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Viewing the landscape of doctoral education against the horizon of policy: Placing ourselves in the academic arboretum

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to you today. I would like to thank the Center for Innovation and Research in Graduate Education at the University of Washington, with special thanks to Dr. Maresi Nerad and Dr. Roxana Chiappa for inviting me to share my thoughts with you this morning. I also want to thank the Canadian Studies Center at UW and Dr. Nadine Fabbi for their generosity in providing a place for me to conduct my sabbatical research this year. In addition, I would like to thank the Killam Trusts for their sponsorship of my current research, knowing, as they do, that the focus of my study on the settler-colonial foundations of Canadian and US higher education in the Pacific Northwest disturbs, disrupts, and hopefully deepens the very knowledge system they were created to support. I disclose that The Killam Trusts, which funds scholarships at the graduate and postgraduate levels as well as faculty research fellowships and prizes at specific Canadian institutions, was established using funds that accrued to Izaak Walton and Dorothy J. Killam in the banking sector, especially through the financing of Canadian wood pulp and paper companies as well as hydroelectric power. As we see with the Killam Trusts, Canada’s resource economies are deeply intertwined with the financial support for higher education and advanced study.

Today I want to focus on this land as a knowledge system. As we begin, I want to I acknowledge the land where we gather today and the Coast Salish nations that have lived and learned here since time immemorial. I acknowledge the Indigenous caretakers of this region whose ancestors have lived here for more than 500 generations: the Duwamish, Suquamish,

Snoqualmie, and Puyallup, as well as the tribes of the Muckleshoot, Tulalip, other Coast Salish peoples.

I am an outsider in this place in many ways. I was born in Ohio, land of the Delaware, Lenape, Miami, Shawnee, and Wyandotte peoples. I have European ancestry and a family connection to more than 300 years of settlement in North America. I am a dual citizen of Canada and the US, working and living on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Musqueam people at the site of the University of British Columbia's Vancouver campus.

As an immigrant, settler scholar I recognize that my inhabitation within the Canadian academy can also be understood as an occupation within Indigenous territory. By reading and listening to Indigenous colleagues and students, I realize that it is my responsibility to understand how I arrived here, and what I bring with me, literally and figuratively. I also recognize the limitations of my knowledge, including that my interest in knowing does not equate with the right to know in all cases. These stances, skills and deficits can be actively and collaboratively brought to bear on the ongoing processes of colonialism, specifically as constituted in the field of Education where I am located.

I have been invited to address the theme of this speaker series, "Committing Ourselves to Social Justice: Doctoral Education for Complex Times." In this first lecture of the series, I suggest that we draw upon Leigh Patel's observation in her book, *Decolonizing Educational Research: From Ownership to Answerability*, that educational researchers should hesitate to use the term "social justice" as it has become an empty signifier, or a signal for something quite different than what we intend. As well, Patel notes that the emphasis of critical scholarship is too often disassociated with the root causes of systemic inequality. She states, "In consideration of settler colonialism's specific needs for differential locations of vulnerability, erasure, and dehumanization, concepts like 'inclusion' and 'equity' seem dismally insufficient" (Patel, 2016, p. 89). We might add that in light of declining environmental stability, the normative baseline for higher education in late modernity requires deep reconsideration. Human rights are Indigenous rights, and Indigenous rights are planetary rights. These rights are often at odds with the principles and practices of Western science.

Some of our colleagues understand this all too well, and others may require alternative means to recognize that higher education operates within a landscape of obscured insufficiency. Academia is not only limited by under-representation, discrimination, and misunderstanding. We

are also limited by our active participation in competition, self-promotion and individualized systems of prestige.

The title of my talk, “Viewing the landscape of doctoral education against the horizon of policy: Placing ourselves in the academic arboretum,” emphasizes educational purpose and place, but also the colonial underpinnings of Western science. The “horizon of policy” references the spatializing sensibility of being located in a particular spot and turning around to view the encircling horizon. This is a planetary standpoint. The metaphor of a 360 degree “policy horizon” takes into consideration that we must move our entire beings to realize what is all around us, instead of facing in one direction and only seeing what is straight ahead.

