To cite this podcast:
Stein, S., Araneta, K. (2023, April 11). Unsettling the university: Confronting the colonial foundations of US higher education (No. 36). [Audio Podcast Episode]. In *Pedagogies for Social Justice*. University of Westminster. https://blog.westminster.ac.uk/psj/tools/podcast/
DOI: https://doi.org/10.34737/w837z

Podcast transcript:

Kyra: Hi everyone, welcome back to the Pedagogies for Social Justice Podcast. For this episode, we are in conversation with Assistant Professor and Author, Dr Sharon Stein, who is currently based at the University of British Columbia. Sharon is a white settler scholar whose research examines educational questions at the interface of systemic colonial violence and ecological unsustainability. In this episode, we discuss growing up in the US and Sharon's academic background in Anthropology, Sociology and Education Studies. We delve into some of the key points raised in her book 'Unsettling the University - Confronting the Colonial Foundations of US Higher Education', before unpacking the importance of understanding our context and developing stamina for doing decolonial work in higher education.

So, I like to start things off with our guests just telling us a little bit about themselves, in their own words, so, where did you grow up and where are you currently?

Sharon: Yeah, thanks. So, I grew up in the suburbs of Washington DC, in what's currently known as the United States, very much, I kind of say, in the shadow of the US empire because so much of that area of the country is sort of dominated by things relating to the US government and contractors for the government, so very much sensitive to those things, and informed my later critiques of these things. And, eventually, I sort of slowly moved my way West, in many ways following the colonial trajectory of the United States itself, and actually moved up to…to what is currently known as Canada to do my PhD, and I am also there now. So, I am currently in what is now known as Vancouver, Canada, which is the traditional ancestral territory of the Musqueam Indigenous people, and it remains their territories to this day, although Canada continues to occupy this place.

Kyra: And I guess how would you describe your upbringing, in terms of how race was kind of seen and felt in your household?

Sharon: Yeah, this is such a great question. So, I think…like a lot of white liberals, my parents kind of assumed that, because they were against racism, and that they believed they themselves were not racist, they assumed, okay, our kids are not going to be racist. Of course, as scholars of racism and whiteness have long pointed out, that's not how racism works at all; it's structural, and it's about systemic advantage, and it's not just about

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individual bias but individual bias backed up by institutional power and resources. So… And of course the insights of many Black Indigenous decolonial scholars point out that race and racism is foundational to our modern world and to all of our systems and to all of our institutions. But my parents didn't see all of those layers. They didn't talk much about race and racism, as is often the case with white parents who think, well, we're good people, our kids will be good people too. I recently read a study about white parents' thinking in relation to their white children's potential racial bias, and it found, not surprisingly, that they underestimated the extent to which their children had internalised racial bias. And I think, you know, of course, on the one hand, like white parents, like mine, choose not to talk much about race, many parents of racialised children understand that this is a necessity for their children to survive and navigate a white supremacist world. And I think that extends to the university, where many white people still feel like it's optional whether or not we engage with questions of race. This is changing a little bit when people are pushing the conversation, but, for the most part, we can still choose not to, most of the time, because it's easier, and if we actually did engage this work, we would confront our complicity in a very harmful, violent system. So, for most people, if they can opt out of that, they do. Now, of course, the upshot of this is that we create…that we allow the continuity of the system, of the racist system, to keep going, and we put the labour on racialised people to always raise the question and then become defensive when they do. So, yeah, I think that starts early for white families, in many cases.

Kyra: I mean you talk about how you didn't necessarily talk too much about race with your parents as a child and at home, but did that differ in any way to how race was kind of seen and felt in your local community? Were there times where, you know, race had to be talked about at home because there was something going on in the wider community?

Sharon: I mean [sighing], that should have been, yes, but in terms of specific events that led to those conversations, not really. I can't recall… And, again, that was probably – I'm sure there were many instances where it should have been talked about, but nothing stands out to me as a moment where this sort of becomes pertinent in school and other things, from my perspective as a white child who was not thinking much about this, right? I'm sure that if you ask a racialised person from that context, they might have a very different account of the story.

Kyra: And what shows and books, I guess, did you watch and read growing up, and I guess what kind of representations were you exposed to?

