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How Long is Never?

Shoghig Halajian



Geisel Library under construction in late 1969. From "Celebrating the University's Built Environment" in UC San Diego Annual Financial Report 2009-2010

A Conversation with K. Wayne Yang

*K. Wayne Yang's work examines the intersection of education and indigenous futurity. His scholarship articulates how our conception and experience of schooling is shaped by settler colonialism and proposes strategic ways to re-program school towards decolonizing purposes. The following conversation attempts to contextualize his 2017 book, *A Third University is Possible* (University of Minnesota Press), within his larger body of research and community organizing. It took place on April 27, 2019, in the Provost's Office of John Muir College (designed by the modernist architect Robert Mosher) at UC San Diego on the territory of*

the Kumeyaay Nation, where I am currently a student and Wayne a teacher.

Shoghig Halajian: The majority of your work is concerned with how the dynamics of settler colonialism shape the organization, governance, and content of schooling, and how a settler worldview is solidified as the only legitimate form of knowledge. In many ways, your scholarship challenges a common assumption that abolition and decolonization are impractical projects, that they're unimaginable and impossible social programs to carry out. Your writings, including your co-authored texts with the Indigenous Studies scholar Eve Tuck, push against this narrative by pointing to practical strategies towards decolonization.

I'm interested in how this work translates on an institutional and disciplinary level in the university setting. In *A Third University is Possible*, you explore decolonial possibilities in academia and educational institutions at large. Your project reaches for a horizon, calling for another kind of university that is not here yet, but the possibility is. You locate this in the first line, stating: "Within the colonizing university also exists a decolonizing education." How did you get to this idea?

K. Wayne Yang: I heard the prominent postcolonial thinker and Kenyan novelist, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, speak on this idea that within our colonial realities there has always-already been the decolonial. He asked the provocative question: "When is the postcolonial?" Does the postcolonial begin after colonization ends? Or, as he suggests, didn't the postcolonial begin immediately with the first moment of colonization? Wa Thiong'o doesn't treat the postcolonial as "after" colonization, but rather "after the beginning of" colonization—so, in writing about postcolonial realities, he is really writing about the colonial condition. For him, then, the "post"+colonial emphasizes all the resistances against colonization, all the decolonial ways that have endured and evolved, all the lived lives beyond the totalizing narrative of colonial conquest—a narrative that itself serves colonization by propagandizing its own power and implying its own inevitability.

I wish to acknowledge the decolonial present and our own decolonial presence. We need to critique these structures of coloniality, heterosexism, and racism, but we also need to know that they're not totalizing. They never are. These big

institutions—even the modernist concrete college that we're in—are never loyal to the intentions of the master plan. The people within them aren't either. I also wish to acknowledge the people we meet in settings like this, like yourself, as subversives, and to see that we are part of a potential decolonizing collaboration. Indeed, we may already be engaged in decolonizing activities: we are schemers learning from each other. Maybe the decolonizing university is not yet here, not by and large, but we are here, *at large*, fugitively. The possibility for a larger, decolonizing university exists.

The first line of the book, "Within the colonizing university also exists a decolonizing education," is an intimate statement for me. It acknowledges that you and I are sharing breath in this space—in this crack in the concrete—and that you are breathing wisdom into my ear. Your wisdom didn't originate in the institution. That shared moment of breathing is a decolonizing education. My graduate experience should have been terribly oppressive, except that I felt like I was part of a fourth-world school within a first-world one, led by our mentor, Patricia Baquedano-López. Profe taught us many things before,

beyond, and transgressive of the university: from *brujería* to Bushido to being in good relation to one another. Such knowledges are sovereign from the university.

SH: You propose a frame for the university in terms of first-, second-, third-, and fourth-world, and draw from a range of political and intellectual frameworks: including Guillermo Bonfil Batalla's *México Profundo*, which argues that Mesoamerican civilization is an ongoing and undeniable force in contemporary Mexican life, and Third World Feminism's articulation of the "Third World" not merely as a site of domination of the Global North over the Global South but a source of transformative politics. So worlding is the central motif in the book that differentiates between universities and their positions. The first-world university (or "first university") is an institution of land accumulation and dispossession. It's the large neoliberal research university—such as the University of California—that is perpetually expanding in size, raising tuition fees, and exists to produce publications, patents, and prestige. You show us that first universities are deeply intertwined with state policing infrastructures, border control, and militarization, ranging from your study from the Morrill Land Act of

1862—giving acres of Indigenous lands to governments in Union states in order to raise funds for new public universities to educate settlers in agriculture and science—to current day university administrators such as the former U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano, and the former Commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Alan Bersin.

