

# **The Planetary Urbanization of Kantsaywhere: Urban Competition, Education, and the New Eugenics<sup>1</sup>**

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*Submitted for consideration as part of City special issue, 'The Urban Process Under Planetary Accumulation by Dispossession'*

We live in a world in which urbanization has now become truly planetary. We live in a world shaped by the acceleration of three circulatory processes: capital, code, and competition. These things are not unrelated. They intersect vividly in the domain of education, where we get a glimpse of the future of knowledge production and the production of knowledge workers of the future.

## **Scenes from the 'Place of Mind'**

Here are a few visions of this world. The first comes from Dr. Jenny Hoffman, a Harvard physicist recently recruited to the Quantum Matter Institute of the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver, Canada. UBC is an upstart university, and one right at the pivot to a Pacific Century of cosmopolitan planetary capitalism. Speculative, imaginative futurism has always been our competitive edge out here on the Pacific Coast of North America. Sir Peter Hall always saw something strange and unique going on out here “at the leading edge of the entire western world,”<sup>2</sup> and so did Manuel Castells, when they were first studying the convergence of new social movements and new information technologies back in the 1960s and 1970s. But now the University of British Columbia has finally reached the centennial mark, and so UBC Communications and Marketing launches a series, called ‘The Next 100 Years.’ They ask faculty, “If you could transport yourself to the future, what would you be teaching / researching in 100 years?”

Here’s how Dr. Hoffman, the Quantum Matter specialist, responds:

“One hundred years from now, we will all wear embedded devices that turn a thought into an internet search, providing instantaneous information directly into our brains. Memorization will be obsolete, so instead of preparing lecture slides, I

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<sup>1</sup> We are grateful for valuable comments and questions from panelists and audience members at the *City* sessions at the 2016 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers (San Francisco) and at the Urban Affairs Association (San Diego). Thanks also to Tom Howard for insightful suggestions that have helped to clarify the argument.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Hall (1996). “It All Came Together in California: Values and Role Models in the Making of a Planner.” *City* 1/2, 4-12, quote from p. 4. Hall’s particular focus is California, and he identifies the late 1960s as the “high-water mark of a certain self-created myth,” in words that look simultaneously prescient and slightly naive when viewed from the vantage point of the predatory Wall Street flash trading algorithms, NSA surveillance ecosystems, and Oculus Rift innovation obsessions that are the legacy of Silicon Valley: “I am conscious of suffering from a catastrophic inability to convey any idea of how California felt in the late 60s, when it was somehow at the leading edge of the entire western world. I doubt whether any part of the world, ever since, has packed such an extraordinary emotional punch, a feeling of place that was leading the world in technology, in economic achievement, in the forging of a new and different lifestyle.” Hall, p. 4.

would be free to focus my energy entirely on the more important, human roles of mentorship and inspiration.”<sup>3</sup>

Other visions of this world come from the instantaneous present directly into our brains, sans embedding devices. As with so many universities around the world, UBC is now an aggressive, entrepreneurial player in the market for international students. But in the strange field of transcultural capital where raising prices increases demand by signaling exclusivity and prestige, UBC has always been too cheap. The Board of Governors recently moved to correct this problem, hiking international tuition by 47 percent over three years. Several student organizations mobilized to try to challenge the decision, and one student’s protest placard stood out: “I’m international! We’re not rich! Don’t stereotype us!”<sup>4</sup>

There’s the rub. Our university, like so many others, is doing everything it possibly can to defy this student, to pursue the rich and only the rich. Middle-class and working-class students do gain admission, but that is most certainly *not* the target market. UBC’s focus is tomorrow’s rich – the diverse competitors of Richard Florida’s 3-T formula of ‘technology, talent, and tolerance,’ the planetary pioneers that Kwame Anthony Appiah has called “cosmopolitan patriots.”<sup>5</sup> All the evidence – or at least the evidence that cannot be suppressed in the name of Anglo Canadian polite denials of class – indicates success. Our motto, “A Place of Mind,” is a starkly de-contextualized blend of Loretta Lees’ concept of “super-gentrification”<sup>6</sup> and Allen Scott’s “cognitive-cultural capitalism.”<sup>7</sup> The flies on the walls of our offices have overheard undergraduates discussing the finer points of stock splits on the liquidity of Berkshire Hathaway shares, plans for holiday weekend shopping excursions (by air, to cities bigger and more important than Vancouver),<sup>8</sup> and thoughtful reflections on how to choose the right neighborhood when buying a condo to fulfill parental expectations ... in a condo market with a benchmark price of Cdn \$475,000.<sup>9</sup> A popular anonymous Tumblr page chronicles the University of Beautiful Cars – images of Bentleys, Ferraris, Lamborghinis, and Rolls Royces on campus, with special attention to those with student parking permits, learner’s permit new driver stickers, and parking tickets; by one estimate, the Vancouver region has the highest per-capita rate of luxury ‘supercar’ ownership in North America.<sup>10</sup> When the Vancouver urban planner Andy Yan

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<sup>3</sup> UBC Communications and Marketing (2016). *The Next 100 Years*. Vancouver, BC: The University of British Columbia.

<sup>4</sup> See Joanna Vranic (2014). “UBC Students Gather for Teach-in on Main Mall.” *The Ubysey*, 16 October, 4-5, photograph on p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah (1997). “Cosmopolitan Patriots.” *Critical Inquiry* 23(3), 617-639.

