

Graduate Education, Linkin Park, and Pandemics: A Reflection

Adrian M. Downey

(Re)Storying my Pandemic

The week before the COVID-19 pandemic hit New Brunswick, I received an offer for the faculty position in which I currently find myself. The Friday I signed the contract for my job at Mount Saint Vincent University was the same Friday where many people decided to go grocery shopping for the next month, anticipating the widespread societal shutdown that was just ahead. I had also just defended the proposal for my dissertation. March 2020, then, was a tumultuous time of transition for me, personally, and for the world more broadly.

Academically, I had a clear path forward. I needed to finish my dissertation as soon as possible, before I became too busy with teaching and the other requirements of being an assistant professor to spend any time on it. With the widespread cancelation of conferences and in-person events, the pandemic created a rare opportunity for me to focus exclusively on my dissertation. It was an opportunity of which I took full advantage.

Unlike the usual, temporally dislocated, graduate student experience (Saul, 2017), between March and June of 2020, I kept a strict schedule. I wrote every morning—an hour or so if things weren't going well, four hours or more if things were. My afternoons were a mix of meetings and reading. The reading kept me nourished. I made notes about the things I could bring into my dissertation as I read, and the next morning, I never felt lost. It was really a magical time facilitated in part by the pandemic itself.

It was also a privilege. Between my SSHRC funding, the absence of responsibilities beyond my work, and the security of knowing there was a job on the horizon, I knew I was getting an experience many graduate students would never have. I have met many graduate students completing their theses and dissertations off the side of a desk, in between parental duties, without substantial financial support, and without a clear career trajectory after the completion of their degrees. Many of these factors can be accounted for in some capacity by the increased marketization of the university (Saul, 2017; White, 2016) and the insidious influence of neoliberalism on education more broadly (Kumar, 2019). The disparity still makes me uncomfortable, and I see the same sorts of stratifications now as a faculty member in the poor treatment of part-time or adjunct faculty (Khan, 2017). The academy is not a meritocracy, and that *should* make us all uncomfortable. As Saul (2017) put it at a previous AEGSC keynote:

Experiencing this tension is ethical. Not experiencing it is unethical. So if you're struggling with the tension of privilege, I'm suggesting that there's something redeeming and really important about doing so. And if you're not struggling with the tension of privilege, then I worry for you. (p. 204)

I defended my dissertation on August 30, 2020—two weeks before I started teaching my first class at MSVU. Still very much in the middle of a pandemic, the defense and graduation felt devoid of the usual pomp and circumstance. I had a quiet dinner with my partner and one of my supervisors the night after the defense, and I watched a livestream of the graduation on a Saturday in the middle of the fall semester.

The transition to being a professor was complicated by the pandemic itself—I stayed in New Brunswick for most of the first year of my contract and completed all the requirements of my job remotely. To be honest, I’m still not sure I’ve made sense of that transition. It wasn’t until AEGSC 2021, where I was invited to share a keynote conversation with Dr. Kim Stewart (2020) and Dr. Keira Brant-Birioukov (2021), that I started to make sense of my graduate student experience. In that keynote session, Alicia Noreiga (2021)—a brilliant and inspiring colleague with whom I had worked in the PhD program at UNB—asked us if we had had the chance to reflect at all on our graduate student experiences. Both Kim and I responded that we really hadn’t—we both completed our degrees and rushed straight into full-time positions. A year later, Keira found herself in much the same situation, starting her position at York just as she was finishing her dissertation.

Alicia’s question that day inspired me to start thinking more about my graduate student experience. I started thinking about the advice I had received, and the advice I wish I had received, at the start of my graduate career. As I’ve written in a previous issue of *Antistasis* (Downey, 2020), education is filled with doxa—commonly held beliefs—and doxa always deserves to be scrutinized and critiqued. In beginning this paper with my own story, I hope to complicate doxa through the complexity and specificity of personal narrative. In what follows, I further this project by presenting a few reflections on my graduate experience by way of a problematization of some doxa within graduate education. While I am inspired by those who have gone before in writing about the graduate student experience, particularly at this conference (Christou, 2014; Rose, 2018; Saul, 2017; White, 2015), ultimately, I turn my attention here toward an unlikely source of wisdom regarding graduate education: the alternative rock band Linkin Park.

