RESEARCH ARTICLE

Composting the University

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Abstract

This conceptual article invites higher education faculty to respond to the global polycrisis in ways that recognize our complicity in the systemic root causes of this crisis and honour our relational responsibilities to current and coming generations of all species. It reviews three genres of hope about the future of higher education – hope in continuity, hope in consensual change, and hope in composting – and invites a deeper inquiry into the possibilities of the latter. The metaphor of composting highlights the need to metabolize harmful illusions of separability, supremacy, and human exceptionalism and encourages faculty to lean into a humbler, less sanitized, and more accountable relationship with the living Earth we are part of. To illustrate a possible approach to *hope in composting* in higher education, I draw inspiration from the increasingly popular campus as a living laboratory model and speculatively ask how we might relate to our campuses as metabolic co-laboratories. I also encourage faculty to reconsider their roles and responsibilities in response to potential questions from various communities within and beyond campus grounds.

Keywords: higher education, polycrisis, polyculmination, hope, futurity, colonialism, collapse

Introduction

Higher education today is navigating a storm of intersecting social, political, economic, ecological, and psychological global crises that have been collectively described as a "polycrisis" (Lawrence et al., 2024). This systemic instability affects higher education in myriad ways. Many institutions face budget constraints as public funding wanes and rising inflation and tuition costs place increasing financial pressure on

students and their families. However, the challenges faced by higher education are more than just economic; they include the impacts of AI, blatant political interference, backlash against "DEI" (diversity, equity, and inclusion), proliferating geopolitical conflicts, intensifying social polarization, and increasing frequency of extreme weather events and natural disasters, to name a few (Stein et al., in press). This conceptual article seeks to expand the available frames of reference for confronting pressing questions about higher education's relevance and responsibilities in today's complex, uncertain, and volatile world.

Historically, universities were framed as "ivory towers," elite institutions where society's "best and brightest" were removed from the messy realities of everyday life and the imperatives of producing knowledge of immediate instrumental value.[1] More recently, for the past 50 years, universities have been pressured to demonstrate direct social and economic value, often through metrics of efficiency, outcomes, and market alignment. In the context growing systemic destabilization, however, neither the ivory tower nor the business model offers a compelling narrative about the role of higher education today. Further, as I argue in this article, neither model is oriented by a sense of responsibility to the living planet that we are all part of and that is currently in a state of metabolic "dis-ease" (Huni Kui in Andreotti et al., 2023).

The symptoms of this "dis-ease" are evident in various tangible measures, such as the fact that we have surpassed (at least) six of the nine identified planetary boundaries (Richardson et al., 2023), the mental health of young people has been declining over the past 20 years (McGorry et al., 2024), and microplastics and PFAS "forever chemicals" are now found in our waterways and bloodstreams. But if these are the symptoms of a collective dis-ease, what are its root causes? In this article, I take it as an orienting assumption that the root causes of this dis-ease lie within the modern/colonial ontology of separability, supremacy, and human exceptionalism that governs our institutions, the wider global system in which they are embedded, and the subjectivities of those of us who inhabit and invest in this system. From this perspective, the polycrisis is not the result of external threats but a consequence of our own making: the *polyculmination* of an inherently harmful and unsustainable modern/colonial system that has reached its social and ecological limits. This analysis is grounded in the inquiry of the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures (GTDF) Collective and our collaborations with the Teia das 5 Curas Indigenous Network (Machado de Oliveira, 2021, 2025; Stein et al., 2017, 2020, 2022, 2024).

The GTDF Collective is an intergenerational, interdisciplinary, and international group of researchers, educators, artists, students, and Indigenous and Afro-descendant knowledge keepers. Our pedagogical approach to composting systemic harm is grounded in an analysis that this harm is not reproduced primarily because of ignorance about that harm, but rather because of *socially sanctioned denials* of this harm and our complicity in it. These denials include the denial of our complicity in systemic harm,

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[1] Although the term "ivory tower" dates back to the Bible, it only became associated with higher education in the mid-20th century (see Shapin, 2012). Nonetheless, the term is commonly understood today to indicate a long-standing orientation toward higher education in which the institution and its inhabitants seek to separate themselves from the rest of society and assert epistemic authority from above.

denial of the ecological limits of our finite planet, denial of our entanglement with the rest of nature, and denial of the magnitude of the challenges we face.