<sup>6</sup> Loretta Lees (2003). “Super-Gentrification: The Case of Brooklyn Heights.” *Urban Studies* 40(12), 2487-2509.

<sup>7</sup> Allen J. Scott (2011). “Emerging Cities of the Third Wave.” *City* 15(3-4), 289-321; Allen J. Scott (2011). “A World in Emergence: Notes Towards a Resynthesis of Urban-Economic Geography for the 21st Century.” *Urban Geography* 32(6), 845-870.

<sup>8</sup> Student weekend and vacation escapes are, of course, now a routine part of university life for many students in Europe. Yet the constraints of old-fashioned geography still apply, and so this phenomenon takes on a very different meaning in Vancouver: there’s no cheap Ryanair option, and the best exclusive shopping destinations – London, Paris, Hong Kong, New York, Shanghai – are made even more exclusive by the costs of time and distance.

<sup>9</sup> Joanna Lee-Young (2016). “Condo Sales Spike in Metro Vancouver as Affordability Tanks” *The Province*, 26 May.

<sup>10</sup> Ian Young (2015). “Chrome Ferraris and Camo Lamborghinis: A Wild Ride Through the Streets of Vancouver.” *South China Morning Post*, 17 March. More detailed data come from automobile registrations disclosed by the

analyzed six months' worth of home sales in the neighborhoods right next to the University, he found a median sales price of Cdn \$2.6 million, and there were more land titles listing the occupation "Student" than physicians or lawyers.<sup>11</sup> A recent single-family home transaction a few blocks away from the UBC campus closed for Cdn \$31 million, and the buyer – occupation, 'student' –disclosed no source of regular income.<sup>12</sup> South of campus, UBC is constructing an entire neighborhood – 12,000 residents upon completion – marketed to "those wanting access to unprecedented educational opportunities in a world class natural setting"; this setting includes some of the highest-ranked secondary schools in the entire province, and the promise from real estate agents that these schools will lead children to acceptance at UBC.<sup>1314</sup>

But those flies on the wall have also heard students in tears, unable to concentrate on tests or papers because they're struggling to make their tuition payments to the Orwellian-named Financial 'Services' office, or to the landlords of this city's red-hot predatory real-estate market. They've seen tears from graduate students (facing the same rent pressures), who have come to the awful realization that their hourly wages decline precipitously from their Teaching Assistant rates when they assume full responsibility for teaching their own courses; they remain on the hook for thousands in tuition just the same. And there is also fear from students who see the divisiveness caused by the international student tuition hike producing "us" versus "them" narratives within classroom discussions and the student body more generally. Here we see the polarizing, trickle-down effects of an aspirational university's quest to attract the global elite. It was an honor, then, for one of us to be invited to speak at a teach-in, to be a modest witness for

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provincial insurance corporation; registrations for high-end brands (Bentley, Lamborghini, Maserati, Maybach, and Rolls Royce) nearly doubled in Metro Vancouver between 2000 and 2010, while total population increased only 7 percent. For the Executive Director of the Vancouver International Auto Show, the market is ideal: "We are a world-class city, at the end of the day, and there's a lot of offshore money that comes in. A lot of the cars have 'N' stickers (for new drivers) on the back of \$600,000 or \$700,000 cars ... You see them in any neighbourhood you're in, but you do see a lot at the bottom of SFU hill and out at UBC, so it's a lot of students." Quoted in Dan Fumano (2016). "Metro's Love of Ritzy Rides Accelerating." *Vancouver Sun*, March 23, p. C3.

<sup>11</sup> Andy Yan (2015). *Ownership Patterns of Single-Family Home Sales on West Side Neighborhoods of the City of Vancouver: A Case Study*. Vancouver, BC: BTA Works, Bing Thom Architects. For more than twenty years, Vancouver's real-estate growth machine has been developing into an especially transnationalized configuration – first with major developers, investors, and migrants strengthening connections to Hong Kong, and more recently to the PRC. In 2014, Macdonald Realty, a long-established Vancouver firm with nearly 1,000 agents in British Columbia, disclosed that 70 percent of its sales of properties over \$3 million in the City of Vancouver went to buyers from Mainland China. David Ley (2015). "Global China and the Making of Vancouver's Residential Property Market." *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 16 December, p. 11. The same year, Macdonald established a branch office in Shanghai "to channel direct investment from China into Vancouver's real estate market." Dan Scarrow, Managing Director of the Shanghai office, explicitly connects the firm's long-term strategy to the embodied capital of students: "The children of Chinese immigrants 'who went to school in Canada, now reside in B.C., and are now Canadian citizens are – by my calculation – in line to inherit over \$1 trillion over the next 30 years,' he said. 'Some of this money will be invested in real estate in Canada.'" Evan Duggan (2016). "Commercial Assets Face Disclosure." *Vancouver Sun*, 9 March, p. C5.

<sup>12</sup> The transaction subsequently became the focus of a policy debate in the Provincial legislature. Hansard (2016). David Eby and Mike deJong, *Debates of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia*, House Blues [draft transcript], July 28, afternoon.

<sup>13</sup> MAC Marketing solutions. *Yu at Wesbrook Village*.

<http://www.macmarketingsolutions.com/projects/vancouver/yu>

<sup>14</sup> Gord Kurenoff (2015). "Vancouver's Wesbrook Village Anchors Growing Residential Neighborhood on University Campus." *Vancouver Sun*, 13 July.