Linkin Park provided the soundtrack to my upbringing and, I would argue, captured the affective situation of being a teenager in the early 2000s. Indeed, a previous analysis of Linkin Park’s lyrics found them rich with discussions of the self, including themes such as inner turmoil, uncertainty, and a desire for self-agency (Ajmani & Kumar, 2020), all of which speak to the feelings I and many others had as teenagers. It is an affective situation not unlike that of being a graduate student—you are taking your first tentative steps into a much wider world that often feels confusing and counterintuitive; you can be judged harshly by your teachers, your peers, and yourself; you may be confused about who you are and who others want you to be. Grad school, like adolescence and the COVID-19 pandemic, is a time of transition, and I think Linkin Park captured what those transitions can feel like.

“All I Want is to do is be More Like Me and be Less Like You”

Linkin Park formed as a band in California in the late 1990s. They skyrocket to international fame in 2000 with their debut full-length album “Hybrid Theory.” In 2003, the band followed up their initial release with their second full-length, “Metemora.” To my ears, “Metemora” toned down some of the heavier elements of Linkin Park’s sound, focusing more on powerful melodic hooks. One of those hooks comes on the track *Numb*. Detailing the emotional impact of others’ expectations of us, especially in youth, *Numb* has a few lessons to share with regard to graduate studies, but the one I’ll focus on is found in the line “All I want is to do is be more like me and be less like you.”

Finding the right supervisor can be difficult. I remember at the start of my PhD journey hearing stories from people who didn’t see eye to eye with their supervisors. Some folks had to

restructure their whole committee halfway through the degree. Others spoke of egos, racism, and a general lack of support. It was intimidating to say the least. There was also the doxa around intellectual lineage—that people look to who your supervisor was to understand where you fit in the academic conversation.

That idea deserves critique. It is an assumption—at best a banal one, at worst an explicitly biased one. It communicates that with whom someone studied matters more than their actual work. In my mind, it also has paternalistic and patriarchal overtones (i.e., “lineage”) that discursively and materially diminish the agency of graduate students. I remember hearing people talk about the importance of a supervisor to your reputation as an academic and thinking that I *would* be a product of my supervision team. There was an inevitability to it that made me uncomfortable. That idea also seemed restrictive—that maybe I couldn’t write outside my supervisors’ areas or without my supervisors’ approval.

The degree to which the above resonates with your experience is largely dependent on your supervisors’ style. Through a review of the existing literature, Ross Deuchar (2008) identified four distinct styles of doctoral supervision differentiated by the amount and type of support provided to the student. The “laissez-faire” style assumes the student is capable of autonomous work, while the “pastoral” and the “directorial” styles assume the student needs personal support and support with their work respectively. Finally, the “contractual” style negotiates with the student what sort of supports they need. Deuchar (2008) highlighted the way that the modern neoliberal university pulls supervisors toward the directorial style of supervision through accountability measures (i.e., progress reports).

Regardless of individual style, the supervisor relationship always operates as a form of what Foucault (1972) called disciplinary power—the mutual surveillance of a population for adherence to particular norms. The relationship ensures that the radical or the different is read and written within acceptable academic/social parameters. The supervisor works to socialize the graduate student in the norms of academic discourse—often *their* version of academic discourse. This socialization process shapes the student’s understanding of what is possible academically, and in so doing there is a limit placed on what can be written. In this way, the assumption of an intellectual lineage has some basis in fact, particularly in less autonomy-granting styles of supervision. But the assumption minimizes the agency of the graduate student to shape their own voice, to blaze their own path, and to react against their supervisors, who often tacitly represent the established order of the institution.

I was incredibly lucky and privileged to work with supervisors (four in total from the start of my MA to the end of my PhD) who valued my voice. The supports they offered were not standardized and didn’t always fit on my progress reports. They heard what I was trying to say and helped me say it more clearly, but I’m not sure any of my supervisors would say I fit within their intellectual lineage. The voice I developed as a graduate student contains elements of all my supervisors, but it isn’t like any of them. The development of my voice stemmed from a desire on my own part to be “more like me” and “less like you”. All my supervisors were very talented academics and writers and wonderful people—all worthy of emulation. But I wasn’t interested in being like anyone else. I wanted to be me. Too often the doxa of intellectual lineage seeps into graduate students’ self-perception of agency, and we get stuck in the emulation, forgetting that we *can* blaze our own paths radically different from those who went before us. Linkin Park, I think, reminds us otherwise.

“Somewhere I Belong”

If *Numb* paints a portrait of the transitory affect of being a graduate student, *Somewhere I Belong*, takes a high-definition digital photo of the same emotion. The first single off “*Meteora*,” the song depicts the existential uncertainty that can arise in transition, especially in our very human search for belonging. It isn’t hard to see how *Somewhere I Belong* would have resonated with a generation of folks feeling out of place at school, work, or in their own skin, but it also teaches us something about graduate education.

