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**A colonial history of the higher education present: Rethinking land-grant institutions through processes of accumulation and relations of conquest**

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**Abstract**

This conceptual paper examines the colonial conditions of possibility for a formative moment of US public higher education, the Morrill Act of 1862, and considers how these conditions continue to shape the present. The federal government's accumulation of Indigenous lands in the nineteenth century helped provide the material base for land-grant legislation, and although conquest of the frontier was eventually metaphorized in higher education discourse, public institutions remain both dependent on and vulnerable to the imperatives of accumulation that were established during colonization, as is evident in contemporary privatization efforts. I argue that if efforts to resist privatization fail to address how colonialism has historically shaped US public goods, then these efforts risk re-naturalizing the imperative of capital accumulation and relations of conquest.

Land-grant colleges and universities in the US are a diverse set of institutions that have been designated by states and territories to receive federal financial and other benefits through the Morrill Land-Grant College Act of 1862 (hereafter the Morrill Act) and subsequent legislation (Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities [APLU], 2012). Land-grant schools make up only a small segment of US public institutions, but they loom large within the collective imaginary of higher education, particularly in relation to their perceived democratizing intent and impact (Eddy, 1957; Nevins, 1962; Ross, 1942). Although this romantic view has been challenged by revisionist historians who point to the economic role of industrialization and global competition in motivating the land-grant movement (Geiger, 2014; Sorber, 2011), in mainstream scholarship as well as popular discourse, land-grant institutions still serve as a metonym for the promises and potentials of public higher education, particularly in the current context of privatization. For instance, Sorber and Geiger (2014) find that recent land-grant institution and association documents 'harken to the Morrill Act's egalitarian past to support contemporary calls for access, [and] increased state funding' (p. 387), while Brown (2003) notes, 'the land grant mission serves as a foil to critique the relationship between education and corporate interests' (p. 328).

In this conceptual paper, I focus my attention on a dimension of land-grant legislation that is overlooked within both romantic and revisionist histories: its colonial origins. I argue that the US federal government's vigorous efforts to accumulate Indigenous lands in the nineteenth century provided the conditions of possibility for the Morrill Act in

1862. Further, rather than view colonization as an isolated historical event, I ask how colonial processes continue to shape contemporary higher education. In doing so, I attend to Byrd's (2011) pressing question, 'How might the terms of current academic and political debates change if the responsibilities of that very real lived condition of colonialism were prioritized as a condition of possibility?' (p. xx). I contend that the US state's genocidal efforts to conquer the literal frontier helped to solidify a colonial template of state-facilitated capital accumulation that is premised on the conquest of a perpetual frontier. Thus, rather than serve as a foil for the present, land-grant legislation illustrates how from their very beginnings, US public goods like higher education have both depended on and been vulnerable to the demands of perpetual accumulation.

As higher education increasingly becomes a target of accumulation, mainstream resistance has been dominated by nostalgic histories that naturalize capitalism, provided that it sustains the relative advantage of the white middle-class in a system that nonetheless exploits them and disproportionately benefits a very few. This paper asks what ethical demands and political possibilities might emerge if, instead, analyses of privatization identified and denaturalized the role of accumulation and relations of conquest in shaping US higher education. Thus, I begin by reviewing how the accumulation-driven dispossessions of Indigenous and Black peoples have historically shaped both US state sovereignty and capitalist markets, before addressing how this relates to higher education, and to land-grant institutions specifically.

### **Critiques of conquest**

In colonial contexts like the US, colonizers 'come to stay', that is, settle indefinitely (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388). Settler colonization enacts a set of social-material relations through which colonizers assert ownership claims and political rights over and against Indigenous peoples (Coulthard, 2014). In these contexts, relations of conquest are not limited to an historical era, but rather remain ongoing, given that they are required to maintain both the literal and figurative grounds for capital accumulation and state sovereignty (King, 2016). Because continued Indigenous presence threatens the US state and citizens' claims to political legitimacy and land ownership, the elimination of Indigenous peoples has been sought through various means, including physical violence, policies of hyperdescent (e.g. blood quantum rules) and forcible assimilation (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013). Although settler colonization differs across contexts (Kelley, 2017), the issues addressed in this paper likely have resonances in other settler states, such as Canada, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and Israel (see, e.g. Te Wharepora Hou, 2016, regarding the dispossessing role of universities in New Zealand).

