Abolish the University: Build the Sanctuary Campus

David L. Clark
McMaster University[1]

> The pursuit of knowing was freedom to me.
> –Ta-Nahesi Coates, *Between the World and Me*
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> We must work and insist and repeat and invent and never give up.
> —Hélène Cixous, *Perpetual Peace Project*

As a longtime professor of humanities who has taught in four universities in two countries, it may seem strange to call for the abolition of the very institution that has given and continues to give so very much to me. But that is precisely what I am saying. Why? Simply put, universities are facing unprecedented levels of agonized distress: anxious and dispirited students, precariously employed faculty, and over-worked and under-resourced staff all make for a disillusioned and disillusioning mess. Manifestly unjust structures of oppression that thrum through Canadian society also mar campus life. Racialized exclusion, the looming climate catastrophe, and debilitating levels of indebtedness threaten even the most resourceful and committed students, of which there are very many. At my university, the office devoted to ensuring accessibility to students reports having to make 911 calls each week. The pandemic conditions have only made these fractures and open wounds more legible. There is so much going on that is unnecessarily hurtful and unhealthful on campus, just below or just at the surface of universities that otherwise spend so much time and energy broadcasting messages of success, innovation, achievement, resilience, and excellence. Smart, purposive students who are simply struggling to survive are compelled to endure patronizing university promises of a "brighter future." Brighter, but for whom? While the university gazes into the far off light I am more worried about how to keep the eyes of my students from growing accustomed to the dark. It is time, and long since time, that Canadian campuses stop believing a great part of their own hype and really look at what their citizens are enduring in the work place and in classrooms–time to radically transform the university's priorities, specifically by putting the health and well-being of its people *first*. The harm done to individuals and communities on campus violates the very idea of the public university. To adapt something Immanuel Kant once said as a professor watching

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the youth of Europe destroyed by endless wars, if some campus citizens are harmed, then everyone is harmed.[2] So my question is this: what would the Canadian university look like if it made the labour of frankly addressing the conditions that create that suffering, as well as the affirmation of human capabilities, its very *highest* priorities–higher than our international ranking, our research productivity, or our "excellence." What would a healthy, inclusive, and, indeed, abolitionist university look like, meaning not a university that addresses harm after the fact or as an administrative problem but instead a university for which flourishing, justice, dignity and well-being are given absolute precedence--and therefore guiding all policies and practices from the ground up?

Let us consider abolishing higher education as it is currently organized and administered and replace it with what I will call *the sanctuary university*.[3] The phrase is not mine. Historically speaking, sanctuary universities in the United States and Europe are institutions that offer substantive protections to all members of the campus community who are undocumented immigrants. Sanctuary is activated by a strongly practical sense of what it means to act ethically and to be hospitable. A sanctuary university both teaches and learns how to cede one's place and voice to the needs of others (never a gesture that isn't imbued with power, of course). And by committing itself to that welcoming practice, a sanctuary university itself undergoes an irrevocable transformation.[4]

McMaster University, where I am honoured to work, can learn a lot from the example of the sanctuary university. McMaster could abolish itself and *become* instead a sanctuary campus. I happen to think all universities should offer such protections. Sanctuary should be our default demeanor, how we who work here face and engage the world in which we are so deeply and

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[2] In the Third Definitive Article of Kant's *Toward Perpetual Peace* (1795), the philosopher argues that "a violation of right on *one* place of the earth is felt in *all*." See Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 330.

[3] My colleague, Rodrigo Narro Pérez, has since told me that the idea of a "sanctuary university" has been introduced before at McMaster, a reminder that work devoted to building a more inclusive university has a history on campus and is of course already underway. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call for universities to abolish their racial logics (palpable in everything from their hiring practices to their campus security apparatuses) and so, in a sense, abolish themselves. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, "the university (last words)," https://anthropology.fas.harvard.edu/files/anthrodept/files/the_university_last_words_fred_moten_and_stefano_harney.pdf. See also Abigail Boggs, Eli Meyerhoff, Nick Mitchell, and Zach Schwartz-Weinstein, "Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation," https://abolition.university/invitation/

[4] Elsewhere I have explored the possibilities of a university that declared "hospitality" to others and otherness to be its primary orientation. See David L. Clark, "'Can the university stand for peace? Omar Khadr, Higher Education, and the Question of Hospitality," *The New Centennial Review* 18.2 (2018): 283–346. http://davidlclark.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Can-the-University-Stand-for-Peace.pdf This lengthy essay falls into two movements. In the first section I discuss the importance of the public university addressing the question of suffering and learning to be more consequentially hospitable, i.e., welcoming and supportive; in the second section I discuss working with students to develop an anti-Islamophobic practice of hospitality.