Sharon: Yeah. So like, as a millennial kid, I watched a lot of TV, all kinds of…mostly crap [laughing], like lots of MTV – this was kind of like the height of MTV – pretty much anything on broadcast, like mainstream TV, and basic cable, all of the big movies. And, as for sort of

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books and things, I went to a public school, but we had an International Baccalaureate programme, and even though the IB programme is still deeply limited in sort of being centred on this Western liberal internationalism, it was I think a little bit more diverse than the usual US public school curriculum. So, we did have I think a little bit more diverse representation in the books that we were assigned and things, but, overall, I think there was still…predominantly white, with a few tokenised spaces, in TV, in movies, in books, in terms of mainstream media, but the overall orientation was…was white and Western, for sure.

Kyra: What almost triggered you to kind of start thinking critically about colonial histories or at least like the ways that you might have been taught it, growing up?

Sharon: Yeah. So, I often get this question, and I wish that I had [laughing] like a crisper answer, like, "Oh, there was this epiphany moment!" but in reality, it's sort of a slow, winding road that…that was…this persistent nagging sense that like, once I saw a problem and then started to deconstruct it, I realised it always was deeper than I had initially thought, and I kept wanting to go further down into the origins of this problem. And it was mostly something that I had to pursue on my own because, as I said, there wasn't that much of this in the curriculum, and we weren't really encouraged to pursue these questions. So, of course, reading about these things in books and articles is a reflection of my privileged…the fact that I was not experiencing these things, you know, myself, but I think then there's also the layer of, yes, I was not exposed to the brutalities of colonialism, but of course I was constantly benefiting from it, but it was the kind of benefit where we can be wilfully ignorant of how we received these benefits. That being said, I did my undergrad major in Anthropology, and, on the one hand, it was clear that Anthropology…it has become very clear that it was a discipline that was deeply embedded in colonialism, but it was also I think one of the earliest disciplines to have something like a postcolonial [turn] and try to reckon with this legacy. So, there's a long way for the field to go, and there's questions about whether it or any other Western field can ever be decolonised, but at least there was some conversation about this in our courses. And there's also something that always sort of stuck with me from that, and I think what drew me to Anthropology, was that…it made very clear that lots of behaviours and social structures and social norms that we are often to assume are universal and just human nature are actually the product of specific systems and histories, therefore we can always ask: how did we come to have these things the way they are and how could they be different? So, I always kept that with me from Anthropology, despite all of its many, many flaws, and that…when thinking about these questions.

Kyra: And I guess what was it like, coming into Anthropology, and obviously studying Sociology as well, that…what was the process, I guess, of unlearning and realising your privilege? Like do you feel like you in yourself kind of almost…gave in and was just like, do

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you know what, I can accept this or do you feel like…do you remember that process being quite challenging for you?

Sharon: I think it wasn't because I always had this…like…I would say, as a child, it was very rudimentary sense of like justice, because I didn't have the context and the knowledge to really make sense of it, but I never…I don't think…especially because it was like a self-driven journey, there was much less resistance, as opposed to sometimes when people…when it's sort of forced upon people [laughing], they have a lot of resistance, but because I was choosing to go there, I didn't have that much of a process. I did have the stage of sort of… righteous indignation, which is a bit ridiculous as a white person – well, [I told] other white people, right – and then I had to recalibrate and say, okay, I'm as much a part of the problem as these people and my responsibility is to ask how we can move away from this harm, not to, you know, show to them that I'm more righteous or more moral or whatever.

Kyra: And, you know, like you said, you studied Sociology and Anthropology at undergrad, and then you later returned to study Higher Education. What was kind of your motivations for doing that?

Sharon: Yeah. So, when I initially graduated, I worked at actually the American Anthropological Association and…because I didn't really know what I wanted to do, I worked in a publishing department, and that was right at the time of the 2008 financial crisis, and so what I observed in that organisation was all of these academics, the anthropologists, not being able to find steady work and employment, and really frustrated by this. So, I kind of became intrigued.. I didn't really think that much about academic labour when I was an undergrad. There was…I think a…you know, a fair wages campaign that happened, that was mostly about staff, but I was like marginally involved with, but I wasn't thinking about academics in that way, until I worked at AAA. So, then I moved to working at a university because I was like, okay, this is really interesting and I want to understand it more, so I moved to the University of Michigan and worked in a staff role, and, there, I also saw the sort of…began to see the range of, you know, problematic hierarchies and racial structures in the university – so not only like the racialised and gendered structure of the university administration in terms of who was in the Vice President roles versus who was the support staff, but also the role of neoliberalism in structuring thing.

