

## CT/d Dialogue 2: Enabling Infrastructures

March 7, 2023, GIDEST Lab, The New School

**Vanessa Andreotti**, Incoming Dean of the Faculty of Education, University of Victoria; co-founder, Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Arts/Research Collective, author of *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism*

**Bedelia Richards**, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Richmond; founder & CEO, RaceTalk LLC

**K. Wayne Yang**, Professor of Ethnic Studies and Provost of John Muir College, UC San Diego

**Melanie Hart** (moderator), Senior Vice President for Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice and Chief Diversity Officer, The New School

**Vanessa Andreotti:** Thank you so much for inviting me to the space, and thank you for making it possible for me to be there, too. Unfortunately, I cannot travel at the moment, and I would have wanted to be in person. So thank you for creating a space. I'm speaking from Victoria, which is located on the ancestral traditional and unceded territory of the hən̓q̓əmi̓n̓əḥ̓ speaking people. As a response to this invitation to contribute something or to put some provocation on the table, what I can say is that I've been working with a collective focusing, on the one hand, on the historical systemic and ongoing violence of modernity: the fact that our modern ways of living depend and were created by exploitation; and, on the other, the fact that social-ecological collapse is around the corner. Now, when we look at the normalization, the naturalization, of colonialism and of Western white cultural supremacy in institutions, my research collective starts with a practice of *7 steps back and 7 steps forward*. And that's the way that I would like to start off with today. I'm just going to show and go through the seven steps very quickly.

The first step back is a step back from your self-image: What are your real investments, fears, hopes and intentions and where do they come from? What emotions, insecurities, unexamined desires or unprocessed traumas could be driving your decision-making? What emotional states are you actively avoiding and at what cost? What does your ego feel entitled and justified to do? To what extent do these entitlements and justifications limit your capacity to face and address the challenges at hand?

The second step back is a step back from your generational cohort to ask if other generations can be interpreting and experiencing the challenges in reality itself differently: How are the associated challenges perceived and experienced by other generations? How are different generations interpreting reality differently, experiencing it differently, and expecting different things from it and how come? How fast are these changes happening? What is your generation being called out on? To what extent are the interests of incoming generations represented in your usual problem-posing, problem-solving, coordination, and accountability approaches?

The third step back is a step back from the universalization of your social/cultural/economic parameters of normality: What does the privilege you carry prevent you from seeing and experiencing? How is your privilege also a loss? What are you projecting as true, real, normal and desirable for everyone and how does that reflect your own background? How can these projections become harmful to others and/or limit possibilities for relationship building and/or coordination? Who could refuse to work with you on legitimate grounds?

Then the fourth one is the step back from your immediate context and time: How do the challenges in your immediate context reflect wider patterns of change in society across different timescales? What historical, systemic, and/or structural forces are at work? What is your perspective of the larger picture? What are the boundaries of this perspective (how is it limited)?

Step five is a step back from familiar patterns of relationship-building and problem-solving that you have been socialized into: To what extent has your approach to the problem been conditioned and limited by the culture it emerged from? What alternative ways of seeing, doing, relating, and being are already viable, but are currently unimaginable to you and those around you? What are you missing out on? Who/what are you accountable to and how come? What accountabilities are you denying, rejecting and/or neglecting? What are you indifferent to and how come?

Since to step back is to step back from the familiar patterns of relationship building and problem solving that we have been socialized into, our approach says that there is a problem with our problem-posing and problem-solving, and our coordination and accountability strategies. And that it needs to be expanded—not the problems but the possibilities. So, the sixth step back is a step back from the naturalization and normalization of elevating humanity above the rest of nature. So this one asks questions about what if we were accountable to other entities like the land, the earth itself as having legal personhood, and also the framing of rights of nature, with a caveat that the attribution of rights still needs the state to dispense these rights. So it's not really a sustainable frame, but it's a useful frame nevertheless.

In the last step back, the seventh step, it's the step back from the impulse to find quick fixes in order to expand our capacity not to be immobilized by uncertainty, complicity, and complexity: In what ways is your approach to the problem part of the problem? To what extent are you being driven by desires for innocence, benevolence, and hopefulness (e.g. a savior complex) and how can these desires be harmful and/or detrimental to the task at hand? How can you leverage the recognition of complicity in systemic harm towards deeper and more enduring forms of responsibility and accountability? To what extent are you equipped to repair and weave relationships grounded on trust, respect, consent, reciprocity, and accountability?

Taking these seven steps into account, education wouldn't be about curating a curriculum to expose people to what we want them to learn. It would instead start from the assumption that they're already exposed to things, but it's difficult to process these things. In this sense, the pedagogy that we believe would be most relevant at this time is a probiotic pedagogy that allows people to digest the difficult things, both cognitively and relationally that they're finding it difficult to process. So the seven steps forward, very briefly, would be to step forward with honesty and courage to see what you don't want to see; to step forward with humility to find strength in openness and vulnerability; to step forward with self-reflexivity so that you can read yourself and learn to read the room; to step forward with self-discipline to do the work on yourself so that you don't become work for other people; to step forward with maturity to do what is needed rather than what you want to do; to step forward with expanding discernment and attention; and to step forward with adaptability, flexibility, stamina, and resilience for the long haul.

And I'll leave it at that and wait for the other presenters to see how we can connect with things together. Thank you.

**Bedelia Richards:** I was asked to talk about the concept of enabling infrastructure in the sense of the challenge of imagining effective institutional forms and the pragmatics of structural transformation. I'm going to talk more about that first one in terms of the challenge. I think of myself as kind of having an inner English major. And so I love metaphors. And so as I thought about the concept of infrastructure, I thought about the concept of a building and the foundation. When I think about infrastructure, I think about the foundation, the thing that holds the building up and the nature of the foundation determines how high the building can go and so on.