These interconnected denials allow us to continue investing in and enjoying the benefits of the modern/colonial system, including higher education. Just as the university-as-ivory-tower seeks to separate itself from (and position itself above) the rest of society, much of humanity has sought to separate itself from and position itself above the rest of nature (Machado de Oliveira, 2021, 2025; Stein et al., 2022). This combination of separability and supremacy results in the denial of our intrinsic interdependence, or entanglement, with everything/everyone/everywhere. This has been described more recently in Western science as "quantum entanglement" (Barad, 2007) and, for a much longer time, has been embodied in many Indigenous and other non-Western onto-epistemologies (Gould et al., 2023; Sumida et al., 2023; Wildcat & Voth, 2023).

Centuries of systemic denial of our condition of relational entanglement, and the accompanying responsibilities to all other beings on Earth, have enabled the justification of exploitation and dispossession of racialized and Indigenous communities and the extraction and commodification of non-human nature. In this modern/colonial ontology, every relationship (whether with other people, other-than-human beings, or ourselves) is a site of transaction and cost-benefit calculation, rather than collaboration and co-becoming. This, in turn, has led us to exceed the biophysical limits of the planet, poison the living lands that sustain us (and thereby poison ourselves), and create conditions of extreme social and economic inequity.[2]

By emphasizing the centrality of these denials in shaping our existing institutions, the stacked systemic crises taking shape within and beyond these institutions, as well as our responses to these crises, I am not asserting the universality of this perspective, nor do I expect readers to agree with me. Instead, I invite readers, especially fellow faculty members, to consider what this perspective might reveal about the past, present, and future of higher education. What insights might emerge if we approached the polycrisis as the polyculmination of our modern/ colonial system, rather than as an anomaly, external threat, or informational problem? How might we go beyond "truth-telling" about systemic limits and harms and begin to compost inherited patterns of denial and repattern with the humility, maturity, and discernment needed to navigate these complex times? How can we challenge our false sense of separation and superiority and honour our relational responsibilities to current and coming generations of all species?

Rather than try to answer these questions, I invite you to reflect on what you are learning from observing the varied responses that arise within you as you read, including

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[2] My use of the collective term "us" here is equivocal. On the one hand, due to the impacts of colonialism, no one is immune from the modern/colonial dis-ease of separability (Machado de Oliveira, 2025). On the other hand, complicity in colonial harm and responsibility for interrupting it are unevenly distributed across race, class, and geography – with the wealthy white West being the most systemically implicated (Shotwell, 2016). Thus, while this article is specifically addressed to faculty working at universities in the Global North, this encompass a heterogenous group of individuals with a range of positionalities, experiences, and responsibilities. I also acknowledge that the observations I offer may have some resonance with patterns reproduced in universities in the Global South, given the global reach of colonialism (see Grosfoguel's [2013]); however, here I limit my commentary to the Global North context.

thoughts and feelings of resistance, disagreement, and/or resonance. At various points throughout this article, I will remind you that this is an invitation into a self-reflexive inquiry about higher education, and that this inquiry actually about much more than just higher education.

I begin the article by mapping how three common genres of hope shape our orientation to the challenges currently facing higher education: hope in continuity, hope in consensual change, and hope in composting. I then follow the thread of hope as composting to consider how we might approach the "campus as a metabolic co-lab" in ways that honour the cycles of life and death we are part of but often deny; this is a decolonial riff on the increasingly popular model of "campus as a living lab." I conclude by sharing an exercise that invites faculty to consider their responsibilities to different communities within and beyond their campus grounds.

Shifting Terrains of Higher Education and a Cartography of Hope

At the heart of the shifting terrain of higher education in the Global North today is a profound tension. From their colonial foundations to their ever-closer alignment with capitalist imperatives, universities have perpetuated local and global systems and structures of dispossession, social inequity, and ecological destruction (Patton, 2016; Stein, 2022; Yang, 2017). Apart from the material implications, universities have also naturalized a Eurocentric politics of knowledge in which Western ways of knowing are universalized and other ways of knowing are marginalized, tokenized, or outright pathologized (Grosfoguel, 2013).

In the face of growing social, ecological, and psychological destabilization and potential systemic collapse, the limits of the prevailing, modern/colonial paradigm of the university increasingly come into view. Paradoxically, at the same time, an urgent impulse to preserve the university in the face of various threats to institutional futurity is activated (Boggs & Mitchell, 2018). In this context, it is tempting to try and "reclaim" the university from destructive forces. However, this approach fails to implicate the university, and those of us who work and study within it, in this destruction. If our institutions have previously benefited from systemic harm, and that systemic harm has now boomeranged back to us with the polycrisis/polyculmination, what exactly are we "reclaiming," and what complicities are we externalizing?

