet, the buffers that have thus far protected these communities are increasingly compromised and unable to sustain the comforts and securities they promise. Despite the many false divisions instituted by colonialism, we are not separate from each other or the rest of nature. Thus, while systemically marginalized communities have been experiencing these crises for a long time and with the greatest intensity, no one is immune from these crises, just as no one is off the hook from complicity in them.

The microplastic particles now found in human blood and breast milk and the PFAS "forever chemicals" found in oceans and drinking water are clear reminders of our condition of entanglement. There is no "away" to which we can relegate these harms because we are part of the same living metabolism that is sick (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). As our collaborator Chief Ninawa Inu Huni Kui describes, colonialism has created a

> dis-ease in our collective body, with symptoms of human greed, vanity, arrogance and indifference. These symptoms are driving the destruction of ecosystems that are essential for our survival, like the Amazon rainforest, and placing humanity on a path of premature extinction. (as cited in de Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2023, p. 73)

Like many institutions, universities are both affected by today's systemic crises and implicated in their root causes. As a result, universities are generally unprepared to address these crises, *especially* their root causes, indicating we are also facing a crisis of education (Z. Stein, 2022). Bauman (2001) suggested over two decades ago that

> The present educational crisis is first and foremost a crisis of inherited institutions and inherited philosophies. Meant for a different kind of reality, they find it increasingly difficult to absorb, accommodate, and hold the changes without a thorough revision of the conceptual frames they deploy. (p. 128)

In other words, our universities are increasingly ill-suited for the current world, and in the context of rapid change, volatility, and uncertainty, they are even more ill-suited for the worlds to come.

This gap between the challenges our universities were built for and the challenges we currently face demands a rethinking of prevailing approaches to research, teaching, and public engagement—especially approaches that sustain modern/colonial separations and presumed supremacies. As Chief Ninawa observed, "the colonial ways of organizing, thinking, feeling, relating, hoping, imagining and being that have got us into this situation cannot alone get us out of it" (as cited in de Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2023, p. 73). Yet, it is not easy for educators to transform these "colonial ways," given most of us were socialized into them; thus, we have developed strong attachments to them and the rewards they promise. Despite more faculty recognizing a mismatch between what we offer through our research, teaching, and service and what might be relevant in the current context, few

of us know what else to do instead. As a result, in practice, we often end up doing more of the same while hoping for a different outcome.

For those actively grappling with the limits of "higher education as we know it" and who are open to other possibilities, the orienting question of their inquiry is often, "If not this, then what?" In other words, they assume it must be known in advance exactly what another kind of education would look like. This approach is understandable for those of us educated to pursue theories of change that are oriented by assumptions of *progress* (i.e., we must consistently move "forward" and "improve" because time and change are linear), *teleology* (i.e., we need a fixed destination and certainty about how we will arrive there before we can start moving), *logocentrism* (i.e., we can only bring something new into being if we can first imagine and describe it), and *anthropocentrism* (i.e., humans are the ones who will determine the direction of change).

The question "If not this, then what?" significantly narrows the range of possibilities for how we might approach the task of repurposing existing universities in the face of complex social and ecological crises. In particular, two of the most commonly identified possibilities are to return to an idealized past of higher education (which served very few people at great cost to many), or to develop guaranteed alternatives to the higher education we have now (which are generally imagined from within our existing colonial frames of reference, and thus are likely to reproduce at least some of the same destructive patterns that have led to the current crises in the first place). A truly different kind of higher education is likely unimaginable from where we currently stand. However, just because something is unimaginable does not mean it is impossible.

Therefore, rather than ask, "If not this, then what?" when it comes to our existing universities, we might instead ask what lessons we and our universities have still failed to learn and why, what we would need to unlearn to enable the possibility of a university that is more relevant and responsive to current crises, and how we might do this learning and unlearning in ways that move us toward deeper emotional stability, intellectual discernment, relational maturity, and intergenerational and interspecies responsibility. These kinds of questions could help reorient conditioned desires for definitive alternatives and guaranteed outcomes toward greater acceptance of, and stamina for navigating, ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity as we and our universities enter an era of unprecedented challenges and crises. This would also invite more emergent, relational, non-linear, and process-oriented approaches to repurposing the university.