And so as I thought about that conceptually and what does that mean in the context of higher ed. I think about the ideological framework as infrastructure for higher ed, the thing that basically determines all the pragmatics and how things are organized and what we can do and how we even envision and think about what is possible and what is not possible. So I think that having an ideological framework to guide institutional transformation is what is needed. But in thinking about what that means in terms of what has been a challenge, I think the dominant ideological framework guiding institutional change in higher ed right now is that of the concept of diversity or what some of us social scientists refer to as "diversity ideology" and that this is a key barrier to imagining effective institutional forms. And when I say effective, I mean one in which groups without societal power can flourish; and if that's what we mean, then the concept of diversity, or diversity ideology, is a barrier. And it's a barrier because at its core it centers whiteness. It centers white feelings, white positionality and white ways of looking at the world. I'm going to talk a little bit about what it is so we can then understand how it is a barrier, an ideological barrier to transformation.

So diversity ideology is a byproduct of the 1978 Bakke decision made by the Supreme Court on affirmative action in university admissions. And with this decision, the Supreme Court decided that addressing past discrimination was not a valid rationale for using affirmative action in college admissions. Because as we know, affirmative action in its initial iteration was designed to address historic wrongs. And the Supreme Court decided, "Yeah, no, we're not going to do that. That's not valid. That's not something that we are supposed to do. That's not in our purview."

And instead, the Supreme court decided that it would be more appropriate to use race in college admissions only when it served a compelling governmental interest; and it viewed a compelling governmental interest as ensuring diversity in college admissions. And the court thought this would benefit both minoritized and majority groups.

So I want to talk through what is problematic about this concept of diversity because we do use it, this is the dominant discourse, and I may refer to it as "DEI" because that's the language that people know. I still critique it, but recognizing that this came about by the Supreme Court saying, "No, we're not going to deal with rectifying past injustice. That's not what we're about. We want to focus on having a variety of different viewpoints or what have you."

One of the reasons that diversity ideology is problematic is that it marks race as one marker of difference among many others. And in doing that, it minimizes *racism*. And I want to pause for a second because I think, especially as someone who does work on racism, I think a lot of times when I'm often in spaces where folks are like, "Well, we need to be intersectional, we need to focus on oppression based on this, this, and this." And of course no one was going to say, "No, we're not supposed to do that." But in reality, what a lot of folks do when they say that is, "Let's talk about anything else but race!"

One of the things that diversity ideology does is to say, "Let's focus on all these different things," but in reality, it functions to squash a focus on race. And in doing so, diversity can become basically a room full of white men that differ by social class, nationality, region of the country, by those who prefer to wear flip-flops to work as opposed to those who prefer to wear dress shoes.

Yeah, David Embrick actually did talk about that in a study. I didn't make it up, it's funny but he actually did do a study where this is one of the ways in which corporate executives defined diversity. It prioritizes visible representation over issues of power and equity or belonging. That is, we tend to use representation as the metric for institutional change rather than look at who inhabits positions of power within our institutions. So, if we notice whether it's my institution or others, the way in which it brands and talks about itself in terms of anti-racist work is like, "Hey, look at the percentage of students of color, they have gone up." And as a matter of fact, they have gone up, since I've been there, and when I first came it was more about let's look at students of color broadly because there just weren't enough individual groups to count. And now we can actually distinguish between international students and domestic students. So there are lots of ways to even play with that. And, it's not that I think that representation does not matter, but it should not be the sole metric.

What diversity ideology does is to focus on that sole metric but not focus on what you do with people like me when we show up. What do you do to make us feel included? What do you do to make us not just feel like we're a guest in your house rather than co-owners?

So that's why again, diversity ideology is problematic. It protects whites and white organizations from discussions of racial inequality. White folks can talk about how much they value diversity as a way of avoiding talking about racial inequities, which is a topic that is uncomfortable for many white folks to talk about, which is why, in order to be effective as a teacher, I literally had to develop a framework of how to teach my students how to talk about race—and yes, I do that as consulting work as well.

So there's that. I read a recent article by Mayorga-Gallo that argues also that diversity maintains white supremacy through four tenets. I'm just going to talk about two of them. She talks about the fact that we think about diversity as acceptance, this cause for tolerance and inclusion across, again, all axes of difference. So we should be tolerant of everybody in the room, even the white guy with the flip-flops. And that has us equating difference based on structural difference—race, gender—with idiosyncratic difference, such as those based on hobbies or one's personality.

So again, that's one of the ways in which we then water down this concept of diversity so that quite frankly it can and has been co-opted by white people. Like this whole language of viewpoint diversity is one way that white men get to say, "I am a victim." So that's what diversity does. Instead of focus on the folks who are marginalized and historically marginalized within higher ed, we get white folks who get to say, "Well, you're discriminating against my ideology, my conservative ideology." And that's also another thing we don't talk about, right? Because we equate, quite frankly, racist ideology with political ideology and then by calling it political ideology, well that makes you intolerant and you're not really valuing diversity. And it's effective.

Sociologist David Embrick found that upper level managers in Fortune 500 companies tended to exclude race and gender in their definitions of diversity. And in fact, these managers would claim that their companies were champions. They exclude that, but they're like, "Yeah, we're champions of diversity." But when he would prompt them to talk about specific policies and practices, they would not be able to

talk about that, not really be able to convey that. So that's one of the ways in which, again, Mayorga-Gallo talks about how diversity ideology is problematic.

The other is this focus on intent. The centering of good intentions during discussions of diversity initiatives. And then we get to focus on how we value diversity instead of addressing structural inequities. And then it becomes more a performance of our identities as folks who value and think of diversity as important—thinking about diversity takes the place of taking action.

One of the things that frustrates me on my campus, but I know it also happens on others, is that whenever there is some kind of racial incident, “Let's have a forum and talk about it. Let's have a forum and talk about it.” Those things are important. But then I start noticing the patterns that we just always want to talk about it. But can we do something about it? And so I no longer want to talk to you about it, talk to somebody else, and I will help you with the strategies and the actual practical things to do.