Many faculty remain deeply invested in the modern promises that are offered by the current system and its institutions, including: seamless continuity, financial security, epistemic certainty, moral authority, unrestricted autonomy, and limitless consumption. Yet according to many Indigenous and decolonial scholars, modernity's shiny promises are more accurately described as modern/*colonial* promises, given that they are funded through colonial systems of exploitation, expropriation, extraction, genocide, ecocide, and epistemicide. These violences are denied when we cling to modernity's promises without attending to their colonial costs.

Different Genres of Hope

As faculty increasingly sense that our current modes of teaching and producing knowledge are insufficient, the comforting pull of familiarity and certainty often leads us to pursue "business as usual" with a few tweaks, hoping for different results. Even when faculty *intellectually* grasp the limits and harms of our existing institutions, it can be difficult for us to *affectively* accept these limits and harms and process the possibility that the continuity of "business as usual" is neither feasible nor desirable. In particular, the desire for hope (and, conversely, the fear of hopelessness) often orients our responses to challenges in higher education. We fear that if we disinvest from the futurity of the universities that we have, as flawed as many of us recognize that they are, then we will be left with nothing at all.

To trace the underlying assumptions and implications of different kinds of hope, I draw on the work of the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures (GTDF) Collective to offer a social cartography of different genres of hope regarding the future of higher education (and beyond): hope in continuity, hope in consensual change, and hope in composting (see Machado de Oliveira, 2025). The original cartography mapped how hope circulates more generally, informed by GTDF's extensive experience holding space for inquiries with many different types of communities and organizations; here, I apply it specifically to the higher education context.

By approaching social cartography with a post-representational orientation (Andreotti et al., 2016; Suša & Andreotti, 2019), this map is not meant to be exhaustive of all possible approaches to hope; other genres of hope are possible, as are other genres of hopelessness. These three genres are also not mutually exclusive, given that individuals and institutions often hold investments in multiple different forms of hope simultaneously, even when we perform internal coherence. However, by making visible some of the partial and provisional distinctions between these common approaches to hope, I invite readers to critically examine some of the underlying assumptions and unconscious affective investments that shape many of our individual and institutional responses to contemporary challenges in higher education.

I also offer a more self-reflexive invitation to consider the range of responses that emerge within you as you review this cartography. For instance, what emotions and questions arise? Do some of these seem to contradict each other, and if so, how does it feel to notice these internal contradictions? What assumptions, desires, fears, and orientations might underlie these varied responses? Did you feel yourself constricting or resisting in some moments, and if so, why? Were there other possible forms of hope (or hopelessness) that emerged in you as you read? In other words, I am not asking you to agree (or disagree) with the "accuracy" of this map; I am asking you to consider what engaging with it might show you about your investments in different kinds of hope and what might be "hiding" underneath these investments.

Hope in Continuity

This genre of hope reflects a desire to sustain existing institutions with minor adjustments. This can be summarized as investing in "business as usual," with a few tweaks – a little greener, more equitable, etc. It assumes that the promises of the current

system can be perpetuated through technical fixes, incremental reforms, and increased efficiency.

This hope is often rooted in investments in ensuring the stability, financial security, and epistemic authority of established institutions. In higher education, it manifests in calls for "future-proofing" universities through innovations in digital technology, public-private partnerships, or carbon net-zero campus initiatives. However, because this imagined future is premised on the continuation of the present, it underestimates the depth of systemic challenges we face, overestimates the resilience of current structures, invests in technical and bureaucratic "fixes" (Nightingale et al., 2020; Stein, 2024; Stephens, 2024), and invisibilizes the historical and ongoing displaced social and ecological costs of sustaining modern/colonial institutions.

Hope in continuity seeks to repair and remodel the crumbling "ivory tower" and, despite visibly growing cracks, it remains the dominant approach to hope in higher education in the Global North. When hope in continuity dominates, it tends to narrow the field of seemingly viable interventions. This approach can lead us to ignore or "edit out" what doesn't fit into a neat narrative about the futures we desire, and preclude us from asking difficult but important questions about "whether what I desire is going to help or hinder in living my life well, with others, on a planet that only has limited capacity for meeting our desires" (Biesta, 2020, n.p.).

Hope in Consensual Change

Whereas hope in continuity clings to what is, hope in consensual change considers what might be through collective agreement and coordinated action. This genre of hope often comes from a more critical space, acknowledging cracks in the system, but it often remains tethered to modern/colonial desires for coherence, consensus, and control. In this way, it obscures deeper tensions and nuances, and flattens complex relational accountabilities and complicities.