When you move to the "second university," you describe the liberal arts college that is invested in critical theory and self-actualization. To many, critical theory represents a sort of answer to the large research university, but you also unsettle this arena by challenging the belief that improving your personal critical faculties and learning how to deconstruct power somehow contributes to a broader good. You quote Denise Ferreira da Silva who said, "we cannot stay in the work of critique, but we must go *through* critique to get to the work." What does it mean to do deconstruction work while acknowledging that there's this other work we have to get to that is beyond the critique? How can this materialize at an institutional level?

KWY: The "third university" is a critique of the first-world, imperial university—this part

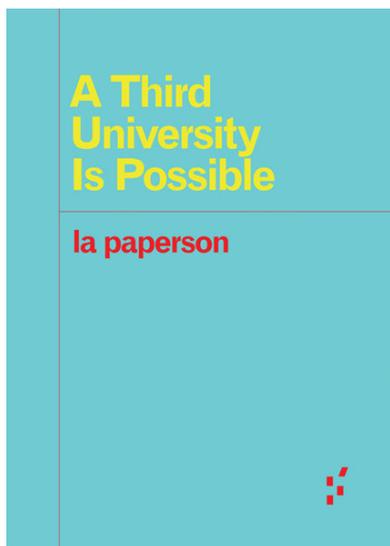
is pretty apparent. But "third" is also meant to critique the self-satisfied liberal agenda of the humanities, or the "second university," which is this whole project of making people more human and adding good to the world, but which fails in making any kind of meaningful alliances and solidarities. The liberal university is the part that fails students of color, for example, with its enlightenment projects and modernist goals that are essentially a kind of benevolent assimilation. It's the "killing me softly" university, tending to position of critical thinking as the prerequisite step to everything, as if we can decolonize our minds and the rest will follow. It claims to "liberate" in a philosophical and individual sense. It's also hopelessly anthropocentric—"human" in the ways Sylvia Wynter critiques the word as not denoting all humans, but an overrepresented "ethnaclass of man." Even the nonhuman turn within the humanities in new materialism is anthropocentric, in the way that human self-effacement is very self-centered. To make this critique more transparent, we might consider how the second-world university is not an Indigenous university, not a place of Black study.

As you said, the "third" acknowledges the legacies of people who have used the

concept of *third-ing*, like Third World Women's movements, Third World Liberation Front, and Third Cinema. I drew heavily from the way that Third Cinema is described as a political project, with the overall meta-project being to imagine a cinema that has a revolutionary, liberatory purpose beyond the representational. That is the audacity of Third Cinema, and we should be audacious in thinking how the university can have decolonizing impact beyond the minds of students. Universities are both knowledge producers and purveyors of legitimated knowledge. But universities are also enterprises: factories, landowners, landlords, land developers. What does it mean to work with those kinds of capitalist powers, disrupting them while trying to make them do something other than their original purpose, which is to consolidate knowledge and to claim expertise?

The third university exists wherever and whenever we are being intentional and deliberate about strategizing decolonization. It's always coming into existence and going out of existence. I don't see the third university as the liberated space that we're trying to get to. I see it as a practical workplace. I don't mean to declare

that some activities are legitimately decolonizing and others are not. Rather it's about having an intentionality that we will do decolonizing work, while knowing that it's messy work. I opened the book with an epigraph from Audre Lorde: "Even when they are dangerous / examine the heart of those machines you hate / before you discard them." May we examine the hearts of academic-industrial-complex machines, find out what decolonizing work they can actually do, and put them to work before we discard them.



SH: Debt in education is a big point of discussion and has been taken up by many theorists including Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, Linda Martín Alcoff, Jeffrey Williams, Sara Ahmed, Curtis Marez, and others. You are also concerned with this expectation that students and their families

can and should take on debt, and how this widespread belief functions as a kind of biopolitical tool that targets the entire youth population.

KWY: People write about debt in amazing ways, and what I'm saying is not different. I chose not to focus as much on how debt is oppressive and exploitative—that is all true. But what I'm emphasizing is how frighteningly expansive debt is. Anyone can go into debt and therefore anyone can be a student. Debt is the fuel of the academic-industrial-complex. In the past, if you were poor, you might get a scholarship at the benevolence of the institution or some donor. But now you can borrow money. There's no benevolence needed. The expansiveness of student debt resembles other industrial complexes, like the military-industrial complex or the prison-industrial complex. The debt-enabled population is a total horizon—that is, the imperial university imagination is that everyone is a potential debtor and student.