**K. Wayne Yang:** I first want to thank you. My main collaborator, Eve Tuck, this is where she came to school and this is the only school she wanted to come to. This is my first time here. And maybe I'm also the secret English major.

I'm going to masquerade as more optimistic than I am because I feel like that's part of the job that we need to do right now.

I'm wondering about the word infrastructure. It made me think, “What is the structure? What is the structure that the infrastructure is holding up?” And because we are talking about the university, “What is the university holding up?” I think that there's a number of ways to answer this question. As a caveat, none of these are my ideas. These are ideas that I've read or heard. But in the spirit of Audre Lorde, there are no new ideas, only new ways of making them felt. So hopefully you'll feel me.

I'd like to think about plantation infrastructure first and then move on to Indigenous futures. Plantation infrastructure is the infrastructure we live in on this continent. The Honorable Sylvia Wynter, the Jamaican novelist, former professor at Stanford, the philosopher, talks about plantation and plot. The plantation is the plot, the master plot of the narrative of the Americas. It is the infrastructure and it has plotted our cities and our connections of cities to rural areas. We are living in it. Even our freeways and our storage containers, all of it is built off of this plantation infrastructure.

Katherine McKittrick, who is a Canadian professor, academic, writer, and someone who writes and engages Sylvia Wynter, these are the people I'm reading. McKittrick has this provocative idea of “plantation futures” that I really struggle with. I'll just be transparent about this struggle. She says, within these plantations that were meant to plant Black people into this country, while keeping them displaced and dislocated and dispossessed at once, Black existence is relegated to these very small plots within the plantation.

She uses the word plot, in this second meaning of a tiny plot of land for enslaved people within the plantation. It's where you're only supposed to survive just enough in order to sustain the plantation, and yet also where Black people have built a Black future. And she calls these “plantation futures.” What I find really challenging about her writing is that there is a future in the plantation and it is somehow desirable. But I think this connects to infrastructure. So is there a liberatory future in this infrastructure that we've inherited?

As an aside, there is this insightful and inciteful collective called Abolitionist University Studies, and I was fortunate to be invited to be part of it for a little bit. I haven't had time to participate except at its first convening. I realized that there was a difference between people in the room in terms of how we thought about infrastructure. I was personally interested in Abolitionist University Studies because I want to know the plantation future. I want to know how we can take over this infrastructure and turn it into an *abolitionist* infrastructure. That's what really motivated me. However, I think there are other people in the room with another totally legitimate viewpoint, which is that they were interested in abolishing the infrastructure. Totally legitimate, but very different from my project. They were talking about *abolishing* the university, and I thought, "Well, we were trying to make the university abolitionist, but you're talking about getting rid of it. There is a contradiction here." This is the same contradiction that I'm always feeling just being in this place.

I want to also acknowledge that our university contexts are quite different. This is something I learned from Sandy Grande who is a professor at the University of Connecticut. We are all living under empire, but all our universities were built at different points and places in empire. And The New School is really special because I mean, you had the whole University in Exile thing and this radical commitment from the inception. I think that intentionality is built into the word "New." I work at a newer university than The New School, and we don't quite have those same commitments. I just want to note these differences.

In terms of my personal positionality within this plantation infrastructure, I'm a provost, not like the real provost but a minor provost—there are eight of us. I would say the real provost is the queen piece on the chessboard, and we are therefore similar to the pawn pieces. Yet we are on the chessboard and we have work to do. We have power—just to acknowledge that. Today's topic makes me think about this contradiction in that very role: Most of my time is to sustain this infrastructure, which is the plantation infrastructure.

Harriet Washington, who I just got to speak to last week, teaches here at Columbia. *Medical Apartheid* was her famous book. She offered this important insight: When we think about environmental racism and all these toxins—she was talking about the FDA or the EPA—the contradiction is that the agencies have a dual responsibility. One is to clean up the harms in the environment and the other is to reassure the public that there are none. She said we must go back to the root of the ideology, as there is a problem with the fundamental framework.

Riffing off what Dr. Andreotti said about composting and what Dr. Richards said about the diversity agenda, maybe what needs to be composted is diversity. Jodi Byrd, who is a Chickasaw professor at Cornell, writes about the "transit of empire," meaning the growth of empire on this continent. As an Indigenous person, her perspective is that when we talk about social justice and diversity, it is "a cacophony" of interests. She's not necessarily criticizing it. She says, that's the reality; there are so many things that people are fighting for. Therefore when we're talking about transforming infrastructure in a cacophony, it is really hard to understand what the guiding framework would be for doing transformational work.

That leads me to what my current framework is, which I don't claim to be the "right" framework, but I offer that maybe it is also your framework. Something that Eve Tuck says is that even in this cacophony of the projects that you might care about, I might care about, it is actually only a very small angle

between our political projects. She says sometimes it is like holding a baby in your lap and you just shift the baby to the other side of your lap. You move ever so little, and your whole perspective changes. So I want to shift the weight to consider decolonization as a framework.

I want to talk about the train system as a metaphor for infrastructure. You have an elaborate train system here in New York City. Also on my mind is the train derailment that just happened in East Palestine, Ohio, which dumped 100,000 gallons of toxic chemicals. There, you have an infrastructure that is literally poisoning well beyond its reach. It is the plantation infrastructure reaching out into communities with these toxins. The train is part and parcel to empire's growth on this continent, such as the Transcontinental Railroad. I think about *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and wonder what it means to be riding the train and realizing, "I don't want to ride in the back." But what does it mean to ride in the front on an imperial train?

There is an amazing book called *Empire's Tracks* by Manu Karuka, who is a professor at Barnard College, which talks about train infrastructure as a key instrument within the war/finance nexus. The train that we're all riding, the university train in this particular case, is infrastructure, built up through the colonial/imperial nexus plantation structure. On the west coast, the Transcontinental Railroad made the Richmond shipyards that produced all the military naval material, the Kaiser shipyards, for World War II—Kaiser now being a major healthcare provider.