‘Students not \$tudent\$’, to question the intensified monetization that makes academic life ever more competitive, corrosive, and divisive.

But one of our students challenged our cry for solidarity as naive and stupid. He’s in the business school, which is of course more selective and more expensive than the Faculty of Arts. They do a lot of group work, and in one of his group projects he was forced to do nearly everything: his assigned partner was simply incapable of completing even the most elementary tasks. One day, she finally confessed: “I didn’t go to high school,” she said. “Really?” he asked. “How did you get into UBC, and into the Faculty of Commerce?” “My father bought the credential,” she explained. “Well, if you didn’t go to high school, what did you do during those years?” he asked. “Oh, you know...” she said. “I shopped. I traveled.”

Now *that’s* human capital, a cerebral hedge fund in a creative-class urban world where, as Richard Florida puts it, “the mind itself becomes the mode of production.”<sup>15</sup> But there is also code, which is achieving a quantum transformation in all of the social relations that were once seen as the essence of universities, and of cities, of what Harvey called the ‘urbanization of consciousness.’<sup>16</sup> “Great cities and great universities exist in symbiosis,” declared one of UBC’s recent presidents, a computer scientist inspired by Florida; “every city counted amongst the world’s ‘most livable’ boasts a world-class university.”<sup>17</sup> But the “social and cultural components that underpin a knowledge economy”<sup>18</sup> are now thoroughly algorithmic, and each year it becomes more difficult to experience the university as a city, as a *place*. Everyone is somewhere else, in the cloud, face glued to the screen of the latest human attention harvesting machine. Money is always tight when it comes to supporting *human* graduate students, keeping class sizes to a scale that allows *human* contact, or replacing *human* faculty when they retire, but administrators at UBC are frantically scrambling to emulate the cyborg divisions of Harvard, MIT, and Stanford, with a dizzying array of initiatives on blended learning, flexible learning, MOOCs, and of course the never-ending “life-cycle” planning for learning management systems that reliably fail during the first and last weeks of every semester.<sup>19</sup> Our latest disruptive vision is called the Learning Technology Ecosystem Project, and almost seems plagiarized from Donna Haraway’s analysis of the “globalized, extraterrestrial, everyday consciousness in the planetary pandemic of multisite, multimedia, multispecies, multicultural cyborgian entertainment

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Florida (2003). “Cities and the Creative Class.” *City & Community* 2(1), 3-19, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> David Harvey (1989). *The Urban Experience*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, Chapter 8.

<sup>17</sup> Arvind Gupta (2014). *Address by UBC President Arvind Gupta to Kelowna Chamber of Commerce*. Vancouver, BC: Office of the President, The University of British Columbia, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Gupta, *Address*, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Public university expenditures on information technology have steadily come to resemble the “public secrets” of intelligence agency budgets: vast but impossible to nail down with any precision, given the way more and more ‘traditional’ human activities and social relations are coercively digitized in ways that require technoscientific intermediaries. Search through UBC Information Technology’s lavish *Annual Report* and there’s no mention of budgets or expenditures, but plenty of proud astronomical quantification of achievements that are entirely meaningless in the absence of the dangers created by digital commodity fetishism: there were 3.6 billion “identity access management transactions” in 2014-2015, and an average of 22,065,104 “blocked messages monthly.” UBC Information Technology (2015). *UBC IT Annual Report 2014/15*. Vancouver, BC: The University of British Columbia.

events.”<sup>20</sup> “The word ‘ecosystem’ was deliberately used throughout this project,” we are told, to acknowledge the interdependencies between “users, technologies, and services. The ecosystem is self-organizing, dynamic, constantly changing and evolving. Technologies are birthed, and they are also removed as new ones take their place.”<sup>21</sup>

Users in the ecosystem, however, are carefully policed by each generation of newborn technologies. UBC was one of the earliest adopters of an infant technology brought into the world by a student at the University of California, Berkeley, who double-majored in rhetoric and neurobiology. While Jenny Hoffman sees instantaneous-information brain injections in the future, more than twenty years ago John Barrie encountered a disaster as a Teaching Assistant while pursuing research on “how the brain encoded the sensory world into the neuro-world.”<sup>22</sup> Barrie had built a system for online student peer review to provide feedback in large classes, only to see it evolve into a platform for rampant plagiarism. Barrie responded by adapting “algorithms designed to detect regularities in large databases of brain waves” to implement pattern recognition in large databases of text written by students. Turnitin.com is now the most widely used educational software application on the planet, a cognitive predator drone that watches more than 26 million students at 15,000 institutions in 140 countries.<sup>23</sup> And there are other services for employers, granting agencies, and publishers to monitor things written by you and me. Plagiarism is on the rise, because everyone up and down the hierarchy is under pressure to do more, to attain more ‘excellence,’ to publish more, to secure more grant money, to achieve more ‘impact,’ and to do it all faster and earlier. Not long ago, Professor Stefan Grimm, a biologist who specialized in toxicology at Imperial College London, took his own life as administrators moved to fire him for his failure to meet annual grant ‘income targets’ of £200,000, and *The Guardian* recently assembled a collection of more than 40 articles under the title ‘Mental Health: The University in Crisis.’<sup>24</sup> In our field, geography, a recent postdoctoral position attracted more than two thousand applicants. At a summer professional development institute hosted at another university, PhD students and early career researchers cried openly while discussing the precarious and competitive nature of the academic career paths to which they were struggling to gain admission, in which they were seeking permission to compete.