The territorial claims of colonial states like the US are rooted in the Doctrine of Discovery. The doctrine, derived from fifteenth-/sixteenth-century papal bulls, authorized European/Christian colonization of non-European/non-Christian lands and peoples and sought to minimize inter-imperial conflict (Miller, 2005). It is through this doctrine that Britain, and later the US, claimed its 'discovery' diminished the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples, secured its preemptive rights to purchase Indigenous lands and barred any other colonial power (or individual colonists) from claiming those lands (Miller, 2005). The doctrine operated in practice well before it was enshrined into US

law, and Miller (2011) notes that when ‘Manifest Destiny’ was first coined to describe the ‘predestined and divinely inspired expansion’ of US empire in the mid-nineteenth century, it drew on ‘the same rationales and justifications that created the Doctrine’ (p. 332).

The state and capital are interdependent in settler colonial contexts, as the state’s ‘discovery’ claims enable the accumulation of Indigenous lands and the subsequent commodification and sale of those lands (Nichols, 2017). Tuck and McKenzie (2014) describe how, ‘Through the process and structuring of settler colonialism, land is remade into property, and human relationships to land are redefined/reduced of the owner to his property’ (p. 64). This violates Indigenous sovereignty as well as Indigenous understandings of land as a reciprocal, living relation, rather than an object to be possessed (Ahenakew, Andreotti, Cooper, & Hireme, 2014). In the US, and elsewhere in the Americas, the remaking of Indigenous land into property was ‘accompanied by the remaking of (African) persons into property, into chattel’ (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014, p. 65). Together, Indigenous colonization and Black enslavement were central to the development of US state sovereignty and capitalist markets (Byrd, 2011; Coulthard, 2014; King, 2016; Kish & Leroy, 2015; Robinson, 1983; Silva, 2007).

While the state-and capital-constituting violences of conquest are largely missing from US national narratives, they are an absent presence in one of the country’s most famous origin stories: Frederick Jackson Turner’s late nineteenth-century ‘frontier thesis’. Turner (1920) argued, ‘The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explains American development’ (p. 1).<sup>1</sup> For Turner, US national identity, economic growth, democratic institutions and individualism all derived from lessons and values learned by ‘pioneers’ as they pushed West. In this sense, Turner uncritically acknowledged that as conquest produced capital and secured state sovereignty, it also enabled the self-actualization of the white, property-owning citizen (Silva, 2007); this political–economic subject emerged through the very processes that subjugated and dispossessed Black and Indigenous peoples (King, 2016).

Conquest in the US remains both contingent and incomplete. This is both because Indigenous and Black peoples have resisted it for over five centuries and because capital requires perpetual frontiers of accumulation, which are in turn shaped by racial and colonial violence. As Melamed (2015) argues, ‘Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups ... racism [and colonialism] enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires’ (p. 77). Not only does capital that was initially accumulated through slavery and colonization continue to circulate and be held disproportionately by white people, but Chakravartty and Silva (2012) also point out that new modes of accumulation are driven by the search for ““new territories” of consumption and investment [that] have been mapped onto previous racial and colonial

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<sup>1</sup>At this time, the US was also turning to an extra-continental colonial frontier that led to territorial acquisitions in Hawai’i, Puerto Rico, Guam, the Philippines, American Samoa, the Marshall Islands, Alaska, the Virgin Islands and Northern Mariana (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014).

(imperial) discourses and practice’ (p. 368). That is, Indigenous, Black and other racialized and impoverished communities are perpetually targeted for the most brutal strategies of accumulation (Kish & Leroy, 2015). Although specific vocabularies of accumulation vary over time, the underlying grammar established during the ‘inaugural moments of conquest’ (King, 2016) still orders the US political–economy: the state enables the continuous accumulation of capital and secures the capital that has already been accumulated. If, as King (2016) suggests, ‘[r]ealizing that the relations of conquest have far from abated encourages a reframing and rethinking of some of the urgent questions and interdisciplinary concerns that critical theories continue to grapple with in the neoliberal university’ (np), then in this paper, I gesture to how addressing relations of conquest also requires that we reframe and rethink critical theories about the university.

### **Conquest and the university**

Critiques of conquest complement existing critical race and anticolonial interventions that identify higher education as a key site in the reproduction of white citizenship and property rights (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Patel, 2015). As Patton (2016) asserts, ‘[t]he functioning of U.S. higher education is intricately linked to imperialistic and capitalistic efforts that fuel the intersections of race, property, and oppression’ (p. 317). Beyond higher education’s role in the production and dissemination of knowledge that has both directly and indirectly contributed to capital accumulation, the history of predominantly white access to US public higher education may be understood as a racialized practice that has helped foster white sociality and solidarity and secure white consent to an inherently violent political–economic system by promising relative advantage within it (Leonardo, 2013; Stein, Andreotti, Susa, & Hunt, 2017; Wilder, 2013).

