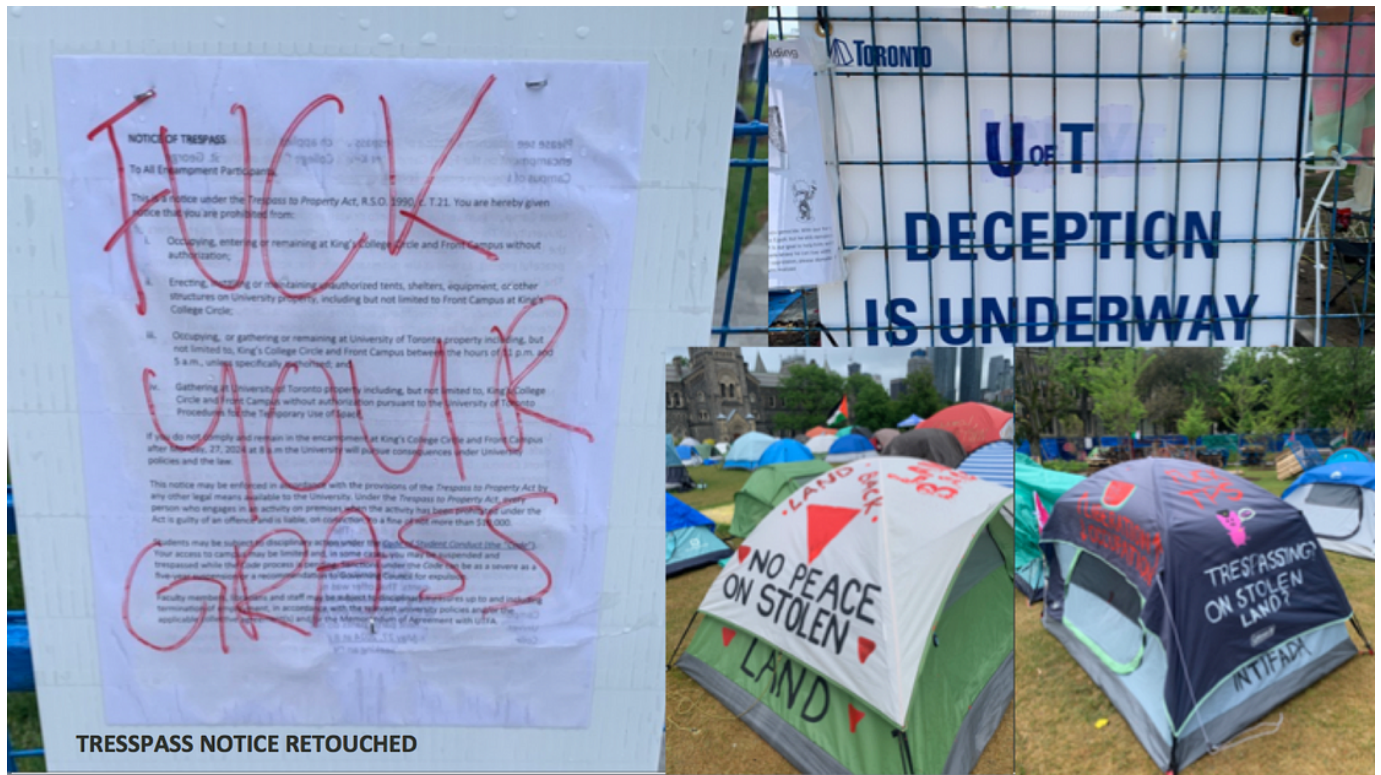


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

What Encampments for Palestine Teach Us About Epistemic Justice

by Katherine Blouin and Girish Daswani

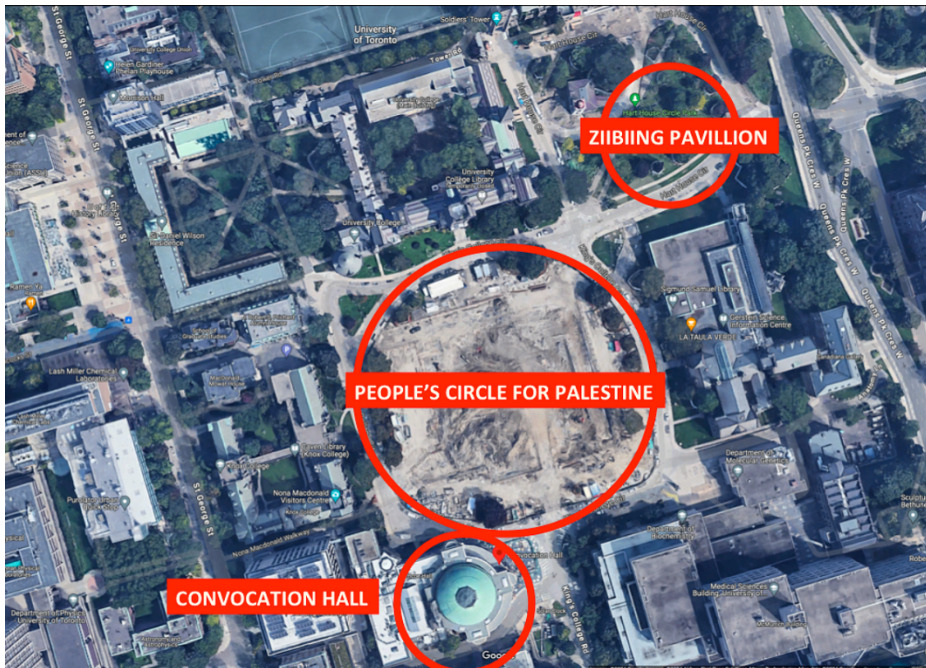


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Context

OccupyUofT's Student's Circle for Palestine was initiated on May 2, 2024, after six months of student protests and many requests for a meeting with University of Toronto President Meric Gertler. When emails and protests were ignored, a group of students occupied Gertler's office in Simcoe Hall until he agreed to meet with them. After that meeting, Gertler declined their demands to divest from weapons manufacturing companies that benefitted from genocide or to cut ties with Israeli institutions that were on illegally occupied land. Gertler also claimed not to know about the scholasticide in Palestine. When the Columbia University protests happened (April 17), UofT decided to fence off King's College Circle in anticipation of what was to come. In the early hours of May 2nd, students reclaimed these fences and occupied the circular field that you see on the picture below.



ANNOTATED GOOGLEMAP. THE PICTURE WAS TAKEN PRIOR TO THE COMPLETION OF THE UNDERGROUND PARKING THAT NOW SITS BELOW THE CIRCLE.

Looking at the map above, you can see three circles: the one in the middle is King's College Circle (now, People's Circle for Palestine), on the bottom left is Convocation Hall (where colonial-style graduation ceremonies are celebrated), and on the top right corner is a pavilion, which UofT built in honour of Ziibiing (meaning 'river' in Anishinaabemowin), an underground waterway that flows north