And then, this last piece of…I played a very small support role for some people in our office who were working on…NAGPRA efforts, which is the Native American Graves Repatriation Act, and that was about returning Indigenous people's remains and artefacts that universities had stolen over the years, which was implemented 30 years ago and still hasn't been followed through by many institutions. And I saw…I hadn't had any context for that

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until I was there, and then I saw the resistance amongst the administrators as well as like Anthropology professors, in many cases, to actually following through with that process, and the level of disrespect for Indigenous people's protocols, and that was also very formative for me. I didn't realise it at the time, but it later came to inform a lot of my work.

Kyra: And that made you want to go back to the university [laughing]!

Sharon: Yeah. It was like, okay, this is...really interesting stuff [laughing], [problematically], like I need to know more – that's when I went to grad school, yeah.

Kyra: Yeah. And did you find that your Master's satisfied that kind of critical lens that you were already looking at the university through?

Sharon: The short answer is no. I did my Master's in the field of Higher Education and Student Affairs, and I had amazing faculty, really passionate about their job and about supporting students, but the curriculum of that field, at the time at least, only sort of touched on questions of race and inequality. There was like, you know, the one course dedicated to diversity or whatever, and then it was maybe sprinkled in the other courses a little bit but I definitely found I wanted to know more, and I tried to do that by taking courses in, you know, Geography and Gender Studies and Ethnic Studies, but, by the end of the Master's, I still had many more questions than answers, and so I kept going to the PhD [laughing].

Kyra: And is there anything you wish you knew as a student that you know now?

Sharon: I mean...like all kinds of things, but then I also know that our learning journeys sort of unfold as they unfold and... What is really interesting to me is the fact that – and this is a generalisation of course, but overall, I feel students today are much more tuned into these issues, and not just tuned in but like more...willing to kind of push the faculty, for instance. Of course, there's always been student movements, you know, throughout the history of higher education, in different eras, but I think it really shows now this kind of huge and growing gap between many of our students and many of our faculty, who have had such different experiences of the world, and such different understandings of where we're headed. And I'm now more and more asking like how do we bridge this gap and invite, you know, both older generations and younger generations, and all of us in between, into a space where we can actually address these issues with sobriety, maturity, discernment and responsibility – and that's a very challenging task, I'm learning [laughing]!

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Kyra: And I guess what do you feel like you're still learning, in terms of your kind of position in the university?

Sharon: Yeah, and this also changes as my position changes, but there's so many things. I mean, one is just this overall question of how to navigate the colonial institution in the most responsible way that I can, given my positionality, and without becoming deluded that I can ever operate outside of my complicity in the harm that I'm trying to interrupt. And I find that…like the more I do this work, the more I realise how complicated it is [laughing] and how much dexterity and kind of discernment we need to be able to map the many moving layers that are at work in any given context, and then to try and assess, given all those layers, where's the layer that I can and should intervene at this particular moment, while knowing that all those layers are also there, and then who the audience is and what they're ready for, and how much you can push and how much you can't. So, I'm always trying to learn how to more effectively intervene in different contexts, in an effort to try and interrupt the harmful patterns, so reading the context and then also reading how I'm going to be read in that context. And I often don't get it right and… So, I've also learned about learning from failure because the mistakes are inevitable in this process, and rather than just sort of beating ourselves up or denying the mistakes, how do we bring them to the fore and look at them with honesty and reflexivity of saying, you know, how did we make this mistake, where is it coming from, how can we learn from it so we don't keep making the same mistake, even though we're probably going to make new mistakes.

Kyra: Exactly. And I'm actually happy that you mentioned context because it is something that I do want to get into a bit later on. But I wanted to dedicate this segment to really talking about your new book, 'Unsettling the University – Confronting the Colonial Foundations of US Higher Education'. I had the pleasure of reading parts of it, and I must say I do really feel like it's perfect for anyone who's really in like those beginning stages of thinking about coloniality and how it permeates our institutions, and really just trying to understand that really deep-rooted colonial history of universities, and how they're linked to some of the contemporary challenges that we face today. But I wanted to first start things off by asking you: how important is considering colonial structures and subjectivities before we think about how we can resist and dismantle them – like why is that really preliminary work and education so pivotal?