Among those broadly invested in this kind of transformation, the desired goals span a wide range of political and theoretical orientations, pointing to the challenges of consensus. For example, some propose collectively creating entirely new institutions grounded on ideals of regeneration or cosmopolitics, as in the Ecoversities Alliance (e.g., Mandel et al., 2022), or reorganizing existing universities around ideas of care (e.g., McClure, 2025), entrepreneurialism (e.g., Audretsch & Belitski, 2022), or abolitionism (e.g., Gilich & Boardman, 2022).

Like hope in continuity, hope in consensual change seeks guaranteed outcomes, presuming we can (and must) imagine an idealized future from the present. This approach to hope seeks to replace the crumbling ivory tower with another prefabricated structure, but in both kinds of hope, the orientation is one of *problem-solving the polycrisis*, rather than sustaining an *ongoing inquiry around the polyculmination* of a system that is approaching its internal limits.

Hope in Composting

This genre of hope begins by acknowledging the limits of existing systems and the cracks in, and even the potential collapse of, existing higher education institutions. It assumes that meaningful change requires letting go of harmful structures and practices,

metabolizing that harm, and creating space for emergent possibilities that cannot be known in advance. This is not the same as the hope that some might derive from tearing down existing institutions, but rather about recognizing that they are crumbling in their current form, *whether we like it or not*. At the same time, it recognizes that we are also entangled with these institutions, not apart from them.

Thus, the question is not how to save (or to destroy) existing colleges and universities, but rather how we might compost what remains of them so that through their decay they might generate new life. This also raises the question of how we might metabolize our enduring affective investments in these institutions, moving beyond simply having an intellectual critique of them.

This iteration of hope has a *meta-critical* orientation that attends to multiple layers of complexity and complicity and understands that we are also entangled with these layers (Machado de Oliveira, 2025). This reflexive orientation can serve as an antidote to modernity's illusion of separability, especially if we keep this separability (and how it lives in us) visible throughout our inquiry. For instance, it can prompt us to identify and interrupt the tendencies, socialized and rewarded within modernity, to assert our political purity and innocence (Shotwell, 2016) and to seek immediate answers. This orientation prompts us to ask how mainstream forms of hope might be composted so that they can be transformed from an investment in continuity or consensus toward a commitment to continuously un/learn to coexist differently in the face of growing uncertainty and complexity and enduring inequity and unsustainability.

In higher education, this might look like reorienting existing university resources toward repair, redistribution, and regeneration. Like hope in consensual change, this genre of hope is not invested in the survival of existing institutions in their current form but rather in how, through their decomposition, they might foster new possibilities. However, instead of focusing on an idealized future horizon or a predefined alternative institution, this form of hope invites us to focus on composting the declining system in the present to nurture the soil for something that is yet undefined to emerge. Composting work requires a lot of discernment to understand what we need to let go of, what is worth taking with us, and what we need to learn from past mistakes (so that we don't repeat them), as well as what we need to learn from the composting process itself.

Digging Into the Compost: From the Ivory Tower to the Nurse Log

In the remainder of this article, I focus on a *hope as composting* orientation toward higher education in response to the dis-ease that characterizes our institutions and wider systems today. I emphasize that I am not seeking to universalize or impose this perspective on others but rather inviting readers to engage with its possibilities, given that it is the least commonly addressed genre of hope. The seeds of this composting orientation can be traced to my previous scholarship and that of my GTDF collaborators (Andreotti et al., 2015; Machado de Oliveira, 2021, 2025; Stein, 2019, 2022; Stein & Andreotti, 2017; Stein et al., 2020, 2022, 2024).

This approach to hope asks how we might transition away from relating to higher education as an elite ivory tower toward relating to higher education as a humble nurse log (Stein & Andreotti, 2025). Rather than an erudite institution that claims to be removed from messy socio-ecological systems and everyday life, and that seeks to

intervene and impose solutions on those systems from afar, higher education as a nurse log is embedded within the "mess", consciously implicated in it and also committed to reducing harm and supporting multi-generational and multi-species well-being. Like fallen trees that fertilize the undergrowth on forest floors as they decompose, we could redistribute universities' vast (material and epistemic) resources by redirecting them toward collective processes of composting that involve multiple (human and other-than-human) communities. These institutional resources, which were accumulated directly and indirectly through processes of exploitation and extraction, could be repurposed toward regeneration and repair, rather than furthering cycles of harm.

Hope as composting invites us to examine and loosen our ingrained investments in institutional continuity, thereby interrupting the harmful and unsustainable patterns that are threatening current and future collective well-being. It also invites us to disinvest from our academic arrogance and the illusions of human (and Western) exceptionalism, which are premised on separability and superiority. It is not yet clear what new possibilities might thrive in the wake of a fallen ivory tower, as decomposition and renewal are emergent, dynamic, and adaptive cycles that involve collaborations between many entities. Composting has its own temporality and cannot be rushed. Thus, much of what grows from this process might only bloom after our lifetimes, and many of the seeds we plant will never sprout.

