

Critical Hope Towards Re-envisioning the University Now

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We live in a neoliberal culture driven by competition and profit, and the neoliberal university is part of this overarching culture. [*Another University, Now*](#), the Canadian Association of Cultural Studies' (CACS) most recent bi-annual conference, which took place in October of 2022, took up the question of the possibility of building a different kind of university in the immediate present, as the title suggests. The scholarship discussed over the span of three days at the conference varied from hopeful to wary of the feasibility of creating a decolonized, liberatory university. I found myself siding with hopefulness, in part because of my personal experience with cultural studies. With a background in front line social work, in 2021, I enrolled in the Cultural Studies MA program at the University of Winnipeg and was captivated by the field's interdisciplinarity and commitment to challenging structural oppressions such as white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism.

Almost a year later, attending *Another University, Now* as a Research Assistant and recent graduate, I wondered, how do we grapple with our ongoing relationship to the university, a place where exciting opportunities and systemic barriers co-exist? The concept of “critical hope” helps make sense of having simultaneous yet contradictory emotions and experiences, such as passion and apprehension, in this context. What is critical hope and how is it relevant to cultural studies? Critical hope is defined as a conceptual framework that a) is rooted in critical theory and pedagogy and b) embraces the tension between idealism and cynicism (Freire). In his article “The Terrible Gift: Museums and the Possibility of Hope Without Consolation,” late communications and critical pedagogy scholar Roger Simon builds on this framework, calling

for a departure from the notion of hope as consolatory to a notion of hope as transformative, on both personal and collective levels. He considers the demanding presence of difficult histories in our lives, including those we did not “cause,” *per se*, but are responsible for remembering in the ways in which we live out the present and imagine the future. Critical hope, in this way, commits us to continuously acknowledge and challenge systemic oppression and injustice.

The conference roundtable on the [#NoIHRA](#) campaign in Canadian universities stood out as an example of a critically hopeful discussion about the successes and challenges of pro-Palestine activism on Canadian campuses. #NoIHRA is an international campaign that was initially launched by Independent Jewish Voices Canada (IJV) as a response to the widespread implementation of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Working Definition of Antisemitism (IHRA WDA) by governments in 2016. The IHRA WDA is criticized by scholars, activists, Jewish communities, and Palestinians around the world for the ways in which it conflates criticism of the State of Israel with antisemitism. The definition poses a serious threat to academic freedom and undermines intersectional, anti-racist and decolonial initiatives across educational institutions. If adopted by governments and universities, roundtable participants argued, there would be consequences for scholarship in Canada, including research funding cuts, outside political influence, and censorship of critiques of human rights abuses in settler colonial societies.

The roundtable brought together representatives from different organizations contributing to this campaign. Panelists spoke about significant moments, challenges, and strategies from their organizing experiences in universities against the chilling effects of the IHRA definition of antisemitism. The discussion also offered a glance at the overwhelming success of the 2020 campaign in Canadian educational institutions, evident in the fact that the Canadian Association

of University Teachers (CAUT) “unanimously backed a [resolution](#) to oppose the adoption of the IHRA WDA at Canadian universities and colleges.” Panelists reflected on “aha” moments and the paths that they have taken, which led to the solidarity work that they engage in every day. A rather common thread among the panelists’ reflections was that their own painful experiences with loss connected them more deeply with their purpose as pro-Palestine activists. Some panelists also shared that having direct contact with the Israeli army and seeing first-hand how Palestinians were getting through their day-to-day lives entirely shifted their perspective from distance to solidarity and a commitment to action for Palestinian liberation. Another perspective that was highlighted was the intersection of Islamophobia studies and pro-Palestine activism. The insights discussed at the roundtable were rooted in critical hope for the ways in which they acknowledged and held space for the complex challenges that come with engaging in pro-Palestine solidarity work and confronting settler colonialism. The panelists’ sense of commitment, care, urgency, and responsibility was reflective of Simon’s theorizing of transformative hope.

Another University, Now was proof that cultural studies offers a critically hopeful space even within the current university to critique settler colonialism, center interdisciplinarity, and challenge fixed neoliberal notions of student and faculty performance and engagement. Scholarship presented at the conference ranged from numerous fields including Black Studies, visual arts, women’s and gender studies, social work practice and community organizing, Indigenous Studies, critical mental health and disability studies, Critical Race and postcolonial theory, Asian and Diaspora Studies, public and cultural memory, and communication and media studies. This interdisciplinarity created an environment for intersectional discussions about what it might mean to permanently and immediately part ways with the neoliberal university.

The concept of creating “a slow university,” as unpacked by Dr. Jeremy Hunsinger (Communication Studies, Wilfrid Laurier University) in the panel on “Reimagining the University,” particularly struck me as a decolonial alternative to the neoliberal university. This call for a collective shift towards a slow university decentres/undermines the neoliberal emphasis and insistence on speed and efficiency, because it centers solidarity and compassion as a guiding principle for student and faculty engagement. Cultivating practices that make way for a slow university demands that students, faculty, and staff consistently work together as they show up with genuine care and concern for each other's wellbeing. Reflecting on Simon's concept of past injustices as terrible gifts, what terrible gift(s), then, has the neoliberal university left us with, and how can cultural studies inspire us to remain critically hopeful that another kind of university is possible and worth fighting for, now? *Another University, Now* was an articulation of what means to live, connect, learn, and teach in the present with a sense of imminent responsibility to confront oppression in its various forms and create a liberatory future for all.

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