Graduate student sense of belonging is a huge factor in completion rates, and the primary ingredient in that sense of belonging is professional relationships (O’Meara et al., 2017). When I was trying to narrow down institutions at which to do my PhD, however, professional relationships were only one element in a long list of factors: distance from home, financial compensation, office space, available supervisors, and SSHRC quotas, for example. The prevailing wisdom offered to me by many academics was that moving to a bigger city would be the best way to go about things. One friend and faculty member put it well when, referring to the Ottawa-Gatineau region, they said, “there is just so much happening there.” As I looked through the faculty profiles at institutions in the Atlantic provinces—where I hoped to end up—I started to believe that idea. My perusing of faculty websites indicated that most folks teaching in Atlantic Faculties of Education completed their PhD further west or internationally.

The pull elsewhere forms another doxa of graduate studies that I think we ought to reconsider. There are two manifestations of this belief on which I will focus. The first might read as follows: You’ll almost never get a tenure-track job at the university where you finish your PhD because folks are afraid of group think. Many of the above assumptions about intellectual lineage and a lack of agency on the part of graduate students are communicated in this statement. The statement also shows the influence of the scarcity mentality—there are not enough full-time positions for everyone with a PhD because of the marketization of the university and the increased reliance on part-time faculty (Khan, 2017; Saul, 2017; White, 2015), so preference ought to be given to those whose ideas are new to us. Pushing aside my concerns about an assumed lack of agency, this fear of group think treats people and their ideas like commodities. At its most visceral, this logic seems to say: You can study here, work on your PhD for 4-7 years, in which time you will build a life here, including deep relationships with your colleagues, but if you want any sort of financial security, we suggest you find a new home.

UNB was the one exception in my searches through Atlantic Faculties of Education. Depending on how you count, there are between five and ten full-time members on UNB’s Faculty of Education who graduated with PhDs from UNB. That is something of an anomaly, and there are no-doubt reasons beyond my perception for that phenomena. From the outside, however, it seems like UNB values their graduates, and I think there is a lesson for others in that too.

The second, related manifestation of the doxa described above is specific to the Atlantic region: it is the idea that, as a colleague told me at the start of my PhD, “It’s almost like you have to move away before you are appreciated at home.” Atlantic out-migration has a history so long and storied that it forms its own sort of doxa—indeed, a grand narrative (see Hadley, 2018; Thornton, 1985). Out-migration is certainly part of the reason that there aren’t more Atlantic graduates working at Faculties of Education in the Atlantic, so is the centralization of opportunities in the bigger facilities of education in places like Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal,

and Calgary. Population density plays a role too—there are simply more graduates from those universities, so it is more likely that they will be hired. All of this is a given, I think, but I often wonder if it hasn't been repeated so often that its assumed truth is hiding something more insidious—a collective bias toward expertise from larger urban centers.

In the second year of my PhD, I saw a call for nominations for an award given by the Canadian Committee of Graduate Students in Education (CCGSE) to a faculty member who had shown exemplary service in graduate student supervision. As I looked through the list of 20 years' worth of past award winners, I noticed that none of them had come from Atlantic universities. Of course, Atlantic Universities haven't had PhD programs for as long as other institutions—it was only after the program at Dalhousie shut down in the late 1990s that UNB, UPEI, and the Intra-Provincial program in Nova Scotia started their PhD programs. But there seemed something fundamentally wrong about the absence of Atlantic names on that list. So, several colleagues and I nominated one of my supervisors for the award. My supervisor didn't win, and, although the winner looked to be an outstanding candidate, I wondered if our location played some unspoken factor in the committee's deliberation.

The point I am leading to here is this: graduate school, especially in education, is not something that is necessarily located in Toronto, Calgary, Montreal, or Vancouver. Finding a place to complete your graduate work is about finding “somewhere you belong,” and that sense of belonging isn't necessarily just about your supervisor—the place itself matters too. Place matters. A host of writers have recently made that idea a part of the social sciences' lexicon (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015), and it has always been a central tenant of Indigenous studies (Deloria, 1994; Styres, 2017, 2019). Some would even go so far as to say place plays a role in forming our human unconscious (Chalquist, 2007). When I think of Atlantic Canada, I think of home. I think of the layered stories of this place: the original peoples of this territory who have lived here since time immemorial, those who displaced them through violent settler colonialism, those who have ridden the turbulent waves of global mobility to arrive here in recent years, and my own personal narratives of this place—including my implication in all the above. Those stories are all mapped on top of one another, creating a dissonant cartography of this place I call home (see Bryant, 2017), and despite the dissonance, I think it is somewhere I belong. Needless to say, I am glad I stayed here to do my PhD.