The “academic arboretum” in the title references the artificiality of the background scenery of many university campuses, an unrealistic environment cultivated for daily performances of the “life of the mind.” The trees that make up the academic arboretum, while lovely to look at in their own right, block our vision of the horizon while also supplanting the forests that stood in place before them. In framing our discussion of the future of doctoral education in this way, I am juxtaposing two viewpoints of postsecondary policy and practice within the landscape of the university campus: the viewpoint toward the horizon and the standpoint of our relationship to our immediate surroundings.

In a simplistic sense, the scenery we see from these vantage points represents ecological systems of inter-relation. The simulated forest within the campus setting is a cultivation that does not resemble the world outside the university walls. We might even call the campus a tree zoo that depends upon us for survival, an arboreal artificiality that perhaps is as untenable as it is unnatural. Higher education, and those of us within it, are implicated and imbricated in this obscured insufficiency, of being in a landscape without a world, where the selected tree specimens before us overlap to block our view of the holistically integrated knowledge systems we have uprooted.

Dr. Nerad has shared with me the 2019 Hannover Recommendations that came out of an international conference and workshop series on the Forces and Forms of Doctoral Education Worldwide, sponsored by the Volkswagen Foundation. The first of seven recommendations is to: “establish a Joint Value System rooted in the universal principles of the United Nations Human Rights Charter. It should be based on respect for the individual and aim for an equilibrium of

knowledges from South, North, East and West including indigenous knowledge systems in an ‘ecology of knowledges’”.

I want to focus on this first recommendation today, particularly the phrase “ecology of knowledges.” While the Universal Declaration of Human Rights informs the protection of individual freedoms, it is not sufficient to address the relational accountability necessary to protect and realize self-determination of Indigenous peoples and their knowledge systems, which extends to ecological systems. Land rights and the rights of the land must be explicitly named in any effort to promote a holistic “ecology of knowledges.”

As well, Indigenous peoples have unique rights that include and extend beyond the human rights cited in the Hannover report. In light of what we already know about social, economic, and ecological inter-dependencies and impending climate forecasts, research universities and their higher education systems cannot deliver on promises to develop the “original, responsible, and ethical thinkers,” noted in the Hannover report, while continuing to operate within extractive and exclusionary premises that impinge upon or exclude the unique rights of Indigenous peoples.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 11.2 declares that “States shall provide redress through effective mechanisms, which may include restitution, developed in conjunction with indigenous peoples, with respect to their cultural, intellectual, religious and spiritual property taken without their free, prior and informed consent or in violation of their laws, traditions and customs.” Article 28 states that “Indigenous peoples have the right to redress, by means that can include restitution or, when this is not possible, just, fair and equitable compensation, for the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned or otherwise occupied or used, and which have been confiscated, taken, occupied, used or damaged without their free, prior and informed consent.”

These articles pertain directly to higher education in imperial and settler states in that the research practices of academic knowledge production continue to impede the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous peoples in relation to field research practices, collection of data including that relating to natural environments and human subjects, denial of Indigenous knowledge systems including that which depends upon the land, as well as the continued justification for and formation of social and economic stratification through elite forms of credentialization and capital concentration. Furthermore, higher education institutions in settler

states occupy Indigenous territories and are subject to treaties where these apply. In countries such as Canada, universities are located on Indigenous lands.

Indigenous academics, elders and knowledge keepers are in dialogue with university leadership in many Canadian institutions, but the right to be included or recognized is not the same as the rights of self-determination. I would like to discuss two documents that guide further discussion of this statement. First, in their recently released Red Paper titled *Land Back*, the Yellowhead Institute at Ryerson University in Toronto describes the connections between land and Indigenous knowledge systems in the Canadian context. The report, written by Institute directors Shiri Pasternak and Hayden King, and informed by a network of research collaborators, is divided into five parts that address the conditions that affect Indigenous jurisdiction. These are: the spectrum of consent, denial, recognition, reclamation, and the continuation of life. Among the aspects of the spectrum of consent that are outlined, the Epistemic element “accepts Indigenous knowledge frameworks and languages for understanding relationships to the land. This may include Indigenous science, land management customs, obligations to the land and waters, or recognizing the land as having agency. This knowledge can be embedded in Indigenous law and governance.”