In the remainder of this article, we introduce a shift in metaphors that invites us to move in this direction: from the university as an exceptional ivory tower to the university as an ordinary nurse log. We begin by reviewing the colonial foundations of the ivory tower.

The Colonial Foundations of the Ivory Tower

While the metaphor of the ivory tower originates in the Bible, when translated to higher education the implication has been that the university should remove itself from the rest of society to protect the unencumbered pursuit of universal truth and knowledge. Western universities originate in 11th-century Europe, with their modern formation emerging a few centuries later through the interdependent rise of the European Enlightenment and European colonialism, first in the Americas (Grosfoguel, 2013). In the 19th century, the university became more closely aligned with the nation-state in Europe and operated as an arm of the state in settler colonial contexts (Grande, 2018). In this way, the original ivory tower structure was modified but maintained.

The infusion of public funding and the massification of higher education in the mid-20th century democratized the ivory tower to a certain extent. In the context of the Cold War, there was a perceived imperative to educate citizens and produce knowledge to ensure the West's advantage over the USSR in global struggles for geopolitical and economic hegemony (S. Stein, 2022). Rather than replace the existing tower, this new formation of the university was layered on top of it. The democratization of the ivory tower soon gave way to its commodification and reorientation more directly in the service of capital accumulation (Etzgowitz et al., 2000; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Tornquist & Kallsen, 1994), with scholars describing its transformation into a factory (Barry et al., 2001), convenience store (Claes, 2005), and shopping mall (Moses, 2000).

While some sought to "rescue" the ivory tower from the grasp of capital, others called to abandon it altogether so that the university could better serve surrounding communities (Taylor, 1997). The idea was not only to democratize access to the knowledge produced by the university, but to recognize that knowledge is also produced outside its walls. In recent decades, we have seen a marked decline in higher education's monopoly over knowledge, particularly thanks to the internet. Whereas universities previously asserted that they alone could create and transmit knowledge, decades of challenges to

these universalizing grand narratives have come from multiple directions. Increasingly, people curate their own realities and the possibility of achieving a consensus or shared, stable truth appears increasingly out of reach (Bauman, 2001).

By the mid-1990s, Readings (1996) declared the university was "in ruins." This shift was not only about neo-liberal reforms and challenges to the university's epistemic authority, but also about the fact that the public was less keen to support (financially and otherwise) institutions that felt disconnected from the "real world" and its problems. Following Padilla and Chavez (1995), we suggest that rather than an ivory tower, what we currently have is, at best, a *leaning* ivory tower, not unlike the famous Leaning Tower of Pisa. Its walls are crumbling and the ground below it is shifting, more like a swamp than solid ground. There is more than one way to relate to this leaning tower. Some wish to stabilize and restore it to an idealized previous state, while others call to "burn it down" (Mayorga et al., 2019)—and many fall somewhere in between. Where one falls on this spectrum depends partly on how one understands the history of higher education in the West.

Many who want to defend, fortify, and withdraw into the ivory tower do so from a desire to defend the integrity of education and research from market forces. However, this inward-looking and protectionist approach generally sidesteps questions about universities' foundations—specifically, how Western higher education has been heavily subsidized through wealth derived from the enduring colonial dynamics of exploitation, expropriation, and extraction (S. Stein, 2022; Wilder, 2013; Yang, 2017). When responses that seek to prop up the leaning ivory tower are grounded in nostalgia for the past and bygone models of plush public funding, they tend to disavow the colonial conditions of possibility for the modern Western university across its different eras, including the present. The ivory tower can only be idealized if the true costs of its operations are externalized and the labour relations and materials it requires are made invisible.

Repurposing the University

Examining the colonial history of the university can lead one to conclude that perhaps it is not worth "saving." After all, what does an elitist, erudite, and exclusionary institution have to offer a world in crisis? Examining the multiple crises of the present can also lead one to conclude the university cannot be saved even if we wanted to. Yet if the ivory tower is indeed to fall, there are many ways that this might happen, some of which will be more or less generative than others.