Wilder (2013) documents how early US colleges served as ‘instruments of Christian expansionism, weapons for the conquest of indigenous peoples, and major beneficiaries of the African slave trade and slavery’ (p. 17). However, the material and epistemological entanglements of higher education with slavery and colonialism are rarely addressed in higher education history texts or in efforts to theorize the present (Andreotti, Stein, Ahenakew, & Hunt, 2015; Patton, 2016). To take just one example, the land-grant institution of Iowa State University has undertaken a project to locate the now-owners of lands that were granted by the federal government and then sold to fund the school (Pounds, 2017). However, the project makes no mention of the Indigenous peoples of those lands, nor the conditions of their displacement.

Disavowal of the role of colonialism in institutional histories has not only created an ethical gap, but a conceptual gap as well, stymieing our ability to adequately grasp and respond to the implications of public higher education’s simultaneous dependence on and vulnerability to the imperatives of accumulation. This work is part of a larger project to trace public higher education’s state managed imbrication with capitalism through conquest, and thus, it inevitably offers only a partial history. First, because most public institutions are not land-grants, the particular dynamics of their origins and development are not generalizable. However, I focus on these institutions because they have significant symbolic weight in discourses about public higher education, and their explicit

relationship to land offers a fruitful opening to identify more expansive patterns of colonization. Indeed, the ongoing displacement of Indigenous peoples is an underlying condition of possibility for the existence of all US higher education institutions, both public and not. Further, although this paper does not address public higher education's role in slavery and its afterlife (Hartman, 2008), these must be read alongside colonization in any effort to address the history of conquest in higher education (King, 2016; Wilder, 2013).

Finally, while in this paper I emphasize white violence in an effort to disrupt the contemporary nostalgia that naturalizes white property and power, Indigenous and Black peoples have persistently critiqued and resisted this violence and fostered worlds and futures that refuse and exceed it (Byrd, 2011; King, 2016; Robinson, 1983; Simpson, 2011), as is evident in contemporary movements like #NoDAPL, Black Lives Matter and many anti-racist student organizing efforts on higher education campuses ([www.theDemands.org](http://www.theDemands.org)). These genealogies of resistance must also inform our histories and analyses of contemporary higher education.

### **The Morrill Act**

By the time the Morrill Act passed, there was already a history of public land-grants for educational institutions (Williams, 1991). However, the Morrill Act's scale and scope were unprecedented. When Senator Justin Morrill first introduced his land-grant bill in 1857, it passed in Congress but was vetoed by President Buchanan. In 1862, Congress passed a revised bill and President Lincoln signed it into law. The Morrill Act granted 30,000 acres of federal public lands per senator and house representative to fund:

the endowment, support, and maintenance of at least one college where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies, and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes on the several pursuits and professions in life. (as cited by National Research Council, 1995, p. 2).

Some states implemented more comprehensive approaches and others emphasized the agricultural element; some created entirely new institutions, while others granted land-grant status to existing schools (Sorber & Geiger, 2014; Williams, 1991). Western states selected parcels from their own (federally held) public lands; for Eastern states that no longer held public lands in plenty, they could select scrip for unappropriated federal lands elsewhere. In both cases, the granted lands were ultimately to be sold in order to buy stocks to continuously support the activities outlined in the act (Cross, 2012). Per the act,

The moneys so invested shall constitute a perpetual fund, the capital of which shall remain forever undiminished (except so far as may be provided in section fifth of this act), and the interest of which shall be inviolably appropriated, by each State which may take and claim the benefit of this act ... (as cited by National Research Council, 1995, p. 2)

In other words, the ‘public good’ of land-grant institutions depended from the outset on profits made from capitalist markets and thus on processes of continuous accumulation. However, none of this subsequent accumulation would have been possible without the federal government’s initial accumulation and distribution of Indigenous lands.