Individualized knowledge and ownership systems, as supported by Western science and the Doctrine of Discovery, are inconsistent with the relational accountability necessary to promote Indigenous rights and resurgence. The *Land Back* report asks the question, “is it the goal simply that Indigenous people make decisions about how to participate in Western social, economic, and political systems? Or must this mean a challenge to those very systems, which have threatened Indigenous existence as nations and as people who live in relation to their own laws?” These questions can also be asked of educational systems at all levels. In relation to doctoral education and the phrase “ecologies of knowledge,” we might ask how academic research programs account for the structural violence of dispossession that may be embedded in faculty hiring practices, student recruitment, workplace climate, curriculum, disciplinary norms and canons, community engagements, and research protocols.

The second document I want to bring into this discussion is the *Red Deal* by the Red Nation, which extends the climate justice proposals of the Green New Deal, with emphasis on Indigenous rights to land and self-determination. The Red Nation, a grassroots coalition, connects land and climate action in what could be described as a movement toward a true

“ecology of knowledge.” They state that “The Red Deal is not a ‘deal’ or ‘bargain’ with the elite and powerful. It’s a deal with the humble people of the earth; a pact that we shall strive for peace and justice and that movements of justice must come from below and to the left. We do not speak truth to the powerful. Our shared truth makes us powerful. And this people’s truth includes those excluded from the realms of power and policy-making.”

The principles of the *Red Deal* are: 1) What creates crisis cannot solve it, 2) Change from below and to the left, 3) Politicians can’t do what only mass movements can do, and 4) From theory to action. While many of the examples in the *Red Deal* draw from the US context, the areas of struggle that they outline pertain to knowledge systems broadly, our globalized economies, and the research practices of our higher education institutions. The Red Nation collective calls upon others to join them in “seek[ing] peace and right relations between all life.”

We need only to listen to our own students to know that it is time for this very necessary redirection. Furthermore, Western science has not been silent on climate change, even as the connections to Indigenous dispossession are not always fully specified. As has been affirmed in many Fridays for the Future rallies this year, millions of youth and their advocates are aware that immediate action is necessary. However, higher education institutions must be willing to confront their addiction to capital to remain relevant in this transformation. Scientists and land defenders have led; the question is who will follow.

At my own institution, a pro-divestment student group named UBC350 organized our September 27th Climate Strike. They advertised the event on social media and by painting a student-maintained campus landmark called the Engineering Cairn that is known for frequent repainting and graffiti as a form of student expression. The UBC350 group painted the time and date of the climate strike, and the phrase, “Climate, racial, migrant, gender, labour, Indigenous Justice.” In less than 12 hours, UBC Building Operations staff had been directed by the university administration to cover the messages with white paint, citing obscenity concerns. For decades, maintenance and monitoring of the Engineering Cairn has been the responsibility of a student group called the Keepers of the Cairn within the Engineering Undergraduate student society. Students noted that administrative intervention in the repainting of the cairn in this manner was “virtually unprecedented.” Not only were the details of the climate strike event whitewashed, so too was the phrase “To change everything we need everyone!” Thankfully, this message of solidarity was anonymously repainted the following morning.

By focusing on public relations, prestige metrics, and revenue generation our universities risk alienating the next generation while putting future generations at risk of further harm by institutional inaction and failure to adapt. While we might like to imagine that we work within nodes of global knowledge exchange, we are instead located within sites of globalized knowledge extraction, with material and ethical consequences.

And yet the role of research and education in collaborative inquiry and development is clear. This month the government of British Columbia introduced legislation to implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples into provincial law, in partnership with the First Nations Leadership Council (BC Assembly of First Nations, First Nations Summit and Union of BC Indian Chiefs). Central to the alignment of provincial law with the UN Declaration is the structural change needed to ensure and support joint-decision making and consent-based decision making between Indigenous nations, industry, and government.