Three decades ago, David Harvey theorized the transformation of the political economy of Anglo-American urbanization toward a system of entrepreneurialism, pushing cities to compete with each other to attract capital investment.<sup>25</sup> Emerging as a class project of nation-state and transnational capitalist elites,<sup>26</sup> neoliberal urban entrepreneurialism entails a reconfiguration of scales of governance, pushing ‘lower’ units of the state towards new regimes of accumulation

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<sup>20</sup> Donna J. Haraway (1997). *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium. FemaleMan©\_Meets\_OncoMouse*<sup>TM</sup>. New York: Routledge, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> Learning Technology Ecosystem Project (2015). *UBC’s Learning Technology Ecosystem: Developing a Shared Vision, Blueprint, and Roadmap*. Vancouver, BC: The University of British Columbia, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> John M. Barrie (2008). “Catching the Cheats: How Original.” *The Biochemist* 30(6), 16-19, quote from p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> iParadigms, LLC (2016). “About Us.” Oakland, CA: iParadigms, LLC, <http://turnitin.com>

<sup>24</sup> See Lawrence Berg, Edward H. Huijbens, and Henrik Gutzon Larsen (2016). “Producing Anxiety in the Neoliberal University.” *The Canadian Geographer*, forthcoming, 1-13, quote from p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> David Harvey (1989). From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism. *Geografiska Annaler Series B* 71(1), 3-17.

<sup>26</sup> David Harvey (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

through privatization, public-private partnerships, and the imposition of market-driven, fee-based access to formerly public, non-commodified services. Educational institutions are exposed to the sharpest contradictions of this movement, torn between the conflicting roles of subsidizing industry R&D and the preparation of workers and consumers, providing popular legitimation for the status and prestige hierarchies of the social division of labor, and maintaining the authority of elitist state accreditation of recognized expertise while offering the populist promise of democratized opportunities for upward mobility. Access to the means of accumulation of economic, social, and cultural capital is controlled in accordance with the varied histories and present conditions of societies undergoing neoliberal projects. Through ever-rising tuition fees and student loans to match, access to education has long been privatized under the guise of public institutions. Now, as institutions compete to work their way up on global university rankings, they explicitly target the global elite – setting elite cosmopolitan patriots into competition with working-class international students, while also escalating the costs facing local students from the middle and working classes. One result is a self-sustaining cycle of debts engineered to extract financial profits from human aspirations: as David Graeber puts it:

“The corporatization of education; the resulting ballooning of tuitions as students are expected to pay for giant football stadiums and similar pet projects of executive trustees, or to contribute to the burgeoning salaries of ever-multiplying university officials; the increasing demands for degrees as certificates of entry into any job that promises access to anything like a middle-class standard of living; resulting rising levels of indebtedness – these all form a single web.”<sup>27</sup>

Regional-geographical context certainly matters here – the sporting-industrial complex of Big Ten football is a peculiar comparative advantage of public institutions in rural parts of the U.S. – but the fundamental process involves the university entrenching its role as a space of accumulation both inside and beyond its physical campus. For UBC, real estate has become increasingly important: through UBC-owned companies operating on a campus built on unceded indigenous territory, the university sells residential properties on land it leases to new condo owners for 99 years.<sup>28</sup> This allows UBC to directly market property to its students (and rent-subsidized employees, in attempts to cope with a permanent affordability crisis of the overheated regional housing market – a growing faculty retention problem<sup>29</sup>) and funnel the proceeds to its endowment.<sup>30</sup> Elsewhere, ‘world class’ universities like NYU and Columbia expand through neighborhoods distant and adjacent, displacing New York’s low-income and racial minority

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<sup>27</sup> David Graeber (2016). *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*. Brooklyn: Mellville House, p. 24

<sup>28</sup> UBC Properties Trust (2016). *Ownership opportunities*.  
[http://www.ubcproperties.com/living\\_market\\_housing.php](http://www.ubcproperties.com/living_market_housing.php)

<sup>29</sup> Helen Zhou (2016). Vancouver’s Pricey Housing Market Impacts Recruitment of UBC Professors. *The Ubysey*, 24 July.

<sup>30</sup> Such schemes invariably corrode the nature of knowledge production at the institution. One of the intramural faculty research grant programs is funded partly through the capital gains of the university’s real estate enterprises, while a steady stream of well-publicized academic events continue to pursue the polite perfectionism of Canadian optimism in the face of structural contradictions; the most recent was a panel discussion in May, 2016, exploring the consequences of Vancouver’s ranking as one of the world’s most ‘livable’ cities. The panel was marketed to local press under the title, “Can Vancouver become more affordable while remaining livable?”

residents with elite students while exploiting underpaid laborers to build new campuses in Abu Dhabi.<sup>313233</sup>