complexly embedded. A sanctuary university offers the chance to flourish not only to undocumented immigrants but also to everyone who seeks a place in its midst: as members of the university community, it is our job, or it *should* be our job, continuously to adapt to the needs of others and pro-actively to create the conditions that welcome all others, that publicly and unashamedly declares that the university mitigates harm, sheltering and nurturing the widest possible range of human capabilities and solidarities. –Not as a matter of policy, to be punted to isolated initiatives and under-resourced services, but as a matter of *principle*, by which I mean governing everything the university does and says that it is. So I'm proposing that we adapt this worthy phrase, "sanctuary university," and use it to describe and to anchor a much more purposively inclusive campus that makes the health and well-being of its citizens, and thus the abolition of the conditions that stand in the way of meeting these desiderata, its most cherished objective. Because it is structured by a fundamental obligation to do good and to do justice, and because it is structured by a principle rather than a policy, a sanctuary university strives to be cruelty-free.

Every person on campus, whether staff, students, or faculty, *deserves* to be treated with dignity and respect, and *deserves* to work in conditions committed to fairness and safety, and *deserves* to teach and learn in ways that embrace the extraordinarily different ways in which people experience and understand this strange thing called "education." We who call ourselves professors know these things to be undeniably true; we differently feel this ethical imperative in our bodies and souls, whether we are ourselves subjected to aggression, violence, danger, exclusion, disrespect, indifference, or whether we observe these injuries inflicted on others, both on and off campus. So why don't we work in a university that more readily recognizes these facts and, rather than repeating well-meaning platitudes about inclusiveness, offers real and lasting sanctuary? Why don't we work in a university that organizes itself in both large and small ways to ensure that everyone can do so much more than merely survive, whether as workers or teachers or learners?

Various important initiatives and services at Canadian universities are available whose objective is to address suffering and affirm human flourishing. Thank goodness for each and every one of these efforts, and thank goodness too for those thousand everyday acts of caring compassion that so often go unrecognized by everyone but the ones to whom succor and encouragement is offered. –Thank goodness, I say, meaning that being answerable to something like the affirmation of the good activates many of our best practices on campus. But as anybody working compassionately with others on campus knows, whatever good we are doing, and a great deal of good is being done, it is often too little, too reactive, and with too few resources, whether we are talking about heroic staff striving to ensure equity, diversity, and inclusion on campus, to labour leaders trying as best they can to address the needs of members whose work is cutting them to the quick, to exhausted professors (too often, disproportionately female professors) struggling to absorb the concerns of their distraught students. What feels on the ground to be the most important question that we could be addressing is not the most important question from the

perspective of the university's "visioning statements" whose very nature is to look far off rather than to tarry with the human cost of what got us to the place where we are today. I'm suggesting that all this needs to change and change quickly. In a way, we are at best forced to work in a *triaged* university, treating inequity and suffering on campus as a local emergency rather than a chronically debilitating condition and a sorrowful part of the everydayness of campus life. That's stupid. That's inhumane. That's deeply unfair. And it would be in any context, but we are talking about a triage mentality operating at the heart of an institution that otherwise lays claim to being a city on the hill, a beacon of enlightenment and progress rallied around evidence-based learning. I happen to work at a university that rightly prides itself on the power and prestige and creativity of its health sciences but I also work at a university in which the health and well-being of its *own* citizens is not treated like a governing principle or an ethical obligation that must be met and met unapologetically and without fail. A sanctuary university is a university that welcomes others, creates the conditions of human flourishing; it makes promises about ensuring the health and well-being of its citizens and then acts on those promises everywhere and at every level.

None of what I am saying here is in fact new. Generations of anti-oppression activists, many speaking from places of exclusion and pain, have pressed for the transformation of the university into a more just, equitable, and healthful place. Advocacy groups, student organizations, labour leaders, care-givers, and thoughtful administrators have repeatedly called for the university not simply to manage its inequalities but to abolish them in the name of fairness and dignity. My suggestion is that those summons to action need now, more than ever, to be treated as adding up to something wrenchingly transformational, beginning with a full and frank acknowledgement of the structures of oppression and wounding harm that thrum through the society that is the public university.