to south from St. Clair and Bathurst into Lake Ontario and which was a meeting place and travel route for several Indigenous peoples. This river still flows underground and sometimes rises to the surface after a heavy rainfall as a reminder of its presence.

The People's Circle for Palestine was set up on the river's path and became a community space for learning and care — it contained several tents that housed a library, a counseling center, a kitchen, and a sacred fire that was cared for by several firekeepers. It hosted teach-ins and workshops, and held social gatherings and

religious ceremonies, including Shabbat services every Friday.

The People's Circle for Palestine has become an example of decoloniality in the face of the "decolonial performativity" of the white settler colonial University.

On Private Property and Epistemic Violence

If epistemic violence manifests when oppressed people are prevented from speaking for themselves, the student encampment became an anti-colonial (multi-religious, multi-racial, multi-national) space where epistemic violence was challenged and disrupted and made visible for all to see. It became a space that challenged the collective histories of epistemic violence on Indigenous land that is now claimed by UofT as "private property."

On April 28th, Sandy Welsh, the vice-provost of the University of Toronto, issued a statement to remind the public that the lands and buildings at UofT are "private property" and that a student encampment was not welcome. Less than a month later, on May 24th, the university issued a trespass notice and threatened to discipline students as well as terminate the employment of supporting faculty, staff, and librarians.