These visions of capital, code, and competition present two urgent questions: 1) What are the relations between urban competition and education? 2) How is the university's role as a space of both accumulation and dispossession accentuated by urbanism and the accelerating speeds of the digital sphere? Conventional approaches focus on a narrow, instrumental version of these questions: how can education practices be changed (through the buzzword bingo of reform, innovation, excellence, or disruption) to help students and cities perform better, to compete, adapt, and survive in a fast-changing world? Even progressives and radicals often adopt this framework in order to challenge the evils that prevent an equitable meritocracy: patriarchy, racism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, settler colonialism, and all the other evolving dimensions of an ecumenical radicalism that J.K. Gibson-Graham once famously called 'The Project.'<sup>34</sup> But do we understand the implications of achieving a fully equitable, fair process in urban educational competition? Let's assume that social movements can succeed in the long-running efforts to root out ethnoracial biases and Eurocentric White privilege in university admissions. Let's assume that the emerging public discourses on micro-aggressions, unrecovered trauma, and safe space begin systemically to change behavioral climates inside classrooms. Let's assume that the turnitin.com algorithmic arms race can be won, that advancing technologies can stamp out the cheating that is enabled by advancing technologies.<sup>35</sup> Let's assume that all of these reforms will achieve the goals of multicultural equity and opportunity outlined by visionaries like NYU's John Sexton, who combined Appiah's vision of tomorrow's "cosmopolitan patriots" with a Jesuit philosopher's idea of a benevolent, transcendent 'noosphere,' a "planetary super-stage of consciousness," to build a digitally-interconnected, planetary exchange-program-degree called the Global Network University.<sup>36</sup> More than 9,000 applied for the inaugural class at NYU Abu Dhabi, and 188 were admitted, representing 39 countries and 43 different languages. Even the most cosmopolitan, inclusive, accepting, multicultural, and safe-space meritocracies are ... *meritocracies*, premised on competition. And the defining essence of planetary urbanization is the intensification, diversification, and acceleration of competition across all domains and scales

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Schaffer & Neil Smith (1986). "The Gentrification of Harlem?" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 76(3), 347-365.

<sup>32</sup> Ariel Kaminer and Sean O'Driscoll (2014). "Workers at NYU's Abu Dhabi Site Faced Harsh Conditions." *New York Times*, 18 May.

<sup>33</sup> Daphne Eviatar (2006). "The Manhattanville Project." *The New York Times Magazine*, 21 May.

<sup>34</sup> J.K. Gibson-Graham (1993). "Waiting for the Revolution, or, How to Smash Capitalism While Working at Home in Your Spare Time." *Rethinking Marxism* 6(2), 10-24.

<sup>35</sup> This is not hypothetical. In Canada's most deeply transnationalized suburb, in the shadow of the flight paths of Vancouver International Airport, is the office of an entrepreneurial firm that offers the ideal cheating services explicitly marketed to the region's stressed-out international students – custom-written course papers promised to be "100% original!" The firm's slick, sophisticated advertisements – online and via posters on local campuses – assure customers of "A+" caliber product, promising originality by pre-screening the custom-written material through plagiarism detection software. Hence, an entrepreneurial firm deploys an algorithmic subversion of UBC's expensive algorithmic contract with turnitin.com, creating a dangerous new form of disparate-impact discrimination based on economic class: the university's official practices (turnitin.com is specifically named in UBC's Senate policies) create a two-tiered enforcement regime, while sustaining market opportunities for innovative predators pursuing well-financed international students.

<sup>36</sup> John Sexton (2010). *Global Network University Reflection*. December 21. New York: Office of the President, New York University.

of life. When subjected to a limit of any kind – when economic, social, cognitive, or temporal resources are constrained – competition always justifies itself by maximizing denominators of rejection, exclusion, and dispossession, and by imposing repeated bell-curve distributions to be used in future rounds of competitive, meritocratic rationing.

This is our provocation: competition, capital, and code are destroying the radical possibilities of urbanism, education, and political freedom – what Don Mitchell theorized as the “pedagogy of the streets.”<sup>37</sup> We offer a hypothesis, a theoretical synthesis, and a polemic with limited, partial, and situated evidence. Our research methods are very simple. They involve those last remaining activities that have not yet been prohibited by our Research Prevention Department, our Institutional Review Board (IRB): teaching; listening to, and learning from, students; reading what they write; and reading across time and space to consider what other students and teachers have written in and about urbanism. If we listen and read carefully, we see that harsh, violent doctrines from a century ago are being deeply encoded into our institutions, practices, and daily lives. And yet these doctrines promise infinite opportunity and upward mobility, and today’s algorithmically optimized marketing delivers a torrent of friendly reassurances that through the intensification of competition we are building a cosmopolis of creativity, achievement, inclusion, equity, resilience, and sustainability.

### **Algorithmic Eugenics**

A new eugenics is being engineered through capital, code, and competition in urban education. Neil Brenner tells us that worldwide urbanization intertwines critical *social* theory and critical *urban* theory as never before in mobilizations against “technocratic” and “market-oriented forms of urban knowledge.”<sup>38</sup> David Imbroscio documents how market-oriented forms of knowledge have become a “Meritocratic Paradigm” that produces toxic competitive outcomes even while praising the utopia of upward mobility and strengthening political support for worsening inequality.<sup>39</sup> Brenner and Imbroscio have it right, but they don’t go far enough. Imbroscio points out that the word “meritocracy” was introduced in the 1950s as satire, “intended to conjure a grim dystopia,”<sup>40</sup> but we need to go back even further, to the earliest formalizations of urban theory, and to the development of the technocratic tools of social measurement and classification – correlation, regression, and inferential statistics. This takes us back to the urbanization of social theory and political economy from the middle of the nineteenth century to the Second World War, and the pervasive philosophical and political struggles over the

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<sup>37</sup> Don Mitchell (2002). “The New Empire of Capital: The Pedagogy of the Streets.” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 24(1-2), 147-151.