Sharon: Yeah. Em…great question… I think it's often the case that, when people start to learn about these things, especially people who have not been forced to think about them before [laughing] or have had the privilege not to, we get really agitated because we…we, number one, don't want to look at our complicity in harm, but also we don't have the like practice holding space for this thing. We have very low tolerance for being uncomfortable

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and for looking at things that implicate us because, again, we've had the privilege of not having to do that. So, when we do confront this, it's often an immediate rush to like, "Okay, well how do we fix it?" which…there may be a kernel of sort of good intentions there but there's also this strong desire I think to want to go back to feeling good and feeling innocent ourselves in our work, so we rush to solutions. But the reality is these things are super-complex. They've been at work for hundreds of years so we're not going to interrupt them with one policy change or one workshop, and they're not just in our institutions, they're in us, and not just in us in conscious ways but also unconscious ways. So, again, there's like many different layers. And then the question is like, okay, what is…what do I need to do in order to prepare to do this work and what are the small, tiny baby-steps I can do to start confronting the raw truth about the racial colonial and ecological violence that have sustained our institutions over time. And one of the things that I think I try to interrupt, in the book - I'm not sure how successful and I don't know if people take up this invitation or not – but like we often assume, and not just about racism and colonialism, but many social harms, we assume that it's a problem of ignorance, that people just don't know, and if we just told them the truth, then something would change. And I think, you know, in many cases, there's definitely a layer of that, for sure, and we do need some information, and that's what I largely, in the book, do try to provide, because I know that's sort of the demand of an academic, but I think a lot of it is not an intellectual problem, it's a…like a psycho-effective problem, because, as I said, like especially those of us who benefit from colonialism, we are very consciously and unconsciously invested in the benefits that it offers us. So, we might look at the truth a little bit but not so much that it starts to unravel our whole world and to see how deep the rot really goes and how implicated we are. So that's why, when people go read the book, I try to say, yeah, there's the intellectual level of learning the colonial underside of these histories, but also there's an affective level of like, when you're reading, think about how your responses are showing up, not just your intellectual responses but also your embodied responses – like what's the part of you that wants to resist or rationalise this or say, "Okay, this is a problem but it's not about me". So, I don't, you know, tell people how to respond but, rather, look at what these responses… where these responses are coming from, where are they taking you, where might they keep you from going, what is the impact of this kind of response on the people most affected by these violences…? And if we can start to make asking these questions a practice, then we can start to get a sense of why it's so hard to actually dismantle these structures. But this requires a level of honesty and self-reflexivity that, again, we're not really incentivised to do, and it's much easier to say, "Okay, what's the thing I need to do to solve this?" even though, when we do that, we often don't really address the problem, sometimes we make it worse, and we waste a lot of time and resources that we could have been using on actually trying to get to the heart of it. So, I think, basic things, we need to build more stamina and new capacities to be able to approach these problems very differently, instead of trying to fix them in one step or use the same tools that led us to the problem to try and solve it.

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Kyra: So, I guess…I mean, this is quite a big question, but in what ways are Western universities structurally complicit in colonial violence? I'm not expecting you to mention every single way [laughing]!

Sharon: Yeah, how much time do you have?! I mean, there's so many different ways to parse this question, and kind of, as I was saying before, like I approach it differently depending on the context because there are so many different entry points, but I think like, at the most basic level, which is a bit hard for people who want like…like a clear answer, it's like…because we're embedded – universities in the Global North are embedded within, and both rely on and contribute to the continuity of a wider set of systems, of economic systems, of political systems, of epistemological systems, of relational systems, that are, at their core, according to, you know, my analysis that's rooted in the analyses of many decolonial Black Indigenous, anti-capitalist, whatever, lots of people critique, is that, you know, these systems are inherently violent and unsustainable, at the end of the day. So, if we're part of that system, then our institutions are also part of that system and not, again, very incentivised to interrupt it - like we might be allowed to make a little critique, but if we go too far, then we get either ignored or shut down, because, in our institutions, including schools and universities, we are taught that the benefits offered by all these systems are proof that they are good, that they are desirable, that they're universal. And now, more and more people are pointing out that, okay, these benefits might be good, but not everyone can access them, so we focus on trying to expand access to them. And in many layers, this is laudable and it's necessary, but there's also other layers that point to the fact that it's not just that not everyone gets these benefits but that…you know, people…that violence is enacted so that these benefits become possible. So that it's not just that, you know, Black Indigenous People of Colour are excluded from the benefits, but the benefits come at their expense, and not just at the expense of people but also of, you know, the wellbeing of the planet. So, within the university, for the most part, we focus on the benefits, and maybe expanding the benefits and making them more efficient or whatever, but we're rarely encouraged to consider the fact that, at their root, these benefits come from harm, and if we want to continue enjoying them, then we have to continue in acting harm. We're always trying to look for a way basically to transcend colonialism, without having to give anything up, and, in my analysis, at the end of the day, that's…that's a fantasy that's not really possible. So, we can keep on with that fantasy and continue the destruction of human communities and the planet or we can face the difficult truth about the costs of the continuity of this system.