While demolishing what remains of our universities might be appealing to those seeking a sense of purity and escape from complicity (Shotwell, 2016), arguably, there is no position outside of complicity in our deeply colonial world, particularly for those of us who live in the Global North (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). Especially given the considerable resources that are held in and continue to flow through Western universities, we propose another option: *repurposing* the inherited (and outdated) role of the university toward relevance and responsibility through practices of redistribution, reparation, restitution, and regeneration.

While these terms are closely related, each has a slightly different meaning. We offer provisional definitions here, but each term is also polysemic and their meaning in practice is contextual and contested. Briefly, *redistribution* indicates the reallocation of power and resources with due consideration of systemic and ongoing power inequities. However, redistribution alone does not necessarily lead to deeper structural change. *Reparation* seeks to repay the debts owed to the communities negatively impacted by dominant institutions and social groups, particularly through slavery and colonialism. According to the UN, there are five basic kinds of reparations: restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition.[1] Some have also emphasized the need for epistemic, relational, and spiritual repair alongside material/financial reparations (Ahenakew, 2019; Alberta Palmer, 2023; Sriprakash, 2022), such that reparations result in a different system of social and ecological relations. *Restitution* is closely related to reparation in that it indicates the restoration and return of what was unjustly taken, including lands, labour, knowledges, and sovereignty. Finally, *regeneration* refers to practices and processes that aim to heal the living systems, relationships, and ecologies that have been degraded by colonialism, capitalism, and other forms of expropriation and extraction.

1 While the meaning of these words is also contested, broadly speaking: *restitution* restores the affected party as closely as possible to their situation before the harm occurred, including restoring rights, returning property, and restoring freedom or status lost due to the violation; *compensation* provides financial reparation for damages, proportionate to the gravity of harm, including physical and mental harm, lost opportunities, material damages, moral suffering, and costs for necessary medical, psychological, legal, or social support; *rehabilitation* offers necessary medical, psychological, legal, and social services to support the healing of those affected; *satisfaction* acknowledges the harm done and seeks justice through various means, such as ceasing ongoing violations, uncovering truth, issuing apologies, honouring victims, or enacting penalties against those responsible; and *guarantees of non-repetition* implements measures to prevent the reoccurrence of such harm in the future, such as institutional and legal reform and education to address systemic issues and promote accountability.

These four different but interrelated dimensions of repurposing the university would prioritize serving the communities that have historically and systemically been most negatively affected by the actions of mainstream social systems and institutions, including the university itself. In addition to repairing past and present harm, these efforts to repurpose the university could foster the conditions from which we could respond to complex social and ecological challenges with more relationally rigorous forms of education, knowledge production, and social coordination.

From the Ivory Tower to the Nurse Log

If we follow Readings's (1996) metaphor of the university in ruins, this repurposing could be approached as a practice of what Hine (2023) describes as "making good ruins"; that is, identifying important learnings and starting points that can inform what might come after. To move in this direction, we suggest a shift in the metaphors we use for the university: from the university as an ivory tower to the university as a nurse log. A nurse log is a tree that has fallen in a forest and, through its decomposition, nurtures the growth of other life, especially new plant seedlings. Many dimensions of the nurse log distinguish it from the ivory tower.

The ivory tower asserts its authority and exceptionalism through its height and distance from the ground, and thus, its separation from the rest of "mundane" life—including from both human societies and the rest of nature. Those inside the tower are deemed "the best and the brightest" (Cimpian & Leslie, 2017). In contrast, the nurse log is low to the ground, with no separations between itself and the Earth, indicating its humility and entanglement with (and thus, its inherent responsibilities to) all other living beings. The ivory tower is also built with durable materials and is intended to stand unchanged in the same place over time. The tower prioritizes its own self-preservation rather than adapting to serve the well-being of those beyond its walls, or even in many cases, those inside its walls. Any external benefits derived from the tower are indirect and incidental rather than intentional. Meanwhile, the nurse log is always changing and embedded in the cycles of both life and death. In fact, it is through its death, and the process of generative decay that follows, that the nurse logs support new life. In this sense, the nurse log is also part of a cycle of intergenerational responsibilities. What ultimately thrives from the nurse log's support and shelter depends on many factors and cannot be known in advance.