<sup>38</sup> Neil Brenner (2012). “What is Critical Urban Theory?” In Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse, and Margit Mayer, eds., *Cities for People, Not for Profit: Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City*. New York: Routledge, 11-23, quotes from p. 12, p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> David Imbroscio (2015). “Urban Policy as Meritocracy: A Critique.” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 38(1), 79-104. The “real tragedy” of competitive meritocracy, Imbroscio (p. 93) emphasizes, is not just the unrealistic premises and practical failures, but that the “project of strengthening meritocratic outcomes by lessening the barriers to social mobility buttresses the justification for, and the political and moral tolerance of, high levels of inequality.”

<sup>40</sup> Imbroscio, “Urban Policy,” p. 82, citing Christopher Hayes (2012). *Twilight of the Elites: America After Democracy*. New York: Broadway Books, p. 42.

application of Darwinian evolution to human affairs.<sup>41</sup> Herbert Spencer, the conservative philosopher who bastardized Darwin's ideas to make evolutionary theory palatable to America's right-wing Christian leaders, provided a powerful tweet-length justification for inequality, racism, and colonialism – “survival of the fittest” was Spencer's catchphrase, not Darwin's, and John D. Rockefeller used the tagline to rationalize his capitalist empire as ‘a law of nature and a law of God.’ More benevolent versions of evolutionary theory shaped philosophies of education, social welfare, and urbanization during the Progressive Era: John Dewey refined a form of “cognitive Darwinism” in his pragmatism that influenced Robert Park's development of ‘human ecology’ and competitive ‘invasion and succession’ portrayals of neighborhood change in the Chicago School of urban sociology.<sup>42</sup> By the end of the Second World War, the modern ‘scientific’ logics of Social Darwinism in public policy had achieved an impressive elite consensus across the political spectrum, which endured despite the recently-demonstrated genocidal implications. John Maynard Keynes, a proud member of the British Eugenics Society, delivered a speech honoring the winner of the Society's 1946 Gold Medal,<sup>43</sup> Sir Alexander Carr-Saunders, whose obsession with the “quantity and quality” of human populations was put into practice in a pre-eminent meritocracy. Carr-Saunders served as Director of the London School of Economics from 1937 to 1957. Carr-Saunders' concern with producing “quality” people, and his thesis that “selection operates on acquired habits and tradition,” shaped nearly every aspect of theories of human competition and cultural evolution developed by Friedrich von Hayek, who Margaret Thatcher credited in her 1993 autobiography as the central intellectual architect of the neoliberal revolution.<sup>44</sup>

‘Acquired habits and traditions,’ of course, is the old pre-Darwinian evolution of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829), who famously hypothesized that giraffes had long necks because each generation stretched to reach higher leaves, and then passed on the elongated characteristic to their offspring. Lamarckian evolution was thoroughly discredited in the long Darwinian revolution that culminated in the ‘modern synthesis’ of natural selection and genetics into evolutionary biology in the 1930s,<sup>45</sup> but the idea has an irresistible appeal that never really dies. In every generation of humanity, parents hope and believe they can do everything right to pass on whatever it takes – habits or traditions, private tutors, music lessons, Montessori – that will enable their children to succeed, to compete, to be labeled as “gifted.” In this sense, whether they realize it or not, every parent today continues in the tradition of the man Lord Keynes described as the “cavalry-leader type of mind” who founded the “most important, significant, ... and *genuine* branch of sociology which exists, namely eugenics”<sup>46</sup> – Francis Galton, Darwin's cousin and author of *Hereditary Genius*. His statistical innovations in refining the Gaussian ‘law of error’ into the “normal curve” and developing the correlation coefficient were a direct result

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<sup>41</sup> Richard Hofstadter (1944). *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

<sup>42</sup> J. Nicholas Entrikin (1980). “Robert Park's Human Ecology and Human Geography.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70(1), 43-58.

<sup>43</sup> John Maynard Keynes (1946). “The Galton Lecture, 1946: Presentation of the Society's Gold Medal.” *The Eugenics Review* 38(1), 39-42.

<sup>44</sup> Erik Angner (2007). *Hayek and Natural Law*. New York: Routledge, quote from p. 81.

<sup>45</sup> Julian Huxley (1942). *Evolution: The Modern Synthesis*. London: Allen & Unwin.

<sup>46</sup> Keynes, “Galton Lecture,” p. 40, emphasis in original.

of the measurement of human bodies and the “mental peculiarities” of different races.<sup>47</sup> His development of the method of regression came out of an obsession with deviations from the mean – reversions to ‘mediocrity’ that contradicted his belief that superior intelligence was inherited through good breeding.