When the 1862 provisions proved insufficient for supporting the various land-grant responsibilities, the 1887 Hatch Act funded ‘agricultural experiment stations’ for scientific research, and the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 funded cooperative extension programs across each state. In 1890, the Second Morrill Act granted further appropriations to land-grant schools and withheld funds from states with institutions that had racist admission policies unless they created separate institutions. This led to the founding of 17 Black land-grant schools. In 1972, several universities in US territories were designated as land-grant institutions, while in 1994, after a successful campaign from tribal colleges, Congress granted these institutions land-grant status (American Indian Higher Education Consortium [AIHEC], 2014; APLU, 2012). Land-grant legislation passed after 1862 was not directly funded through grants of land or land scrip. The exact benefits derived from land-grant status have shifted over time, and land-grant institutions now receive funding from many different sources in addition to institutional income derived from the 1862 grants (APLU, 2012).

Tracing the role of conquest in the material and epistemological foundations of public goods like land-grant institutions offers an empirical and analytical challenge if one wishes to go beyond general acknowledgement of the fact that ‘the deed to almost all real estate in the United States originates from a federal title that itself came from an Indian title’ (Miller, 2005, p. 3). While certainly many of the US state’s efforts to gain territorial control were enacted according to careful planning and argued legal rationales, the precise unfolding of federal land acquisitions and subsequent public uses or direct private sales were not always determined in advance. Instead, the imperative of accumulation tended to be general, with precise uses determined after the fact. This is evident when one considers that part of President Buchanan’s rationale for vetoing the initial Morrill Act was that he did not think it a judicious use of federal lands.

One might, as I hope to do in future work, work backwards from a particular land-grant institution in order to ask about the histories and peoples of the lands on which it sits, as well as the lands that it selected and sold to fund itself per the provisions of the Morrill Act. Indeed, such inquiry should be the task of all US institutions, along with subsequent efforts to determine the responsibilities that follow from it. In this paper, however, I make a more general argument: that while Indigenous dispossession in the decades prior to the 1862 Morrill Act was not specifically enacted so as to fund land-grant institutions, the resulting accumulation of lands by the US government was a prerequisite for the legislation. I establish this connection by linking secondary literatures about land-grant history to the history of Indigenous removals in the nineteenth century.

### **Conquering the frontier**

In the Declaration of Independence, the ‘frontier’ was designated under the purview of the US state, while Indigenous peoples who lived beyond it were described as ‘merciless

Indian Savages' (as cited by Byrd, 2011, p. xxi). While never inevitable, continental expansion was taken for granted by the early US state, which assumed that it inherited England's Doctrine of Discovery rights. The federal government sought to carefully regulate the settlement of lands in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in order to maintain its political authority vis-à-vis individual states and citizens, to manage the balance of power between free and slave-holding states and to ensure that accumulated lands would build the national treasury. According to Gates (1976), in the early US, 'the power to own, manage, grant, and otherwise dispose of the public lands was to be one of the most nationalizing factors in the life of the federal republic' (p. 213).

Key (1996) notes, 'few nations had been so richly blessed with such an abundance of land. This abundance became the principle resource of the new government when the colonies joined together and unoccupied land was ceded to the new Union' (p. 199). Here, Key employs 'discourses of conquest' (Williams, as cited by Wolfe, 2012, p. 6) by suggesting a divine providence of land ('so richly blessed') and reproducing the colonial fiction (known as terra nullius) that lands occupied by Indigenous peoples for millennia were empty ('unoccupied'). Initially, Congress sold public lands to pay national debts, but in the 1820s/30s, policy started to shift toward 'settlement and national development' (Key, 1996, p. 207). As the country's developing capitalist economy demanded unfettered access to lands and resources, the displacement and/or elimination of Indigenous peoples at/beyond the frontier became more pressing (Silva, 2007).

Despite the presumed inevitability of expansion, the US had to address the fact that the supposedly empty lands beyond its initial frontier were inhabited by hundreds of different Indigenous nations that were designated as foreign entities in the Constitution and should therefore be engaged 'in the way sovereign collectivities relate to others, namely, trade, treaties, and war' (Silva, 2007, p. 205). Questions remained about how to remove Indigenous peoples without appearing to contradict the country's 'self-image as [a] distinctly free societ[y] governed by law' (Nichols, 2017, p. 14). These questions were partially answered by three landmark Supreme Court cases between 1823 and 1832, presided over by Chief Justice John Marshall, now known as the 'Marshall Trilogy'.