The land UofT claims as "private property" was granted (some say taken through fraudulent treaties) by the British Crown. During colonial rule, the Crown simply gave Indigenous lands to universities as "educational land grants" — the land was meant to be leased or sold to pay the university's ongoing operational expenses.

As a sign of protest (for what UofT admin was threatening to do to students), Kristen Daigle, who was designated to be the Eagle feather bearer for the multi-day Convocation ceremonies, resigned, is Mushkegowuk (Cree) and a member of Constance Lake First Nation in Treaty 9 territory. In her resignation letter, she writes:

The protection of property cannot and should not be mobilised as a tactic to prevent this political protest, because that is not the role we are playing here... many of these students have lived through a similar type of violence that we are now seeing streamed live to us every day through our phones. And here they

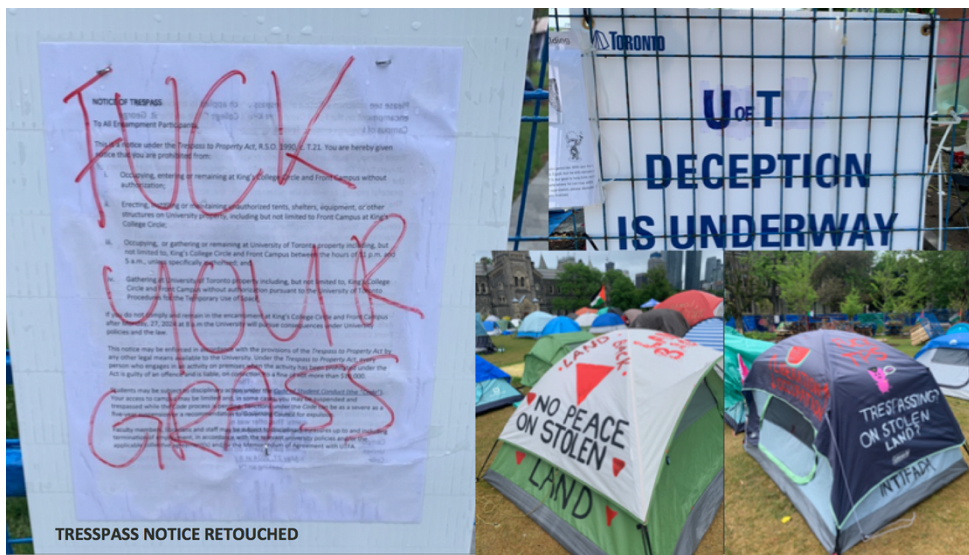


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are, putting their bodies and minds and spirits at risk. All in the name of visibility; to make us see, to make you see what is so easy to ignore. It is important to know who is showing up and who has been showing up, even before October 7th, in this resistance against the genocide of Palestinian people.

The claim that the University is built on “private property” and, therefore, sees itself as property owner and landlord, allows it to enact colonial harm and violence upon its undergraduate students. And, yet, the People’s Circle for Palestine has demonstrated what epistemic justice and care, what anti-colonial solidarity, look like. The same can be said of UofT’s convocation season.

Convocation Ceremonies as Spaces of Epistemic Justice

Indeed, what we have seen happening this convocation season at the University is something extraordinary: Located next to the People’s Circle for Palestine, Convocation Hall has been turned into a space of transgressive pedagogy. There, the dissonance between, on the one hand, the University’s branded performances of truth, reconciliation, and EDI and, on the other hand, its British, colonial, and increasingly corporatised power structure, is made impossible to unsee.

The graduation ceremony at UofT takes place in a domed rotunda building called Convocation Hall. Located right next to the People’s Circle, this Pantheon-like structure, which was inaugurated in 1907, is described in a [2006 piece by UofT Magazine](#) as “designed in the classical style of ancient Greece, echoing the historic foundations of higher learning”.

On June 3rd, UofT had yet [another fence](#) set up in front of the building entrance, seemingly as an attempt to hide the People’s Circle from the graduates and their loved ones.

Obviously, just like the fencing of King Circle’s lawn, this attempt at occlusion did not work. On the contrary.