We know what you’re thinking. How did we get from critical urban theory and education to the horrific legacies of eugenics? While no one uses the word ‘eugenics’ anymore, there’s an inescapable genealogical continuity between today’s competitive Ivy-League overachievers, the rising cosmopolitan patriots of the Global South, and Galton’s vision from a century ago. Francis Galton’s last piece of writing was rejected for publication. It was a novel about a university, of precisely the sort that we would today call “world class.” It was called *The Eugenic College of Kantsaywhere*. It takes the form of a love story as a Professor Donoghue tries to gain acceptance into a utopian community of the best and the brightest and tries to marry his love, Augusta Allfancy.<sup>48</sup> Donoghue has to pass all kinds of tests of strength, intelligence, aesthetic judgment, and the ‘good genes’ of his ancestors. Update the technology of 1911 and it looks a bit like a hybrid of Big Data, fitbit, Ancestry.com, No Child Left Behind, Common Core, SAT, ACT, GRE, and all the other acronyms of accelerating assessment, of constant testing and competition. Donoghue’s pursuit of Augusta Allfancy would today be mediated by Match.com, OKCupid, or Christian Mingle, with its motto of algorithmic predestination, “Find God’s Match for You!” although we can never really be certain about all of the precise parallels with Victorian-era systems of measurement and matching. After Galton died, his niece was so offended by the explicit sex scenes in the novel that she began tearing up the pages of the manuscript – until she was stopped by Karl Pearson, the executor of Galton’s estate, which provided the endowment that made Pearson the first Galton Professor of Eugenics at University College, London. What is certain is that the obsession for measuring and ranking human beings was continued as Pearson merged Galton’s old Biometric Laboratory and the Galton Laboratory for National Eugenics into the more benign-sounding Department of Applied Statistics – and it is also certain that today, the statistics of Galtonian bell curves are being applied everywhere, with ever greater speed, frequency, and intensity. We see it in the way Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s racist hereditary analysis of the low tail of the bell curve was used to justify orchestrated right-wing attacks on African Americans through welfare ‘reform’ and the ‘underclass’ discourse of the 1990s.<sup>49</sup> We see it in the way Herrnstein and Murray’s logic – subtitled ‘Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life’ – has been gentrified into an upscale, multicultural Lamarckian merit-based evolutionary logic putting Asians on the high tail of the curve in Amy Chua’s celebrated *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*.<sup>50</sup> We see it in the

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<sup>47</sup> See Ian Hacking (1990). *The Taming of Chance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Chapter 21.

<sup>48</sup> See Matthew Sweet (2011). “Francis Galton’s Eugenic Novel Kantsaywhere Published Online.” London: University College London, at <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/news-articles/1111/111117-Galton-novel-Kantsaywhere-published-online>

<sup>49</sup> Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray (1994). *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*; cf. Darren Barany (2016). “From Whence Cometh this Welfare Consensus? U.S. Welfare Policy Discourse as Class Warfare in the 1980s and 1990s.” *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 36(3/4), 203-225.

<sup>50</sup> Amy Chua (2011). *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. New York: Penguin. Among the activities that Yale law professor Chua proudly declares that her two young daughters were “never allowed to do”: “choose their own extracurricular activities,” “get any grade less than an A,” and “not be the #1 student in every subject except gym and drama.”

“systemic reforms” to “use data effectively in the classroom” of Obama’s Race to the Top education initiative, and in the website, Facebook page, and Twitter account established by the National University of Singapore to ease the smartphone convenience for students praying to the “Bell Curve God.”<sup>51</sup> We see in a Mathematics professor’s praise for UBC’s newest president as a “Tiger Parent,” and the president’s Twitter praise for the Class of 2020 – “This year’s UBC 1st year class has a 90.4 entry grade,”<sup>52</sup> corresponding to an A+ average – and we see it in the pop-culture Galtonian quantifications of the daily morning talk shows that tell us over cups of coffee that “studies show” the Duchess of Cambridge’s nose width is the statistically most desired nose-width of all.<sup>53</sup>

## Kantsaywhere, Everywhere

“It doesn’t stop, this comparative stuff.”

– First-year Law student, describing her peers’ competitive maneuvers to obtain learning disability certifications in order to obtain extended times for examinations, August 2016.

Galtonian thought and practice – the dangerous and pervasive mechanisms of what Danny Dorling calls “bell-curve thinking”<sup>54</sup> – have intensified the competitive dynamics identified so clearly in Harvey’s diagnosis of urban entrepreneurialism. They have been refined, digitized, and automated in ways that are dynamically reconfiguring the geographical scales of competition. If Richard Florida and Allen Scott have it right – ‘mental and affective human assets’ are being integrated into the commodity production system, and the mind itself is becoming the mode of production – then we must confront the implications of an emerging, interconnected world of accumulation by *cognitive* dispossession.<sup>55</sup> As the productivity advances of automation continue to alter the material basis of labor processes involved in commodity production, the dynamics of knowledge and subjectivity take on greater importance in the reproduction of capitalist social formations. Knowledge and subjectivity, however, cannot be understood as purely *immaterial*; indeed, embodied, situated human subjectivity and consciousness formation elides the material/immaterial binary amidst the evolving, quickening rhythms of daily life in the vortex of concentrating capital accumulation and commodification by code. Hence the centers of power and consciousness formation inherited from the age of industrial capitalism – individualism and money-fueled consumption, class, community, the state, and the family<sup>56</sup> – are all being reproduced in newly networked, transnational, and selectively automated scales of individual and collective human competition. Competition is the shared, singular essence of a cognitive capitalism that is co-evolving with a cosmopolitan, polycentric planetary urbanization. This is why it is sometimes so hard to see the parallax view

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<sup>51</sup> Jody-Lan Castle (2016). “Top 10 Exam Rituals from Stressed-Out Students Across Asia.” *BBC*, 3 March.

<sup>52</sup> Santa J. Ono, who came from Cincinnati to UBC with about 73,000 Twitter followers, now tweets from the handle @ubcprez; his ‘90.4’ tweet was on 6 September, 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Lilly Workneh (2016). “‘Most Desirable Face’ Revealed, Black Anchors React Accordingly,” *Huffington Post*, 1 September.