In the first case of the trilogy, *Johnson v. M'Intosh* (1823), Marshall argued, 'Conquest gives a title which the Courts of the conqueror cannot deny', thereby upholding and formally enshrining into US law, the Doctrine of Discovery. The court ruled that following 'discovery', Indigenous land title was not one of full ownership or sovereignty, but only one of occupancy that could only be fully recognized through its extinguishment by treaty, trade or war with the European colonial power that first 'discovered' the land (Barker, 2015). Only after lands passed from Indigenous peoples to the US state could they then be granted or sold to other entities. To this day, the doctrine continues to be upheld in law and used against Indigenous peoples (Miller, 2005).

*Johnson v. M'Intosh* (1823) also asserted that Indigenous peoples were 'fierce savages', such that 'to leave them in possession of their country was to leave the country a wilderness'. It was argued that Indigenous nations 'remain in a state of nature, and have never been admitted into the general society of nations'. US expansionism was in part

premised on the notion that the continent had yet to be ‘properly developed’, i.e. made productive for the ends of capitalist profits (Byrd, 2011). These colonial claims were in turn rooted in the understanding that individual freedom, self-determination and capitalist productivity were the greatest moral virtues, and the unique domain of white/European-descended peoples (Silva, 2007). Wolfe (2012) argues that the Marshall trilogy ‘yielded more than land for settlers. It also yielded sovereign subjecthood: they became the sort of people who could own, rather than merely occupy’ (p. 10). Thus, the rulings not only justified further Indigenous dispossession, they also reified categorically different political–economic subjectivities for white citizens and Indigenous peoples and sought to invalidate and erase the latter’s complex relationships to their ancestral lands.

According to Frymer (2014), ‘During the first half of the nineteenth century, the territory of the United States nearly tripled in size as the nation expanded across the continent from thirteen Atlantic-side states south to the Rio Grande and west to the Pacific Ocean’ (p. 119). This was made possible through treaties with other nations (Britain, France, Mexico and Spain), treaties and battles with Indigenous nations and government policies that promoted settlement (Frymer, 2014; Wolfe, 2012). As Wolfe (2012) points out, ‘Most of the forced removals perpetrated against Indian peoples took place during the half century following *Cherokee v. Georgia* [1831]’, the second case in the Marshall trilogy (p. 7). By 1850, federal land holdings numbered approximately 1.2 billion acres, and as Rifkin (2013) notes, ultimately ‘all of that land was gained through purchase from and/or the removal of Native peoples’ (p. 335, emphasis in the original).

Importantly, even when land was ceded through purchase or treaty, there remain significant questions about the extent to which cession of land was consensual and not made under duress or threat of (further) violence. As Deloria (1996) observes, most treaties ‘occur at the end of political and military crises in which the respective Indian nations have been forced to surrender tracts of land. But even here there are many anomalies ... for example, some very large areas of land are classified as being ceded in unratified treaties’ (p. 978). Beyond these considerations, today the US remains in violation of many of its ratified treaties with Indigenous nations (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014).

### **Indirect but dependent**

The US government’s land accumulation throughout the nineteenth century helped to create the conditions of possibility for land-grant colleges and universities in what I describe as an indirect but dependent relationship. Although Indigenous lands were not accumulated by the state for the express purpose of funding land-grant institutions, without them the government would not have been able to grant land as parcels or scrip that were then sold to fund the institutions as per the provisions of the 1862 Morrill Act. More generally, in western states, the expansion of higher education helped extend and solidify US sovereignty. Sedlak finds, ‘Colleges were often founded right on the frontier line – not a generation after the founding of a town or of a state, but at the same moment as the founding of the town or state’ (as cited by Goodchild & Wrobel, 2014, p. 5), and, according to Johnson (1981), the schools ‘were a boon to frontier settlement and an important ingredient in the frenzy of “internal improvements” in many states’ (p. 226).

The Morrill Act, along with other legislation passed in 1862, including the Homestead Act and Pacific Railroad Act, was significant in enabling and encouraging further white-majority settlement of the US and in shoring up federal authority over recently acquired lands. These acts effectively broke multiple treaties with Indigenous nations (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). It is therefore telling that this set of legislation has been termed ‘the blueprint for modern America’ (McPherson as cited by Geiger, 2014, p. 281, emphasis added). White settlers moved westward in large numbers, thanks to these acts, along with gold rushes, and the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, however, the war against Indigenous peoples was far from over in 1862.<sup>3</sup>

As Dahl (2014) notes, US popular sovereignty ‘was forged through processes of settler expansion’, as people not only physically migrated West, but also projected the nation’s futurity across the continent, intensifying their investment in colonization (p. 17). Advocates of westward expansion viewed land appropriations as a means to guarantee democratic egalitarianism, by ‘spreading’ wealth rather than concentrating it in a few hands. This emphasis on land as a means of democratization is similar to the perspective offered in romantic land-grant histories. Yet, this was a white supremacist democracy, underwritten by colonial violence. Further, as the case of land-grant institutions indicates, even this already-distorted democratic vision was shaped by capital, not only in the structure of funding but in the drivers and effects of the legislation.