To facilitate a process through which the leaning ivory tower can be repurposed into a nurse log would require us to consider several questions, such as: How should we spend our limited time right now if the tower is crumbling? How can we help the tower fall to the ground as softly as possible, without rushing things or waiting too long, so its fall creates the least possible destruction to those in and around it? How can we support those mourning the tower in grieving it so they can stop investing in its futurity at any cost, learn from its mistakes, and make space for new possibilities to grow? What elements from the tower are worth keeping even as the structure decomposes? How can we redirect the immense resources accumulated in the tower (including wealth and knowledge) toward supporting the aspirations and self-determined healing of those communities and landscapes that have been negatively impacted by it? How can we mobilize these resources to "feed" new possibilities that would benefit current and coming generations of all species? How can we treat these possibilities as provisional experiments (or budding plants in the undergrowth of the forest) that may or may not develop into fully-grown trees or flowers, but have much to teach us? How can we approach the current transition as part of an ongoing cycle of birth, growth, and death?

The answers to these questions will vary significantly depending on one's context, and the structural integrity of the specific "tower" one inhabits. Thus, rather than try to answer these questions, in the following section we offer two examples of efforts to repurpose universities and thereby experiment with the shift from the ivory tower to the nurse log.

Experiments in Repurposing the University

This section reviews two efforts to "repurpose" the university. We emphasize that these are contextual, provisional, and tentative *experiments* and *examples* from which important lessons might be learned about both their successes and failures, rather than universal or perfected *models* that can be applied and replicated in all institutions and contexts. It is important that any effort to repurpose an institution be grounded in its specific context and histories.

PWIAS Climate and Nature Emergency Catalyst Program

The year-long Climate and Nature Emergency Catalyst Program was hosted at the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies (PWIAS) at the University of British Columbia (UBC) from 2022–2023, right before the Institute permanently closed in its current form. The timing of this experiment was not coincidental: the program leadership team we were part of knew this closure was likely and understood this as a unique, time-bound opportunity to try something different in a traditionally elitist corner of the university. Indeed, our ability to undertake this experiment was likely only possible given the Institute's impending closure. Often, it is only once it is clear that existing approaches are no longer viable that a glimmer of something else seems possible.

Historically, the Institute's biggest program funded 10–12 "exceptional" scholars to pursue a research project according to their own interests, following an ivory tower model of academia focused on celebrating individual scholarly "genius." When we were developing the Catalyst Program, we were interested in exploring whether elite university spaces could be re-oriented toward engagement with pressing social and ecological concerns—in this case, the climate and nature emergency (CNE)—in ways that would foster and deepen practices of redistribution, reparation, restitution, and regeneration. Rather than centring individual scholars and reproducing siloed Western disciplinary approaches to knowledge production and dissemination, we sought to create opportunities for genuinely collaborative, critically engaged, complexity-informed, multi-generational, socially relevant, and ecologically accountable transdisciplinary research and action in response to the CNE.

We created six cohorts (rather than just one cohort of faculty) including faculty, undergraduate and graduate students, artists, emeriti/ae (retired academics), and staff. Challenging the usual treatment of the CNE as a technical problem that can be solved with Western scientific and technological innovations (Nightingale et al., 2020), we framed colonialism, capitalism, and consumption as root causes and drivers of the CNE. However, rather than asserting this as universal truth, we attempted to create an environment of collective inquiry, where people were consistently invited to expand their capacity to engage with difficult, uncomfortable issues and address complex, ambiguous challenges in collective, responsible ways, but without being told what to think or what to do. Program participants were invited to exercise self-reflexivity and accountable autonomy as part of the experiment, while also being reminded that the program itself was an

inquiry in which our "failures" (including those of the leadership team) were "good data" that could be used to inform future experiments in various contexts.