Within those shipyards, you had Black women working in the industries for the first time. You also have Santa Fe Indian Village, or "Boxcar Village," which was Acoma and Laguna people who also jumped on that train, that same train that went through their territories on the genocidal mission. Well, they decided to use that infrastructure to go to California, where they set up a village. These kinds of Native relocations—which albeit coercive were also never without Indigenous agency—is why Oakland has one of the oldest Intertribal Friendship Houses in the country, even though it is a relatively newer part of the United States. I think about Duke Ellington's song, "Take the A Train" and how much jazz is influenced by even just the sound of riding these trains—again, these imperial modes of transit. I think about the Pullman Porters traveling on racist infrastructure yet also never without Black agency.

Eve has written about the New York subway system as portals—you sort of pop up here and there. There is a sort of *Matrix* science fiction thing where maybe there is a liberatory project within this plantation infrastructure. On this note, I want to acknowledge Nini Hayes, who is a professor at Western Washington University. They write about this idea of decoupling your train from this imperial train and going someplace else.

All this to say, infrastructure is an imperial legacy. Yet the project that I am interested in right now, and I am curious to learn from you all, is: How can we indigenize that infrastructure? How can we turn it into an abolitionist infrastructure, a decolonizing infrastructure? I am thinking about Winona LaDuke. She says Native people are not anti-infrastructure. LaDuke is the great Anishinaabekwe economist, speaker, lawyer, activist. She says pipelines carry toxins, carry fracked oil, but they can also carry water.

How can we imagine re-indigenizing infrastructure so that we can forward an Indigenous future? Indigenous is not exclusive of Blackness or migrants. Actually, we know there is Black indigeneity, Indigenous migrants. It is also not exclusive of settlers, because honestly, I don't know if any of us have a solitary identity in that respect. But maybe the framework is to forward an indigenous future.

This brings me to just a small project that we're doing at my university, UC San Diego: the Indigenous Futures Institute. It has to do with the infrastructure that is particular to our university (noting that we are not The New School).

Indigenous Futures Institute is an Indigenous-led faculty collective. We have earth and atmospheric scientist Sarah Aarons, who is Iñupiaq (Alaska Native). We have got Keolu Fox, who is a Kānaka Maoli, (Native Hawaiian) genomic scientist who coined the name for the institute. We have Theresa Ambo (Tongva and Luiseño), who, like some of the people around here, works on transforming institutions. And then we have Afrofuturists like LaWana Richmond. We have Caroline Collins who is working on various Black Pacific projects. IFI is built on this understanding that Indigenous knowledge wasn't meant to be contained in a history department or an anthropology department. Indigenous Futures is an interdisciplinary project. It is also built on the understanding that Indigenous people have always been futurists. This is a design-based concept. It is through prototyping and iterative redesign that Indigenous people have built things. Like Eve's people, they have kayaks that are transparent, built from whales' bellies, and they are capable of nearly planing speeds, speeds that motor craft do now. That wasn't achieved overnight. That was because they're science fiction people. Black people are science fiction people. They're futurists. That is why Afrofuturists are part of this group.

I want to leave it here, which is we had to build this Indigenous Futures Institute within the existing infrastructure. We are built within the Design Lab at UC San Diego, which is the newest building right by the trolley station that was just constructed on campus. We are part of this plantation infrastructure that keeps expanding and extracting, and yet we are hoping it can do something different. And I guess that's what brought me here today to learn with all of you.

**Melanie Hart:** This idea of what is the infrastructure that we're actually deliberating, as we sit in an infrastructure that is a container of higher education. And whether we're talking about The New School individually or this collective that is higher education and its many different forms, what does it mean for us today?

I love this idea, “decolonization is not a metaphor.” It's more than a metaphor. Decolonization, what it is and what it is not—where it is rematriation of land very specifically, versus the idea that Vanessa and is bringing us to, of what does it mean for all of us to have a step back from all of our ideas and ideologies in order to be participants in this work to move forward and really critically analyze what we're talking about.

Obviously, I have a very deep connection to this. I guess I'll be the third aspiring secret English major. And I'll say, I start from this premise that, as Octavia Butler said to us, “Everything we touch, we change, and everything we change, changes us.” And so as we sit in this space, even this conversation, I hope we will evolve as we continue to have this conversation. The basis that you talk about, diversity, I think is a driving program for higher education moving forward, I think is a great foundational place for us to start, because it begs the question of what's the value proposition? What are the values that are driving this whole idea, this enterprise of higher education, every discipline.

And we hear this at The New School. I'm going to go into this a little bit more, but every discipline is values-based. There is no discipline that any of us will walk into that does not have a foundational basis of values, whether it is explicit or implicit. And yet some of them are more acknowledged than others. I think the three of you are very explicit in the work that you do, what your values are and what's driving



it. But in most disciplines, values are hidden, particularly in predominant and more traditional disciplines. Values are much more hidden and not brought to light to be interrogated, investigated, and challenged.

I want to bring this to the fore, because I think it would be intellectually dishonest for us to not acknowledge. We are very much known as an institution that is progressive, and yet we have yet to grapple with the ideas of race institutionally. And I say that as we sit here with “Black leadership.” And so it is this oxymoronic, almost gaslighting type of endeavor, to have a conversation about positionality of power. But we must challenge ourselves to think about what is true power versus positionality, and how do those two things intersect? When someone has a title of position, but someone has an identity that is marginalized and what happens when those things intersect?

So even within this institution, how do we think about it? And so I just want to make sure we're putting that on the table because it would be dishonest for us to sit here and say, yes, we're progressive. Thanks, Wayne, but we're not saying that. And at the same time, one of the things that we have done here is, my office is the first Office of Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice in the 100-year history of the institution. 102 years.