According to Geiger (2014), ‘The [1862 Morrill Act] immediately affected the expansion and structure of higher education and, eventually, the productivity of the American economy’ (p. 281). There had been growing interest in supporting education for practical knowledge and vocational training related to agriculture and industry since at least the 1840s (Geiger, 2014; Williams, 1991), and the land-grant movement developed in the context of larger social transformations and the shifting hegemony of merchant to industrial capital. Land-grant institutions both supported and responded to these developments, but popular demand for higher education did not grow until later (Williams, 1991). Sorber (2011) argues that rather than democracy, land-grant development was driven by a contest between ‘gentleman farmers’ seeking to preserve their position and ‘educational reformers’ seeking to prepare professionals, managers and bureaucrats for an industrial economy. Between these groups, ‘sources of the tension were opposing beliefs of the proper progression of American capitalism and land-grant

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<sup>2</sup> With the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico ceded its northern territories, which were inhabited by Indigenous as well as mestizo peoples (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). According to Barker (2015), the treaty was meant to ensure the US ‘would protect tribal land grants [in lands that were formerly Mexico]’, but ‘US citizens displaced and outright murdered tribal peoples to gain holds of their lands and coerce survivors into servitude’ (p. 263).

<sup>3</sup> For instance, at the end of the Civil War, many demobilized troops went West to battle Indigenous nations on a new front (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). In 1887, the General Allotment Act affected the ‘virtual obliteration of tribal rights’ (Barker, 2015, p. 256), reducing Indigenous landholdings by about two-thirds and breaking up remaining lands so as to make its collective uses nearly impossible. It was also around this time that the first Indian boarding schools were founded with the stated intention to ‘Kill the Indian and save the man’ (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). Although there is not adequate space to trace all post-1862 efforts to dispossess and eliminate Indigenous peoples, Indigenous struggles against conquest continue to this day.

colleges' relationship to that development' (p. 20). In other words, the land-grant movement was always about economic expansion, but there was conflict about what form this expansion would take and which subset of the wealthy classes it would benefit most.

Sorber and Geiger (2014) argue that each land-grant institution developed in alignment with the 'ideology of the politically powerful within each state' (p. 8), and rather than increase access for lower classes, 'early land-grant colleges appear to have been the domain of an expanding middle class: professionals, white-collar businesspeople, and sole proprietors' (p. 394). Eventually, land-grants and other public institutions became more widely accessible, particularly after World War II. However, at their best, Gelber (2013) notes, 'Land-grant institutions have expanded the number of professional occupations and widened the pipeline to these jobs, but rarely have they encouraged students to reject upward mobility or question the line separating professionals from workers' (p. 184).

### **Metaphorizing the frontier**

The new middle class, which made up 25% of workers by the early twentieth century, required preparation in engineering, agricultural and industrial sciences, bureaucracy and social norms if they were to be of service to the country's emergent industrial economy (Sorber, 2011). Thus, with the transition from agricultural to industrial labor, the pursuit of social mobility was no longer sought through farm ownership, but rather by obtaining a higher education credential (Barrow, 1990). Bowles and Gintis (1977) assert, 'With the closing of the western frontier in the latter part of the nineteenth century ... a new ideology of opportunity became the order of the day. The folklore of capitalism was revitalized: Education was the new frontier' (p. 3). This late nineteenth century shift in white middle-class aspirations was premised on the shift from the literal to a metaphorical frontier (Barrow, 1990). Indeed, this was the vision outlined by Turner in a university 1910 commencement speech in which he expressed concern that the democratic spirit and egalitarianism fostered by the frontier was threatened by expanding economic inequality and class conflict, particularly given 'the practical exhaustion of the supply of cheap arable public lands open to the poor man' (p. 11).