Mourning Chester

In 2004, Linkin Park and New York-based rapper Jay-Z released a collaborative EP called “Collision Course”. The album is aptly titled because when it released it did feel like a collision course. Growing up in suburban Nova Scotia, there was often a tangible social distinction among my teenage peers between those who listened to heavier music, such as Linkin Park, and those who listened to hip-hop artists like Jay-Z. But everyone listened to “Collision Course.” The album brought together the most recognizable artists in each genre and created something that was more than the sum of its parts.

I look back on that album now with some fondness, but also with a distinct sense of loss. On July 20th, 2017, Chester Bennington, the singer behind Linkin Park's most memorable vocal moments, took his own life. The outpouring of grief from fans was immediate and intense. Folks posted video tributes, shared stories online, and held gatherings. To use a cliched phrase, it felt as though the voice of a generation had been lost.

There is a video on YouTube from September 2017 where Jay-Z performs *Numb/Encore*, the most famous track from “Collision Course,” in a BBC studio. Jay-Z starts his performance by dedicating the song to Chester, and when the music decrescendos for Chester’s pre-recorded voice to sing the chorus, Jay-Z tips his hat and brings a somber energy to his musical interjections. “Yeah” he says, thick with emotion, and through the bridge he builds along with the song. Just before a return to the course, the video shows Jay-Z with his left hand raised to the sky, his back to the camera, and his gaze fixed into the distance. This, for me, is a powerful moment of mourning. In it, I remember my own losses, and I hold them next to me in the company of Jay-Z, and then with Chester’s fans through their comments under the video.

Learning is often framed as exclusively an exercise of growth, but a presence is always haunted by an absence (i.e., Derrida, 1994), and in our focus on the presence of growth, we have missed the haunting of loss (Downey, 2020). In other words, learning comes with loss (see Downey, 2020; Saul, 2017). In graduate school, life happens. People come into your life, and then they leave. Family members get sick. Friends move away. Relationships go through periods of conflict. Sometimes what is lost in graduate school is a version of oneself, or even a blissful ignorance. At the end of the journey, remembering what has been lost and the heartache that came with it might be the last thing we want to do, but I think we need to hold them with us rather than push them away. They are a part of us—we carry those losses with us. I’ll never listen to Linkin Park the same way after Chester’s passing, just like I’ll never be the person I was before graduate school. There is growth in that, for sure, but there is also loss, and loss calls us to mourning (Nellis, 2018), and that mourning carries on well after graduate school.

Moving Forward with Mourning

Dr. Melissa White’s (2015) keynote to the AEGSC in 2015 focused on the internationalization of the university, and the tensions between international education’s emancipatory potential and its often borderline assimilatory and neocolonial realities. In his keynote address to AEGSC in 2016, Dr. Roger Saul (2017) suggested that the graduate education system is one that facilitates competitive relations between graduate students, and that there are communities we can find that might subvert the structured antagonisms that lead us toward competition and comparison. In 2017, Dr. Ellen Rose (2018) delivered the AEGSC keynote and spoke about the potential of graduate students to rise to the challenges of the post-truth era, reimagining the purpose of research in the process.

What I hope to add to this ongoing conversation is a critique of some of the commonly held ideas about graduate studies—that graduate students are necessarily a direct continuation of their supervisors’ work; that graduate students need to leave home to advance their careers; and that graduate study is a journey of growth to the exclusion of loss. Certainly, my own experience has shown many of these assumptions to be false. In my thinking with Linkin Park, however, I also find a lesson regarding the pandemic: we need not move forward with the way things were. Indeed, I don’t think we can—and I have made that argument elsewhere (Downey, 2020). Times of transition demand the affective attention we often name mourning. Mourning means giving up the old, acknowledging its continued place inside us, and preparing to face the new all within the affective context of loss. The pandemic has forced us to re-examine the status quo in a meaningful way, and many people have found certain doxa wanting. We must remember those critiques and move forward with something else—an otherwise. Yes, there will be loss, and loss is always worth mourning, but through the mourning, new ways of relating to one another

emerge—to borrow the clever wordplay of curriculum theorist Robert C. Nellis (2018, p. 55), a good morning.