The program was also grounded in four guiding principles through which we sought to experiment with the possibilities and limitations of repurposing the university:

- **Ethical collaboration:** Transdisciplinary, intergenerational, and community relationship-building grounded on trust, respect, reciprocity, accountability, consent, and compassion.
- **Intellectual depth:** (Self-)critical and relational rigour in moving beyond common patterns of simplistic solutions, paternalistic and extractive forms of engagement, and ethnocentric ideals of sustainability, justice, and change.
- **Reparative redistribution:** Allocating resources with a reparative orientation to prioritize communities most affected by the CNE and research with the greatest urgency and impact.
- **Engagement with the UBC Indigenous Strategic Plan:** Deepening understanding of settler responsibilities and supporting the aspirations of Indigenous scholars and communities.

Program participants were not expected to agree with these principles, but rather to continuously consider their implications for the interventions they were developing in response to the CNE. Recognizing there were different levels of familiarity with each principle and that people would understand these principles differently, we offered guiding questions to consider around each principle. These principles also guided our funding and programming decisions.

Even though the Institute closed following the year of Catalyst programming, it offered an important space for collective learning and unlearning. For instance, this experiment made visible the challenge of inviting people to confront and process their complicity in systemic harm, particularly in ways that activate the expansion of social and ecological accountabilities, rather than trying to elicit blame, shame, and guilt. The Catalyst program also made visible the depth of intergenerational dissonances in the university, with the student cohorts in particular challenging current and emeritus faculty to account for how their disciplines had contributed to the CNE and the extraction of knowledge from systemically marginalized communities. This taught us the importance of creating pedagogical containers for difficult intergenerational conversations about the CNE, where we can support all generations in facing the complexity of the current challenges and the

challenges ahead of us without mutual accusations and learn together from the mistakes of the past to make only different mistakes in the future. Finally, we learned about the challenges that emerge when scholars are invited to shift from a problem-based, outcome-oriented research model to more process-oriented approaches to inquiry. (For an in-depth report about the un/learning from this experiment, see de Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2023.)

The University of the Forest

The second example is an approach to repurposing the university grounded in collaborations between the University of the Forest (UoF), and the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures (GTDF) Collective.

UoF has been a centre of wisdom and knowledge for the Huni Kui People of Acre in what is currently known as Brazil since time immemorial. The university's physical campus is located on the banks of Rio Envira, one of the affluents of the Amazon River.

UoF is governed by customary Huni Kui laws, values, oral traditions, and relational sciences and technologies. The university is overseen by both human and other-than-human Elders, leaders, and knowledge keepers. For instance, the Sacred Samaúma tree is the UoF president, and the senior leadership team also includes the Sacred Anaconda, who serves as the academic provost, and the Royal Harpy Eagle, who is the provost international. The education offered by UoF emphasizes integrity, reciprocity, and accountability to the Amazon forest and all its inhabitants. UoF is where members of the Huni Kui First Nation learn not only to care for the Amazon biome, but also that they are one with it, through sacred songs, designs, philosophies, and practices of respect, reverence, reciprocity, responsibility, and regeneration.

While UoF has primarily served the Huni Kui People for centuries, the urgent global crises of climate destabilization and biodiversity catastrophe—the climate and nature emergency—have led the university to recognize its broader responsibility as an institution. The UoF Elders noted that as Indigenous Peoples they have always recognized their interdependence with the Land, and as an institution of higher learning they felt a responsibility to collaborate globally to interrupt the harmful thinking and practices that are placing humanity on the path of premature extinction. This led UoF to develop an international digital campus in collaboration with GTDF (universityoftheforest.org). The purpose of the UoF digital campus is to support people everywhere in repairing their relationship with the Earth, wherever they are located, and in so doing, embrace their responsibilities to Earth/everything/the whole.