The university is expanding because it's falling apart. It's running out of money all the time, and the only way to stay in business is to expand. Like an empire that is decaying in the center, it needs to keep pushing its

frontiers. We see this at every level, from increasing research grants to new construction to swelling enrollments to capturing students online. There may be a few select universities that are insulated from this because they have huge endowments and they'll never run out of money, but for the most part, the calculus of university expansion is very much like the actuarial calculations for an investment portfolio: How much are we getting from in-state tuition? How much are we getting from international and out-of-state tuition? How much are we getting by just expanding our numbers because we can expand our enrollments faster than our faculty? Enrollment growth means that we'll always be slightly over capacity, and students will get less than what they're paying for. The alternative is a withering, dying university. For instance, UC San Diego has one of the largest applicant pools in the country right now: over one hundred thousand students applied this year, whereas enrollments at traditional liberal arts colleges are shriveling up. UCSD has an imperial investment portfolio, whereas liberal arts colleges follow a different model, a second university model, a withering model.

SH: This year we witnessed student groups from various campuses across California

protest increases in tuition. Concurrently, media and public discourse picked up on college admission fraud scandals, reaffirming a reality that education in this country is catered to the wealthy. If you don't have the funds for tuition, then there's the inducement for excessive debt. I work as a Teacher's Assistant for my department, and one of my undergraduate students recently told me that he had to take time off from school because he could no longer afford the \$12,000 *quarterly* fee, which includes his living and material expenses. I was stunned to hear this dollar amount, and disappointed that I didn't know earlier. How does this reality inform how you're thinking of the university?

KWY: It's evolving really fast, and similar to what Angela Davis said recently about her writing on prisons in the '70s and '80s. She said that back then, we didn't predict how big they would become, even though she was already writing against it and against expansion. She said we had no idea prisons would reach this scale. I think that's how the university is right now. Nobody really understands how huge this academic bubble is. The difference is that no one wants to go to prison, but everyone is programmed to want school.

We're living in a science fiction future. And people are being made into cyborgs—if you're lucky, you get to be made into a cyborg. You're going to borrow money and pay for the cyborg surgery yourself. You do it to yourself with hopes that this will get you a job. You have students who want to become artists, and they go to art school and take on debt even though there's rarely any financial profit in artmaking. The Art Institutes were recently shut down, including campuses around San Diego. So many people are distressed that their art school has abruptly closed: they've invested so much in it, but no one sees it as liberation. No one says, I'm free now that my art school got shut down. People still desire to participate in this, to mortgage themselves for cyborg parts, even though the machinery is so obviously exploitative.

SH: I was first introduced to your work through a text that you co-authored with Eve Tuck, titled "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor" (published in *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 2012). At the time, my cohorts and I were developing a UC grant-funded group, called Interrogating the Archive, which explores new research methodologies for tracing the lives of communities and objects that are

systematically subject to erasure by dominant cultural paradigms. A faculty advisor sent us this essay, which had a huge impact on our writing and thinking, fundamentally challenging how we understood decolonial theory, specifically in projects that claim a decolonial agenda. You both assert that decolonization is not a metaphor for other improvements we want to make in societies, even if they're moving towards social justice ends. Instead, it's a project that should return—*rematriate*—Indigenous land and life. Your article outlines how a liberal theoretical use of the term decolonization makes a set of evasions possible that ultimately reconcile settler guilt, but do not necessarily further an Indigenous futurity. In your discussion of the school, you continue this line of thought and make a strong distinction between the *decolonized* university and the *decolonizing* university. Can you speak about this?

KWY: A lot of people talk about the need to decolonize ourselves, decolonize our education, decolonize this or that: the object of the decolonization is ourselves or education or the university. It implies that it's a process that can actually be achieved and concluded. So, a "decolonized university" sounds like a liberated university,

a better university, and some sort of endpoint where you rescue the university. I don't want to be aggressive about terminology because people can use the word however they want. But I prefer switching from a decolonized university to a decolonizing university, which changes the university from the object to the subject of the verb: a university that decolonizes, a student who decolonizes. How do we imagine education that does something, that practices decolonization, rather than one that we've cleaned up enough to call it decolonized? Don't get me wrong; I too want a liberating curriculum that doesn't do as much harm. But ultimately that's not the only thing I care about. Can we make a university that rematriates land? Here at UC San Diego we are on Kumeyaay land. One meaning of Kumeyaay is "those who face the water from a cliff"—UC San Diego is built on those very cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean. How can we return the people to the cliffs, and return the cliffs to the people?