In light of these changes, he argued, public universities had a 'duty in adjusting pioneer ideals to the new requirements of American democracy' (p. 27). He called upon state universities to educate leaders from 'the democratic masses as well as from those of larger means' and train experts for new fields like public health and manufacturing, 'as the test tube and the microscope are needed rather than axe and rifle in this new ideal of conquest' (p. 24). The frontier trope continued to be adapted in higher education rhetoric. It was revived by Vannevar Bush in his post-World War II report 'Science: The Endless Frontier', which advocated for increased federal support for basic research around health, national security and economic prosperity (Crow & Dabars, 2012). For Bush, this was a means to ensure US military advantage and economic expansionism. Today, frontier metaphors operate uncritically in the context of discussions about expanding global reach of US universities through internationalization, along with much speculation about the democratizing potential of the 'technological frontier' (Chaput, 2004).

Chaput (2004) suggests that the rhetorical metaphorization of the frontier in the late nineteenth /early twentieth century helped suture the potentially contradictory logics of democracy and industrial capitalism. In other words, the promise of opportunity through education mitigated the fact of inequality and exploitation. As Barrow (1990) observes, liberal states socialize the costs of private production through ‘manpower training and the provision of scientific-technical infrastructure to support modern industry and national defense’ (p. 8). In this way, US public higher education has subsidized the accumulation of capital at the same time that it has helped manage tensions between capitalism and democracy through meritocratic promises of social mobility, thereby helping to ensure white citizen/workers’ continued buy-in to an unjust political–economic system. Since the land-grant era, the promise of opportunity by way of education has only intensified. Yet while the historical strength of higher education’s meritocratic promises is itself dubious, in the present era, these promises have come under increased suspicion. In drawing attention to how ‘the rhetoric of frontiers’ has historically obfuscated the economic violence of capitalism, Chaput (2004) concludes that the economic violence of the present should prompt us to ‘rethink the use of frontier rhetorics as integral to representations, advertisements, and discussions of U.S. public universities’ in the present (p. 313). However, Chaput does not address the relations of conquest that undergird the ties between public higher education and capitalism’s ever-expanding ‘frontier’. Though land-grant institutions supported capitalist expansion in the emergent metaphorical frontier of the country’s industrial economy, these institutions and indeed all institutions would not exist without prior efforts to conquer the literal frontier. Furthermore, industrial capitalism, in the form of mechanized agriculture, new technologies of resource extraction and manufacturing plants, was no less reliant on the material land base that emerged from histories of accumulation that preceded it.

As the US state facilitated the creation of a capitalist market through processes of conquest, it also became entangled with and dependent on that market (Nichols, 2017, p. 18). In order to create land-grant institutions, the US government had to first assert and secure its title over Indigenous lands. Next, it transferred some of those lands to individual states to be sold on the market; the profits from those sales were then used to buy stocks, again on the market, so that interest from those stocks (again, on the market) could fund the public universities in perpetuity. Thus, from the beginning, the public good of land-grant institutions required the accumulation of lands through colonization, and a stable capitalist market on which those lands could be sold, and their profits used to continue to produce continued income. This is just one example of how public higher education has been both dependent on and vulnerable to the imperative of accumulation.

### **The shape-shifting frontiers of capital**

Capitalism requires the periodic, state-managed reconfiguration of social relations in order to ensure ongoing accumulation (Chakravartty & Silva, 2012; Harvey, 2005). In the perpetual search for capital, goods and services previously categorized as public are not immune from becoming subject to accumulation (Melamed, 2015), as not only did the state first make these public goods and services possible through its own processes of accumulation (Lloyd & Wolfe, 2016), but it is also the state that creates and maintains the infrastructures that uphold the capitalist market (Peck, 2004), as the state itself is in thrall

to that market (Nichols, 2017). The contemporary regime of capital accumulation is largely premised on the privatization of what was once deemed 'public'. For instance, the privatization of higher education has entailed a shift in funding from public sources to individuals. The state has been central in managing this shift, as part of the larger transition from the hegemony of industrial to financial capitalism (Harvey, 2005; Lloyd & Wolfe, 2016). Shrinking public subsidies for education have led lower- and middle-class people to take often-risky securitized debt in the form of student loans (van der Zwan, 2014), which then produces a profit for lenders and investors. The state establishes and manages the infrastructures that enable and enforce debt-based relations (Mahmud, 2012; Soederberg, 2014), and student loans are structured to protect lenders from risk, rather than borrowers (i.e. students and their families) (Adamson, 2009).