McMaster University has recently embraced a new "visioning statement:" *Advancing human and societal health and well-being*. I have a lot of problems with this motto, not least of which is how it disappears humanistic forms of inquiry that would turn the university's attention to all that has been sacrificed and lost in the name of advancement, including the advancement of the "right" kind of being "human." But if we are a public university that is considering branding itself in this putatively novel way, and a public university worthy of the name, why on earth would we not *begin* by acting on the promise that we are a sanctuary university, that is, an institution that on principle shelters and affirms the idea that we support the health and well-being of our own citizens, while also promoting the health and well-being of unnamed others–in other words, that we are willing and able to practice what we preach? If we are university educators, then how can we not believe in the educability of the university, beginning with our university? It seems absurd to me, and grossly hypocritical, to discuss our university's global mission as one devoted to human flourishing without exemplifying that commitment everywhere on campus, especially for our existing and prospective students, especially those who think and learn and exist in the world in unconventional ways. Let us begin this work by not looking longingly towards the future and instead tarrying with what we have done and what we have failed to do.

To describe itself as a sanctuary campus, universities would need to attend actively and pro-actively to the thriving of all those who make it work; a sanctuary university a deep sense of welcome and belonging not one concern among many but instead a *primary* concern, a catalyst for sustained and sustaining change, and a common standard against which to measure each and every policy decision, university directive, program design, mission statement, condition of employment, teaching and learning practice, and student, staff, and faculty experience. A sanctuary university is a university that understands the health and well-being of its staff, students, and faculty to be much more than an administrative question, calling for managerial solutions. Such solutions, such operationalizations, are of course necessary. But the point here is to imagine and then to create a university that isn't reducible to managerialism when, after all, the very lives of its citizens are on the line. Affirming dignity is after all not a strategic plan but a way of being-together. A sanctuary university treats the practice of welcoming its citizens as an *existential* question, one lying at the heart of what higher education is and can be. It is a place that shelters the labour of connecting health and well-being, always in intersectional ways, to other pressing social and cultural concerns, from white supremacy to economic inequality to the climate change to the injurious effects of settler-colonialism, racism, homophobia, sexism, among other gaping wounds in the social body and therefore in the body of the university. I hasten to add that focusing on health and well-being is not an "opportunity" for the university to exploit, i.e., in the name of increasing productivity, but instead a means by which to radically reconsider what on earth, amid the ongoing ravages of the 21st century, a university is good for.

A sanctuary university is not, strictly speaking, a *refuge*, not an escape from the world but is instead much more candidly and courageously a university that speaks *to* the world and *of* the world, modeling for others what the great American feminist philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, calls "a capabilities approach" and an "ethics of care"–an approach and an ethics that jettisons the deracinating notion of individuals as isolated atoms and instead embraces the irreducible interdependence of life on and off campus. A sanctuary university says loudly and clearly, for all to hear, that university is not *The Hunger Games*, not a place in which the strong are winnowed from the weak, not a place where you are expected to survive rather than thrive, not a place where every person is assumed to sink or swim mostly on their own initiative. Compassion, not compliance, should be the instructive principle. A sanctuary university makes room, course by course, program by program, class by class, for students to falter, waver, circle back, catch their breath, miss the mark, and fail. . . but to experience these set-backs, which, after all, are endemic to education that is worthy of the name, not in solitude, much less embarrassment or shame but surrounded by helping hands and understanding ears. A sanctuary university does everything it can to abolish the conditions that lead to feelings of isolating disgrace or experiences of neglectful invisibility, and thus the terrific toll that such wounds take on mental and physical health. A sanctuary university embraces new languages, new idioms with which to practice and experience teaching, including joy, care, pleasure, compassion, humility, and love. Yes, there is room, indeed, lots and lots of room, for *love* in teaching and learning. Let us not flinch from this word, so important, after all, to what it means to thrive and to grow; let us not dismiss it too

quickly as "sentimental" or "inappropriate," i.e., a word that cannot possibly be meaningful to administrators and managers and educators, not useful or operative in an institution founded on rational inquiry. No, a sanctuary university puts love–and therefore mutuality and humility–at the centre of the classroom experience and at the heart of program administration. At a sanctuary campus, being cherished by others and learning to cherish oneself are deeply connected to falling in love with knowledge. Learning in love and with love will always take precedence, finally, over a student's competence in a particular subject. Can the university stand for that arduous possibility? Can it withstand all the solidarities and intellectual energies that would be released in the classroom that was activated by compassion, pleasure, and love? As Rebecca Gagan, a Teaching Assistant Professor at the University of Victoria wisely says in a recent podcast, "Waving, Not Drowning," "teaching and learning with love" is vitally important in a world in which so many, including so many Indigenous children, were taught in schools cruelly emptied of love.[5] In the ongoing shadow of those atrocities, and as one small way to recognize those losses, let us imagine our classrooms and our workplaces completely anew.