The UoF virtual campus has five inter- and trans-disciplinary faculties, each of which has a hub of experiments and inquiries that have connection points across and beyond each faculty:

- **The Faculty of Respect** promotes the healing of thinking (cognitive justice/well-being) and hosts exchanges and experiments related to weaving respectful, responsible, and reciprocal relations between all humans (especially Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples), between humans and other species, and between humans and the Land (as a living entity).
- **The Faculty of Reverence** promotes the healing of feeling (affective justice/well-being) and hosts interchanges and experiments around our relationships with what is conscious and unconscious, with life, aging, death, pain, loss, suffering, joy, forgiveness, compassion, patience, generosity, and love.
- **The Faculty of Reciprocity** promotes the healing of exchanges (economic justice/well-being), as well as interchanges and experiments related to the balance of energy exchanges that happen in the metabolism of the planet and the problems caused by greed, accumulation, and overconsumption.
- **The Faculty of Responsibility** promotes the healing of relationships (relational justice/well-being), as well as interchanges and experiments related to intergenerational and interspecies interdependence and implications for the long-term viability of life on Earth.
- **The Faculty of Regeneration** promotes the healing of the cycles of Mother Earth (ecological justice/well-being), as well as interchanges and experiments related to how we got to the predicament we are in—how the sense of separation from the metabolism of the planet has led us to neglect it and act irresponsibly to the point that we are risking human survival, and how we can work toward regenerative solutions only when we have an idea of the depth of the problems (of our own making) that we are facing, and our responsibility to everything.

According to Chief Ninawa, UoF's global ambassador and Dean of the Faculty of Responsibility, the possibility of generative, respectful, and reciprocal collaborations between Indigenous eco-versities, like UoF, and Western institutions, researchers, and educators requires that the latter shed their academic arrogance and commit to material, epistemic, and relational repair. This could entail: redistributing funds to support education by and for the community according to their priorities and aspirations, building

equitable partnerships with Western researchers to conduct research at the direction of the community and its practical and strategic needs, and developing educational experiences for Western students that focus on inviting them to confront and interrupt modern patterns of extraction and consumption, deepen their sense of social and ecological accountability, and support Indigenous rights and the rights of Nature.

Yet, none of this can happen without a commitment to developing relationships grounded in trust, respect, reciprocity, accountability, and consent (Whyte, 2020). Chief Ninawa observes that to develop these relations, those of us who work in Western institutions would need to begin by humbling ourselves—coming closer to the ground, like a nurse log. We would need to interrupt our socialized desires for comfort, certainty, and control, and disinvest from our perceived entitlements to authority, unrestricted autonomy, the arbitration of truth and justice, and accumulation (Stein et al., 2024). UoF frames these desires and entitlements as intellectual, affective, and relational blockages that need to be cleared so that Western-educated people can open up to being taught by the wisdom of the Earth, stewarded by Indigenous Peoples for millennia through their advanced relational sciences and technologies, without reproducing common colonial patterns of appropriation. Through these processes of learning and unlearning, we might be reminded that many possibilities for education and existence are viable, but unimaginable from within the ivory tower, and that our work as educators is not about preserving existing institutions, but rather about serving intergenerational and interspecies well-being.