Kyra: And I guess do you have any examples in mind of those kind of benefits, like those specific kind of colonial investments that individuals can have in the university?

Sharon: There's a lot of promises that I think the university makes, it invites us to invest in, and it's not just the university but other systems also encourage. So, one of the biggest

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investments is like the idea that the university is benevolent, that it's going to offer us universal truth, that it can offer us a position…or strengthen our position in the middle class, that it's going to make us better, smarter, more moral people, and that it can affirm the fact that we are…we've earned our position in society, that it's not a product of our privilege – that's the kind of role I think of the [meritocracy]…has been to sort of…in many cases, allows people like me to say, "Oh yeah, I'm here because I earned it", as opposed to "I'm here – yes, I worked hard, but also I had every single possible advantage throughout my life that allowed me to be here and to succeed here." And I think a lot of people don't assume that the university is perfect but it's…we actually become more invested when we start saying, "Yeah, but it can be perfected – if we just funded it better, if we just brought more people in, if we just taught the right things…" and, essentially, our investment in the continuity of the university goes uninterrupted, especially because so many social issues have been projected as being able to be solved by the university – for instance, this idea of social mobility. Like, okay, everyone has a chance to move up and down the ladder if you go to higher education and work your butt off. Now, there is…as long as we're in this hierarchical social structure, there is a way the university does offer that, although it depends on the institution and the context and everything else, but we rarely step back and say, "Okay, but is this hierarchical social structure the thing we want?" like [laughing]…because what is the cost of that? So, we…like without sort of realising it I think, reinvest in the existing hierarchical capitalist colonial system and just focus on trying to make that system a little bit more fair, as opposed to stepping back and saying, "Is this really the system we want? Is this the system that's going to offer the most wellbeing for not just the privileged few but for everybody, and not just humans but other than human beings as well?"

Kyra: And I guess why is it not necessarily a case of just simply opting out of these investments and of our own kind of complicity?

Sharon: Yeah. Yeah, that's definitely like…the individual response to those kinds of things is like, "Well, I'm either going to opt out by not being in university or I'm going to be in the university but I'm not going to be, you know, part of the problem." And I think like the first… one thing to name is that we're not that transparent to ourselves. Many of our harmful investments are unconscious and we don't even realise that we have them, but I think there's the layer of like, even when we recognise them, it's not as simple as opting out because we are embedded in this system. Our everyday life is sustained by this system. And I've learned, over the years, that having people, you know, including myself, recognise that the system is harmful and unsustainable does not necessarily lead us to actually do something different. It doesn't necessarily interrupt our investment. It might raise the level of awareness, and there might be part of us that thinks, okay, this is not great, but there's many other parts of us that say, okay, but colonialism is delicious, like it gives me so many benefits, and so I don't actually want to change my behaviour, I don't actually want to give something up. And that goes back to the thing of thinking that this is a problem of

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ignorance rather than a problem of our investment in the things that this violent system offers us.

Kyra: I also wanted to take some time to kind of talk about the workbook that you co-created called 'Developing Stamina', like you said, for decolonising higher education, a workbook for non-Indigenous people, but before we kind of get into that, would you maybe care to just share about what was the kind of motivation behind creating this resource?

Sharon: It was actually more a product of the work that I do with another collective which is the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures collective, and we are an international, intergenerational, interdisciplinary group of artists and activists and educators and knowledge-keepers that are trying to address the educational challenges of actually interrupting both systemic colonial violence and ecological unsustainability. So, this is sort of like our approach to how would we look at the university. And, yeah, it's one of many resources that we have created, but, you know, there's a lot of investment in the kind of pedagogical question of how do we interrupt harmful desires and, as Vivek would say, like… uncoercively rearrange them towards something different, like make the invitation that, you know, this is harmful, number one, and that we're actually missing out on a lot of other [things] that could actually make the continuity of human life on the planet possible [laughing], as opposed to the trajectory we're on which is…it's not looking good for the future of humanity.

Kyra: And I guess, in your own opinion, like what are some of the major differences in approaches to decolonising universities in settler colonies versus in the US and Europe?