In the face of these transformations, in addition to land-grant romanticism, many critical higher education scholars return to the post-War era as the site of idealized contrast and seek a return to 'the public good'. While post-War higher education begs for its own anti-colonial analysis, in general Nelson (2013) finds in his historical examination of motivations for state investment in higher education that, 'when it comes to the state, economic priorities are nearly always likely to predominate' (p. 34). Further, 'When the state invested in higher education and research ... it expected a rapid economic return' (p. 34). Before today's hegemony of financial capital, or the industrial capital that preceded it, it was capital accumulated through conquest that enabled the state to fund public goods like land-grant institutions, from which it subsequently expected economic returns. Even as public higher education expanded opportunities for access in the twentieth century, these transformations were nonetheless tied to the demands of capital and the particular formations of accumulation that predominated (Ferguson, 2012). The state-subsidized access to higher education that followed from land-grant legislation and the subsequent founding and funding of additional public institutions helped secure white middle-class investment in the US's colonial nation-state and capitalist system by offering the egalitarian promise of social mobility and other relative advantages (Brown, 2003). Yet as capitalism's adaptable frontier logics open up new spaces and populations for extraction, exploitation and containment, the white middle-class is increasingly subject to some of the methods and rationales of accumulation that were previously reserved for Indigenous, Black and other racialized populations, as well as, to a lesser extent, poor whites. As the promised benefits of white supremacist capitalism appear to be diminishing, what appear to white people as novel configurations of accumulation actually have instructive precedents. However, these precedents are invisibilized within mainstream critiques because they most significantly affected populations who were and are deemed to be outside the realm of ethical obligation and political rights. Indeed, the sacrifice of non-white peoples has long been justified in the name of the nominally democratic 'public good' that this sacrifice is thought to serve.

Each new strategy of capital accumulation does not replace but rather adds new layers to historical and ongoing violences that have yet to be redressed. Not only do public goods remain under perpetual threat of privatization under the imperatives of capital accumulation, although always subject to political contest, but regimes of both public and private property were and are produced through the continued occupation of Indigenous

lands and subjugation of Black lives. Capitalism continues to circulate wealth accumulated through conquest, on lands accumulated through conquest, and continues to accumulate in ways that disproportionately harm Black and Indigenous populations. This is as true in the context of higher education as in any other social institution. For instance, inequities in access, graduation rates and student debt all illustrate the disproportionately negative effects of decades of higher education privatization on racialized students (Cottom, 2017; Goldrick-Rab, Kelchen, & Houle, 2014; Seamster & Charron-Chénier, 2017; Soederberg, 2014). Meanwhile, 1890 historically Black and 1994 tribal land-grant institutions fail to receive funding equal to their historically white 1862 counterparts (AIHEC, 2014; Association of Public and Land- Grant Universities [APLU], 2013). Finally, many ethnic studies programs operate under perpetual threat of closure, censure or downsizing (Barker, 2016).

### **Conclusion**

The disproportionately experienced harms of contemporary processes of capital accumulation do not negate but rather intensify the need to contest these processes, while also complicating dominant framings of resistance. The accumulation of Indigenous and Black lands, lives and labors provided the conditions of possibility to establish many public institutions that continue to be both dependent on and vulnerable to accumulation.

Yet while it is necessary to examine higher education's entanglements with conquest, it is also unlikely that simply producing more knowledge about these injustices will be sufficient for addressing 'the problems imperialism continues to create' (Byrd, 2011, p. xxvi). It is not simply a lack of knowledge that reproduces colonial relations and impoverished horizons of justice, but willful ignorance. As Vimalassery, Pegues, and Goldstein (2016) argue, 'Even where the ongoing nature of colonialism as it structures the shared present is grasped, colonial unknowing manifests in ways that foreclose upon future possibilities, and decolonization is named as either impossible or unreasonable' (para. 30). This 'unknowing' and its accompanying disavowal of responsibilities and relationships are oriented by the continued desire for and investment in white relative advantage within capitalist social relations and the promised (if increasingly unfulfilled) securities offered by the nation-state (Stein et al., 2017). It is often these very advantages and securities that are reclaimed in mainstream efforts to resist privatization.

Given the ethical, political and analytical limitations of only viewing capital accumulation as a problem now that the white middle-class is increasingly harmed by it, the question that remains is how to organize collective resistance to emergent forms of accumulation in ways that also seek an end to relations of conquest. Of course, this is precisely what many Indigenous and Black communities have done since conquest first began. In order for white people to learn from this resistance without romanticizing, tokenizing or instrumentalizing anti-colonial struggles in ways that would reproduce, yet again, colonial relations, we would have to disinvest from our perceived entitlements, certainties and supremacies and face our own roles in the violence of accumulation. Thus far, this remains a process that few are willing to undertake.

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