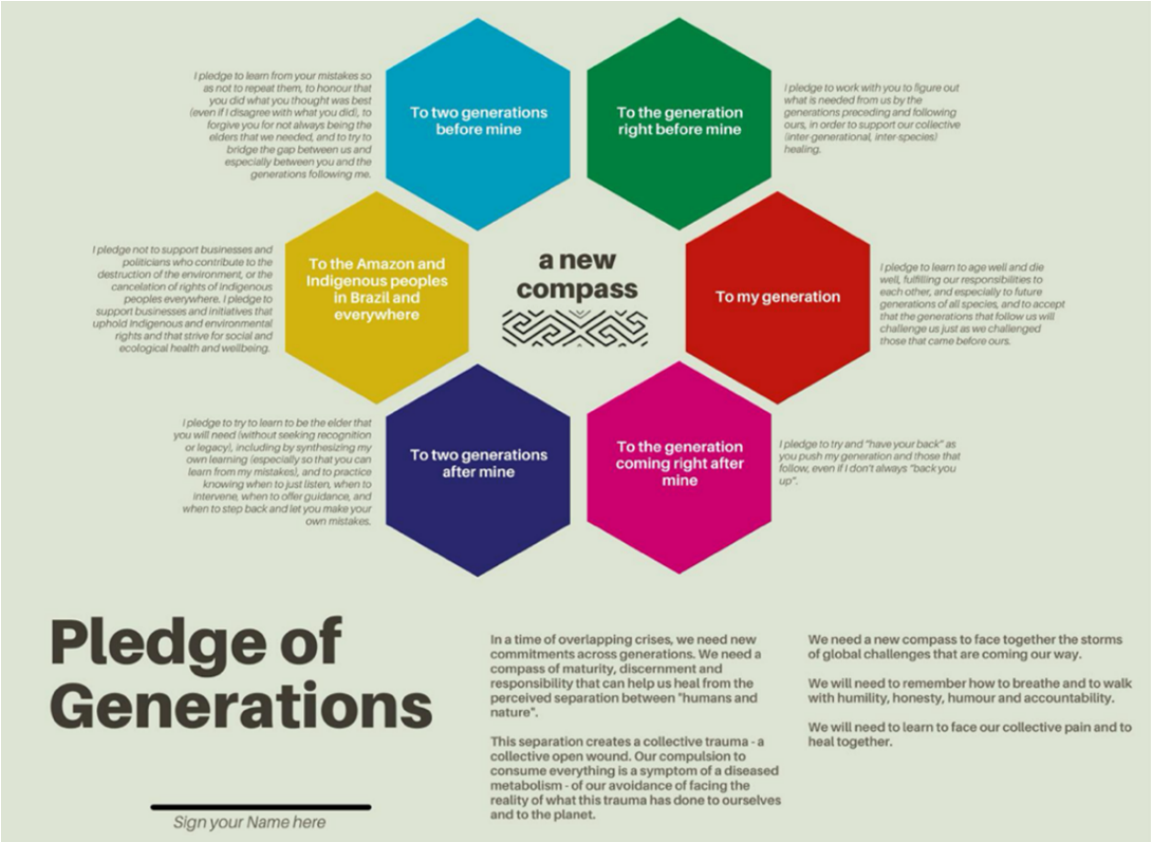
Conclusion: Toward Intergenerational and Interspecies Responsibility

In this article, we invited readers to sit with difficult questions about how we might repurpose universities as we face the potential decline of existing systems and institutions over the next few decades. We invited readers to temporarily bracket the desire for quick, simple, "feel-good" resolution, and observe what emerged in them in response to these open-ended questions. As we conclude, we invite you to reflect on what you have learned by observing these responses. This self-assessment can help you discern your existing capacity to navigate volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, and identify opportunities to deepen your sense of intergenerational and interspecies responsibility in the context of current and coming crises. This responsibility can orient individual and collective efforts to repurpose the university.

Against the expectations of closure or answers usually imposed at the end of academic articles, we conclude with another invitation based on a pedagogical resource developed as part of the curriculum of the University of the Forest's international digital campus, the "Pledge of Generations." The pledge invites people to situate themselves within a multi-generational and multi-species flow of responsibilities in the service of deepening our collective social and ecological well-being. This includes the responsibilities we have to those who have come before us, those who will come after, and our own generational cohorts.

Figure 1

Pledge of Generations (Courtesy of the Authors)



Note. Available online: https://decolonialfutures.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/pledge-of-generations.jpeg

For instance, the pledge emphasizes a commitment to learn from the mistakes of previous generations, as well as from our own mistakes, and to serve as a bridge between older and younger generations. It also invites people to work with those in our own generational cohort to uphold our responsibilities to younger generations and to accept that they will likely challenge us, in the same way that we challenged the generations that came before us. The pledge also encourages people to show up for younger generations when they need us, without expecting them to celebrate our "legacy" or agree with us. In addition to these generational responsibilities, the pledge invites a commitment to uphold the rights of Indigenous Peoples in the Amazon and beyond, and to respect the rights of Nature as well.

Overall, the Pledge of Generations offers a guiding compass for our shared responsibility to interrupt cycles of intergenerational (and interspecies) violence and say, "The buck stops here." It can serve as a reference point for individuals or for groups who are making collective decisions about the direction and priorities of their community or organization. We leave readers with an invitation to continually ask how these layered responsibilities might translate into individual, institutional, and systemic changes within their own context.

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