Can we return all this land to Indigenous stewardship and Indigenous futures? I think we actually can. I think we can work in that direction. The land doesn't care if we take a hundred years or one year—humans care. Once we get on that path, then we've

already secured the future, and that is what's so beautiful about it. In the future, decolonization is already a fact. I see this in land projects: for instance, in Oakland, Indigenous people may not own this plot of land, but they *are* stewarding it, and, in the way things are going, the land will always be under Indigenous care. So, the idea of property no longer even matters—ownership is a technicality at that point. I feel like we can do that kind of work.

I believe that everything in the book actually isn't coming from the university: I think it all originates outside. In my work with Eve, who is Unangan and the Canada Research Chair of Indigenous Methodologies at the University of Toronto, we are looking at the fourth-world heart inside the third-world machinery. We are not trying to rescue the university and make it a better, more livable place. We are here temporarily because there's an opening, a portal, some plugs that we can jack into and we're going to do whatever decolonizing work we can while we're here. One of the things we have assembled is the Land Relationships Super Collective, a collective of collectives who work on land-based projects across North America. We connect The Underground Center in Saugerties, New York (working on

viable alternative and autonomous ways of living), to the Sogorea Te' Land Trust in Oakland (an urban, Indigenous women-led community organization that facilitates the return of Chochenyo and Karkin Ohlone lands in the San Francisco Bay Area to Indigenous stewardship) to the Black/Land Project (documenting Black relationships to land that are otherwise disavowed because of how antiblackness positions Black people as place-less). All of this work is informing my writing, with old ideas but new ways of making them felt, and this feeling is driving me.

Rather than try to create a liberated university where we feel like freedom is real, how do we just do the work of freedom? I think it's in acknowledging that a third university is not a home, not a destination, not a liberated zone. It's a moving machine and we have seized its controls (and not for long). It's a colonial space but also one with some amount of privilege and access, and we should use it. Radicals don't believe in incremental reform, but I think there can be slow radicalism where change is fundamental. I think about this as a metaphor from science fiction again. If you could make a time machine—if we started making it today and achieved it a hundred

years from now—it's the same as achieving it today. Because a hundred years from now they'll travel back in time and they'll say, "Hey, we did it." I see decolonizing work this way. Some things are so fundamental that once you're on the path, it's almost already accomplished. People say we're never going to get there, and I say, "How long is never?"

SH: I also want to point out that you experiment with what academic or theoretical writing and authorship can look like: you write as yourself; you write collaboratively; and you also write under the pseudonym, la paperson, who is the cited author of *A Third University is Possible*, not K. Wayne Yang. This is both a theoretical project but also a formally and strategically speculative one, no?

KWY: la paperson is not quite me, even though s-he is me. I'm writing the words, but I'm trying to be accountable to the ones writing through me: grandmothers-not-my-own, and grandchildren-not-my-bearing. My academic training was in education studies, which is disciplinary, very much influenced by the social sciences and psychology. When I started writing, I had difficulty publishing certain texts. For example, I was examining these questions of ghetto colonialism, and I

didn't feel like I was supposed to do that as a social scientist. But la paperson was the one who could do that work. I published an article on the question of "What is a ghetto?" What does that mean? What is ghetto colonialism? I realized that I could only do it, and finish it, if it were written by someone else wiser than me. That's part of the initial impetus.

In the book, when I state, "cite me not, and ghost-ride this book," I'm attempting to move away from authorship, to write without claiming. I'd like to think of this book as not my original work. When I think about avatars and la paperson, I think about the idea of a mentor from *The Odyssey*. Odysseus' best friend is named Mentor, who is not actually with him on the journey but is waiting for him back home in Ithaca. While desperately lost at sea, Odysseus is visited by Athena, who appears to him in the form of Mentor. So, a mentor is the goddess of wisdom and war who speaks to you through the voice of a trusted friend. S-he appears in this fe-male-gendered form and reveals little bits of wisdom and strategy. My role as a writer, academic, and teacher is not to pretend to create new, proprietary ideas. I'm actually just sharing things that I have heard and learned from other people. The

grandmothers told it to me, but it was meant for you.

K. Wayne Yang is a scholar and activist who works in urban education, critical pedagogy, and anti/de/post+colonial theory. He is Professor of Ethnic Studies and Provost of Muir College at UC San Diego. His research examines community organizing for school reform and efforts at self-determination in urban settings. Yang was the cofounder of East Oakland Community High School, and the cofounder of the Avenues Project, a youth development nonprofit organization. Some of his community collaborations include the Land Relationships Super Collective, the Black Teacher Project, and Indigenous Regeneration.

GEORGIA