References

- Ajmani, N., & Kumar, S. (2020). The struggles of self: Analysing the music of Linkin Park and *Sleeping at Last*. *Human Arenas*, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-020-00129-3>
- Brant-Birioukov, K. (2021). Covid-19 and In (di) genuity: Lessons from Indigenous resilience, adaptation, and innovation in times of crisis. *Prospects*, 51(1), 247-259. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-021-09557-7>
- Bryant, R. (2017). *The homing place: Indigenous and settler literary legacies of the Atlantic*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Chalquist, C. (2007). *Terrapsychology: Reengaging the soul of place*. Spring Journal Inc.
- Christou, T. (2014). Pedagogies of peace: The exigencies of life. *Proceedings of the Second Atlantic Education Graduate Student Conference*. 3-18.
- Deuchar, R. (2008) Facilitator, director or critical friend?: Contradiction and congruence in doctoral supervision styles. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13(4), 489-500, DOI: [10.1080/13562510802193905](https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510802193905)
- Derrida, J. (1994). *Specters of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the new international*. (P. Kamuf, Trans.). Routledge.
- Downey, A. (2020). Mourning our losses: Finding response(-ability) within COVID-19. *Antistasis*, 10(3), 1-4.
- Foucault, M. (1972). Two lectures. In C. Gordon (Ed.), *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews & other writings, 1972-1977* (pp. 78-108). Pantheon Books.
- Hadley, G. (2018). Why entrepreneurship education is a good fit for rural Nova Scotia Schools. *Antistasis*, 8(1), 21-30. <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/antistasis/article/view/25846>
- Kahn, S. (2017). The problem of speaking for adjuncts. In S. Kahn, W. B. Lalicker, & A. Lynch-Binieck (Eds.), *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity: Labor and Action in English Composition* (pp. 259-70). University Press of Colorado.
- Kumar, A. (2019). *Curriculum in international contexts: Understanding colonial, ideological and neoliberal influences*. Palgrave Macmillan.

- Nellis, R. (2018). Old mournings, new days. In E. Hasebe-Ludt & C. Leggo (eds.), *Canadian Curriculum Studies: A Métissage of Inspiration/Imagination/Interconnection* (p. 55). Canadian Scholars Press.
- Noreiga-Mundaroy, A. F. (2021). Square peg in a round hole: Unveiling rural student challenges in Trinidad and Tobago through Currere. *The Currere Exchange Journal*, 5(2), 24-32. <https://cej.lib.miamioh.edu/index.php/CEJ/article/view/127>
- O'Meara, K., Griffin, K. A., Kuvaeva, A., Nyunt, G., & Robinson, T. N. (2017). Sense of belonging and its contributing factors in graduate education. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 12, 251-279.
- Rose, E. (2018). Graduate research in a “post-truth” era. *Antistasis*, 8(1), 63-71. <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/antistasis/article/view/26259>
- Saul, R. (2017). Competition, scarcity, and silos: Graduate student antagonisms and the consolations of community. *Antistasis*, 7(1). <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/antistasis/article/view/25055>
- Stewart, K. (2020). Sacred spaces: Places to call home? *Antistasis*, 10(1), 15-22. <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/antistasis/article/view/30429>
- Styres, S. (2017). *Pathways for remembering and recognizing indigenous thought in education: Philosophies of iethi'nihténha ohwentsia'kékha (land)*. University of Toronto Press.
- Styres, S. (2019). Literacies of land: Decolonizing narratives, storying, and literature. In L. T. Smith, E. Tuck, & K. W. Yang (Eds.), *Indigenous and decolonizing studies in education: Mapping the long view* (pp. 24- 37). Routledge.
- Thornton, P. (1985). The problem of out-migration from Atlantic Canada, 1871-1921: a new look. *Acadiensis*, 15(1), 3-34. <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/Acadiensis/article/view/12079>
- Tuck, E., & McKenzie, M. (2015). *Place in research: Theory, methodology, and methods*. Routledge.
- White, M. (2015). The internationalization of higher education: Tensions and debates. *Antistasis*, 5(2). <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/antistasis/article/view/24322>

Adrian M. Downey is an assistant professor at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU). He holds undergraduate degrees in music and education from Bishop's University, a Master's in Arts in Education from MSVU, and a PhD in Educational Studies from The University of New Brunswick. His research focuses on Educational Foundations, Curriculum Studies, and Indigenous Education. He can be reached at Adrian.Downey@msvu.ca.