Sharon: Yeah. I mean, this is such a good question and I feel not an expert on the Europe side, so I don't know how much I can speak to it, but my sense is that conversations about this, in the European context, are more focused on the afterlives of empire, and slavery to a certain extent, whereas, in the settler colonial context, it's focused on the afterlives of slavery, in a place like the US at least, and the ongoing [fact of settler colonial], i.e. Indigenous dispossession. Of course, the reality is that, even in settler contexts, there were the European empires that were the initial colonisers, but then you don't see those conversations really happening, for instance, in the UK, about their complicity in Indigenous dispossession. I do have a student, Eva Crowson, who's working on this question of like the UK and what's its role in settler colonials in universities, but em…one thing that's common to both sides though, from what I gather, is that there's a lot of watering down of the critique. By the time it actually gets to implementation in universities, it sort of becomes like another diversity, equity and inclusion exercise of like how do we sprinkle in a few more texts from people of colour and recruit a few more racialised faculty, as opposed to actually looking at

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the deep structures of the institution and its imbrication in these histories and ongoing structures of extraction, and whether that's about settler colonisation or imperialism, in many ways, the basic…the basic modes of extraction are similar, and I think that is something that people trying to push for change are coming up against, right, that it's become co-opted by universities, and then that tension of like, okay, it's on the table, so how do I…do I either sort of say, "No, you're getting it all wrong" or do I push a little bit further to try and keep going? And I think, again, that's a question of the context and our positionalities and what we can push, as depending on who we are.

Kyra: No, I completely agree, and I think like one of the things I'm also just trying to articulate in my own writing is, you know, the importance of, like you say, understanding our context when it comes to doing decolonial work in the university, you know, coming from the UK, the colonial power, you know, kind of at the belly of the beast, like I often find myself really having to repeat like why we need to decolonise, even though we aren't in a colony or an ex-colony, and I also think that the British scholarship that is available is slightly earlier in the conversation about kind of contemporary forms of coloniality compared to the South and in the US. So, yeah, like we've really found this workbook really useful in terms of thinking about how to position ourselves and do this work appropriately because, you know, it's not as simple as kind of applying the work that's being done elsewhere to our own project, and I think, you know, with that being said, I also wanted to ask if you could maybe explain the differences between indigenisation and decolonisation because I think that is also really dependent on the context of whoever is speaking about these things and where that comes from.

Sharon: Mm, yeah, that's such a great question. First, I should also say that, in a way, I've been moving away from even talking about decolonisation in my work – like, for instance, the publishers of the book were encouraging me to call it 'Decolonising the University', and I was like, well, number one, it's not even about that, and number two, who am I to write a book about decolonising the university? So…and also because we're just not there yet. So, I've moved towards talking about like confronting colonialism [laughing] and my current work is more like that because it's like that's the first step. We haven't even got to that part. We keep kind of like dipping our toe in and then running away. So, like how do we actually sit with this?

With that being said, there is, especially in what's currently known as Canada and the US, there are more conversations about like what's the difference between indigenisation and decolonisation, and it really depends on who you ask. And I think that's another thing that I try to emphasise in my work, is that we often assume we're talking about the same thing, but we could mean very different things by the term "decolonisation" and I've tried to, with my colleagues, map some of those different understandings, and it's a little bit in the book

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as well, towards the end. But I think…particularly when it comes to like settler colonies, indigenisation is very much trying to like centre the leadership and the knowledges of Indigenous peoples, and that's a process that absolutely must be Indigenous-led, and there is maybe a small role for settlers in terms of supporting those initiatives, and understanding their importance and creating space by stepping back and ceding space that we have stolen initially. And then decolonisation is not just about including and centring Indigenous knowledges but actually dismantling, or at least interrupting, and then perhaps dis-investing from the colonial systems that we have established. And there's definitely a role for everybody in that, but, again, it depends on who we are. And there's definitely a trend of settlers trying to, again, lead in decolonisation because we're so used to assuming that we know the answers and we should be the leaders, and it's really hard to step back and say, okay, it's not me or…and maybe actually what we're centring is like this question of how do we move toward collective wellbeing, but understanding there's a need for reparations and rematriation of Indigenous lands, and I think that's another step people want to skip, like they want to skip the hard stuff and the painful stuff – settlers do at least – and then there's the insistence by Indigenous peoples and other peoples that, no, decolonisation is going to be uncomfortable, it is going to require you to give something up, and that's why we say like developing stamina for that. And it's not…I think there's some people that assume we know what decolonisation will look like and want to have the answer ahead of time, especially settlers, because they're like, well, if I'm going to agree to this, I need to know what I'm agreeing to – and the reality is, we don't know, like it's a process that unfolds. And how do we emphasise the integrity of that process of moving slowly together toward something different, as opposed to let's decide now what it looks like and then force everybody to come with us, but rather like weaving this possible future together in a way that is going to be really hard, but, in my mind, again, when I think about the scale of the climate crisis, we don't have a choice [laughing]! And that's…well, we can maybe talk about that when we talk more about relationships I guess…

Kyra: Well, that was actually going to be my next question, you know, with the understanding that this work is intellectual, effective and relational, do you think there is potential for our relationships with one another to be decolonial, and, I guess, what is even required from us to kind of make that happen?