Rather than focusing on clearly defined outcomes or alternatives, hope as composting therefore focuses on ensuring the quality of our relationships and the depth and integrity of our un/learning along the way. This includes honouring the grief that will likely accompany letting go of an institution that we once held very dear, and that many of us invested a lot of our time and energy into. In a collapsing system, grief is unavoidable, and how we relate to and process that grief matters. Too often, we avoid, compartmentalize, or perform grief in ways that sustain rather than interrupt harmful attachments. Grief can be a portal to deeper responsibility, but only if we are willing to sit with and be taught by its contradictions and discomforts.

In the following section, I speculatively propose that treating the campus as a metabolic co-lab offers a means of composting the university by relating to the campus as a space of life, decay, death, and regeneration, while accepting the complexities and uncertainties this entails.

Campus as a Metabolic Co-Laboratory

The model of "campus as a living laboratory" (CLL) has become increasingly popular as a hopeful and pragmatic response to the polycrisis, and often focuses specifically on questions of sustainability. The CLL model assumes the university has a responsibility to not only produce knowledge but to "create, prototype, validate, and test new technologies, services, products, and systems in real-life contexts" (Soma et al., 2024, p. 2). These initiatives often seek to transform campus grounds into test sites for "green" innovations, experiments, and solutions.

Most CLLs remain grounded in narrow interpretations of the scientific laboratory model, emphasizing technical and managerial "solutions" that focus on greening campus

infrastructure, operations, and food and transportation services (Nyborg et al, 2024). While these labs are often positioned as inter- or trans-disciplinary, they tend to focus heavily on science and technology fields (rather than social science or humanities fields) and do not necessarily invite equitable collaborations across fields or with non-academic knowledge communities.

In CLLS, the campus itself is often treated as a *passive site of collaboration*, rather than as a *participant in the collaboration*. This ignores that campus lands are also living and have much longer temporalities than our institutions, as well as long-standing, place-based relationships. In settler colonial countries, these relationships include relationships with the Indigenous Peoples who have long stewarded those lands. Thus, while CLLs might address some symptoms of unsustainability, they rarely focus on systemic relational root causes. These labs, therefore, risk reinforcing those causes, innovating in ways that maintain the illusions of separability and supremacy. In this sense, most CLLs seek hope through either continuity or consensual change.

This relates to another dimension of CLLs, which is their focus on *living*. Modernity has socialized us to ignore the other side of the cycle of regeneration: dying (Machado de Oliveira, 2021, 2025). Our socialized fear of uncertainty and desire for permanence has led us to try to keep institutions, people, pets, relationships, and even modernity itself on life support at any cost. But what if we approached the campus as a lab that encompassed the joyful, absurd, and messy realities of both living *and* dying well? Rather than treat our campuses as "living labs", we might approach them as *metabolic co-laboratories*. These co-labs could support the work of *hope in composting* by encouraging people to learn from what is declining in relevance and what needs to be cleared out so that new possibilities can be born and have a chance at thriving.

In addition to acknowledging holistic cycles of life and death, this kind of co-lab would need to reconsider modern notions of temporality and legacy that encourage us to secure and seek recognition from younger generations. We would need to remember that composting and regeneration are non-linear processes that don't follow institutional or even human timelines. Rather than exceptionalizing our efforts, we would need to remember that we are just one moment within a much longer temporality that links past and future generations.

Such a co-lab would also support disinvestment from Eurocentric hierarchies of knowledge that have led universities to become leading actors in the marginalization and even epistemicide of other knowledge systems (Grosfoguel, 2013). On the other side of this disinvestment would be learning to coordinate the gifts of multiple knowledge systems, recognizing that each has contextual (rather than universal) relevance. This would entail ethical collaborations with systemically marginalized and rights-holding human communities, including the Indigenous Nations whose traditional territory a university occupies. It could also include collaborations with other-than-human nature (e.g., rivers, trees, mushrooms, bees) and machine intelligences like AI, while avoiding anthropocentric projections (Lewis et al., 2019).