**Bedelia Richards:** Did you say the first?

**Melanie Hart:** First, yes. Yes, ma'am.

**Bedelia Richards:** And when did it come up?

**Melanie Hart:** When the new Black president started. When COVID started. And so in March 2020, the president started, President Dwight McBride, and he charged me with launching the Office of Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice. We had not previously had one at this institution. And so I'm very clear when I say we've not tackled this issue. So at The New School, what I did was create a framework for how we think about, and interpret equity, inclusion, and social justice. The idea is that we take a transdisciplinary approach to equity, inclusion, and social justice. And note, I did not say diversity, specifically. But we don't say diversity very specifically because, again, it's a values-based proposition. The legal argument that was used around diversity is the one that set the stage for how we then drive what can come after it. This is a long game, right?

Derrick Bell asks whether we'd have had a different outcome if we'd made a different argument for Brown v. Board. He sits back in reflection and says that we argued that you needed to have Black children and white children in the same room. There wasn't such a thing as separate but equal, but what that meant was you could legally desegregate without actually desegregating and decolonizing. And so how would you rethink that if you had to? But we can't even have that conversation because it is seen as inflammatory and a zero-sum game. It is either/or, to your point. So here we use a transdisciplinary approach, 13 different disciplines, and I'm going to put it on the table and then I'm going to bring this all back. So I want to open it up for the questioning here. But we start with a Black feminist theory critique.

And I want to acknowledge our provost here, Renée White, because she is a Black feminist theorist, and she's a sociologist. And so all of that is infused in the work that we do. So I use Black feminist theory, law, particularly critical race theory. And I think your point around intersectionality is important because it can be an exclusive and diluting conversation. But I think if we put it in its proper context of law, which

is where it actually originates, and not in the popular definition of it, it in fact becomes a tool that we can use. We also use Economics, I use stratification economics, because we're talking about the marginalization of people; Psychology when we talk about belonging, bias and empathy, because what are going to be the motivational factors? And to Vanessa's point, this is not strictly a morality argument, but really this is a policy and praxis argument, and power analysis that we're using here. Policy and politics. We question policy creation, agenda setting, implementation, all pieces of policy and then how that leads to politics.

Media in terms of what has been popularized as the democratization of access, but really it's been the democratization of tools. But those are value-based tools and how they're used and weaponized and otherwise are not questions that we've interrogated. And then we talk about the Creative Arts, and I use Literature because I am in no other way an artist, but I could read. Yes, literature gives us the foundation to imagine the things that we've not yet conceived of, because I think for all the fantastic work that all three of you are engaged in, we don't have the model yet for what freedom actually looks like—the reimagining, the radical reimagining, we still don't have. So we must use things outside of our normal disciplines to understand, what is even possible? Because we've not yet gotten there.

Education from a democratic perspective, what is democratic education? What is liberatory education and what could that mean? What is teaching us about that? And then History, because we work in a global epistemology and domestic context, domestic epistemology in a global context. I'm so glad that Vanessa is with us because while we're still talking about a very North American construction, there's clearly a global construction of what it means to be minoritized, what it means to be colonized and otherwise. And then fundamentally Community Engagement, Activism, and Knowledge Projection, because to have this conversation today about the institution of higher education, we can't do that without acknowledging where we believe production of knowledge sits, whose expertise we actually believe in, rely upon.

And Vanessa, forgive me, I think I'm pulling from one of your other talks when you said this is not an issue of information. This is not about a lack of information. This is about who actually has power, where do we decide where power sits, and where does it originate? So contextually, at The New School we are still grappling with those issues, and that is our ideological framework – how we think about this. But we must be explicit about the context in which we situate ourselves, in this physical space as well as intellectual academic space.

And so with that, I'll start with Vanessa again, I'm always pulling you into the space as I know you're not here physically. And I want to also acknowledge why you are not here. My understanding is that Vanessa chose to not travel here today because, when thinking about her carbon footprint, she wanted to actually minimize that. She had met her limit for the year and she was not going to come here to participate in this space. And I think it's important that we make explicit what is often invisibilized around the activist work that people are doing, literally in their daily lives.

Often, we continue the same enterprises. So I think it's important that we make explicit why Vanessa is not here, but I will be constantly calling you into the space, Vanessa, because I think it's important that we are also acknowledging what she writes extensively about, is that even the technology that we're using to bring you into the space today is part of the decolonization effort.

With that, Vanessa, if you wouldn't mind, you talk about these seven step-backs, and I guess I want to ask you from an organizational perspective, when you think about this institution of higher education, how do the seven steps-back actually play out? I think when people think about a lot of this work, we think about it in a very personal way, 'I need to step back,' right? Because we are all looking to center ourselves in these things. How do you think about that from an institutional perspective?

**Vanessa Andreotti:** Thank you. I just wanted to say, too, that we are piloting a pledge, an academic pledge, that asks people to pay attention to their travel, but also if they want to offset their travel, to consider how carbon trading is also part of the market. And we are piloting this carbon reparations pathway that would take the offsetting money and put it in the hands of land protectors and water protectors and we are working with people in the Amazon right now. So the money that you would get for travel or for your fee for a conference, you would redirect to the people who are at the front line of the protection of waters, land, and air. This is in pilot stage that we are finding fiscal issues that make it difficult to transfer this money to communities. That's why we are not coming out with this for everybody. But watch that space.

Once we sort out the fiscal issues, we are going to be inviting other people to join in. So that sets aside what you said about values. What came up for me is that it's not just the cognitive frame of values. There's a cognitive and affective and a relational infrastructure that is modern/colonial. And this cognitive, affective, and relational infrastructure, based on the conditionings of modernity/coloniality become an impairment to how we can come together or how we can imagine, even, what a different future or a different policy could look like. So our imagination and our unconscious are also colonized. And even our strategies of resistance that have to operate within the frames of intelligibility of what is possible within the modern/colonial infrastructure, they also carry with them ontological tenets of modernity/coloniality. So the seven steps back in institutions—if I'm speaking as a dean for example, we are going through changes at University of Victoria—are used in preparation to be able to hold difficult conversations without relationships falling apart.