If the pandemic has taught me anything as a professor it is the importance of teaching and learning in love and with love. Notwithstanding the deracinating conditions in which my students are currently living, I must not forget what it means to love teaching, to love learning, to model for others what it means to love knowledge, and to try as best as I can, even through the tiny aperture of a web-cam, to ensure that students feel free to experience their education as a labour of love–brimming with difficulty and worry and heartbreak, yes, but also joy and pleasure and hope. It wouldn't be love, true love, without experiencing all of those tumultuous things. A sanctuary university welcomes love as the unruly stranger to education who ends up totally renovating the host. The pandemic has in many ways mutated higher education; but to me that only means that the university is also fully capable of altering itself–and for the Good. A sanctuary university, a university of humility, re-examines and then transforms itself, from top to bottom, from management styles to curricula, from work-place conditions to the makeup of committees, from the labour negotiations to how faculty conduct classes and conduct themselves in classes. A sanctuary university is characterized by patience, sheltering a place for experimentation in the adoption of new and more purposefully humane solidarities, administrative styles, course designs, program structures, testing strategies, performance indicia, among many other things. If the sanctuary university is to have a motto it should come in the form of an open-ended provocation about the present rather than an confident announcement about the future: "In the midst of our individual fears, what are our shared responsibilities?"

Let me conclude by emphasizing again that by sanctuary university I do not mean a university

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[5] I owe the idea of "teaching and learning in love" to Professor Rebecca Gagan, who discusses the question in the latter part of her podcast, "Introduction: Waving, Not Drowning." https://anchor.fm/uvic-bounce/episodes/Introducing-Waving--Not-Drowning-epa82d. The phrase's origins lie in Indigenous wisdom. As Professor Gagan notes, she learned the phrase from Andrea Cranmer, Co-founder and Group Leader, Tŝasała Cultural Group. https://www.tsasalaculturalgroup.ca www.cultureshocklife.com and www.umista.ca. .

that offers "refuge"–that is, a bubble into which to withdraw or hide. Now, offering "refuge" is a marvelous practice in a world where there is far too little of it. Speaking personally, school for me was always a place of shelter, hugely anxiety producing, yes, but also a source of solace and stability in an otherwise unfeeling and alienating world. But a sanctuary university is not a cloister; no, by sanctuary I mean a Shiloh, meaning a "place of peace," remembering that peaceableness is not a sabbatical from demanding queries and piercingly critical thinking but the condition of their concerted and unending intensification. By sanctuary I mean a university that is fully *engaged* with the world, with many worlds, a place that gives capacious and spacious room to "difficult knowledge,"[6] unbearable questions,[7] counter-intuitive ideas, and the thoughts that unsettle and disrupt our deepest held assumptions about the world. A sanctuary university is quickened through and through by a demonstrable commitment to fostering diverse strengths, histories, hopes, and solidarities, identities and doing so not as some abstract "mission," to be replaced by another "mission" with the coming of another senior administration, but as a matter of *principle*, meaning, a specifically ethical commitment to the affirmation of difference and the alleviation of the conditions of suffering that cannot waver because it is structured into the very fabric of the university.

David L. Clark is Professor in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University, where he is also Associate Member of the Department of Health, Aging, and Society and a member of the Council of Instructors of the Arts and Science Program.

dclark@mcmaster.ca

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[6] I borrow the now widely taken up term "difficult knowledge" from the influential educational theorist, Deborah Britzman. See, for example, Deborah P. Britzman and Alice Pitt, "Speculation on qualities of difficult knowledge in teaching and learning: An experiment in psychoanalytic research," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* (2003) 16(6):755-776.

[7] The "unbearable question" is the generative and disruptive opening to entirely new regions of knowledge that "the Stranger" brings to ancient Greek philosophy in Plato's dialogues. For a discussion of the "unbearable question," see, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000).