The graduation ceremony itself is structured like a Christian mass: It starts with a golden-scepter-led procession of regalia-clad faculty who, accompanied by a pipe-organ, walk from the back of the hall to the stage. Once everyone is seated, the Chancellor and President or other high administrators filling in for them read a welcoming speech that includes a Land Acknowledgement. They then introduce the honorary speaker, who is generally a

member of the local cultural scene, a donor, a member of the Governing Council, or a faculty with some higher administrative role. At the end of their speech, speakers must recite some sentences in (unintelligible) Latin. Once this is done, the parade of the graduates starts. In a university shamefully nicknamed UofTears, to make it to the graduating ceremony is no small achievement. One by one, the students step to the front of the stage. There, instead of getting a eucharist, they stop for a few seconds, the time for someone stationed at a pulpit to read their name. Applause and cheers from the audience follow, as they walk to the other end of the stage, passing by the officiant, special guests, and mostly White high administrators who face the applauding audience. At the end of the ceremony, the organ comes back, everyone stands up for the national anthem of Canada, and the regalia-clad guests exit in a parade. Once they are gone, the audience is allowed to mingle and leave.



CONVOCATION HALL FROM WITHIN (PICTURE: UOFT)



SCENES FROM UOFT 2024 LIVESTREAMED CONVOCATION. COURTESY OF AUTHOR

Despite the overwhelmingly racialized, and to a large degree non-Christian, fabric of its graduating cohorts, UofT's convocation ceremony continues to epitomize the institution's Britishness, Whiteness, and Christian nature. Peppared on top of this ritual we find some "EDI" and "truth and reconciliation" initiatives: the opening Land acknowledgement, the granting of honorary degrees to Indigenous, Black, and racialized folks, and, more

recently, the presence at the start of the procession of an eagle-feather bearer.

This year, convocation became something more.

To paraphrase Gayatri Spivak's seminal piece, it became a space where those deemed "subalterns" by European colonial powers and their agents, spoke.

Despite the UofT higher administration having served notices of trespass to the campers; despite having singled

out a few of occupyuoft's leaders in their affidavit to the court; despite having waged a campaign of disinformation portraying students' demands for disclosure, divestment, and the cutting of ties with Israeli institutions as "unreasonable"; despite misrepresenting the encampment as an unruly and antisemitic space; despite President Gertler having, for the whole duration of the People's Circle for Palestine [May 2 to July 3 2024], refused to meet face to face with the negotiators or visit the encampment; despite, or perhaps because of all those reasons, many students have brought Palestine into Convocation Hall.

There, and just like in the People's Circle, the students occupied the physical, visual, and audible space that exists between the university's White patriciate on the one hand, and their enthusiastic peers and loved ones on the other. They were doing so by wearing Palestinian symbols, waving Palestinian flags, displaying banners, screaming "Free Palestine" to the crowd, or talking directly to the President when he was in attendance.

Most of these courageous students are racialized, and a majority are female. While we find them in all ceremonies, some fields — Medicine and Social Work — have been more vocal in their support of the encampment than others — Management, Commerce.

Faced with such transgression of convocation's hierarchized and ritualized displays of power, what has the university done?

So far, the UofT has not actively prevented students from wearing Palestinian symbols and showing banners. However, from that day on, it started censoring the livestream. Whenever a student came on stage with a flag or a banner, the camera cut to the crowd. On day 3, they also muted the cheering crowd. Thankfully, videos and pictures taken by members of the audience have allowed for this censorship to be publicly exposed and countered.

Administrators, guests, and faculty seated on stage displayed different reactions, from enthusiastic applause (a small minority) to, for the most part, half-assed applause and a rigid half-smile to, and this is especially frequent with the higher-ranking guests, an absence of a smile or applause. A big donor was also pictured giving a thumbs down to one of the brave students.

By showing their support for the People's Circle for Palestine on stage, graduates transgress the symbolic border the convocation ceremony is meant to enforce. There, in front of a cheering, supportive crowd that acts as a chorus, they not only bring the very encampment administrators have fought so hard to dismantle and discredit into the sacred precinct of the university; they also show the university's colonial administration how naked it is.