I'm trying to normalize the steps in the full resource. There are seven steps back and seven steps forward, with the questions that we need to hold so that we can layer reality, increase our capacity to hold complexity without feeling immobilized or overwhelmed, so that we can have the discussions taking account of the fact that we are at as a position of impairment (i.e. cognitive, affective and relational constraints caused by modernity/coloniality's design), and that this is setting us on the course of premature extinction. In this sense, the point is to understand that we are missing out on things we cannot even imagine yet, but that could possibly support something new emerging. But this emergence won't happen unless we develop the stamina and the stomach to compost the shit without throwing a tantrum and without trying to escape the difficult parts of reality by holding on to an idealization that repeats the past. And I think in institutions where the normalization and naturalization of colonialism, white supremacy, and western supremacy haven't been challenged or interrupted, this becomes extremely difficult, because there's already an immunity to the challenges at hand.

That's why diversity and celebration of diversity doesn't equate with the interruption of the normalization and naturalization of white/Western western supremacy. And then we also have patterns of exceptionalism, where we challenge white supremacy by proposing other forms of cultural supremacy, like Black, Indigenous and southern supremacy, rather than challenging supremacy itself. . . We need to figure out what's the kernel of the thing that is going to actually break through the

colonization of the unconscious and the colonization of the imagination into something that is difficult, but that could potentially offer a new pathway for us.

**Bedelia Richards:** So I'm a sociologist. I'm much better at criticizing problems. And with RaceTalk, I focus on solutions. But I think one of the things I've been thinking about, since we brought up Black feminist thought, I've been thinking about Patricia Hill Collins's concepts of partial perspectives. And so as I'm imagining, this is just my initial thoughts around convening groups of folks with different positionalities, and being able to communicate across our partial perspectives. So I think if recognizing that each of us, as a Black woman, a Black immigrant woman, that that definitely influences how I approach these issues. But also recognizing that I have, for lack of a... I'm trying to think of a better word for this, but blind spots are things that I may not be as... Because I don't experience it, I may not be thinking about it to the same extent. That even though I may value and think about, it's important to think about what it might mean to be a Black poor person and all the different intersections.

My lived experience means that I may not be thinking about those issues and the way they intersect in the way that someone who embodies and lives it. And so having folks in the room who embody these different partial perspectives, and being able to communicate about how do we build that infrastructure where the different partial perspectives can come together and think about creating something that recognizes all of humanities. So I know this is on the abstract level, but this is what I've been thinking about in terms of recognizing that we all have partial perspectives, and they're always parts of other people's lived experiences that we're just not thinking about as much. But that is important, to get back to your point, is that it's not that intersectionality is not important, but it's just how people weaponize and use it.

Tools are tools, and it could be used in different ways. It could be used in a liberatory way, it could be used in a not liberatory way. But, in any case, as I ruminate about this as well, as I think about disciplines, one of the things that I'm doing with my capstone students is to focus on knowledge production in Sociology, and how it is also influenced by systems of oppression. And it's mind-blowing for my students, because they come to Sociology, most students of color, precisely because we talk about issues of inequality. And so for them, this is a liberatory thing, but then to be like, what? To get them to think about who are the founders, and how is theory taught?

So I think, to also think about knowledge, we are in the business of knowledge production. So I think it's important to also think about those conversations as well and how our own disciplines, how even I as a sociologist, I tell my students, because they're like, yeah, when I took your theory class, you taught it very different. And I have to say, look, that was the first time. I had to unlearn some things. And so it's not just your white professors, all of us who are trained as sociologists or whatever it is our disciplines are, that's how we are trained. And I may have an incentive as a Black woman, and because of my positionality, to maybe question certain things, but then there's a point between that and then getting to do the unlearning and the process.

And as I think about, I guess one final thing, because that's just something I was been thinking about in terms of the solutions bit, is, it is amazing to me to be in institutions of higher education, and have people in positions of power, particular white men, who are guiding DEI efforts, and they don't know anything. I'm sorry. They do not have the racial literacy or anything. How are you going to guide conversations? So I think part of the issue is also that when we are hiring people in positions of power to lead these kinds of initiatives, literally that should be part of the qualifications, is to either have that kind

of literacy, or, because I recognize this, even I have said, I don't know all the things equally well, ... I call it my areas of growth.

And to be committed to antiracism, as a leader, you are going to get the coaching in those areas. So to me, that's part of how do you claim that, what you call DEI fine for now, right? This thing is important, but you're hiring people who have zero kinds of literacy... just basic (race or equity-based) literacy. I'm not even talking about expertise here, basic literacy. And I think that's also part of the problem. And instead, we pick random Black and Brown people, and say like, okay, that's your job. The representation thing again. And part of the issue is we also know that many times in these institutions, it's the Black and Brown folks that are part of the status quo that may get promoted into these positions. And for those who are not, we expect them all by themselves to just fix things, right? With nobody else...

But then we're focused on democracy. So we have that one person in the room, so let's say you're the one like a Brown dean who actually is for the people, and you're supposed to have a voice in a room of folks who don't get it? How's that supposed to do anything? But we have one in there though. Representation, right? So those are just some, I just say random thoughts, because I don't have a cohesive answer to how to do the fixing. But those are some things I've been thinking about.

**Melanie Hart:** I don't think any of that is random at all. You're talking about racial formation theories, the question, how are people coming to these different ideas? Pamela Newkirk tells us in her work, *Diversity Inc.* that DEI is a \$20 billion industry.

Let's think about higher education as a futurist project. Wayne, you said you come to this idea of abolition, what do you believe is the future or should be the future, or needs to be the future of higher education? How are we approaching that? You were working with young people even before higher education, but this question of what is the institution and what is its viability or what is its utility? I would love to hear from you what you think the future is or could be.