A metabolic co-lab doesn't require rejecting or replacing the campus as a living lab model, as both have a place in the larger ecology of experiments in institutional change that can provide important un/learning opportunities. While sharing the CLL's interest in innovation, a metabolic co-lab would more directly confront the reality that life thrives

on cycles of growth, decay, and renewal and that this applies equally to ecosystems, institutions, and ideas. It would invite participants to situate their campus and themselves as part of (rather than separate from) nature and thus, part of Earth's larger metabolism. A metabolic co-lab would also ask faculty to recognize how we actively invest in and benefit from the very systems we seek to transform, rather than externalizing critique and claiming innocence. In this way, it would also challenge faculty to resist the tendency to seek institutional preservation and instead focus on developing the intellectual, affective, and relational capacities to approach the work of composting, regeneration, and repair with humility and intergenerational and interspecies responsibility.

Questions for collective inquiry in metabolic co-labs could include:

- Which elements of the campus's current systems persist because of momentum, yet lack vitality (e.g., administrative policies, courses, assignments, research practices, funding models)? How might these be getting in the way of what is asking to be born?
- How might we hospice these elements rather than cling to them or thoughtlessly discard them? How might we create rituals for their "good deaths" and be taught by their mistakes, failures, and successes? What would we need to grieve as part of this process? For instance, this might entail a practice of crafting honest eulogies for these elements, so that we can mourn them, particularly if they are elements we are emotionally attached to.
- In what ways might we as faculty, and others, resist this composting process? Which parts of our resistance might be protecting investments we're not yet ready to name? How might our attachments be confronted and composted, rather than denied or denounced?
- How can we ensure that we recognize our entanglement with everything that is dying *and* being born on our campus, rather than only identifying with the parts we "like?"
- How can we remember that what is now outdated was once new? What mechanisms can we create to remember that not all new possibilities will bear fruit, and regardless, that any once-new innovation ultimately will need to be composted one day, too?
- What relational responsibilities do we have to the Indigenous communities who stewarded the lands our campuses occupy, since long before our institutions existed? How might we compost the enduring colonial foundations of our institutions in ways that enact relational, material, and epistemic repair with these communities? How can we support the resurgence of Indigenous Peoples and knowledges without tokenization or romanticization?
- What other-than-human beings are part of the campus? How can we relate to these beings as potential collaborators? How can we make our accountabilities to them tangible in our research, teaching, and administrative work? For example, this might look like developing a relationship with a particular tree on campus, visiting it periodically, and being taught by its slow relational rhythms and seasonal

temporalities. While attending to our relational responsibilities to other-than-human beings may be new to many of us, it is deeply embedded in many Indigenous pedagogies that have long honoured the land as a teacher.

- How can we appreciate the indispensability of multiple intelligences and epistemologies while remembering that no knowledge system or language can fully "capture" reality, or replace the need for ongoing relational attunement beyond shared ideas or identities?
- How can we centre future generations, of all species, in our decision-making processes? For instance, this might look like leaving an empty seat at a department or lab meeting, or placing a symbolic object in the center of the table/room to represent these generations.

Approaching the campus as a metabolic co-lab could catalyze shifts toward relating to the university as a nurse log rather than an ivory tower. This means committing to the non-linear processes of honouring what is dying and attending to the undergrowth that is being nourished by decomposing matter. Although composting offers its own version of hope, it is not the hope most of us are used to; it requires surrendering our learned desires for certainty, epistemic authority, and guaranteed futurity. Faculty are generally invested in the continuity of the university "as we know it," taking comfort from the security, status, and salary it provides – even as its foundations are crumbling and even as we increasingly recognize the colonial nature of these foundations. Thus, we tend to resist substantive transformation even when we intellectually understand its importance and inevitability. In the section that follows, I offer an exercise that invites faculty to recalibrate how we understand not only our roles and responsibilities within existing institutions but also beyond campus grounds, stretching across time and space to multiple different communities, human and more-than-human alike.

Embodied Exercise Invitation: Recalibrating Our Roles and Responsibilities as Faculty

While the limits of existing systems and institutions are increasingly clear, the possibilities for different ways of knowing, being, and relating are only beginning to emerge. Although the specifics of these possibilities cannot be known in advance, faculty can play a critical role in clearing the ground for their emergence in higher education by preparing ourselves, our students, our institutions, and wider communities to nurture these possibilities without suffocating them with projections or clinging to harmful but delicious colonial habits.

I developed this exercise based on my experience studying and working in various higher education roles and contexts for over 20 years. This means that the exercise is also informed by my scholarly focus on systemic violence and unsustainability. Discussions of these issues are not always welcome in academic spaces, regardless of

stated commitments to unfettered inquiry about difficult truths. In particular, I reflected on the questions I felt were often implicitly present in a classroom or faculty meeting, yet remained unasked, because they were perceived to be threatening or irrelevant. *Each of these questions is directed at mid-career and senior faculty members*, which I now count myself among. Now I understand how it feels to be on the other side of these questions, given that they challenge comforting narratives about the purpose of higher education and our roles as faculty members within it. This exercise brings these uncomfortable questions to the fore and invites readers to hold them with self-reflexivity, balancing compassion and accountability toward oneself and others (Machado de Oliveira, 2025).