Through their courageous stances, these students refuse the university as it is being shaped by UofT's White, and increasingly

Zionist and corporate, elite. Instead, they affirm that *they*, the students, are the university. In the face of a too-often disconnected, blasé, and cowardly lineup of White administrators, they exemplify what true experiential learning and epistemic justice entail: the active resistance to colonial violence; the courage to embrace discomfort as a liberatory act of (un)learning; and the rooting of one's learning in communities of care.

It is in these interstitial spaces of colonial encounters, be they encampments or convocation ceremonies, that the liberatory potency of epistemic justice lies. In this moment of profound moral and ethical failure, these students are teaching us what epistemic justice should, could, and does, look like.

What the Camp Means to Me: Drawing as Pedagogy

by Katherine Blouin

The hand drawings pictured below were made shortly by my nine-year-old son and by me before the dismantlement of the People's Circle for Palestine. Not only is drawing an art form I have always practiced, including with my son, but art making has become a choice pedagogical medium in my history classes. To my son, the People's Circle for Palestine means first and foremost the fire, his solidarity with Palestinians (including the children pictured at the entrance of the camp), and the time he spent with one of the campers, who he grew very fond of. To me, the camp means the fire, the hawks, and radical care. To us both, the camp means the Land and all the generative connections it fosters, from Turtle Island to Palestine.

My son and I went to the People's Circle for Palestine often. There, we shared the space with folks who, for over two months, embodied what anti-oppressive community-building and Land-based pedagogies mean. Our favorite



WHAT THE CAMP MEANS TO ME. AUTHOR AND SON'S DRAWING. COURTESY OF AUTHOR

part of the camp was the sacred fire. The sacred fire, which was kept by firekeepers, including Indigenous matriarchs, was alive. It was the beating heart of the People's Circle for Palestine, and a ceremonial protection of its ground. Like an iris around a pulsing pupil, we sat several times around the dancing flames. In addition to the fire, two hawks protected the camp. We would see them often fly very low above the fire tent and the nearby trees. One Sunday, during a drumming and dancing gathering, one of the hawks flew in a circle above the seated crowd. When the drumming came to an end, everyone stood up for one last song. At that moment, the hawk started flying higher and higher, and eventually drifted away in the horizon.

The Circle's sacred fire, the hawks, the trees in which they lived and in whose shade we sat or gathered all taught me something. So did the silence around the flames; so did the burning cedar and the matriarchs' sharings; so did the damp soil outside the fence, where the now buried Taddle Creek runs; so did my son's smile as he played soccer with his favorite camper; so did his tears the day he came to the fire only to find it gone.

Conclusion

The People's Circle for Palestine, with all the encounters and teachings it contained, taught us that despite the lawns and fences and trespass notices and campus police violence, UofT stands on sovereign, Indigenous Land. *Terra nullius* and its British colonial offshoots are, fundamentally, legal fictions. The reality is that this Land belongs to no one but herself. She is not a commodity and neither is she private property.

Our time at the Circle also taught us that despite the corporate, Eurocentric, and White supremacist fabric of the University's high administration, despite its institutional violence and gaslighting, despite its nickname of "UofTears" and its commitment to the settler colonial status quo, there lives within and beyond it alternative universities where liberatory pedagogies coexist.

These universities are plentiful, and they are as fragile as they are strong: They are the fire, they are in the trees, they are the hawks, they surge like the water. For two months, these universities met in and around the People's Circle for Palestine; they shined on stage and in

the audience during convocation; they were sprayed on tents, lived in the art that covered the fence and gave birth to the [papier mâché olive tree](#) that stood on the ground of the Circle until its very end. These universities are powerful loci of resistance and resurgence. These universities are the only universities that matter. These universities are fuels to the fire of liberation and histories to come, from Turtle Island to Palestine.

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Dr. Girish Daswani is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Toronto. His research interests include Ghana, religion, transnationalism, post/colonialism, activism, and the University. Dr. Daswani has a monograph entitled *Looking Back, Moving Forward: Transformation and Ethical Practice in the Ghanaian Church of Pentecost* (2015, University of Toronto Press) and co-edited (with Ato Quayson) the *Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism Studies* (2013, Wiley-Blackwell). His work and public-facing scholarship have explored the ways in which imperialism, colonialism, and Orientalism have impacted (and are still impacting) the University, popular politics, and Anthropology.



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