**K. Wayne Yang:** I don't know. I mean, I think I just try to pay attention to people who forecast the future, whether they be astrologers or sociologists. I believe that we should be re-indigenizing this planet. That is a future beyond a human future. That's for sure, I'm confident about. Now, how do we get there from the tools we have, which are often the master's tools? I think that's where I am.

I'm in the weeds. I'm not the visionary. I'm the one who asks, "Hey, tell me what you saw last night in your dreams and I'll follow that." I'm the number two. I'm not the number one. I think it's what Vanessa said, it's imagining a planet that can heal itself. That's the future.

**Attendee:** I was just reacting to what you said last, talking about how knowledge is not enough sometimes and that experience is understanding and actually finding ways to act on some of these inequalities as much as I could.

I've learned and read in books and things like that. I was never ready for the experience that I was having in real life once I have learned all of these things. For me it's imagining maybe in preparing people who have not had this experience actually be better at understanding what those ideas are. If there are experiential parts of the learning that could happen instead of just asking people to read more. Actually practicing to center in on yourself, looking back on some of the things that you say,

where they come from and how they relate to other people. I just wonder how you could curate experiences like that for learning in academia.

I think instead of actually teaching people about racism who have never experienced racism, how in going beyond asking them to read books and comment on them and things like that, having experiences that are more practical that might allow to them to understand the concept better and embody it. I feel like it's an important step in thinking about how a lot of these very cognitive spaces are failing at actually acting on a lot of these inequalities that they are dispensing.

**Bedelia Richards:** Yeah. In terms of experiences, and I'm thinking within higher ed, I don't know about, for example, sending the students who don't have the tools out into the world and be with some Black and Brown folks.

I'll tell you what I have done right? Because I teach at a very conservative school. When I first came it was mostly white, very resistant students. Many of them were probably like, are you here to clean the room? What are you doing here? I looked young too. I definitely looked younger, probably looked around their age. But But bottom line, I met with that resistance in the classroom to having these conversations even let's say about race and other kinds of inequality.

One, we're not trained as professors, one to even teach. I know that sounds weird. We're not. There are some institutions that may actually have programs that are focused on teaching. But generally speaking, when you're getting a PhD, even though we go on to be a professor, there's not a curriculum for teaching us how to teach, right?

We definitely aren't taught how, specifically, to teach about issues of inequality. Race, gender, and so on. I had to figure that out. Right? I think that's also one of the things that may be needed as we think about higher ed or going to college is one of those places where we learn that we can't actually teach our content when there's this huge emotional resistance. Well, when I'm talking, all they hear is blah, blah, blah, blah, Black woman is, making me feel guilty as a white person, blah, blah, blah.

I look like I think that's just what they heard. I had to figure out how do I get through to that? I developed what I now call my RaceTalk as a skill workshop. I had to teach my students how to talk about race in the classroom.

I'm aware of the fact that I'm a talker, so I don't take up too much space. But I'll tell this story anyway. It was in a class actually called Race, Class and Schooling. If you're taking a Sociology class, upper level then you expect to probably have some conversations about this. But the class literally is called Race, Class and Schooling so you expect to actually come and be able to have these conversations. I remember having a Black women student who was responsible that day for guiding the conversation. She had this activity because I told them I wanted to be active where she'd write things on the board. She'd write things like criminal or slavery. She's like, okay, first thing that comes to mind, first thing that comes to mind. My students were like, yeah, there was just silence... she was like, nothing comes, no, not a thought?

I'm sitting there thinking in my head, "you liars" .. but I'm like, how do I deal with that? I had a conversation with the Black woman student afterwards just to let her know, look, I see the work that

you put into this and I don't want you to take your colleagues, your classmates, lack of engagement to ... I see the work you put into it. I'm getting to answer your question, right?

Anyway, at the end though, I was like, yeah, but what do you think you could have done differently? I hope y'all recognize that that was problematic. I did. As soon as it came out in my month, I was like, you know what, don't even answer that. That's not your job because that's all part of the issue.

Our Black and Brown students are expected to teach us, right? I said, don't answer that question, that's my job. That's what I sorted out. I do this thing early in the semester in my classes that I call The Race Talk as a skill workshop, which basically addresses a lot of the emotional resistance students have about talking about race(ism) and provides a framework and an incentive to my students, and one of the things I talk about is it's a skill. That's one of the things that I talk about. For me, it was literally just kind of reframing how they think about having conversations about race.

For some of my white students talking about race is divisive in and of itself. When we'd have these conversations without preparing them, then it was like, you are trying to make me feel bad or feel guilty. I then had to think about how to lead them through. I thought it would just take maybe 15 minutes. It took up the entire class session. I've seen a huge difference, I'll say. It's something that I've perfected. I think in terms of what to do in the context of the classroom, there needs to be more of that. But our professors need to be trained to know how to do that because a lot of the racial microaggressions and other kinds of aggressions that happened in higher ed happens in the classroom because students can't get away. You have to go to class. Or, I've literally had conversations with students recently who are just like, I dropped the class. I couldn't do it.

That has an impact on students' learning.

These are things I have to learn for myself and practice and experiment. Students would give me informal feedback. Then I'll tweak to figure it out myself. I think that's one of the things we may need to think about: how to focus on the skill-building because students, especially white students, can literally sit through a whole semester of a class like mine and just be like, you're just mad at me for being white.

None of that content is actually getting through. We need to also train professors because that discomfort that they feel, part of why I'm good to be honest is because I will go there. I model it, right? I'm not saying I never feel discomfort, but I will talk about it.

**Melanie Hart:** Vanessa, I see you had put the comment up. I don't know that everyone got to see it. You said, "Hiring: leadership confidence and experience being equated with compliance with white sensibility."

**Attendee:** I think something pertinent right now off the conversation about students, I'm thinking, specifically, about the things to step back from. When I'm honest with myself about stepping back from certain self-images or of jumping back from certain dependencies on this education structure, I think of so much of my desire to be both in graduate school and my desire to insulate myself from postcolonialism.