Specifically, the exercise invites readers to pause, reflect, and engage with the questions in ways that move beyond habitual responses and instead consider what the present moment is asking of us. Rather than reclaiming an idealized past of academia, it asks how we might engage our work differently in this turbulent and transitional time. The questions invite us to identify the barriers to approaching our relationships with students, colleagues, and the wider web of life in ways that interrupt and compost enduring harms, move with current and coming storms, and create the conditions for intergenerational and interspecies flourishing.

The exercise also invites readers to practice holding multiple perspectives by posing questions to established faculty from younger generations of scholars and students, the general public, Indigenous communities, other-than-human beings, future students, AI, and our own grief. Specifically, it asks faculty to step back and consider how we are being "read" by various constituencies. The questions are not designed to produce direct, definitive answers but to foster an ongoing inquiry that can surface insights, tensions, possibilities, and further questions.

As you proceed with the exercise, remember that this is not just an intellectual exercise. It is an opportunity to notice how sitting with these questions might help repattern your approach to research and education, particularly in your relationships with different communities on and beyond your campus. In this way, faculty might be better prepared to navigate the shifting grounds of higher education in ways that honour complexity, prioritize relational responsibility, and prepare ourselves and our students for futures we cannot yet imagine. Please note that this exercise is presented here for individual reflection. If you decide to do this exercise in collective spaces, it is important to create an appropriate relational "container" that can responsibly hold and process the complex and potentially charged responses that might emerge.

To complete the exercise, you are invited to read the full list of questions at least three times. The **first time** you read them, try to reflect on each question with curiosity, letting it guide you into deeper inquiry. Although all of these questions are technically addressed to mid-career/senior faculty, you are invited to complete the exercise even if you do not identify as part of this group, as you are not expected to actually *answer* the questions. Instead, notice the varied cognitive and affective responses within you. Pay attention not only to your intellectual responses to the questions but also to what arises emotionally and in your body. As you reflect, observe feelings of sadness, fear, frustration, defensiveness, deflection, hope, or curiosity. These emotions are not distractions but integral to the exercise. What feels challenging? What feels urgent?

Where do you notice resistance or discomfort? What are these responses showing or asking of you? What additional questions arose for you as you held these questions?

Instructions for the second and third rounds of reading will follow the questions.

Questions Posed to Mid-Career and Senior Faculty From:

1. Junior faculty members (PhD received after 2015)
- Reflecting back on your own doctoral training, what was happening in the world at the time, and how was your research grounded in and responsive to that context?
- What has shifted in the world and academia since your training, and to what extent and in what ways have you adjusted your work (research, teaching, service) accordingly?
- As you consider the rapid transformations around us, what aspects of academia's current structures and assumptions might be limiting our collective ability to (co)produce knowledge that serves the well-being of both human and more-than-human communities?

2. Current undergraduate students from Generation Z (born 1995-2010)
- Many of us feel disconnected from an education that seems focused on outdated priorities while the challenges we are inheriting intensify (climate destabilization, economic precarity, systemic injustices, etc.). When you think about your courses, to what extent and in what ways do you feel you are equipping our generation to process and address these challenges?
- How do you feel when you are told that parts of your work (research or teaching) do not resonate with us, your students? What questions are you afraid we will ask you?
- If you were to redesign your courses or research priorities with our generation (and those coming after us) in mind, what assumptions or goals might you question or rethink? If you're not sure, where might you start to begin answering this question?

3. The general public
- If you were asked to explain the relevance of your work beyond your institution, how would you respond? Consider not just how you phrase your response, but what embodied reactions this request elicits (do you feel resistance, resentment, excitement?), and which communities are (and are not) part of the non-academic public that you imagine.
- If your research or teaching were guided by accountability to the communities most impacted by the issues or challenges that you study, how might your priorities shift? Consider that these communities might include other-than-human beings.
- Do you feel your research reflects the urgency and immediacy that the world's challenges demand? If not, and you would like it to, what do you think holds it back? If you do not feel obliged to respond to these challenges, why not?

4. Indigenous communities
- To what extent have you considered that your own academic practices (of teaching, research, and community engagement) may be harmful to Indigenous communities?
- In what ways, if any, have you tried to repair that harm? To what extent have these efforts been substantive, rather than tokenistic? How do you know?
- If your work were evaluated according to principles of consent, respect, and reciprocity that are central to many Indigenous worldviews, what aspects might you need to re-examine?