Sharon: Yeah. It's a great question again. I mean, one of the people that I often refer to about this is an Indigenous environmental philosopher, Kyle White, and he has a lot of work about Indigenous approaches to the climate crisis, and one of those analyses is like…it seems like a new crisis to settlers because the system isn't working for them so far, but for Indigenous peoples, this has been a crisis since the beginning of colonialism, which, you know, has always been entangled with the changing climate. So, one of his analyses is that, you know, a root cause of colonial climate change relationships that are built on extraction and denial of responsibility and accountability to each other, and that's what allowed, or

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allows, settlers to exploit people, to extract resources, to dispossess people, without having, you know, an ethical crisis. So, he says that often in like climate change discourse we're worried about this ecological tipping point, after which we will have, you know, no possibility of sort of turning back, and he says, yeah, that's concerning, but there's also this relational tipping point, that we actually crossed centuries ago, of not fulfilling our responsibilities to each other, and he says what we really need to focus on is repairing this relational violence toward each other and toward the land if we want to move somewhere different, and he says that needs to be grounded in trust, respect, reciprocity, consent and accountability. And those things, of course, also mean different things to different communities, and that has to be centred, but he's like…there's one way of approaching the climate crisis, which is focusing on the ecological tipping point and what sort of technologies and policies we need in order to avoid that, but the way it's going, those policies and technologies are reproducing the same colonial violences and the same relational harm. If we focused on building relationships that are actually generative, we would be much better prepared actually to face the crises that we're facing because we would be able to move in coordinated action with each other in ethical and accountable ways. I don't think it's really either/or of course – like we need to pay attention to ecological and relational tipping points, but I think there's so much built into the Western ontology about separation and individualism that we have forgotten that we are…not just like connected to each other, which suggests we're separate and then we get connected, but we're actually part of each other in everything. And this of course gets taken up in New Age circles in problematic ways where it's like, "Yes, we're all one – why are we fighting? I'm connected to the trees and the whales." Yes, you are, and you're also connected to the violence and the atomic bombs and the guns and everything else. So, how do we recognise our connection to and accountability to everything, and how would that change how we approach these problems? But it's a huge shift, and it's not just an intellectual shift. Again, it's like actually…a shift in our guts [laughing], in our sense of I need to do this thing, even when it's uncomfortable and maybe goes against what I thought was my self-interest. And that shift of not just changing the mind but changing the guts is something that we work on in the [Gesturing Towards] Decolonial Future collective, and it's…it's a difficult question [laughing]!

Kyra: So, I guess, what advice would you give to educators who are kind of in the beginning stages of trying to decolonise their curriculum content, their pedagogies, their relationships, like what you were just talking about? How do those relationships manifest in the classroom?

Sharon: Yeah. I mean…well, the first thing I think is just to like tell people that this is a marathon, it's not a sprint [laughing]. And, again, we're going to waste a lot of time and resources, and probably create more harm, if we think we have quick fixes to this and if we think we already have the answers, so we need to definitely develop that stamina and develop… It's not like you need certain knowledge, but we need certain dispositions or

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capacities that will allow us to approach this work differently and continue it, even when it gets difficult - because, usually, people are happy to along with it, until it gets hard. You know, they get really excited in the beginning and there's this like, "Ooh yeah, we're going to fix everything…" and blah, blah, blah, blah, and then there's usually a crash when there's some conflict or when something doesn't go as expected, and then we get stuck in this like pit of like, "Oh, there's no point – I'm just going to go back to the way things were." But if we can get out of that pit and see we have no choice but to keep going, and then we will still have the ups and downs, but it will be less dramatic if we can develop some of those skills and capacities. And I think that requires like remembering that…we might lose some of the things that we currently value and enjoy, and that's not necessarily because they're being taken away by someone, in many cases, but because the planet can't sustain this. But there's also a lot of possibilities for existence and for wellbeing that are totally unimaginable from within the current system but that could be a way of living together differently. But we're not going to be able to have our cake and eat it too. We can't keep going with these levels of consumption, and our presumed entitlement to…to other people's labour and lands, and have those other possibilities. So, we have a choice to make [laughing]. We don't have a lot of time…like if you look at the projections about, you know, the climate, the climate impacts. So, on the one hand, we don't have a lot of time; on the other hand, we can't rush it. We have to move at the speed of trust.