<sup>54</sup> Danny Dorling (2010). *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists*. Bristol: Policy Press.

<sup>55</sup> David Harvey (2003). *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>56</sup> See Harvey, *Urban Experience*, pp. 254 ff.

of violence and freedom: everything looks so fair, so democratic, so progressive, and so meritocratic – and yet there are so many devils in so many details of the Bell Curve God. Dorling shows how “bell-curve thinking” now entails a comprehensive and far-reaching quantitative system of *engineering competition* to replace and destroy cooperation. The seemingly neutral statistical operations of transforming the standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis of non-normally-distributed test scores across the nation-states of the OECD, for instance, shape individual child destinies while reproducing the hierarchical subjectivities of ‘intelligence,’ ‘merit,’ and ‘achievement’ that sustain popular support for ever more severe social inequalities.<sup>57</sup> Put simply: no matter how hard everyone works, we can all be made to fit the curve, and as Dorling reminds us, “[t]here is very little room under a bell curve to be at the top.”<sup>58</sup>

Today’s generations of students, workers, consumers – and entire urban communities – are forced into more bell curves, more often, than ever before in human and non-human history. There are the endless entrance exams to get into schools and universities. There are the constant tests and assessments once you get in. There are the bell curves of finance and the rank-and-yank systems used by ‘human resource’ managers who proudly embrace Darwinian language. There are bell curves embedded into the proprietary algorithms of consumer credit scores, target marketing systems, and the voter databases maintained by political parties. And all these bell curves are accelerated through code, as Big Data coalesces with the migration of more and more urban life into a social media ecosystem that Katherine Hayles theorizes as a “cognisphere” of “distributed cultural cognitions embodied both in people and their technologies.”<sup>59</sup> Urban entrepreneurialism is at the event horizon of a planetary capitalist cognisphere. Florida’s 3 Ts – talent, technology and tolerance – are accumulative rose-colored refractions of dispossessing circuits of capital, code, and competition. This is our provocation: Kantsaywhere is everywhere. The world class university is no longer “the great equalizer” Horace Mann claimed education to be, and that most of the world still believes it to be. It is instead the instantiation and perpetuation of eugenically motivated ideas of excellence. Galton is in the cloud, and although many of today’s meritocracies are starting to look more fair, multicultural, and cosmopolitan, there are troubling consequences from what William Deresiewicz, Emeritus Professor of English at Yale, diagnoses as elite university students evolving into an “alien species” of “bionic hamsters.”<sup>60</sup> No matter how ‘fair’ it purports to be, the essence of a planetary meritocracy is that the hamster wheel spins faster and faster. As the digitized bell curves proliferate through an evolving ecosystem of ratings and credentials, they reshape the experience of time and space across the generations – it’s now been more than a decade since Cindi Katz warned us where this all leads: “At the endgame, the baby arrives with curriculum vitae.”<sup>61</sup> Are ‘world-class’ universities producing ‘world-class’ knowledge workers? In a cognitive-capitalist world of algorithmic flash trading premised on capital accumulated through nano-second leveraged bets

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<sup>57</sup> See Dorling, *Injustice*, pp. 46-55.

<sup>58</sup> Dorling, *Injustice*, p. 47.

<sup>59</sup> N. Katherine Hayles (2006). “Unfinished Work: From Cyborg to Cognisphere.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 23(7-8), 159-166, quote from p. 160.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Nathan Heller (2014). “Poison Ivy: Are Elite Colleges Bad for the Soul?” *The New Yorker*, 1 September, 68-72, quote from p. 68.

<sup>61</sup> Cindi Katz (2005). “Securitization and the Militarization of Childhood.” Colloquium presentation. Vancouver, BC: Department of Geography, The University of British Columbia.

on the likelihood of failure of someone else's mortgage, company, or country, what is the ultimate goal of a world-class education? Should we prevent plagiarism, or should we create better plagiarizers, perhaps teaching students to write their own algorithms to efficiently subvert the official algorithms of institutional surveillance?<sup>62</sup> Are we producing world-class knowledge workers, or are we creating generations of students who are learning metrically *how to appear as if* they have achieved the credentials demanded of a planetary cognitive-capitalist *Kantsaywhere*? As Silicon Valley encodes user-friendly, multicultural interfaces for the proliferating apps of a Galtonian world of eugenic human competition, "[t]he urbanization of capital and of consciousness threatens a transition to barbarism in the midst of a rhetoric of self-realization."<sup>63</sup>

Do not ask for whom the bell curve tolls. It tolls for all of us.

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<sup>62</sup> Again, this is not entirely hypothetical. Responding to a story about automated online chatbots, an Engineering student told us of a friend who wrote code to build a bot to automate the mundane, boring, early stages of 'getting to know you' conversations on online dating sites. He was able to efficiently outsource the tedium to multiple bots carrying on multiple conversations; once a conversation proceeded to a stage 'serious' enough to demonstrate 'potential,' he could take over from the bot. See also Les Perelman's brilliant Basic Automated B.S. English Language essay generator – the BABEL project – designed to produce meaningless text that nevertheless maximizes the scores obtained on automated essay scoring algorithms. <http://lesperelman.com>.

<sup>63</sup> Harvey, *Urban Experience*, p. 254.