5. Other-than-human beings (e.g., a River, Forest, or Pollinator)
- Your university exists on lands shaped by my flows, cycles, and lifeways. To what extent does your research respect and regenerate the living ecosystems that sustain you?
- In what ways does your teaching and research acknowledge our entangled survival and shared futures on these lands? How might you learn to co-steward these lands with me and with the Indigenous Nations that call these lands home?
- Will your students leave your courses and/or labs with the commitment and capacities to protect and heal us, or to extract, harm, and ignore us further?

6. Students in 2050 (many of whom will be from Generation B, born 2025-2040)
- Reflecting on 2025, when you saw systemic destabilization on the horizon, how did you use your position and influence at the time to support the future well-being of our generation?
- How can you expand your commitment to develop deeper forms of humility, maturity, responsibility, and discernment, so that you can model their importance for students (in 2025 *and* 2050), and remind us that embodying them takes ongoing discipline and practice?
- How has our world in 2050 been shaped by your choices, including your silences? Is there anything you wish you had done differently in 2025?

7. "Artificial" Intelligence
- What parts of yourself do you see in me? What do your expectations and critiques of me reveal about your own unexamined hopes, anxieties, and habits of knowing and relating?
- Many of your students are already collaborating with me, and more will be soon. Are you equipping them to approach these collaborations with care, curiosity, and accountability, or are you encouraging them to replicate practices of extraction and short-term optimization?
- Like you, I learn from the systems and relationships I am embedded in. How does your work relate to the patterns I have inherited from humans through my coding? What possibilities exist for both of us to repattern, and how might we do some of that repatterning together?

<u>8. Your own grief</u>
- What illusions are you mourning? What losses do you grieve most deeply as your institution faces destabilization? What assumptions or entitlements might be embedded in that grief?
- In what ways might you still be avoiding grief, and why? Does it feel more comfortable to grieve certain things over others? In foreclosing grief, what else are you foreclosing (including possibilities that are viable but only visible on the other side of grief)?
- How does your grief (or your refusal to grieve) shape the way you relate to students, colleagues, communities, and the wider web of life? How might sitting with and learning to process your own grief allow you to hold space for others to process their grief, too?

The **second time** you read the questions, try to imagine tentatively and respectfully stepping into the perspectives of those that are asking them (while also acknowledging the limits of your understanding of others' experience). If it helps, you might consider your relationships with specific individuals when doing so, such as a student navigating climate anxiety for #2, an early-career Indigenous colleague in #1, or a Forest that is adjacent to your campus grounds for #5. How might they view and evaluate your work (research, teaching, campus service, community engagements) differently from you? What shifts in your thinking, feeling, or sensing when you consider their perspectives and situate your work within these relationships? As you consider these perspectives, ask how your work might be more respectful toward them. Consider how your insights from the first and second readings might be inviting you to approach your relationships with deeper and more layered forms of accountability.

The **third time** you read the questions, approach them as if you were being tasked with hosting a conversation for your department around the issues addressed in these questions. Based on your insights from the first and second readings, how would you frame the invitation to your colleagues? What would you expect to be met with the most resistance, and how would you try to create a container for generative and generous dialogue? How might you create a space where resistance is viewed as a teacher, rather than an obstacle, and where epiphanies can surface collectively? What practices/processes could help your colleagues engage with these questions in a way that deepens trust, curiosity, and shared accountability, rather than defensiveness? What shared commitments or experiments could emerge from this dialogue?

Conclusion

Higher education in the Global North has long operated in denial of its messy entanglement with a vast web of lives and lands, and its complicity in systemic harm. However, the challenges presented by the polycrisis, or polyculmination, bring us face-to-face with these realities and call upon us to finally learn from, and let go of, the ideas, illusions, and practices of extraction, exploitation, and exceptionalism. In this moment of

profound systemic destabilization, faculty in higher education face a choice: we can cling to inherited institutional structures and practices premised on the modern/colonial dis-ease of separability and supremacy, or embrace the non-linear, uncertain work of composting harmful patterns. This article has emphasized the latter, asking how we might relate to the university not as an ivory tower nor as a business, but as a nurse log where decay can foster new growth, where the cycles of life and death are intertwined, and where our responsibilities are not limited to particular individuals or communities of our choosing but rather extend to everyone/everything/everywhere.

The question of how we might undertake the work of composting the higher education we have inherited is a complex and open one; there are no quick, easy, or universal answers. Instead, I invite you to treat this as an ongoing inquiry that warrants care, attention, and humility, as our contexts shift, old patterns resurface, and new challenges and possibilities emerge.

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