Kyra: I like how you mention how, you know, we need to make room for the ups and the downs and like making mistakes, and there's actually a diagram that you include in the workbook, which I refer to often whenever I'm like going through something, and I'm just like, you know what, this isn't rock-bottom, this is just a dip in the path [laughing], so we're good. But I guess, for our audience, how can people keep up with the work that's being done and, yeah, how can we keep up with you guys?

Sharon: Yeah. So, our website is decolonialfutures.net and there's a lot of different resources on there. It's not the most user-friendly. It sort of started as like a place for us to work things out. But there's a lot of resources there about, you know, building capacity for these kinds of things, about interrupting harm, about becoming familiar with the good, the bad, the ugly, within ourselves, so that we can face the good, the bad, the ugly of the world, and also developing those capacities to read, again, the context and be read by the context, and various other tools that try and support those different… Again, that's why we say "gestures", like it's Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures. We're not there yet. Our lives and livelihoods are still sustained by violence. But how can we move through all the mistakes to the possibility of something different, which may not necessarily even be better – like we have to make sure that it is [laughing], right? Different isn't always better. So, we try to make tools that people can like do that self-reflexive work of seeing, you know, how did I repeat the same thing I'm trying to interrupt in this work, for instance, and how am I always part of the problem even when I'm trying to solve it?

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Kyra: Thank you. I will include that website link in the podcast description so everyone can go grab it there. So, unfortunately, we're actually coming to an end, but as a question I do like to end on, what would you like to see happen or see develop within higher education in the next 10 years?

Sharon: Yeah. I mean, there's part of me that's hesitant to answer just because I know how it's sort of like…we can only see the next step once we take the first step and then we assess how it went, and, from there, what's the next most responsible small step, and then so on and so forth [laughing]. But I think… And it's less about what I want to see and more about what might be necessary if we want our institutions to remain relevant in a world that's rapidly changing in terms of social movements, in terms of certainly the climate and technology, and many other things. And I think our institutions were not built for this world, and they're not that great at adapting to it. So, when I think about academics, for instance, we will have to learn to disarm our defences, to decentre ourselves and our discipline, and [de-eragantise] ourselves essentially so that we can learn how to coordinate multiple knowledge systems in order to have relevant, rigorous and responsible responses to the wicked challenges that we're facing, as well as recognising our uneven responsibility for creating those challenges, always in a self-implicating way. So, how do we make more space for difficult self-implicating conversations about these issues, and…not try and reach consensus but try and move towards something…slightly more responsible perhaps [laughing], so that we can take this coordinated action to try and address these major issues.

As far as teaching, I think we are going to have to move away from promising hope and promising solutions, especially hope in the continuity of the systems we have now. Because I see a lot of other academics wanting to promise this because we don't know what else to say, and we don't the possibility of something else, and we're worried that, if we don't promise hope, especially hope in what we already have, then students are going to become nihilistic and just feel like, "What's the point?" But then I have students telling me, "We know that this system doesn't work! We can see the world we're going to inherit, and what we're learning isn't always relevant to that world, and it feels like you faculty are in denial about these things and maybe you yourselves are afraid of facing them, so we don't get the space to actually talk about things that are important to us, and we feel like you're infantilising us by not like allowing us to sit with the difficulty." So, how do we move toward a place where we can be real about these things and sit with the difficult truths so that we can learn from our mistakes, so that we can build the stamina and capacities to try and move towards something different? And that's not about teaching any particular knowledge or set of skills, but preparing people in order to face whatever challenges are already here and that are coming. So, there's basically lot of work to be done [laughing]. I'm not always certain that we're up for the challenge, but I think it's worth a shot, you know [laughing].

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Kyra: Absolutely. Thank you so much. Sharon, I can't even express how much of a pleasure it's been to be in conversation with you today. You've answered every question so thoughtfully, and I feel like our listeners will really learn so much from this talk, and, you know, maybe [even be moved like I have]. I want to thank you for the work that you're doing. You inspire us so much in this project, and I hope we can find other ways of collaborating again.

Sharon: Thank you so much for having me.

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