Much of the focus at present is on relationship building between First Nations and BC's heavily resource-dependent economic sectors such as forestry and mining. At the very least, this implementation will strengthen the knowledge and competencies that will be expected from our graduates in fields such as Law, Public Policy, Forestry, Mining Engineering, and Indigenous Studies. It is likely that the skills necessary to fully implement the UN Declaration will extend much more broadly into all areas of the university, and will entail increased attention to anti-racist, decolonizing and anti-colonial pedagogies in all disciplines. Perhaps most importantly, the implementation will likely change the legal and normative context of the relationship between UBC and the Musqueam people.

It is time to ask how the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples will influence the mission of the research university in Canada and elsewhere. Yet, transforming the academy cannot happen solely at the level of pedagogy; governance must also change.

In relating these concepts to the theme of this speaker series, I want to highlight Patel's recommendation when she states, "Perhaps one of the most explicit decolonial moves we can make, in this moment, is to sit still long enough to see clearly what we need to reach beyond.... Without pause, it's difficult to ascertain what structures, what inequitable structures, are enlivened by narratives, even and perhaps especially the progress narratives." (Patel, 2016, p. 88).

The images that have been cycling before you are part of an ongoing photo essay on the subject of campus trees. The presentation of these images in this format and in this context is meant to convey the veiling and distracting aspects of the campus arboretum, where imported vegetation confuses our sensibilities and desires for connection with the non-human world.

Now I want to turn to an expression of what the campus arboretum has replaced through erasure of the natural environment of the campus. This project is called Tree 973, and it is an ongoing photo essay focusing on a single tree at UBC to examine the changing campus site in relation to the surrounding forest. I want to share it with you today as a way to see this landscape of obscured insufficiency.

What we are seeking to understand is the nature of the forest-shaped hole that has been filled with a globalizing research university. At the center of campus, the view of the original ecological system is obscured, both by buildings and planted trees that form the academic arboretum. The insufficiency that we cannot see is the disconnection and potentially irreparable harm we continue to inflict on our own local environment and social structures, as well as the mirroring forest-shaped holes we are creating and connected to in other parts of the world.

Tree 973 is a Douglas Fir recommended for retention in a residential development area known as Wesbrook Place, managed by UBC Properties Trust, situated within unceded Musqueam territory. Wesbrook Place is a university neighbourhood that contains leasehold market-based housing units, faculty/staff rental properties, recreational amenities, and retail space. Revenue from the projects managed by the UBC Properties Trusts is estimated to be \$2 billion Canadian dollars over 20 years, and contributes to an endowment with earnings that are used to support “discretionary strategic priorities,” which include capital projects and research funding. The total land development endowment at UBC currently amounts to over \$800 million.

Tree 973 is the tallest tree on the site, reaching the height of the canopy of the other Douglas Firs in nearby Pacific Spirit Park and the remaining trees in adjacent lots. These trees of similar height had been part of a contiguous forest prior to the site being cleared for campus development. Tree 973 is likely around 100 years old based on its size, belonging to a century of forest regrowth that began after a period of intense timber logging in the 19th century, which slowed after the establishment of the university site in the early 1900s. Now isolated to a small group of trees at the corner of the grazed block, Tree 973 serves as a reference point for the

former forested land, placing the newly constructed condo towers in cultural, ecological, spatial and temporal context.

Tree 973 and the lot on which it stands is also an intimate abstraction in that it is part of the view from my own window, the tree that greets me every morning as the sun rises just past the treetops behind it. Tree 973, in its mix of striking resilience and isolated precarity, represents my hopes and fears of the university of the future.

I will keep my conclusion short because I am interested in what you have to say about these ideas. I firmly believe that it is now time to divest ourselves from academically-justified extraction practices at the level of the individual and at the level of the institution. Looking out to the horizon we can see that our present academic knowledge systems are insufficient for the continuation of life as we have known it. Divesting from extraction is collective in the sense that this type of change is political, re-normative, and collaborative. Divestment from extraction is individual in the sense of a personal dis-mantling of the academic hoods that prevent us from recognizing the vulnerability, erasure, and dehumanization occurring in our own campus spaces and those to which we are tethered globally.

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