The reference of the prestige of the school allows me to, in some ways, advance a position that separates me, at least theoretically, from class and race. I think that there's so much of that, the

attraction to places of higher education is that it's at least the illusion or the enticement or the desire for that escape. I'm not going to become a finance bro, I'm a Professor of Sociology.

It's not a derision or me saying everyone here is not about that life. I think there's so much about what students want or what I want from this place. It's like, I really just want to pay my student loans off. But I also don't want to be a part of the problem. When we talk about how the university performs ideological frameworks and the things we step back from, how do we reconcile the fact that a lot of times I'm coming here as a customer buying a service.

**K. Wayne Yang:** Yeah, that's an interesting question about escape and complicity. It also touches on the difference between the abolishing of universities versus making the university abolitionist. I think you were talking about the framework of university schools and educational system. Strictly speaking, I guess an American framework is the plantation infrastructure, a colonial infrastructure, dominating systems, infrastructure in that regard.

What you said makes me think about the question: how far do you reform before you just completely abolish? Especially, if it's a plantation infrastructure. Can you use the master's tools to be fully free and to benefit everybody? Even in coming to the university, you're saying it is still a process of you separating yourself from class and race.

**Attendee:** I'm a Parsons designer. I'm educated. Still you're creating a level of division, a level of privilege from other people, and separating yourself from other people. Then we have discussions about either reform or abolitionist work or whatever, but certain people aren't available in the room because they just don't have that privilege.

I feel like we're doing ourselves a disservice by not being like, all right, this hasn't been working for X amount of years. Let's just trash it. Let's try something new. That might not go as far as we want. I like what you said about iterations and stuff like that of your classes and stuff. Let's just try something new.

Whether it is going back to re-indigenizing of the world that Wayne spoke about. Let's go back and do things that were working, bring that back as opposed to trying to fix something that wasn't made to benefit everybody in the first place. We talk about abolishing prisons. I was thinking in that similar framework, what if we made prisons abolitionist, just a provocative thought.

When you said that, I was really trying to mess around with that thought. I was just trying to use different ways of wrapping my head around it. You were talking about byproducts of the railroad systems. You can think of positive byproducts of slavery and racism and marginalization... you can think of jazz and hip hop and rap.

Those came from being marginalized. I feel like if you asked certain people, would you want freedom if it meant you couldn't have jazz. I guess that's what I'm thinking is that we're talking about different ways we can fix things or reform things. But if there's so many different issues, when do we get to the point where we're just like, let's just create something new.

**K. Wayne Yang:** I really appreciate your questions. I share exactly those same questions. Today, I'm framing my comments around reform just because for this panel, we are talking about university and infrastructure. Yeah, I mean the Panthers thought about being in prison. If you end up in prison, then



you're going to organize there. That's what they said, right? An abolitionist project even within prisons, they do exist.

I think about maroonage and just leaving the colony and starting your own free society. Yet they often had a diplomatic relationship with the colonies, the Maroons. These are people freeing themselves and establishing new societies. The things I'm interested in have primarily been outside of the university, outside institutions. For example, it was a self-determination project, the work we were trying to do in Oakland. There is a great abolitionist feminist project called Earthseed Laboratories. Check that out. By Renée Byrd, who is a professor at Humboldt. They've acquired land and developed relationships with Indigenous people. They are trying to create their own thing. At some point, we have to say, let us create freedom.

What I'm thinking about with the university and plantation are completely different circumstances than Maroons, more like *La Amistad*, the ship that the people who were enslaved took over. Now what do you do? Where do you go? There's no place to go. George Jackson said there's no simple way to define fascism, but if we had to use one word we would call it reform. Reform is fascism. I'm totally with you there.

However, given my positionality, I'm very clear... nobody in this country wants to pay reparations. Yet I'm very clear that I'm ready to pay reparations. I could argue I wasn't around "back then", but I've nonetheless benefited from slavery. However, I don't know if *you* need to pay reparations.

It's kind of like with my students ... I have activist students. They often say, there's all these things I don't want to do now. I don't want to be a banker, I don't want to do x or y... But I say to them: Do it all! I would love to see some of you go to investment banking. I would love to see what you will do with it. Maybe some of you are going to work in a prison. Just know that wherever you are, you'll be a transformational agent.

I need *you* to travel. I should probably travel less. I need to pay reparations. I don't need *you* to pay reparations. I'm really speaking to you, who I perceive as Black men. I'm not saying that of everyone. But I think, yeah, reform, that's my issue right now. It doesn't have to be your issue. I also feel that if you want to escape something, I'm good with that. That's what your ancestors would have wanted for you. Who are you to deny that? I don't know what you're going to do in that position.

I'm just saying—going back to this question of reform—we are all positioned differently. The question of reform is necessitated by the partial perspective that I have. These are the questions I'm struggling with. They are not at all a prescription for you.

**Melanie Hart:** Sadly, we are over time. Obviously, this conversation could and should continue. There's so much here and I want to thank all of you for coming.

I feel like there's a community here from which a lot can grow. I think there's an opportunity for us to continue to engage. I will offer myself up as a member of the New School community and everyone who's also in the room who wants to also continue this conversation here, internally, particularly to the students who are having this conversation thinking about, I will say, revolution versus reform. We would all be very uncomfortable, but we have to make decisions about that, right?

Because there is a difference between revolution and reform. To today's point, this idea of where you start is that there's no neutral place. We're all coming in informed by something. How do we start to think about what we build from there? But I think that's a lesson for all of us to take from here.

We're all informed. We all come to this place from something. Even if we sit here and look at each other and assume what we know about each other, that's such the surface of who we are and what we really know about each other and what we could build moving forward.

I hope this is an opportunity to deepen our interaction with each other, deepen our knowledge and think about what are the ways we really interact and not just teach and give lessons and books, but we actually think about what are the experiential moments that we have for teaching and learning across this institution and other institutions around higher education.